

## The Role of Reward and Gender in Inducing Consumers' Willingness to Post Reviews

Ran Huang and Sejin Ha  
University of Tennessee Knoxville, USA

Keywords: Online review, reward, deception, ethicality, gender

**Introduction** Over two thirds of American consumers aged 18-64 (78%) rely on online reviews for making purchase decisions (Ipsos, 2012). Recognizing the potential power of online consumer reviews, many fashion retailers attempt to encourage consumer participation in e-word-of-mouth (e-WOM) activities and offering monetary rewards is widely used to do so (Sun, Dong, & McIntyre, 2017). For instance, Forever 21 provides promotional payments to consumers encourage them making product recommendations (i.e., “purchase hauls”) at YouTube (Sun et al., 2017). DSW, a fashion retail chain, sends shoppers review invitation emails with a chance to win a \$25 bonus card. In spite of the popularity of this emerging marketing practice, however, little is known about its effectiveness. This study aims to contribute to the literature by addressing: *How do consumers perceive this reward-based e-WOM marketing?* We argue that the practice may backfire when consumers form an impression that this marketing effort is to deceive (Bughin, Doogan, & Vetvik, 2012). Furthermore, given that males and females exhibit different cognitive responses to marketing communications messages (Koc, 2002), males and females may react to this marketing program differently. The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to explore a psychological process in which consumers develop perceptions of reward-based e-WOM marketing and subsequent responses and (2) to examine the moderation of gender in the psychological process.

**Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses** This research builds on the notion of persuasion knowledge model (PKM) that consumers tend to develop knowledge of persuasion motives from marketers and respond to them accordingly (Friestad & Wright, 1994). When receiving an email of reward-based review invitations, consumers use their theories to interpret and identify a retailer's motives for this marketing attempt. When it is conceived as a mere attempt to lure consumers like a typical promotion offering, they may perceive the practice negatively. Specifically, we propose that offering a monetary reward for e-review invitations may trigger consumers to perceive it as a lure rather than as a favorable invitation, thereby developing negative perceptions such as deception (Roman, 2010) and ethical judgment of the act (Story & Hess, 2010). Deception is defined as one's perception that a retailer tries to mislead consumers to believe or behave in favor of something that is not necessarily true (Bok, 1989). Ethicality represents a consumer's evaluation of the morality of a subject (e.g., a firm, brand, service or product) (Brunk & Bluemelhuber, 2011). Hunt and Vitell (2006) explained that negative perceptions toward a marketing attempt lead to ethical judgment and behavioral intents. Accordingly, a serial mediation is hypothesized:

**H1.** The deteriorating effect of reward on consumers' willingness to post reviews is explained by higher deception, which results in a lower ethicality.

Compared with men, women tend to evoke a greater number of cognitive thoughts about the judgment-related cues (Koc, 2002; Meyers-Levy & Sternthal, 1991). When assessing the reward-based e-WOM marketing, female consumers will undergo cognitive thinking of deception and ethicality, which will eventually hinder their willingness to post reviews. Thus,

**H2.** Gender moderates the effect of reward on consumers' willingness to post reviews. Specifically, for female consumers, the negative effect of reward on willingness to post reviews is activated through perceptions of higher deception and lower ethicality, but for male consumers, this effect is mitigated.

**Methods and Results** We performed a single factor between-subjects experiment. Participants were recruited through Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform; they were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions with different monetary rewards available (\$0 vs. \$50). A total of 106 final responses were used for data analysis ( $M_{age} = 40$ , female = 50.9%). First, a serial mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Macro with 1000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2013). The results confirmed that deception and ethicality mediate the relationship between reward and willingness to post ( $B = -.21$ ,  $SE = .10$ , 95% CI [-.45, -.05]), supporting hypothesis 1 (Figure 1). Second, a moderated mediation testing indicated that there is no interaction between reward and gender, rejecting hypothesis 2. However, the result provided directional support that females process reward-based e-WOM marketing through two underlying mechanisms – deception ( $B = .30$ ,  $SE = .17$ , 95% CI [.06, .74]) and ethicality ( $B = -.44$ ,  $SE = .22$ , 95% CI [-1.11, -.13]) but males do not.

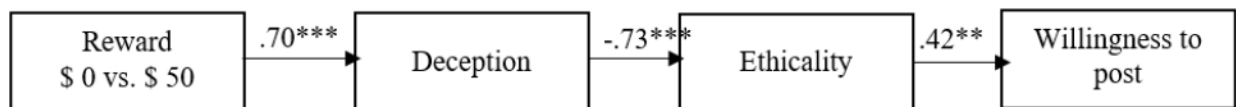


Figure 1. A resulted model

**Discussion and Implications** Our findings illuminate a serial psychological process in which consumers develop perceptions of and consequent reactions to reward-based e-review invitations from fashion retailers. The findings revealed that monetary rewards may not work efficiently to persuade consumers. In fact, the rewards could bring negative influences on consumers' e-WOM activities. Such negative effect is explained by higher deception and lower ethicality. Fashion marketers, especially those who target women, should be cautious as to how to design and implement e-WOM communication strategies.

*References available upon request*