

Consumers' Responses to Negative Word-of-Mouth Communication: An Attribution Theory Perspective

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Research on negative word-of-mouth communication (WOMC) in general, and the process by which negative WOMC affects consumers' brand evaluations in particular, has been limited. This study uses attribution theory to explain consumers' responses to negative WOMC. Experimental results suggest that (a) causal attributions mediate the negative WOMC-brand evaluation relation, (b) receivers' attributions depend on the manner in which the negative WOMC is conveyed, and (c) brand name affects attributions. Results also suggest that when receivers attribute the negativity of the WOMC message to the brand, brand evaluations decrease; however, if receivers attribute the negativity to the communicator, brand evaluations increase.

Word-of-mouth communication (WOMC) is an important marketplace phenomenon by which consumers receive information relating to organizations and their offerings. Because WOMC usually occurs through sources that consumers view as being credible (e.g., peer reference groups; Brooks, 1957; Richins, 1983), it is thought to have a more powerful influence on consumers' evaluations than information received through commercial sources (i.e., advertising and even neutral print sources such as *Consumer Reports*; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). In addition, this influence appears to be asymmetrical because previous research suggests that negative WOMC has a stronger influence on customers' brand evaluations than positive WOMC (Arndt, 1967; Mizerski, 1982; Wright, 1974). Given the strength of negative, as opposed to positive WOMC, the study presented here focuses on the former type of information.

Our research develops and tests, using multiple studies, a set of hypotheses that describes consumers' attributional and evaluative responses to different types of negative-WOMC messages. The hypotheses posit that consumers will generate predictable patterns of attributional responses to negative-WOMC messages that are systematically varied in terms of information content. Furthermore, they predict that attributional responses will mediate the negative WOMC-brand evaluation relation. Finally, and similar to recent studies (cf. Herr et al., 1991), the hypotheses suggest

consumer responses to negative WOMC are likely to be influenced by strength of the targeted brand's name.

This study extends research on negative WOMC in two important ways. First, whereas previous studies have typically examined receivers' responses to a summary statement of a focal brand's performance (cf. Bone, 1995; Herr et al., 1991), it is likely that the information contained in negative-WOMC messages is more complex than this. In this study, focal messages are manipulated to include three components of information besides the communicator's summary evaluation (Richins, 1984). Messages include information about the (a) consensus of others' views of the brand (besides the communicator), (b) consistency of the communicator's experiences with the brand over time, and (c) distinctiveness of the communicator's opinions of the focal brand versus other brands in the category. Interestingly, these types of information correspond to the information dimensions examined in Kelley's (1967) seminal work dealing with attribution theory. It is also important to note that although others have used this work to model individual responses to another's actions (e.g., observing someone's inability to dance), this study is the first that empirically extends Kelley's research into a context in which consumers interpret a conversation about a brand.

Second, whereas other studies have posited the existence of a direct relation between negative WOMC and postexposure brand evaluations (e.g., Arndt, 1967; Haywood, 1989; Katz & Lazerfeld, 1955; Morin, 1983), our investigation examines the attributional process that explains this association. This approach is consistent with the thinking of several researchers (i.e., Bone, 1995; Herr et al., 1991; Smith & Vogt, 1995) who posited that cognitive mechanisms

are important, as they can more fully explain the negative WOMC–brand evaluation linkage. Furthermore, this research is consistent with other studies that suggest (but do not test the notion) that receivers’ cognitive processing of negative WOMC involves causal attributional reasoning (cf. Folkes, 1988; Mizerski, Golden, & Kernan, 1979).

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Negative WOMC

Negative WOMC is defined as interpersonal communication concerning a marketing organization or product that denigrates the object of the communication (Richins, 1984; Weinberger, Allen, & Dillon, 1981). Negative WOMC potentially has a more powerful influence on consumer behavior than print sources, such as *Consumer Reports*, because individuals find it to be more accessible and diagnostic (Herr et al., 1991). In fact, research has suggested that negative WOMC has the power to influence consumers’ attitudes (Engel, Kegerreis, & Blackwell, 1969) and behaviors (e.g., Arndt, 1967; Haywood, 1989; Katz & Lazerfield, 1955).

Attributions as Responses to Negative WOMC

Because the transmission of negative WOMC involves interpersonal and informal processes, attribution theory appears to be particularly helpful in understanding a receiver’s interpretation of a sender’s motives for communicating such information (Hilton, 1995). The central theme underlying attribution theory is that causal analysis is inherent in an individual’s need to understand social events, such as why another person would communicate negative information about a brand (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967). For this study, *causal attribution* is defined as the cognition a receiver generates to infer the cause of a communicator’s generation of negative information (Calder & Burnkrant, 1977).

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed process consumers use to deal with negative WOMC. Specifically, it proposes two important influences on receivers’ attributional responses to negative-WOMC communication. First, the information conveyed by the sender in a negative-WOMC message is posited to influence receivers’ causal attributions. Second, brand-name strength of the focal brand is also thought to directly affect receivers’ causal attributions. These attributional responses, in turn, are expected to affect receivers’ brand evaluations. Therefore, this study suggests that attributions mediate the presupposed negative-WOMC–brand evaluation relation. Such a model is consistent with theoretical frameworks of interpersonal communication that suggest that attributions mediate an interpersonal message’s effect on a receiver’s evaluation of the focal object (e.g., Hilton, 1995).

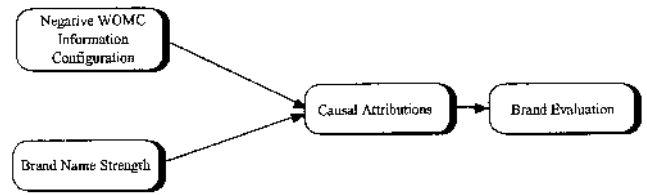


FIGURE 1 Attributional process model for receivers of negative word-of-mouth communication.

There is additional support for the mediational role played by attributions in influencing individuals’ brand evaluations. For example, studies in the advertising literature have suggested that receivers generate causal attributions that in turn affect their evaluations of the advertised brand (e.g., Wiener & Mowen, 1986). In the performance evaluation literature, studies indicate that sales manager attributions of salesperson performance shape their reactions toward a salesperson (e.g., DeCarlo & Leigh, 1996). Thus, the following is proposed for receivers of negative WOMC:

H1: Causal attributions will mediate the effects of negative WOMC on brand evaluations.

Information Type and Causal Attributions

According to research in classical attribution theory (Kelley, 1967, 1973), the categories of causal attributions that people generate in response to information include: stimulus (i.e., brand, in this case), person (i.e., communicator, in this case), circumstance, or a combination of these three.¹ The specific type of attributions generated by individuals, however, depends on the manner in which information is conveyed. According to attribution theory (Kelley, 1967) and other studies dealing with WOMC (e.g., Richins, 1984), a receiver is likely to use three important information dimensions to generate causal attributions: consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency. In a negative-WOMC context, the consensus dimension refers to the degree to which others are likely to agree with the negative views of the communicator. The distinctiveness dimension encapsulates the extent to which the communicator associates the negative information with a particular brand but not other brands. Finally, the consistency di-

¹Although attribution theory suggests that individuals have the potential to generate multiple and interactive attributional responses, this study focuses only on those attributions that are thought to have a significant impact on brand evaluations in the negative-WOMC context (i.e., brand and communicator attributions).

mension deals with the degree to which the communicator has had stable negative experiences with the brand across time and situations.

The three dimensions of information noted previously are typically viewed as being high or low in occurrence. For example, WOMC that is high on the consensus dimension would suggest that others (beside the communicator) have had problems with the focal brand. Low-consensus information, on the other hand, would indicate that the communicator does not know anyone (besides him- or herself) who has had problems with the focal brand. Combining the three information dimensions yields eight ($2 \times 2 \times 2$) potential configurations. It is commonly noted in attribution research (e.g., Hilton & Jaspars, 1987; Kelley, 1972; Teas & McElroy, 1986) that two (out of the eight possible) combinations provide theoretically unambiguous information (and thus are relevant to the study of negative WOMC). These combinations are the high-consensus, high-distinctiveness, and high-consistency information configuration, as well as the low-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency information configuration. A third combination—the low-consensus, high-distinctiveness, low-consistency information—has been posited to be the most ambiguous configuration (Hilton & Jaspars, 1987). Accordingly, the research presented here focuses on negative-WOMC messages utilizing these three information combinations.

