

Posting versus Lurking: Communicating in a Multiple Audience Context

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Two experiments examined public and private responding in a multiple-audience context—a context in which members have varying opinions. I propose and find that posters (those communicating their experience to others) are influenced only by another's negative opinion because it triggers such social concerns as appearing indiscriminate. Consequently, they adjust their public attitudes downward. Self-presentational concerns appear to cause this negativity bias: lurkers (those not posting their opinion) were less affected by another's negative opinion. Furthermore, posters presented more than one side when publicly explaining their attitudes. These effects persisted despite posters' favorable product experiences and commitment to these attitudes.

After patronizing a local restaurant, I visited Citysearch's Web site to post my experience. I know that Citysearch attracts a diverse audience. How might this influence the degree to which I incorporate others' reviews into my own? Past theorizing does not fully address the types of social pressures present in online group contexts like Citysearch. When these social pressures are taken into account, a different pattern of effects is predicted and observed.

Many Web sites like Amazon, Citysearch, and Epinions allow individuals to post reviews, presumably to inform strangers of their product experiences. Understanding whether consumers accurately post their actual experiences is important because the transmission of product information is a significant aspect of market operations, especially when the informed are weakly tied to the uninformed (Frenzen and Nakamoto 1993; Johnson Brown, and Reingen 1987).

This article differentiates between posters (those who expect to post their product experiences on the Internet) and lurkers (those who expect to read others' postings without anticipating communication). Because of the open structure of the Internet (i.e., anyone can post or access content; Hoffman and Novak 1996), posters are often speaking to an audience composed of diverse individuals—a multiple audience. The objectives of this article are to examine (1) how

expecting to post a message to a multiple audience influences individuals' public and private responses, especially when knowing of another's product evaluation, and (2) how this compares to the responses of those who receive the same information without expecting interaction. Because individuals typically recommend products based upon personal experience, the focus of this article is on individuals' evaluations of a product that they directly experienced.

A great deal of research has compared those who expect to transmit versus receive information, especially in the area of cognitive tuning. According to this research, transmitters report extreme attitudes, ignore inconsistencies, and form one-sided arguments (see Guerin and Innes [1989] for a review). Other research suggests that individuals tailor their communication to guide the audience to a particular conclusion. For instance, when individuals are uncommitted to an attitude and know the audience's views, they adopt the audience's opinion in order to gain their approval (Tetlock, Skitka, and Boettger 1989).

The focus of prior research, however, has been on single audiences—audiences primarily comprised of those sharing the same opinion. In contrast, multiple audiences consist of equally powerful and legitimate groups of at least two different opinions. Such contexts create a multiple-audience problem: the speaker must appeal to normally segregated audiences with the same message (Fleming et al. 1990). In such situations, speakers are concerned that what they say may cause one of the audiences to form undesirable judgments about them. Consequently, speakers are unlikely to adopt and present arguments supporting any one voiced position.

It is proposed that posters will be influenced by another's opinion only when it is negative. Negative evaluators are seen as more intelligent, competent, and expert than positive

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evaluators (Amabile 1983). Although reporting less favorable opinions to a multiple audience will be inconsistent with some members' opinions, the discrepancy will likely be attributed to the speaker being more knowledgeable or having higher standards. Thus, voicing less favorable attitudes may increase one's likelihood of being admired and respected.

Such a negativity bias does not occur in all social contexts, however. Certain social contexts—such as those heightening concerns with the quality of one's opinions—appear to elicit a negativity bias (Amabile and Glazebrook 1982). Knowing that someone had an unfavorable product experience may be one such context. Posters likely view the author of a negative review as intelligent, which may trigger concerns about the quality of their opinion and the resulting social outcomes. For instance, they might wonder if their opinion is too favorable and might give the impression that they have low standards or are indiscriminate. As a result, even if their personal experiences were favorable, they will adjust their public attitudes downward. In contrast, because positive evaluators are seen as less intelligent than negative evaluators (Amabile 1983), a positive review is unlikely to trigger such social concerns. Thus, rather than polarization, in which posters' public attitudes (or ratings) become more extreme in the direction of a positive or negative review, a negativity bias should occur. Further, if a negative review rather than the social context itself is what triggers such social concerns, then posters' public ratings should be less favorable when they receive a negative review than no review.

