

# The Impact of Online Comments on Consumer Attitude Change - Focus on the Key Concepts and Evidence of Attitude Change

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**Abstract:** *As a form of online word-of-mouth (WOM), online comments (or online reviews) are a way for consumers to understand products and judge the quality of products. With the widespread application of online reviews in e-commerce, online comments directly affect consumers' purchasing decisions to a certain extent. This essay will try to demonstrate that online comments of online marketing information are affected by users or consumers' cognition, emotions, and behavioral tendencies. Marketers could use online comments as a representative of word of mouth (WOM) to persuade consumers' attitude change and products purchase. Meanwhile, through the analysis of the main concepts such as attitude, attitude change, and persuasion, discuss the impact of online reviews on consumer attitude changes and limitations. Additionally, it will discuss some potential limitations.*

**Keywords:** *Online Comments, Attitude Change, Persuasion*

## 1. Introduction

The development of online social networks enables online social marketing becoming one of the main marketing approaches. Online marketers tend to publish a variety of promotional information or advertisements about their products or services on the Internet, and users or consumers usually make online comments to describe the individual experience and satisfaction about the products. Consumers could get a large number of online comments when searching for products information from the Internet or making purchase decisions. Online comments could help the consumer to understand products, which could also influence consumer attitude and purchase behavior; thus, it could be said that online comments belong to the word of mouth. The online comments of users or consumers as the interactive phenomenon are the effective feedback sources in the development of brands and products for online social marketing (Cao et al., 2009) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Persuasion performs an important role in every aspect of social lives in contemporary society. Successful persuasion in online social marketing means changing the attitudes of consumers to attract consumers to purchase. As Petty & Brinol (2008, p.53) <sup>[2]</sup> points out, attitude change is the focus and purpose of persuasion, which could be influenced by beliefs, emotions, and behavioral tendencies. The structure of the attitude includes three basic components: cognitive, affective and behavioral components (Maio & Haddock, 2012) <sup>[3]</sup>. In general, the cognition and emotion of certain objects of people might determine the tendency of attitudes, thus cognitive and affective changes might lead to behavioral changes. The basic approach to change cognition and emotion is persuasion.

This essay will attempt to argue that online comments of online marketing information are influenced by the cognitive, affective, and behavioral tendencies of the users or consumers, and marketers could use the online comments as the representative of the word of mouth (WOM) to persuade consumers' attitude change and products purchase. This essay will first introduce the analysis of the main concepts of the attitude, attitude change, and persuasion. It will then discuss the online comments (or online reviews) and the impact on consumer attitude change and limitations. Finally, it will discuss some potential limitations.

## 2. What is an attitude

Attitude is one of the most common and significant psychological phenomenon in human society. In general, people in the society might have a certain attitude towards themselves as well as their surroundings, whether it is correct or incorrect or people like it or dislike it. There are many psychologists

and researchers have defined the concept of attitude, such as “a general and enduring positive or negative feeling about some person, object, or issue”, and “an overall evaluation of an object that is based on cognitive, affective, and behavioral information” (Cacioppo, 1981, p.7, cited in Maio & Haddock, 2012, p. 4) <sup>[3]</sup>. As could be seen from the definitions of attitude, it is a psychological reaction to a certain tendency, which is related to the cognitive, affective and behavioral components. The cognitive mainly refers to the individual's understanding of the attitude object, including the facts, knowledge, and beliefs; the affective component may refer to the emotions of individual, including the positive or negative evaluation of the object; the behavioral component mainly refers to the tendency of before the individual to make certain behavior (Crano & Prislin, 2008; Petty & Brinol, 2008; Maio & Haddock, 2010) <sup>[4]</sup>. In general, the cognitive and affective component might determine the tendency of behavior. Therefore, in the marketing process, the influence and change of the affective and cognitive components of consumers are the important ways or methods to change the attitude of consumers, which are also the focus of attitude change research. The three components of attitude clearly and accurately indicate the composition of attitude, which could contribute to providing a starting point for attitude change research.

