Valenced Fit Reviews in the Online Apparel Retailing Purchase Decision Process

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Significance. An important source of product information today is online consumer reviews (OCR) (e.g., Chen & Xie, 2008). OCR are considered a form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that is defined as "any positive or negative verbal statement made by potential, actual, or former customers of a product or company" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). Fit reviews (FR)—the OCR specifically regarding clothing fit—have been found to supply important evaluative information and were positively related to the customer's self-reported level of satisfaction with the product (Shin & McKinney, 2017). However, there is a gap in knowledge about the full role of FR in consumer purchase decisions in the online apparel shopping context. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to explore how FR affects the consumer decision-making process during online apparel shopping. Specifically, the study focuses on whether and how the valence of FR (negative vs. positive) influences consumers' responses to the FR, overall product information (OPI), and the online retailer.

Theoretical background. The first two stages of Rogers (2003)' innovation decision model (IDM) (i.e., knowledge and persuasion), credibility, and confidence in purchase decision (CIP) are applied in the conceptual model. IDM is a useful theoretical basis for this study in that apparel is a continuous innovation due to its constant small changes in styling due to the fashion process. At the knowledge stage, when an individual first encounters an innovation, he or she tries to understand how the new apparel style functions (or would look on the body) (Rogers, 2003). At the persuasion stage, individuals actively seek out information about the new product, decide what messages are credible before interpreting them, and develop a general perception of the innovation that determines their behavior (Rogers, 2003). Because credibility is a key factor in assessing information in IDM, two aspects of credibility specific to the online shopping context (review credibility and site credibility) were included. CIP is an important concept, especially in an unfamiliar shopping environment. Based on the negativity effect found in many eWOM studies (e.g., Lee, Rodgers, & Kim, 2009), we posit that negative FS have more effect on responses to FS (i.e., review credibility, review evoked CIP, and attitude toward the review) than positive FS (H1-H3). We further hypothesize that consumer responses to FS have a positive influence on responses to OPI (i.e., site credibility and overall CIP) that affects responses to the online retailer (i.e., attitude and future purchase intention) (H4-H14).

Methods. A one-factor (valence of the FR) within-subject experimental design was used to examine the influence of valence of FR on consumer responses to FR, OPI, and the online retailer. To develop the stimuli, four steps were taken: (1) selecting the apparel category, (2) selecting the specific product, (3) developing product information and valenced FR, and (4) conducting a pretest to check manipulation of the valenced FR. Based on pretest ratings of apparel categories and pictures of garments by female samples accessed through Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT), a shirt was selected as a stimulus and a mock website was developed to include the apparel product, product information,

and positive and negative FR. Results of a manipulation check of the positive and negative FR indicated significant differences in perceived valences for each FR (t = -15.20, p < .001, η_2 = .99).

   In the main study, a repeated ANOVA analysis and a structural equation modeling analysis were performed. A total of 418 female consumers completed an online self-administrated survey that asked them to read each valenced FR in the mock website and answer the questions through AMT. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 83 years (M=35.00) and the majority of the participants were White or European American (81.6%).

   Results. See figures below. The repeated ANOVA analyses did not support H1-H3, in that positive FR was more effective than negative FR for participants in terms of perceived review credibility [F(1, 415) = 5.06, p < .05, $M_{Positive(P)}$= 5.37 (SD=.93), $M_{Negative(N)}$=5.26 (SD=.99)], review evoked CIP [F(1, 413)=23.41, p < .001, M_P= 4.97 (SD=1.48), M_N=4.48 (SD = 1.79)], and attitude toward the review [F(1, 414)=425.64, p < .001, M_P= 5.69 (SD=1.14), M_N=3.53 (SD=1.60)]. Post-hoc tests were performed to explain the opposite direction of hypotheses. There was a moderating effect of product likability on the relationship between valenced FR and responses to FR that supports selective perception in the knowledge stage of IDM (Rogers, 2003) and confirmation bias (Kassin, Goldstein, & Savitsky, 2003) (see figure on the right).

   According to the structural model analysis with maximum likelihood estimation method, the *chi*-square test and fit indices showed that the hypothesized model fits the data well (χ_2=305.538, *df*=108, p<.001, CFI = .97, TLI=.96, RMSEA = .07, and SRMR = .08). The structural model supported 6 of 11 hypotheses (see figure on the left). In an ad-hoc mediation test, there were indirect effects of site credibility on future purchase intention (.20) and of overall CIP on future purchase intention (.09) through attitude to the online retailer.
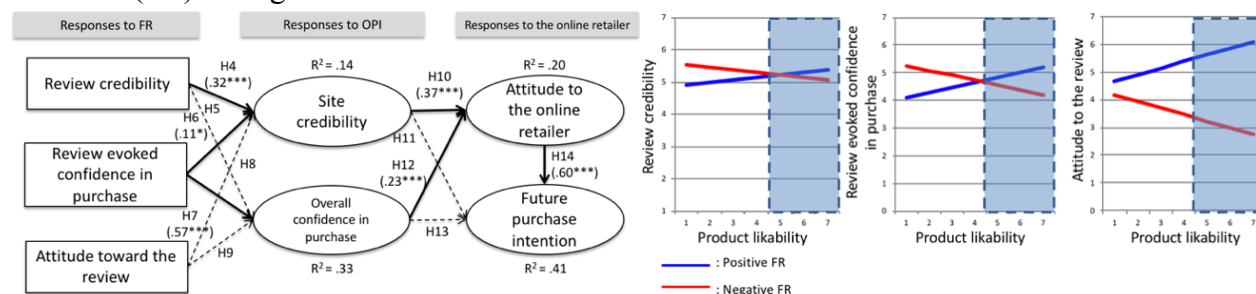
   Conclusions and Implications. The analyses showed that positive FR was more compelling than negative FR for female consumers when they like the apparel product. Two aspects of information credibility (i.e., review and site credibility) specific to the online shopping context played important roles in the consumer purchase decision process. Consumer CIP evoked by both FR and the provided OPI were also key determinants of the consumer purchase decision process. Online retailers should strategically highlight customers' positively valenced FR and should prompt consumers to leave valenced FR because valenced FR positively affects review credibility and review evoked CIP that enhances customers' perception of site credibility and overall CIP after browsing OPI on the website. The FR invoked process consequently improved consumers' future purchase intention through their positive attitude to the online retailer.

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