Previous research has suggested that receivers will more likely attribute the consequences of an action (i.e., the negativity in a WOMC message) to the communication object (i.e., the focal brand) when information is configured as being high consensus, high distinctiveness, and high consistency, in comparison to the other information configurations (Hilton & Jaspars, 1987; Kelley, 1967). Information contained in negative WOMC using this type of configuration will likely be viewed by receivers as more logical and well developed than that configured as low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency, or low consensus, high distinctiveness, and low consistency. Specifically, the information is considered to be logical because the communicator indicates that he or she has had repeated bad experiences with the focal brand (high consistency), knows of many others who have had problems with the focal brand (high consensus), and also believes that most other brands are of high quality (high distinctiveness). After receiving such focused and cogent arguments, we believe that consumers will generate stronger brand attributions to it as compared to the other negative-WOMC configurations.

Receivers of a low-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency configuration, on the other hand, should be inclined to direct the negativity of the information toward the communicator for a number of reasons. Information configured in this manner is less logical and persuasive than WOMC configured as high consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency because it provides an inconsistent and critical view of

not just the focal brand, but all brands in the product class. Therefore, the communicator may be viewed as being overly negative and opens him- or herself to critical attributions. Furthermore, past research has indicated that individuals may consider a communicator's assessment as typical behavior in the absence of prior knowledge about the communicators' motives (Hilton, Smith, & Alicke, 1988). For negative WOMC configured as low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency, the communicator's assessment may be perceived as containing more information about the communicator than the focal brand of the conversation. Specifically, the communicator bases the negative argument on his or her repeated bad experiences (high consistency), but when questioned, the communicator provides information that no one else he or she knows has had problems (low consensus) and that he or she feels all brands are of low quality (low-distinctiveness information). Thus, the communicator is likely to be viewed as contradictory and the receiver should attribute the negativity toward the communicator.

This study utilizes negative WOMC configured as low consensus, high distinctiveness, and low consistency as a comparison to the other two scenarios for a number of reasons. First, there is significant evidence that this configuration is the most ambiguous with respect to brand and communicator attributions (cf. Hilton & Jaspars, 1987; Iacobucci & McGill, 1990). Second, research indicates that the perceived informativeness of this configuration about the focal object or person is low (Hilton & Slugoski, 1986). Because of this, we believe that the low-consensus, high-distinctiveness, low-consistency pattern is uniquely suited as a comparison configuration to the two patterns that yield unambiguous attribution patterns.² Thus, all hypothesized comparisons of the strength of specific attributional responses made by receivers of the high-consensus, high-distinctiveness, and high-consistency scenario versus the low-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency scenario are implicitly made in comparison to this configuration as well. Therefore, the following comparison hypotheses for the three negative-WOMC configurations are:

- H2: Consumers exposed to negative WOMC configured as high consensus, high distinctiveness, and high consistency will be more likely to attribute the negativity of the message toward the brand than those receiving other configurations.
- H3: Consumers exposed to negative WOMC configured as low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency will be more likely to attribute the negativity of the message toward the communicator than those receiving other configurations.

²As will be seen in Study 2, we examine responses to alternative information configurations.

Brand Name and Causal Attributions

Prior research has suggested that the effects of negative WOMC on brand evaluations are likely to be reduced when prior positive brand impressions exist in consumers' memories (Herr et al., 1991). Consistent with this notion, we contend that the effect of a brand name is likely to influence consumers' attributional processing of negative WOMC. A more-favorable brand name is expected to reduce the persuasiveness of negative WOMC because impression-inconsistent information is typically deflected away from the brand and discounted (Hoch & Deighton, 1989). Such a view is consistent with research in attribution theory, which suggests that attributions directed at the focal object are unlikely to be generated by receivers who have favorable associations with it (Harvey & Weary, 1984). Thus, based on the cognitive process mechanisms of attributional biasing (De Nisi, Cafferty, & Meglino, 1984; Regan, Straus, & Fazio, 1974) and discounting (Sanbonmatsu, Kardes, & Gibson, 1989), receivers should attribute negativity away from the focal brand when the negative information (about the focal brand) is inconsistent with a positive brand name. On the other hand, negative WOMC is more likely to fit with consumers' associations for less-favorable brand names and should reinforce these associations (cf. Wilson & Peterson, 1989). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H4: Consumers exposed to negative WOMC about a more-favorable brand will be less likely to attribute the negativity toward the brand than those receiving negative WOMC about a less-favorable brand.

However, if not toward the brand, to where (or to whom) do receivers of negative WOMC about more-favorable brands attribute the negativity? It is our contention that receivers of negative information about favorable brands will be more likely to attribute the negativity of the WOMC toward the communicator. Hilton's (1995) model of social communication suggested that, all things being equal, a receiver assumes that a conveyor of interpersonal information is trying to be helpful and consequently should be positively disposed toward the communicator at the time of exposure. However, when contradictory information (i.e., negative information about a favorable brand name) is presented by a communicator, the receiver will shift his or her impressions toward the negative, leaving him or her in a state of cognitive imbalance. Hilton's model suggested this imbalance will be overcome by the receiver's attributing the negativity of the message toward the communicator. Thus, we posit the following:

- H5: Consumers exposed to negative WOMC about a more-favorable brand will be more likely to attribute the negativity toward the communicator than those receiving negative WOMC about a less-favorable brand.

Attributions and Brand Evaluation

The influential role of brand attributions on brand evaluation is consistent with cognitive processing models of performance evaluation (e.g., DeCarlo & Leigh, 1996; De Nisi et al., 1984). In these models, there is a direct linkage between performance attributions of an employee and his or her performance evaluation. In other words, when supervisors attribute negative performance to the subordinate, evaluations tend to be lower. Extending this notion to the negative-WOMC context, we posit that brand attributions will have a negative effect on brand evaluations. This is the case because as receivers link the negativity of WOMC messages to a brand (via brand attributions), their evaluations should be negatively affected. Specifically, we hypothesize the following:

- H6: The strength of brand attributions generated in response to negative WOMC about a particular brand will be inversely related to brand attitudes.

We hypothesized that communicator attributions will be directly related to brand evaluations (i.e., a positive relation is expected between communicator attributions and brand evaluations). This view is consistent with theories of conversation that suggest that the interpretation of social discourse requires a form of cognitive balancing (cf. Brown & van Kleeck, 1989). In the process of communicating negative WOMC, the communicator is establishing a negative link between themselves and the brand (in the eyes of the receiver). When the receiver attributes negativity toward the communicator, his or her reasoning process will allow him or her to disassociate it from the brand. Once blame is assessed toward the communicator, Hilton (1995) suggested that the receiver will rally to the defense of the brand and in fact be more supportive of it. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

- H7: The strength of communicator attributions generated in response to negative WOMC about a particular brand will be directly related to brand attitudes.

STUDY 1

Method

Overview

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six cells in a 3 (negative-WOMC information scenario) \times 2 (brand-name strength) full-factorial experiment. The negative-WOMC message was manipulated to provide three information configurations, as noted previously. Strength of brand name was manipulated by providing negative WOMC about more- versus less-favorable brands. Dependent measures included multi-item measures of causal attributions (i.e., measures of

the strength of brand and communicator attributions) and postexposure brand evaluations. Several manipulation checks were also obtained.