### **3. Attitude change**

Every individual in society might receive a large deal of information in daily life, encountering a variety of promotions and persuasions. According to the cognitive response theory (Greenwald, 1968; Petty et al., 1981, cited in Petty & Brinol, 2008, p.53) <sup>[2]</sup>, external information could stimulate individual thoughts and determine the extent of the impact. Everyone might be facing persuasions and varying degrees of attitude change. Attitude change is the changes in the attitude that a person has influenced by external information or opinions, that is, people's general evaluation of objects or issues are changed due to the social influences. Social influence mainly refers to the external factors that could influence the individual attitude change. For instance, on the one hand, individual attitudes change may be affected by the various social groups, such as families and peers. The education from parents and parents' personal behaviors easily influence the attitudes and values of their children. In the group or team, personal attitudes tend to be consistent with the attitudes of members and peers. On the other hand, the indigenous socio-cultural context may also influence the attitude change, for example, history, culture and political propaganda are imperceptibly affecting people (Liu, 2008) <sup>[5]</sup>.

It is difficult to deny that the effective attitude change is a relatively complex psychological process. Changing attitude requires changing the composition of attitude, especially the cognition and emotion. In the marketing process, the persuasion carried out by the marketer usually changes people's cognition or emotion, which thus changes people's attitudes. Therefore, it is essential to study the theory of attitude change: persuasion.

### **4. Persuasion**

Persuasion is the main method of attitude change, which plays a significant role in social interaction. Persuasion could be defined as an attempt to make the attitude change by accepting information from another individual or group (Fogg, 2003; Petty & Brinol, 2008) <sup>[6]</sup>. Carl Hovland, a contemporary social psychologist, who proposed the learning theory at Yale University: people not only understood the information associated with attitudes, but also learned the values and emotions related with the information (Liu, 2008) <sup>[5]</sup>. The significance of this theory is to link attitudes to the information transfer and emotional transfer, which also involves the three components of attitude. Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding persuasion. As Petty and Brinol (2008, p.54) <sup>[2]</sup> points out, ELM model presents two main persuasion routes: central route and peripheral route. The former refers to the attitude formation or change of consumers through thinking and analysing the marketing information, that is, the attitude change of the consumer is based on rational analysis and thinking. The latter refers to the attitude changes of consumers which unrelated to the rational analysis or thinking but relying on external factors, such as a number of argument. The theory of persuasion enables researchers having a clearer understanding of attitudes and helps researchers to study the attitude change. In the field of marketing, persuasion could help marketers to change the attitude of consumers, so as to persuade consumers to purchase their products, achieving the economic purpose of marketing. In addition to marketing information from marketers, the word of mouth effect of online comments could help to persuade to change the attitude of consumers about marketing information and its products.

## **5. Online comments and the credibility of online comments**

In the contemporary, consumers on the Internet mainly through two ways to get the information about the products, one is the product advertising from companies or merchants; the other one is the published online comments (or online reviews) from other consumers based on their own product experience and evaluation. Online comments are the kind of new form of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, which are different from the traditional form. The effect of traditional word of mouth (WOM) is mainly confined to the local population, while online comments could affect the majority of Internet users. Online comments are based on other consumers' own experiences and views, which could provide the product information and relevant evaluation for consumers. Online comments as the significant and indispensable way of providing information and persuasion are widely adopted by consumers. It could help consumers reduce the uncertainty and risk when making the purchase decision.