H1: Posters will publicly rate the product less favorably when they receive a negative review than a positive review or no review, whereas their public ratings will not differ when they receive a positive review versus no review.

If the negativity bias is a self-presentational strategy, then it should emerge among those rating the product publicly (posters) but not privately (lurkers). That is, although lurkers likely view a negative reviewer as intelligent, because their ratings are private, they do not feel the social pressures to present themselves as intelligent and discerning. Consequently, they do not lower their rating. Furthermore, if a positive review fails to trigger such social concerns among posters, then posters' and lurkers' ratings should not differ when the review is positive.

H2: Posters' ratings will be less favorable than lurkers' ratings after reading a negative review, whereas their ratings should not differ after reading a positive review.

Posters' public explanations for their ratings (i.e., their reviews) will likely acknowledge more than a single side because voicing one side risks alienating at least one audience. Indeed, speakers will send mixed (overt and covert) messages to appeal to multiple audiences (Fleming et al. 1990). Hence, independent of the review read, posters will

likely publicly acknowledge other perspectives in addition to theirs (e.g., the product has benefits but also flaws).

H3: Posters will present more than one side in their (public) reviews.

Considering multiple sides of an issue appears to be largely due to anticipated evaluation by others (Simonson and Nowlis 2000). Thus, lurkers' reasons for their opinions (i.e., their private reviews) are less likely to exhibit a point-counterpoint format. In fact, unlike posters, lurkers' focus may be more on integration than differentiation. Differentiation occurs when individuals recognize at least two different perspectives on an issue, whereas integration represents the development of complex connections among different viewpoints (Tetlock et al. 1989). With differentiation, differing viewpoints are considered in isolation, whereas integration involves identifying interactions or superordinate categories that link these viewpoints. For posters, their audience's differing viewpoints may remain separate in their minds, and perhaps even irreconcilable. Thus, whereas posters will likely acknowledge different viewpoints, they are less likely to recognize overarching connections between these viewpoints compared to lurkers.

H4: Posters' reviews will demonstrate less integration than will lurkers' reviews.

EXPERIMENT 1

Method

Participants and Experimental Design. The sample was 251 undergraduates who participated in exchange for course credit. The experimental design was a 2 (task: posters vs. lurkers) \times 3 (review: positive, negative vs. none) factorial. The data of nonnative English speakers and those who did not follow instructions were deleted, leaving a sample size of 154. Across experiments, there were no differences in the data deleted across conditions (χ^2 's < 1).

Materials and Procedure. At the start of the experiment, participants were either told that they would rate and write a review of a film that would be posted on a Web site (posters) or that they would read others' ratings and reviews of a film (lurkers). Both then watched *Canhead*, an 8 min. clay animation, after which they completed an online survey. At the beginning and throughout the survey, posters were told that only their rating and review would be made public.

Participants listed their thoughts using a standard cognitive-response measure (Cacioppo and Petty 1981), rated the favorability of their thoughts from -2 (very unfavorable) to $+2$ (very favorable), and reported their attitudes toward the film on four semantic differentials ranging from -3 to $+3$ and anchored with bad/good, uninteresting/interesting, dislike/like, and irritating/not irritating, the average of which represent their private attitudes ($\alpha = .91$). Those in the positive review condition then read "The clay animation is wonderful, and the way everyday objects are in-

corporated into it is very innovative and fun to watch. I loved the surreal feeling of it, although it sometimes makes the plot a little hard to follow.” Those in the negative review condition read “While a well done claymation, it seems to lack the ability to tell its viewer what it is about until the end. The preceding parts of the show are barren and oblique, as the setting, and in my opinion, unnecessary.” To pretest the valence of the reviews, 185 undergraduates watched the film and then rated these and other reviews on a scale ranging from 1 (very unfavorable) to 5 (very favorable). Supporting the review manipulation, the positive review was rated more favorably than the negative review (M 's = 3.39 vs. 2.18, $t(184) = 8.25$, $p < .01$), and both were significantly different than the midpoint ($t(184) = 4.22$ and $t(184) = -8.85$, p 's $< .01$).