Stimuli

Product. Personal computer (or PC) brands were featured as the experimental stimuli for a number of reasons. First, previous research has indicated that there must be sufficient motivation for consumers to generate and receive negative WOMC (Richins, 1984). Because personal computers are complex and relatively expensive products, there is a reasonably high probability that consumers may be involved with the product class and thus be motivated to attend to and process negative WOMC about brands within the product class. Second, we believe that both high- and low-product knowledge individuals use personal computers; thus, even low-knowledge people might engage in negative WOMC.³ Finally, personal computers have been used as experimental stimuli in similar negative-WOMC studies (Herr et al., 1991). The potential effects of product involvement and product knowledge are assessed by including them as covariates in the study.

Brand-name strength. The starting point for selecting brands that differed in name strength was to use the results of a study sponsored by the *Wall Street Journal* (Pope, 1993) in the personal computer category. According to the results of this study, the brands Packard Bell and Everex ranked 9th and 10th, respectively, whereas IBM and Compaq were 1st and 2nd, respectively. Thus, two less-positive brand names (Packard Bell and Everex) and two more-positive brand names (IBM and Compaq) were pretested.

A number of brand-name strength measures were used in preexperimental pilot tests and the main experiments as manipulation checks. The measures included scales of brand familiarity, brand affect, brand awareness, favorable brand associations, and purchase intention. These measures were used in previous empirical research dealing with brand equity (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, & Donthu, 1995). Pilot test results indicated that participants rated the Packard Bell and Everex computers significantly lower on these dimensions than IBM and Compaq computers. Furthermore, no significant differ-

ences were found between the two less-positive brand names (i.e., Packard Bell and Everex). However, the within-cell analysis for the more-positive brand-name computers indicates a significant difference between IBM and Compaq. IBM was rated more positive in our pilot tests than Compaq. However, we selected the more moderately rated Compaq brand name for use in the main experiments. We believed that using Compaq (vs. IBM) would be a stronger test of the power of brand name in consumers' processing of negative WOMC. Specifically, if differences are noted between Everex and Compaq brands in the main experiment, it would seem logical to conclude that the difference between Everex and IBM would be greater.

Negative-WOMC scenarios. Three distinct negative-WOMC conditions were developed using high and low levels of consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency information, as previously discussed. These configurations were: (a) high consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency; (b) low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency; and (c) low consensus, high distinctiveness, low consistency.

Each negative-WOMC scenario contained identical information with the exception of the statements of either high or low levels of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness information, and the brand described in the scenario. Care was taken to ensure that relatively equal total word counts (high consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency = 208; low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency = 210; and low consensus, high distinctiveness, low consistency = 206) were used for each scenario.

The negative-WOMC stimulus was a tape-recorded conversation that occurred between two confederates. The confederates read the scenarios from a script provided by the authors. To ensure that the WOMC sounded natural, the confederates rehearsed the script a number of times. The confederates included a man (Pat), a perceived computer expert and the provider of the negative comments, and a woman (unnamed), the person interested in the other's opinion. (A transcript of each scenario is provided in the Appendix.)

Participants

A total of 192 male and female undergraduate students was recruited from various business classes at a major midwestern university. Participants received extra course credit for their participation in the study. Because of missing data, 11 participants were dropped from the analysis phase of the study. Thus, the final sample size was 181 (103 men and 78 women). The sample distribution across the six experimental cells ranged from a low of 26 (14%) to a high of 35 (19%) participants. The use of a homogeneous sampling frame (e.g., undergraduate students) is appropriate as recommended theory test procedures require selection of respondent groups such that rigorous examinations can be conducted (Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1982).

³Our sample indicated having a high degree of involvement with the personal computer product class. Product class involvement was assessed with Zaichkowsky's (1985) scale. Factor analysis results suggest that this scale contained two dimensions: one appearing to be a utilitarian involvement factor ($\alpha = .78$) and the other as an aesthetic involvement factor ($\alpha = .91$). Participants' mean level of utilitarian involvement is 6.11 on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*low involvement*) to 7 (*high involvement*), and the mean level of aesthetic involvement is 5.37 on a similar 7-point scale—well above the midpoints of each scale. In addition, the sample reported having a moderate level of personal computer knowledge ($M = 6.07$, $SD = 3.21$), with 10 being a perfect score. Personal computer knowledge was assessed with a 10-item objective measure developed by the authors ($KR-20 = .91$).

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six experimental cells. They were handed a booklet containing instructions, a transcript of the negative WOMC, and related questionnaire items. The first page of the booklet contained instructions that were read aloud by a proctor who invited the participants to read along. This procedure was used to increase participants' involvement with the conversation that is likely to occur in face-to-face conversations. The instructions read:

The University Microcomputer Products Center and Marketing Department have been gathering information from focus groups to determine what students look for in computers. These focus groups are routinely taped to capture as much information as possible. One session included an interesting conversation that occurred between two students during a session break. Because the conversation took place during a break, the quality of the tape was poor. So, you are going to listen to a reenacted audio tape of this conversation.

PLEASE LISTEN TO THIS CONVERSATION VERY CAREFULLY. While listening to this tape, keep in mind that we will be asking you to make judgments regarding the brand that these two people are talking about, the people who are having the conversation, and the situation that surrounds this conversation. So, please follow this conversation carefully, because we will be asking you your opinions about the brand, the people, and the situation. A transcript of this conversation has been provided. This may help you more closely follow the conversation.

Although the experimental procedure used in this study did not allow participants to hear face-to-face negative comments about the experimental brands as was the case in previous studies (cf. [Herr et al., 1991](#)), it did allow the experimenters to achieve greater control of message content. Given that the focus of this study was to determine consumers' attributional and attitudinal responses to a variety of messages (and not on the accessibility of the message compared to memory information), we concluded that the tradeoff between the realism associated with a face-to-face message, versus a tape-recorded one with greater message content control, was appropriate.

The second page of the booklet contained the transcript of the assigned negative-WOMC scenario. To ensure that participants were actively involved in the experiment, they were told to read the transcript while listening to the taped conversation. Immediately following the conclusion of the tape, participants were asked to turn the page and read general questionnaire instructions. The participants were then instructed to turn the page to the scaled causal attribution measures and read them prior to completing the scales. These instructions read:

Pat made some negative comments about (brand name inserted). There may be many reasons why he did so, but what we are interested in is your thoughts about why you think Pat made these comments. There are no right or wrong reasons, we simply want to find out your feelings for the statements below. You may refer back to the transcript on page 2 to help you respond.

Following these instructions, participants answered questions regarding their evaluation of the scaled attributions, brand evaluation, and questions related to the effectiveness of the manipulations.

Three separate manipulation-check groups (comprised of participants similar to those used in the main experiments) were used to test the efficacy of the brand-name manipulations and to check perceptions that each negative-WOMC scenario included consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness information dimensions. In the first group, participants ($n = 79$) were given the brand-name manipulation check measures for familiarity and affect for each brand, as well as measures of brand evaluation. For the second pilot test, participants ($n = 129$) were provided with questionnaires that included four additional measures of brand-name strength: brand awareness, ad awareness, brand associations, and purchase intention (Cobb-Walgren et al., 1995). Participants completed these questionnaires for either the Compaq ($n = 65$) or Everex brands ($n = 64$). The third group ($n = 68$) listened to the negative WOMC for the Compaq brand, and then they were asked to complete the manipulation check for the consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness information in the negative-WOMC scenarios.

Measures

Causal Attributions

Multi-item scales were developed to assess communicator and brand attributions for the cause of the negative information conveyed in the scenarios. The two measures were based on recommendations made by Lichtenstein and Bearden (1986) and Weiner (1980). In addition, the scale-development procedure used followed Churchill's (1979) paradigmatic recommendations. First, a large pool of items was developed to correspond to the brand and communicator attribution constructs. To capture the richness of possible attributions, a number of theoretical perspectives from the literature were utilized. Communicator attributions were developed from Wind's (1978) categories of people, which included demographic–socioeconomic factors, personality–lifestyle factors, and attitudes–behaviors toward a product. Brand attributions were developed with the aid of Enis and Roering's (1980) levels of product offerings. Two pilot tests (the first with $n = 50$ and the second with $n = 44$) were then conducted to purify the measures. As a result of the tests and pretest, participants' responses to open-ended questions in test scenarios—several

items (from each measure)—were eliminated, and others were revised to improve their specificity and precision.