The persuasion effect of online comments depends on the credibility of online comments. On the one hand, consumers might be more interested in the marketing information with online comments than the marketing information without online comments. It is mainly related to the credibility of information. The credibility of the information provided by other consumers is relatively higher than that provided by the companies or merchants. In general, online comments express the real feelings of consumers after using the product. Online comments not only relate to the attribute information of the product itself, but also could provide information about the commodity price, user experience, and overall evaluation. In general, compared to perceptual and subjective information, the objective information has a higher degree of credibility, which might effectively change the attitude of people. This kind of information from other consumers might be more reliable than the marketing information from marketers. On the other hand, the higher frequency of the information in the online comments might mean that the higher credibility of the information. To a certain extent, the frequency represents the extent of recognition. The publisher of the acknowledged information performs as a kind of opinion leader, which might have the certain credibility. It could be concluded that online comments which have certain credibility could be convinced by consumers, influencing the attitude change of consumers effectively.

## **6. Marketers use online comments to persuade consumers to change attitudes**

To some extent, online comments represent the attitude of the commentator to the purchased product. Online comments are both the information communicator and information recommender. Positive content of online comments might have a strong persuasive effect which could increase the other consumers' trust degree and preferences of the product, while negative content of online comments or lower ratings could cause a lower trust degree and preferences, forming a negative attitude and dispelling the purchase intentions. Online comments are the effective sources that marketers could persuade customers to change their attitudes and purchase products.

Online comments enable online marketers to effectively monitor online comments on online social media, for example, marketers could promote the products by emphasizing those favorable online comments. With the development of online social networks, visualization of the network structure enables marketers to identify the "influencer" and "connector". The "influencer" is usually the opinion leader who may influence or change attitudes of that are not influencers (Xu et al., 2008, cited in Cao et al., 2009, p.2)<sup>[1]</sup>. Marketers could filter the online comments by opinion leaders, selecting the online comments which are in favor of the brand promotion and production marketing. Marketers could promote these online comments as word of mouth (WOM) marketing, which is beneficial to persuade consumers' attitude change.

In addition, marketers could encourage consumers to comment on relevant websites, such as establishing a better online comment platform. The more online comments there are, the higher popularity the product obtains. To some extent, more prevalence of the products means the higher possibility for consumers to concern about the products. It might help the marketers to achieve the effect of persuasion and marketing.

## **7. Potential limitations**

To begin with, the credibility of online comments is not absolute. The content of online comments does not exclude the possibility of false comments, such as deliberately falsifying the facts. With the popularity of online comments, there are some marketers attempting to change consumer attitudes and

persuade consumers to purchase by making false comments, for example, some marketers might disguise marketing advertisements as the word of mouth (WOM). In addition, some commentators might have malicious behaviors for personal purposes or irresponsible attitude. The emergence of false comments will not only reduce the credibility of online comments, but also damage the benefits of marketers.

Moreover, it is difficult to guarantee the timeliness of online comments. In general, recent online comments may be more persuasive than the online comments that were published long ago. Due to the continuous update of the products, the latest online comment could be more accurate to describe the current product characteristics. However, the release of online comments is relatively random and man-made. Thus, it is difficult to guarantee the timeliness.

## 8. Conclusion

As Chou et al. (2013)<sup>[7]</sup> point out, online comments (or online reviews) could persuade consumers' attitude change and purchase decisions. When searching for the products information from the Internet or making a purchase decision, there are a large number of online comments could help consumers to get relevant information of the products or services, which may also affect the attitude change and the purchase behavior of consumers. It could be said that online comments are the kind of word of mouth (WOM).

This essay argued that online comments on online marketing information are influenced by cognitive, affective and behavioral tendencies by users or consumers, and marketers could use online comments as a representative of word of mouth (WOM) to persuade consumers to change attitudes and purchases products. Due to the randomness and man-made nature of online comments, there are few potential limitations, such as the credibility of online comments is not absolute, as well as the timeliness of online comments is difficult to guarantee. Therefore, it is necessary for online companies or merchants to pay attention to the impact of word of mouth (WOM) on consumer attitude change in marketing propaganda. In addition, in the context of moral and regulatory limits, companies or merchants could take advantage of online comments which as a representative of word of mouth, to make consumers attitude change and achieve the greatest effect of persuasion.

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