After reading the review, participants rated the film from 0 (terrible) to 5 (fantastic) and reviewed the film in a text box. Following this were questions about their demographics and prior familiarity with the film. Overall, participants were unfamiliar with the film ($M = -2.75$, where -3 represents unfamiliar, unaware, and not knowledgeable, $\alpha = .97$).

Coding. Two judges coded the reviews for integrative complexity (IC)—or the degree of differentiation and integration exhibited in their reviews—on a seven-point scale (Baker-Brown et al. 1992). A score of one represents one-sided, absolute thinking (e.g., “This film is not worth anyone’s time”); a two or three represents “differentiation,” or the recognition of multiple sides (e.g., “Although the claymation was excellent, the plot was a bit confusing”); and a score of four or higher represents “integration,” or the identification of relationships between alternatives (e.g., “These elements played against each other to remind me of conquering a demon in your own world of thoughts”). The judges had 70% agreement, and a third judge resolved disagreements.

Results

Posters’ Private Responses. Both posters and lurkers disliked the film (M 's = $-.88$ vs. $-.64$, respectively, $F(1, 152) = 1.05$, NS). They also listed a similar number of thoughts (M 's = 5.10 vs. 4.84, $F(1, 152) < 1$), which were of similar favorability (M 's = $-.13$ vs. $-.21$, $F(1, 152) < 1$).

Posters’ Public Responses. Ratings and IC scores were analyzed with a 2 (task) \times 3 (review) ANCOVA while controlling for private attitudes. For ratings, a significant task \times review interaction emerged ($F(2, 147) = 3.25$, $p < .05$). Consistent with hypothesis 1, posters’ ratings were significantly less favorable when they received the negative than positive review (M 's = 1.92 vs. 2.35, $F(1, 39) = 6.23$, $p < .05$; see table 1) or no review ($M = 2.28$, $F(1, 50) = 4.20$, $p < .05$). Furthermore, posters’ ratings did not differ when they received the positive review from when they received no review ($F(1, 48) < 1$). Consistent with hypothesis 2, the negative review influenced posters’ more than lurkers’ ratings (M 's = 1.92 vs. 2.42, $F(1, 39) = 6.23$,

TABLE 1

EXPERIMENTS 1 AND 2: POSTERS’ AND LURKERS’ MOVIE RATINGS AS A FUNCTION OF EXPOSURE TO ANOTHER’S REVIEW AND ATTITUDE COMMITMENT

Experiment	Negative review				Positive review			
	Lurkers		Posters		Lurkers		Posters	
	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>
Experiment 1	2.42 _a	30	1.92 _b	31	2.44 _a	31	2.35 _a	20
Experiment 2:								
Committed	3.59 _a	18	3.18 _b	17	3.58 _a	15	3.53 _a	18
Uncommitted	3.65 _a	18	3.23 _b	17	3.65 _a	17	3.67 _a	17
Overall	3.62 _a	36	3.20 _b	34	3.61 _a	32	3.60 _a	35

NOTE.—Cell means with different subscripts represent significant pairwise differences within experiment at $p < .05$.

$p < .05$). In fact, the reviews had little effect on lurkers’ ratings ($F(2, 77) = 1.98$, NS). These results suggest that the negativity bias is triggered by a negative review and is a self-presentational strategy used by posters.

For IC scores, consistent with hypothesis 4, posters wrote less integratively complex reviews than lurkers did (M 's = 1.92 vs. 2.25, $F(1, 147) = 4.23$, $p < .05$). Yet, consistent with hypothesis 3, posters’ reviews recognized more than a single perspective (i.e., had IC scores greater than one; $t(72) = 9.03$, $p < .01$). No other effects were significant ($F(1, 147)$'s < 1.06 , NS).

Conclusions

As predicted, posters adjusted their public evaluations only after receiving a negative review rather than adopting or ignoring another’s review. Furthermore, when publicly explaining their rating, posters presented more than a single perspective. These results appear to be due to a self-presentational strategy. First of all, the negativity bias emerged among posters’ (public) ratings and not lurkers’ (private) ratings. Second, posters’ and lurkers’ private attitudes and cognitive responses did not differ. It appears that the mere knowledge that they would post did not influence their experiences with, private judgments of or thoughts about the film.