For the final measures, in which we used 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*), exploratory factor analysis of the nine causal attribution items yielded two factors accounting for 84% of the variance. The lowest item loading was .63. Inter-item correlations ranged from .66 to .91. The following header was used in measuring all causal attributions: "Pat said these negative things about ____ [insert brand name] because." The following specific items were used to measure brand attributions: "This PC is an inferior product," "This PC is an unpopular brand," "This PC's performance was poor," "This PC is unusual," and "This PC lacked the features Pat wanted or needed." The following specific items were used to measure communicator attributions: "He doesn't know enough about using PCs," "He does not appear to have the expertise to evaluate the product properly," "He wanted to look smarter than he really is," and "He's the type of person who always says bad things about brands." For the two scales, $\alpha = .95$ (brand attributions) and $\alpha = .95$ (communicator attributions).

Attitude Toward the Brand

Three bipolar brand-attitude items on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*bad, unfavorable, negative*) to 7 (*good, favorable, positive*), were summed to form the postexposure brand evaluation measure (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Factor analysis of these items yielded one factor explaining 91% of the variance. Loadings ranged from .92 to .95, and inter-item correlations ranged from .88 to .93. For the brand evaluation measure, $\alpha = .95$ (higher strength brand name) and $\alpha = .93$ (lower strength brand name).

Manipulation Checks

Multiple items were used to ensure that the brand-name treatments provided participants with stimuli that varied in their degree of perceived strength. Measures were developed to tap the brand familiarity and affect dimensions of brand name. Factor analysis on items corresponding to both dimensions yielded a two-factor solution with expected item loadings. Specific items for the affect dimension of the brand scale include: "My overall opinion about this brand of computer is very favorable," "I have positive feelings about this brand," "I really like this brand of computer," and "Using this brand of computer makes me feel good about myself." Items for the familiarity dimension of the brand equity scale include: "If I had to name a single brand to represent all computers, it would be this one," "When I think of computers, this is the brand that comes to mind," and "This brand is a very good example of my image of what a computer is." The internal consistency of the two measures (i.e., familiarity and affect) was in the range of 0.68 and 0.79.

The measures of brand awareness, ad awareness, brand associations, and purchase intention used in the post hoc test

were similar to those employed by Cobb-Walgren et al. (1995). Specifically, brand awareness and ad awareness ("Have you heard of ____ computers?" and "Have you ever seen any advertising for ____?") were assessed with one-item, 3-point scales ranging from 1 (*yes*), 2 (*no*), to 3 (*don't know*). Brand associations were obtained by asking participants the following question: "When you think of ____ computers, what descriptive words, thoughts, symbols, or images come to mind? Please list all that you can think of no matter how simple or irrelevant they may seem to you." Purchase intention ("If you were to buy a computer, how likely are you to purchase a ____ computer?") was assessed with one item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*).

Several measures were also gathered to ensure the efficacy of the WOMC manipulations. The manipulation check for consensus information utilized a single-item measure: "According to Pat, a number of people have had problems with ____ [insert brand name] every time they boot one up." The consistency and distinctiveness manipulations used multi-item, 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). Consistency items include: "Pat has had problems with ____ [insert brand name]" and "Pat has problems with ____ [insert brand name] every time he boots one up." Distinctiveness items include: "Pat usually does not say many good things about personal computers," "Pat does not like many of the other computer brands in the market," and "Pat likes other personal computer brands, but not ____ [insert brand name]." Factor analysis and reliability indexes ($\alpha = .98$ and $\alpha = .88$ for the consistency and distinctiveness measures, respectively) indicate that these measures were satisfactory.

Results and Discussion

Brand Name and WOMC Manipulation Checks

To ensure that the brand-name treatment was sufficiently strong, 40 participants similar to those, but not included, in the main experiment were asked to respond to the brand scales discussed previously. Different participants were used to avoid contaminating the main experimental results from measurement context effects that might have arisen from these measures (Feldman & Lynch, 1988). Results suggest that the brand-name manipulation was appropriate because the affect ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.09$ for the more-positive brand name; $M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.12$ for the less-positive brand name), $t(38) = 3.62$, $p < .001$, and familiarity ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.28$ for the more-positive brand name; $M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.22$ for the less-positive name), $t(39) = 4.29$, $p < .000$, measures yielded significant differences in the expected direction.

A total of 68 participants, similar to those used in the main experiment, were used to test the efficacy of the negative-WOMC scenarios. Results of multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedures indicate that the three communication scenarios yielded differences across the dependent variables of

perceptions of message consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness, $F(6, 126) = 133.20, p < .001$ (Wilks' $\lambda = .02$). Subsequent one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) using Fisher's least significant difference test were run to assess the independent effects of the high and low levels of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness information in the three negative-WOMC scenarios. The analyses show strong results for the consensus, $F(2, 65) = 139.53, p < .001$; consistency, $F(2, 65) = 176.40, p < .001$; and distinctiveness, $F(2, 65) = 182.38, p < .001$, manipulation checks. The cell means (see Table 1) for consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness indicate significant contrasts in the expected direction for the three conditions.

The post hoc strength of brand-name analyses for brand awareness, $\chi^2(1) = 76.91, p < .01$, indicates that more participants were aware of Compaq (54 out of 65 participants, 83.1%) as opposed to Everex (4 out of 64, 6.3%). The analyses for ad awareness, $\chi^2(1) = 47.29, p < .01$, indicates that more participants had seen advertising about Compaq (35 out of 65 participants, 53.8%) as opposed to the Everex brand (0 out of 64, 0.0%). Participants also had more brand associations (i.e., total thoughts about the brand) for Compaq ($M = 2.49$) as compared to the Everex brand ($M = 1.55$), $t(127) = 2.89, p < .01$. Moreover, participants also had more-positive brand associations for Compaq ($M = 0.92$) as compared to the Everex brand ($M = 0.14$), $t(127) = 4.32, p < .01$. Finally, participants also indicated that they are more willing to purchase a Compaq ($M = 2.71$) as compared to an Everex ($M = 1.92$), $F(1, 127) = 14.87, p < .001$. In sum, these analyses provide additional support that consumers perceive Compaq to have a significantly more-positive brand name than Everex.

Tests of Hypotheses

Analysis procedures. The mediation hypothesis of attributions on the negative WOMC–brand evaluation model (H1) was assessed using hierarchical multiple regression procedures as suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). The overall effects of the negative-WOMC scenarios and brand-name strength on the two attribution measures were assessed with a MANOVA and follow-up ANOVA procedures.⁴

⁴To further understand the nature of processing used by the participants, cognitive-response data were also gathered. The cognitive responses were independently coded by three judges as (a) brand attributions, (b) person attributions, (c) situation attributions, or (d) nonattributional thoughts. A majority decision was used to assign thoughts to final categories. Disagreements by all three judges were resolved by the authors. Interjudge reliability was calculated using the proportional-reduction-in-loss approach as suggested by Rust and Cooil (1994). The proportional-reduction-in-loss reliability was .82, which is well above Rust and Cooil's recommended level of .70. The magnitude and complexity of these data preclude their detailed discussion in this article. However, they suggest that consumers actively engaged in attributional processing of the negative WOMC. Participants generated a total of 511 classifiable cognitive responses, of which 169 (33%) were attributional responses. Furthermore, the pattern of attributional responses within each of the cells was generally consistent with the scaled results reported here.

Mediation analyses. Because it is possible that product involvement and knowledge could alter the proposed relations in the negative WOMC–causal attribution–brand evaluation model, we controlled for their effects. Involvement and knowledge were included as covariates (in which the effects are accounted for before examining the effects of other independent variables) in the hierarchical regression (Cohen & Cohen, 1983) procedures. To determine if the attribution variables mediated the relation between negative WOMC and brand attitude, Baron and Kenny (1986) suggested that several conditions need to be met. First, it would need to be determined that negative WOMC significantly influences the attribution variables and postexposure brand evaluation. Second, the attribution variables would need to significantly affect postexposure brand evaluation. Finally, results would need to indicate that a statistically significant change in R^2 would occur when the attribution variables were added to the regression equation in which negative WOMC served as the independent variable and brand evaluation as the dependent variable. The mediation results for the study presented here are reported in Table 2.

1. The initial step in the mediation analysis is to determine if negative WOMC significantly influences the attribution and postexposure brand evaluation variables after controlling for the effects of several covariates. Given that there are two dependent (attribution) variables, a multivariate coanalysis of variance (MANCOVA) is used to test the negative WOMC–attribution relation. MANCOVA results indicate that negative WOMC is significantly related to the attribution variables (Wilks' $\lambda = .91$), approximate $F(6, 342) = 2.74, p < .05$. To determine if the negative WOMC–postexposure brand evaluation linkage is significant, the three experimental treatment levels of negative WOMC were coded as two dummy-coded variables with low consensus, high distinctiveness, and low consistency as the comparison treatment (coded as zero and zero for the two dummy variables). Multiple hierarchical regression results suggest that the set of negative-WOMC variables significantly influence postexposure brand attitudes (incremental $R^2 = .07$), $F(2, 175) = 7.68, p < .01$.

2. The second step in the mediation analysis is to determine if the attribution variables significantly affect postexposure brand evaluation. Regression results indicate that the set of attribution variables significantly influences postexposure brand evaluation after controlling for the covariates (incremental $R^2 = .19$), $F(2, 173) = 21.84, p < .001$.

3. In the final step of the mediation analysis, results indicate a statistically significant change in R^2 by adding the attribution variables to the regression equation in which the relation WOMC dummy variables served as independent variables and brand evaluation as the dependent variable (incremental $R^2 = 0.15$), $F(2, 171) = 18.12, p < .001$. Results show that brand attributions are negatively related to postexposure brand evaluation ($\beta = -.35$), $t(175) = -4.96, p <$

TABLE 1
Analysis of Variance of the Consensus, Distinctiveness, and Consistency Manipulation

Dependent Variable	Information Configuration			<i>p</i> Value	<i>df</i>
	LHL	LLH	HHH		
Consensus	Low level	Low level	High level	139.53*	2, 65
<i>M</i>	6.50 ^a	6.20 ^a	1.41 ^b		
<i>SD</i>	0.74	1.41	1.14		
<i>N</i>	22	24	22		
Distinctiveness	High level	Low level	High level	182.38*	2, 65
<i>M</i>	6.04 ^a	1.77 ^b	5.80 ^a		
<i>SD</i>	0.82	0.81	0.94		
<i>N</i>	22	24	22		
Consistency	Low level	High level	High level	176.40*	2, 65
<i>M</i>	6.29 ^a	1.43 ^b	1.68 ^b		
<i>SD</i>	1.11	0.78	1.00		
<i>N</i>	22	24	22		

Note. LHL = low levels of consensus information, high levels of distinctiveness information, and low levels of consistency information. LLH = low levels of consensus information, low levels of distinctiveness information, and high levels of consistency information. HHH = high levels of consensus information, high levels of distinctiveness information, and high levels of consistency information. Superscript letters indicate significant means. Different letters (i.e., ^a vs. ^b) are significantly different ($p < .05$ or better). Means with the same letter are not significantly different ($p > .05$).

* $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Hierarchical Regression Coefficients (*t* Values in Parentheses)

Variables	Dependent Variable: Brand Evaluation			
	Covariates Only Model	Covariates, Negative WOMC Model	Covariates, Attribution Model	Full Model
Covariates				
Product knowledge	.13* (1.67)	.13* (1.75)	.09 (1.35)	.10 (1.40)
Aesthetic involvement	.18** (2.08)	.15* (1.76)	.04 (0.55)	.04 (.49)
Utilitarian involvement	-.05 (-.60)	-.03 (-.39)	-.03 (-.34)	-.01 (-.18)
Independent variables				
Negative WOMC (LLH)	—	.01 (.03)	—	-.04 (-.53)
Negative WOMC (HHH)	—	-.28**** (-3.32)	—	-.22*** (-2.84)
Brand attributions	—	—	-.39**** (-5.47)	-.35**** (-4.96)
Communicator attributions	—	—	.16** (2.27)	.15** (2.21)
Adjusted R^2	.03	.10	.22	.25
<i>F</i>	3.04	5.04	10.99	9.48
$p <$.05	.001	.001	.001
Incremental R^2	—	.07	.19	.15
<i>F</i> change	—	7.68	21.84	18.12
$p <$	—	.001	.001	.001

Note. WOMC = word-of-mouth communication. LLH = low levels of consensus information, low levels of distinctiveness information, and high levels of consistency information. HHH = high levels of consensus information, high levels of distinctiveness information, and high levels of consistency information.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

.001, whereas communicator attributions are positively related to brand evaluations ($\beta = .15$), $t(175) = 2.21$, $p < .05$. The high-consensus, high-distinctiveness, and high-consistency treatment remains significantly related to brand evaluation in the full model but at a weakened level ($\beta = -0.22$ vs. $\beta = -0.28$ in the original model).

These results appear to suggest that both brand and communicator attributions meet the criteria for mediating the relation between negative WOMC and postexposure brand evaluations.⁵ Thus, results support H1. The previous mediation results add credence to Burnkrant's (1982) and Richins' (1984) contention that receivers employ attributional processing when encountering negative WOMC.

MANOVA results. MANOVA results indicate that the WOMC scenarios (Wilks' $\lambda = .94$), approximate $F(4, 336) = 2.52$, $p < .05$, and brand name (Wilks' $\lambda = .88$), $F(2, 168) = 10.59$, $p < .001$, have a significant effect on attributions. Results indicate a significant Brand Name \times Negative-WOMC interaction. (ANOVA results indicate that this interaction is significant only for communicator attributions.) Given that the interaction is not theoretically relevant (i.e., no interaction hypotheses were proposed), we report it only to be complete, and, thus, the interaction will not be discussed.

ANOVA results. H2 posits that participants exposed to high consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency WOMC will generate stronger brand attributions than those exposed to the other WOMC scenarios. The omnibus F test indicates a main effect for negative WOMC on brand attributions, $F(2, 178) = 4.77$, $p < .01$. The a priori planned comparison test, $t(178) = -2.85$, $p < .01$, indicates that participants are more likely to attribute the negative information to the brand when exposed to the high-consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency scenario ($M = 4.51$) as opposed to either the low-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency scenario ($M = 3.88$) or low-consensus, high-distinctiveness, low-consistency scenario ($M = 4.10$). Thus, H2 is supported.

H3 posits that participants exposed to low-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency negative WOMC

will generate stronger communicator attributions than those receiving high-consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency and low-consensus, high-distinctiveness, low-consistency negative WOMC. Omnibus F test results indicate a significant effect of the negative-WOMC scenarios on communicator attributions, $F(2, 178) = 2.38$, $p < .10$. Planned comparison results suggest that participants are more likely to generate stronger communicator attributions ($M = 4.51$) after receiving low-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency negative WOMC as compared to high-consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency negative WOMC ($M = 4.06$) or low-consensus, high-distinctiveness, low-consistency negative WOMC ($M = 4.07$), $t(178) = -2.18$, $p < .05$. Thus, H3 is supported.