There is an alternate account, however, for the effect of the negative review on posters’ public ratings: the congruency hypothesis. Specifically, posters may be receptive to a review when it supports, or is congruent with, their attitudes. Indeed, those speaking to a single audience selectively attend to supportive information (Brock and Fromkin 1968). Hence, the negative review may have affected posters’ public ratings because it supported their attitudes. To test this alternate account, the film chosen for experiment 2 was generally liked. If the negativity of the review accounts for the results, then posters’ and lurkers’ ratings should differ when the review is negative. If the congruency of the review accounts for the results, then posters’ and lurkers’ ratings should differ when the review is positive (i.e., congruent with their attitudes).

Recall that participants reported their private attitudes before reading the review. Perhaps because of this, posters felt committed to these attitudes and thus did not alter their public ratings unless the review was negative. Without attitude commitment, they may be influenced by the review regardless of its favorability, and thus polarization may emerge. Indeed, past research on single audiences suggests that when individuals are uncommitted to an attitude, they adopt the audience's position (Tetlock et al. 1989). Attitude commitment may have also caused lurkers to maintain their initial attitude, and, without such commitment, they may be influenced by another's review. To test this, attitude commitment was manipulated in experiment 2.

A third goal of experiment 2 is to test whether the motivation to elicit positive social outcomes elicits a negativity bias. Consumers vary in their confidence to make choices that yield positive reactions from others (i.e., social outcomes [SO]) and that are personally satisfying (i.e., personal outcomes [PO]; Bearden, Hardesty, and Rose 2001). Because the negative review influenced posters' public but not their private evaluations, the negativity bias appears to be driven more by posters' attempts to make a good impression than to reexamine their own experience. Hence, the negativity bias appears to better represent posters' efforts to elicit positive social than personal outcomes. If so, then SO (and not PO) confidence should moderate posters' public ratings. In fact, by being typically concerned with the social outcomes of their choices, those with high SO confidence may be more negative in general, although reading a negative review may enhance this effect. For those with low SO confidence, any attempt to produce positive social outcomes may seem futile. In fact, they may be unaware that reporting less favorable public ratings could yield positive social outcomes. Thus, the negativity bias is more likely to emerge among those with high than low SO confidence.

H5: A negativity bias should emerge for posters with high but not low SO confidence.

EXPERIMENT 2

Method

Participants and Experimental Design. Two-hundred and fifty-one undergraduates participated in exchange for course credit. The experimental design is a 2 (task) \times 2 (review) \times 2 (attitude commitment: committed vs. uncommitted) factorial. The data of nonnative English speakers and those familiar with the film were deleted, resulting in a sample size of 137.

Materials and Procedure. The materials and procedure were the same as those used in experiment 1 except for the film, the commitment manipulation, and the reviews. The film was *Xiao Xiao*, a 2 min. animated martial arts film. As in prior research (Tetlock et al. 1989), attitude commitment was manipulated by varying when participants reported their private attitude relative to receiving the review.

Those in the attitude committed (uncommitted) condition reported their attitudes before (after) receiving the review. To pretest the valence of the reviews, 45 participants watched the film and then rated the reviews on a scale from 1 (very unfavorable) to 5 (very favorable). As expected, the positive review was rated more favorably than the negative review ($M = 3.86$ vs. 2.36 , $t(44) = 7.86$, $p < .01$), and both were significantly different from the midpoint ($t(43) = 5.72$ and $t(43) = -3.57$, p 's $< .01$). A subsample ($n = 15$) also rated the film. For this subsample, the positive review was as favorable as (i.e., congruent with) their own ratings ($M = 4.13$ vs. 3.86 , $t(14) < 1$), whereas the negative review was less favorable than (i.e., incongruent with) their own ratings ($M = 2.36$ vs. 3.86 , $t(14) = -5.78$, $p < .01$).

Several weeks prior to the main experiment, participants completed the Consumer Self-Confidence scale (Bearden et al. 2001). This scale was used to categorize participants as high versus low in SO and PO confidence (using a median split at 3.40 and 2.80, respectively).

Results

Posters' Private Responses. Responses were analyzed with a 2 (task) \times 2 (review) \times 2 (commitment) ANOVA. As in experiment 1, there were no significant differences between posters' and lurkers' attitudes ($M = 1.32$ vs. 1.52 , respectively, $F(1, 129) < 1$), number of thoughts listed (all $F(1, 129) < 2.75$, NS), and thought favorability (all $F(1, 129) < 2.24$, NS).

Posters' Public Responses. A 2 \times 2 \times 2 ANCOVA controlling for private attitudes yielded a significant task \times review interaction ($F(1, 128) = 4.33$, $p < .05$). Supporting hypothesis 1, posters' ratings were significantly less favorable when they read the negative rather than the positive review (M 's = 3.20 vs. 3.60 , $F(1, 64) = 7.08$, $p = .01$). Moreover, supporting hypothesis 2 and inconsistent with the congruency hypothesis, posters' ratings were significantly less favorable than lurkers' ratings when they read the negative (incongruent) review (M 's = 3.20 vs. 3.62 , $F(1, 65) = 7.50$, $p < .01$) and did not differ when they read the positive (congruent) review (M 's = 3.60 vs. 3.61 , $F(1, 62) < 1$). As before, the reviews had little effect on lurkers' ratings ($F(1, 63) < 1$). Moreover, attitude commitment did not moderate these findings ($F(1, 128) < 1$; see table 1).

To test whether a negativity bias would emerge for posters with high but not low SO confidence, a 2 (task) \times 2 (review) \times 2 (SO confidence: high vs. low) \times 2 (PO confidence: high vs. low) ANCOVA was conducted. The only significant effect involving SO and/or PO confidence was a task \times SO confidence interaction ($F(1, 118) = 5.96$, $p < .05$). Among those with high SO confidence, posters rated the product less favorably than lurkers did (M 's = 3.31 vs. 3.68 , $F(1, 70) = 7.41$, $p < .01$). Among those with low SO confidence, posters' and lurkers' ratings did not differ (M 's = 3.61 vs. 3.47 , respectively, $F(1, 55) < 1$). Closer examination of the cell means reveals that this difference was

greatest when posters with high SO confidence read a negative rather than a positive review (M 's = 3.15 vs. 3.66 and M 's = 3.47 vs. 3.69; see table 2).

Two judges coded the reviews using the procedures described earlier and had 77% agreement. These IC scores were analyzed with a 2 (task) \times 2 (review) \times 2 (commitment) ANCOVA. Consistent with hypothesis 4, posters wrote less integratively complex reviews than lurkers did (M 's = 1.68 vs. 2.00, $F(1, 125) = 4.29, p < .05$). Yet, consistent with hypothesis 3, posters' reviews recognized more than a single viewpoint ($t(66) = 6.85, p < .01$). The only other significant effect was a review effect: everyone wrote more integratively complex reviews after reading the negative rather than the positive review (M 's = 2.01 vs. 1.68, $F(1, 125) = 4.29, p < .05$). Knowing that someone had a different (negative) experience to one's own appears to have prompted more complex thinking. No other effects were significant ($F(1, 125)$'s < 1).

DISCUSSION

The results of two experiments collectively shed light on how consumers broadcast their product experiences on the Internet and indicate that prior research on single audiences does not apply. For instance, cognitive tuning research suggests that speakers exhibit attitude polarization and resist information inconsistent with their attitudes (Guerin and Innes 1989). Yet, posters exhibited a negativity bias rather than polarization, even when their personal experiences with the product were favorable and they were committed to these attitudes. It appears that reading a negative review triggers posters' concerns with the social outcomes of their public evaluations, thereby causing them to lower their public ratings strategically. In fact, this bias was limited to posters' public opinions—their private attitudes and thoughts did not differ from those of lurkers.