In combination, results of the test of Hypotheses 2 and 3 suggest that the manner with which a communicator structures his or her negative-WOMC message influences receivers' attributional responses. It appears that receivers attribute the cause for a negative-WOMC message to the brand when the information is unambiguous and sufficiently strong (e.g., those that are configured as high consensus, high distinctiveness, and high consistency). On the other hand, receivers appear to attribute the negativity to the communicator when the information conveyed is more ambiguous, less well developed, or both (e.g., those that are configured as low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency). Such results empirically support Richins' (1984) suggestions that the structure of WOMC messages influence the manner in which receivers process such information. Results also emphasize the need for researchers to conceptualize and operationalize negative WOMC as something more than a summary negative statement about a brand.

H4 posits that stronger brand attributions are expected for less-favorable, as compared to more-favorable, brands for receivers of all configurations of negative WOMC. ANOVA results indicate a significant effect of brand name on brand attributions, $F(1, 179) = 23.28$, $p < .001$. As hypothesized (and in support of H4), the means indicate that participants are more likely to make brand attributions for less-favorable brands ($M = 4.58$) as opposed to more-favorable brands ($M = 3.79$).

H5 posits that receivers will generate stronger communicator attributions for more-favorable, as compared to less-favorable, brands for all configurations of negative WOMC. ANOVA results suggest a significant effect of brand name on communicator attributions, $F(1, 179) = 7.71$, $p < .01$. Mean comparisons indicate that participants are more likely to attribute the negativity of the WOMC to the communicator for more-favorable brands ($M = 4.48$) as opposed to less-favorable brands ($M = 3.94$). Thus, H5 is supported.

Results of the tests of Hypotheses 4 and 5 indicate that receivers of negative WOMC are more likely to generate brand attributions for brands with less-favorable names, whereas receivers of negative WOMC featuring more-favorable names tend to attribute the negativity toward the communicator. Thus, more-positive brand names appear to be protected from the effects of negative WOMC, especially when weaker or ambiguous negative WOMC is communicated.

⁵Based on a comment by one of the reviewers, an additional mediation analysis was conducted using a summary attribution measure (i.e., a separate single item that was collected prior to the multiple item measures) for brand and communicator attributions. The results are similar to those using the summated attribution measures. Hierarchical regression estimates, with involvement and knowledge as covariates, indicate that the added effects of the single-item attribution measures on postexposure brand evaluations explain significantly more variance to the WOMC, brand-name, covariate model (incremental $R^2 = .10$), change in $F = 11.99$, $p < .001$. Results show that brand attribution is negatively related to postexposure brand evaluations ($\beta = -.28$), $t(175) = 3.96$, $p < .01$, whereas communicator attribution is positively related to brand evaluations ($\beta = .16$), $t(175) = 2.45$, $p < .05$.

H6 and H7 deal with the effects of attributions on brand evaluations. Specifically, H6 posits that brand attributions generated in response to negative WOMC will be inversely related to postexposure brand evaluation, whereas H7 suggests a direct relation between communicator attributions and brand evaluations. As indicated in Table 2, regression results show that brand attributions are negatively related to brand evaluation ($\beta = -.32$), $t(175) = -4.37$, $p < .001$, supporting H6. Conversely, communicator attributions appear to be directly related to postexposure brand evaluations ($\beta = .13$), $t(175) = 1.96$, $p < .05$. Thus, H7 is supported.

Results for H6 indicate that negative WOMC will have the expected negative effect on receivers' postexposure brand evaluations when the negativity is associated with the brand. However, results for H7 suggest that when receivers associate the negativity of a WOMC message with the communicator, they will increase their evaluations of the focal brand. Such a finding suggests that communicator attributions may be one mechanism that allows receivers of negative WOMC to disassociate the message from the brand.

STUDY 2

H2 and H3, based largely on the covariation principle in attribution theory, posit specific relations between negative WOMC and receiver attributions. One inherent assumption with these hypotheses is that particular combinations of the information dimensions—consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency—would lead consumers to generate stronger brand and communicator attributions. Although these hypotheses (and subsequent findings) provide interesting insights into receivers' responses to different configurations of negative WOMC, they do not generate conclusive evidence about why specific attributional responses emerged. For example, the finding that negative WOMC configured as high consensus, high distinctiveness, and high consistency would be more likely to lead consumers to generate stronger brand attributions than the other tested configurations, may have occurred because (a) high-consensus information was sufficient to elicit brand attributions (recall that the high consensus, high distinctiveness, and high consistency configuration was the only one tested that included high-consensus information), or (b) high levels of all three information dimensions led participants to generate a predominance of brand attributions. Theoretically, both explanations are possible. Whereas Kelley's (1967) classic covariation model suggested that high levels of all three information dimensions are needed for participants to generate strong brand attributions, the findings of Folkes and Kotsos (1986) indicated that high levels of consensus information may be sufficient to drive them. Study 2 was designed, in part, to determine which of these two explanations is more plausible.

In addition, results from Study 1 also indicate that receivers of low-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency in-

formation generate stronger communicator attributions as compared to the other two information configurations tested. Given that the low-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency WOMC configuration was the only one tested in Study 1 that contained low-distinctiveness information, it is possible that low levels of this dimension are driving receivers of negative-WOMC information to generate stronger communicator attributions. Thus, Study 2 was designed to also investigate whether low-distinctiveness information was sufficient to drive participants' generation of communicator attributions.

Method

Negative-WOMC Scenarios

Four negative-WOMC scenarios were tested in Study 2. They include (a) high consensus, high distinctiveness, and high consistency; (b) low consensus, high distinctiveness, and high consistency; (c) high consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency; and (d) low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency. As illustrated in Tables 3 and 4, these configurations were systematically selected to test the notions discussed previously. If high-consensus information is an important driver of brand attributions in negative-WOMC communication, we would expect a significant difference between the means on brand attributions for the first contrast (i.e., high consensus, high distinctiveness, and high consistency vs. low consensus, high distinctiveness, and high consistency), given that consistency and distinctiveness information dimensions are held constant, whereas only con-

TABLE 3
Effect of Consensus Information on Brand Attributions

Information Dimensions			Brand Attribution		<i>t</i> Value	<i>p</i> Value
Consensus	Distinctiveness	Consistency	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
High	High	High	4.34	1.26	3.31	.001
Low	High	High	3.79	1.31		
High	Low	High	3.73	1.00	-.29	.766
Low	Low	High	3.72	1.00		

TABLE 4
Effect of Distinctiveness Information on Communicator Attributions

Information Dimensions			Communicator Attribution		<i>t</i> Value	<i>p</i> Value
Consensus	Distinctiveness	Consistency	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
High	High	High	4.19	1.44	-3.33	.001
High	Low	High	5.08	1.46		
Low	Low	High	4.67	1.49	2.47	.014
Low	High	High	4.02	1.58		

sensus information is varied. Similarly, we would expect receivers to generate stronger brand attributions after receiving high consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency as compared to the low-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency information scenario in the second contrast.

Two *a priori* contrasts were also used to test whether distinctiveness information was driving the generation of communicator attributions as suggested by the results in Study 1. If low-distinctiveness negative WOMC is driving communicator attributions, we would expect a more-positive direct relation with communicator attributions for the high-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency information configuration as compared to the high-consensus, high-distinctiveness, and high-consistency configuration. Similarly, consumers receiving negative WOMC configured as low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency would likely generate stronger communicator attributions as compared to those receiving low-consensus, high-distinctiveness, and high-consistency negative WOMC.

Participants and Procedure

A total of 259 undergraduate students were recruited from two introductory marketing classes from a large midwestern university. Incomplete responses were obtained from 3 participants, so the net sample was 256. The sample distribution across the four cells ranged from a low of 56 (21%) to a high of 71 (27%). Participation in the study fulfilled a course requirement in both classes. None of the Study 2 participants took part in Study 1.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental cells. The procedure, instructions, and scenarios (other than the systematic variation of the three information dimensions) were identical to those in Study 1. Brand-name strength was held constant in all four experimental cells. Given our interest in the effect of the WOMC configurations on attributions, Study 2 focuses on the Compaq brand name only.

Results and Discussion

Further manipulation checks on the WOMC scenarios were not completed because the manipulation check results in Study 1 indicated that the wording of the information configurations is viable. MANCOVA results (with involvement and computer knowledge as covariates) indicate that the WOMC scenarios (Wilks' $\lambda = .88$), approximate $F(6, 494) = 5.11$, $p < .001$, have a significant effect on brand and communicator attributions. Follow-up tests including *a priori* planned comparisons were used to test if (a) high consensus is sufficient to elicit brand attributions (see Table 3) and (b) low distinctiveness is the primary information cue receivers use to generate communicator attributions (see Table 4). The omnibus F test for brand attributions indicates a significant effect for negative WOMC, $F(3, 252) = 4.73$, $p < .05$. Moreover, the *a priori* contrast between the high-consensus, high-distinctiveness, and high-consistency configuration ($M = 4.34$) versus the low-consensus, high-distinctiveness, high-consistency con-

figuration ($M = 3.79$) is significant for brand attributions, $t(252) = 3.31$, $p > .01$. The contrast between high-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency configuration ($M = 3.73$) versus low-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency configuration ($M = 3.72$) is not significant, $t(252) = -.30$, $p > .10$, for brand attributions. The results of these two contrasts suggest, although not conclusively, that receivers covary consensus information with distinctiveness and consistency in generating brand attributions.

To test this assertion more fully, a third contrast was conducted. This contrast compared the high-consensus, high-distinctiveness, and high-consistency information ($M = 4.34$) with the high-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency negative WOMC ($M = 3.73$) on brand attributions. It was indicated by t test results that the means are significantly different and in the direction supporting the covariation hypothesis, $t(252) = 2.59$, $p > .05$. The pattern of results for these three tests indicates that participants who received negative WOMC, configured as high in consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency, generated stronger brand attributions than all of the other tested scenarios. Such findings suggest that receivers covary all three information dimensions when generating brand attributions toward the focal brand. Thus, in the presence of varying levels of distinctiveness and consistency information, high-consensus information is not to be sufficient for receivers to attribute the negativity of a WOMC message toward the brand.

Results of the omnibus F test, comparing the information configurations on the dependent variable of communicator attributions, indicate a significant effect for negative WOMC, $F(5, 380) = 4.11$, $p < .01$. The *a priori* contrast of the high-consensus, high-distinctiveness, and high-consistency scenario ($M = 4.19$) versus the high-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency configuration ($M = 5.08$) is significant for the communicator-attribution dependent variable, $t(380) = -3.52$, $p > .001$. In addition, the second contrast that compares the low-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency configuration ($M = 4.67$) with the low-consensus, high-distinctiveness, and high-consistency scenario ($M = 4.02$) is also significant for communicator attributions, $t(380) = 2.47$, $p > .05$. Collectively, these results suggest that low levels of distinctiveness information may be an important factor in leading receivers of negative WOMC to attribute the negativity of a message toward the communicator.

GENERAL DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

General Discussion

The influence of negative WOMC on consumers is seemingly significant. Yet, empirical research dealing with this phenomenon is surprisingly limited. In particular, there appears to be a dearth of research that deals with the manner in which consum-

ers cognitively process negative WOMC. This study draws on prior conceptual evidence to develop and test hypotheses relating to the attributional responses used by consumers when encountering negative WOMC. In general, the results support the hypotheses and provide several key contributions.

First, this research found that causal attributions mediate the negative-WOMC–brand evaluation relation. Thus, not only do consumers generate causal attributions in response to negative WOMC, but our results suggest that they are used to influence subsequent brand evaluations. Second, this research, using a broader and—according to Richins (1984)—richer conceptualization of the negative WOMC, found that different combinations of consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency information lead receivers to have differential responses. Third, this research also found that the strength of the focal brand's name influenced consumers' responses to negative WOMC. The use of existing brand names adds realism to researchers' understanding of the WOMC phenomenon, which, up to this point, had been based on empirical investigations that used fictitious brands (e.g., Bone, 1995; Herr et al., 1991).

As noted previously, brand attributions mediated the relation between negative WOMC and brand evaluations for certain information configurations. Specifically, the relation was fully mediated for negative WOMC that was configured as low consensus, low distinctiveness, and high consistency; and low consensus, high distinctiveness, and low consistency. However, the direct effects of high-consensus, high-distinctiveness, and high-consistency WOMC on brand evaluation are strongly, but not completely, attenuated when attributions are considered. Thus, it appears that well organized and compelling negative WOMC can have a direct effect on brand evaluations.

Although previous research emphasized that negative WOMC will have a negative impact on receivers' brand evaluations, our study points out the nongeneralizability of this finding. For example, our results suggest that information configured as low-consensus, low-distinctiveness, and high-consistency negative WOMC may actually increase receivers' brand evaluations. This finding suggests that communicator attributions may be one mechanism that allows receivers of negative WOMC to disassociate the message from the brand. Specifically, receivers will appear to use attributional processes to deflect the negativity away from the brand for this type of WOMC and "rally" to its defense and, as a result, increase evaluations. Consistent with theoretical models of conversational processing that deal with cognitive incongruity (cf. Hilton, 1995), receivers appear to search for a balance between themselves, the communicator, and the brand on receiving negative information from others.

These results may be also used to augment past findings. For example, whereas Herr et al. (1991) findings suggested that receivers may not always find negative WOMC to be diagnostic (i.e., useful), results of this study provide a further explanation of why this is the case. Specifically, our findings suggest that when negative WOMC is attributed toward the communicator (and

not the brand), receivers will not decrease their evaluations of the brand (i.e., they will not use the negative information). Thus, the nature of the causal attributions, generated in response to negative WOMC, may be used as indicators of the extent to which consumers find this information to be diagnostic.

Another interesting finding of this study is that brand name does have a direct effect on the attributions generated by receivers of negative WOMC. Although past research (cf. Herr et al., 1991) suggested that negative WOMC will not have a significant effect on brand evaluations when receivers have strong prior beliefs about the focal brand, it is our belief that brand name (and its association) influences brand evaluations through the cognitive mechanism of attributional processing.

Finally, the results from Study 2 yield some additional insights into receivers' attributional responses to different configurations of negative WOMC. First, the results indicate that negative-WOMC messages containing only high-consensus information (but varying levels of distinctiveness, consensus information, or both) may not lead receivers to generate significantly strong brand attributions. Thus, receivers of negative-WOMC messages that include distinctiveness and consistency information dimensions are not likely to focus on consensus information alone as a means to generate attributions toward the brand. Second, the results also suggest that when high levels of distinctiveness and consistency are paired with high-consensus information, receivers will generate stronger brand attributions as compared to the other information configurations tested in this study. In combination, these results provide additional support for the high-consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency information–brand attribution relation obtained in Study 1.

Negative-WOMC messages containing low-distinctiveness information, on the other hand, may be sufficient to enable receivers to generate attributions toward the communicator. Although future research is needed to examine the generalizability of this finding in other contexts, it appears that low-distinctiveness information provides enough relevant evaluative information about the communicator for the receiver to blame him or her for the negativity. Although not explicitly tested in this study, it is possible that receivers are using the simplest attributional process available; that is, in the absence of contradictory information about the communicator's disposition, receivers apparently discount or ignore other information about the brand (i.e., consensus and consistency) and blame the communicator for the negativity of the message when it is not particularly distinctive. It is interesting to note that a direct linkage between low distinctiveness and communicator attributions is consistent with findings in other settings (e.g., Alicke & Insko, 1984; Bassili & Regan, 1977; Hansen, 1980).