The results also support the prediction that posters will publicly acknowledge (although not integrate) multiple viewpoints. This is contrary to prior theorizing that speakers think about prototypical, supporting information (Kruglanski and Webster 1996). Whereas focusing upon supporting information may be best when defending an attitude or ingratiating a single audience, acknowledging multiple perspectives is likely best when speaking to a multiple audience.

The findings for lurkers also contrast those of prior re-

search. Specifically, according to cognitive tuning research, receivers suspend judgment and are influenced by additional information more than transmitters are (Cohen 1961; Higgins, McCann, and Fondacaro 1982). The fact that lurkers' ratings were unaffected by additional information (the reviews) is likely because they did not expect communication. Indeed, one criticism of prior experiments is that receivers were really transmitters who did not begin the conversation (Guerin and Innes 1989). Consequently, they had to have flexible cognitive structures and be receptive to incoming information to prepare for a range of possible messages to which they must respond (Higgins et al. 1982). Lurkers represent a purer form of receiving because the social pressures to respond are negligible. It appears that under such circumstances, their judgments and thoughts are complete and organized.

The present findings also qualify previous theorizing that a negativity bias will not emerge among those anticipating social interaction (Ahluwalia 2002). Consistent with this prior research, a negativity bias did not emerge among those speaking without any audience information and among posters' private responses. However, the present findings suggest that a negativity bias can emerge among the public opinions of those speaking to a multiple audience.

The findings also appear inconsistent with the cooperative principle of communication, which proposes normative maxims of effective communication (Grice 1975). Specifically, the finding that a negativity bias emerged even when posters' experiences with the product were favorable violates the maxims of quantity and quality. According to these maxims, the speaker should provide new information (quantity) and be genuine and truthful (quality). Hence, posters should have reported their favorable product experiences (new and genuine information) when receiving a negative review. Ironically, it appears that posters' motivations to yield favorable social outcomes caused them to violate these normative maxims of conversation.

In both experiments, it was assumed that participants would infer that the Web site attracts a multiple audience. To examine whether the same pattern of results would emerge when posters are explicitly told this, a separate study was conducted using the same materials and procedure as the poster/uncommitted condition in experiment 2 except that the 63 participants were told that the Web site attracts those with diverse movie tastes and that the ratings for the

TABLE 2

EXPERIMENT 2: POSTERS' AND LURKERS' MOVIE RATINGS AS A FUNCTION OF THEIR CONFIDENCE IN THE SOCIAL OUTCOMES OF THEIR DECISIONS

Social outcomes confidence	Negative review				Positive review				Total			
	Lurkers		Posters		Lurkers		Posters		Lurkers		Posters	
	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i>
High	3.66 _a	18	3.15 _b	23	3.69 _a	19	3.47 _a	15	3.68 _a	37	3.31 _b	38
Low	3.52 _a	16	3.51 _a	11	3.42 _a	13	3.71 _a	20	3.47 _a	29	3.61 _a	31

NOTE.—Different subscripts represent significant pairwise differences between tasks at $p < .05$.

film ranged from the highest to the lowest. Replicating the results of both experiments, a negativity bias emerged: posters' public ratings were less favorable when they received the negative review than the positive review or no review (M 's = 3.09 vs. 3.52 vs. 3.52; $F(2, 60) = 4.53, p < .05$). Moreover, posters' reviews recognized more than a single perspective ($M = 1.71, t(62) = 6.82, p < .01$).

One limitation with the present research is that it focused upon one product category: short films. Opinions of such products are likely more a matter of taste than fact. It is possible that posters will exhibit less of a negativity bias when their opinions are a matter of fact. Under such circumstances, there is the threat of one's opinion being found invalid. Indeed, such fears of invalidity can minimize judgmental biases (Kruglanski and Freund 1983).

Although a negative review appears to trigger posters' concerns regarding how they will appear to others, it is possible that a negativity bias may emerge whenever the situation makes salient that their intelligence will be questioned. For example, regardless of the review received, posters may downgrade their public evaluations if they believe that an intelligent audience will read and evaluate their review. It is also possible that receiving a positive review from an intelligent person might trigger such concerns and that posters may craft their review to reflect that of the intelligent author, thereby leading to an increase rather than a decrease in their public ratings. These are important research directions to pursue.

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