Limitations

Not unlike other empirical research efforts, the results presented in this study are limited by a number of factors—many of which can be addressed in future studies. First, this study dealt with neg-

ative WOMC regarding a single product (personal computers). Although personal computers were purposefully chosen (as they represent a product class with which consumers would be expected to share WOMC), results may not be generalizable to other product categories. Second, the negative-WOMC scenarios were artificial. They were chosen to represent theoretically based information configurations. Future research should attempt to investigate actual negative WOMC to determine if it is configured in a manner similar to that portrayed in our study. It is important to note that previous studies investigating negative WOMC employed a unidimensional view of the concept. The attempt made in this study to examine negative-WOMC message structure could act as a catalyst for future research in this domain. Future research could use different conceptualizations of message structure, such as argument type (e.g., benefit vs. attribute), order of presentation, and message complexity. Third, the WOMC treatments were presented to participants via a tape-recorded message with explicit instructions as to how to listen. Such a method limits participants' opportunities to ask questions and seek clarifications of message points (Smith & Vogt, 1995), and it eliminates some of the interpersonal flavor of WOMC. Thus, future research may attempt to determine if participants' attributional responses to interactive WOMC situations are similar to those observed in this study. Moreover, participants were not afforded the opportunity to hear the negative WOMC on multiple occasions. Future research may be used to determine if receiver responses may have differed had they listened to multiple accounts of the information. Fourth, in this study, brand-name strength was manipulated simultaneously on the two dimensions of affect and familiarity. Although the focus here was to determine the overall effect of brand-name strength on consumers' responses to negative WOMC, future research could isolate the effects of each of these brand-name strength dimensions. Finally, classic attribution theory posits that certain information configurations would lead to interactive attributional responses of receivers (e.g., Person \times Brand attributions). We did not deal with these interactive attributions because theory does not suggest how they would affect our ultimate dependent variable (i.e., brand evaluations); yet, future researchers are advised to consider these types of responses to negative WOMC.

Implications

Findings of this study hold a number of implications for managers. First, managers should be aware that consumers exposed to negative WOMC actively process the information and change their brand evaluations only under certain conditions. For example, it appears that negative WOMC configured in a strong and compelling manner negatively affects brand evaluations. On the other hand, negative WOMC that is less compelling could even have a positive effect on consumers' evaluations of brands (depending on the attributions of the receiver). Thus, it appears that managers do not always need to take corrective action when negative WOMC is generated about their offerings. Corrective action, however, may be needed when

the negative-WOMC message states that others are in consensus with the communicator's view, the focal brand has a unique problem, and it consistently performs poorly.

Second, study results also suggest that consumers have the ability to deflect the negativity of a WOMC message away from a brand. This may be the case as consumers recognize that negative WOMC may be generated for reasons other than dissatisfaction with a brand (e.g., to obtain feelings of power or prestige, to reduce their own postpurchase dissonance, etc.). Managers therefore are encouraged to monitor WOMC, as it may not always prove to be harmful to their brand. Several mechanisms are available to monitor negative WOMC. For example, Bolen (1994) encouraged marketers to listen actively to customer conversations and question them to determine underlying sources of dissatisfaction. We also believe that it would be useful for managers to monitor WOMC by setting up focus groups with opinion leaders. Opinion leaders often initiate negative WOMC (Brooks, 1957) or are, at a minimum, aware of consumer complaints with regard to a particular brand. Marketers should question opinion leaders about the type of negative information that they received from others and details of the situation surrounding the communication. Finally, we encourage managers to monitor negative WOMC that occurs via Internet chat rooms. Hopefully, this and other information will aid managers in determining the degree to which WOMC is configured in a manner similar to high consensus, high distinctiveness, and high consistency.

Third, results suggest that managers may offset the potential effects of negative WOMC by gaining high levels of strength or equity for their brands. Such a view is consistent with theoretical notions (Haugtvedt, Leavitt, & Schneier, 1993; Keller, 1993) contending that high levels of equity allow consumer perceptions about a brand to be resistant to external forces such as negative WOMC. Previous research suggested that higher levels of equity may be gained by enhancing consumer's familiarity with a brand and reinforcing positive affect for that brand (Farquhar, 1989). Although it is obvious that advertising may help managers increase the familiarity of their brands, a well-chosen ad message could build and enhance consumers' affect toward the brand as well (Haugtvedt et al., 1993). In addition, satisfactory brand performance should reinforce the positive associations that customers hold in their memories.

Finally, our findings illustrate that when brand attributions are made in response to strongly configured negative WOMC, evaluations will be reduced for all brands. It is important to realize that strong and compelling negative WOMC will lead consumers to generate brand attributions, which, in turn, penalizes brand evaluations for high- and low-strength brands. Given the complex set of interrelations among brand-name strength, negative-WOMC configurations, and attributional processing, marketers may benefit from a systematic understanding of how (potential) customers process all marketplace information about their brands.

In conclusion, this article represents an initial attempt to model a process consumers employ when receiving multidimensional negative-WOMC messages. The results indicate that such messages not only affect brand evaluations directly, but also have indirect influences through causal attributions made by consumers. In addition, the results highlight the usefulness of brand factors in influencing the effects of negative WOMC. Although the study yielded several interesting results, a more systematic research effort regarding consumers' processing of negative WOMC is needed before researchers can confidently make definitive conclusions about this common marketplace phenomenon.

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APPENDIX

Introduction for All Three Scenarios:

- Person 1: “Hey Pat I’m thinking about buying a computer and I noticed that you were able to answer those computer questions pretty easily.”
- Pat: “Yeah, it’s sort of a hobby of mine.”
- Person 1: “Well, do you know anything about the Compaq (Everex) PC?”

- Pat: “Yeah, I know a lot about ‘em. Why, what do ya’ want to know?”
- Person 1: “I know we’ve only got a couple of seconds before we get started again, but I’ve been thinking about buying a Compaq (Everex), what do you think?”

High Consensus, High Distinctiveness, High Consistency Scenario Manipulation

- Pat: “Well, I don’t like ‘em and lot of other people I have talked to don’t like Compaq (Everex) either.”
- Person 1: “Really, like who?”
- Pat: “Well, a bunch of different people I know have said they have had some sort of problem with ‘em.”
- Person 1: “Yeah, but what about you? Have you used ‘em?”
- Pat: “Yeah, I’ve used Compaq (Everex) a lot and every time something always went wrong. It just seemed like every time I boot one up I have some kind of a problem.”
- Person 1: “So, you don’t think much of Compaq (Everex) then, huh?”
- Pat: “Well, no, I don’t think much of Compaq (Everex). But, I could say some good things about some of the other brands out there. You know, there are lots of other good PCs, but I don’t think Compaq (Everex) is one of ‘em.”

Low Consensus, Low Distinctiveness, High Consistency Scenario Manipulation

- Pat: “Well, I don’t like ‘em. But, you know, a lot of other people I have talked to like Compaq (Everex).”
- Person 1: “Really, like who?”
- Pat: “Well, a bunch of different people I know have said they haven’t had any problems with ‘em.”
- Person 1: “Yeah, but what about you? Have you used ‘em?”
- Pat: “Yeah, I’ve used Compaq (Everex) a lot and every time something always went wrong. It just seemed like every time I boot one up I have some kind of a problem.”
- Person 1: “So, you don’t think much of Compaq (Everex) then, huh?”
- Pat: “Well, no, I don’t think much of Compaq (Everex). Though, to be honest, I can’t say many good things about the other brands out there either. You know, there aren’t many good PCs, and I don’t think Compaq (Everex) is a good one either.”

Low Consensus, High Distinctiveness, Low Consistency Scenario Manipulation

- Pat: “Well, I don’t like ‘em. But, you know, a lot of other people I have talked to like Compaq (Everex).”

Person 1: "Really, like who?"

Pat: "Well, a bunch of different people I know have said they haven't had any problems with 'em."

Person 1: "Yeah, but what about you? Have you used 'em?"

Pat: "Yeah, I've used Compaq (Everex) a lot, and the last time something went wrong. But, you know, I hadn't had any problems with it except for that last time."

Person 1: "So, you don't think much of Compaq (Everex) then, huh?"

Pat: "Well, no, I don't think much of Compaq (Everex). But, I could say some good things about some of the other brands out there. You know, there are lots of other good PCs, but I don't think Compaq (Everex) is one of 'em."

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