



ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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“Tell Me Again How I Need ‘Healthy’ Whole Grains?!”: Collective Assessment of Online Credibility and Negotiation of Truth in Difficult Decision-Making Processes

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This research focuses on consumer narratives across different online platforms arising from consumption practices associated with the gluten-free lifestyle. Through a netnographic investigation, we describe the collective credibility assessment and negotiation of truth that takes place when consumers encounter negative eWOM or comments from experts such as registered dietitians.

[to cite]:

Ana Babic and Kristine de Valck (2013) , " “Tell Me Again How I Need ‘Healthy’ Whole Grains?!”: Collective Assessment of Online Credibility and Negotiation of Truth in Difficult Decision-Making Processes ", in E - European Advances in Consumer Research Volume 10, eds. Gert Cornelissen, Elena Reutskaja, and Ana Valenzuela, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 13-15.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1013847/volumes/v10e/E-10>

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Who, What, How and Why to Believe? Secrets, Revelations, and Truth Negotiations in Consumer Behavior

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Paper #1: “Tell Me Again How I Need ‘Healthy’ Whole Grains?!”: Collective Assessment of Online Credibility and Negotiation of Truth in Difficult Decision-Making Processes

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Paper #2: Do You Know What I Know? : Negotiating The “Secret” Brand Backstory

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Paper #3: What Does Green Mean? : Managing Divergent Meanings of Corporate Social Responsibility for Different Market Segments

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SESSION OVERVIEW

This session focuses on how consumers assess the credibility, authenticity, and truth of information. We take a broad approach to the notion of information, including information received through electronic word of mouth from other consumers and experts in the field (paper 1), information revealed about the making of a brand, its “backstory” (paper 2), and information communicated by companies, via their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts (paper 3). Collectively, the papers show that, regardless of the source of information, consumers must assess the credibility of the sender (the Who), and the information presented (the What) and negotiate the meaning of the message and its implications for their relationships with the brand, company, or consumption practice (the How and Why?). Although they focus on different contexts of consumption (food, television, and green CSR claims), the papers reveal strikingly similar distinctions about the processes that affect who, what and how consumers individually and collectively believe and about the reasons they chose to believe or not. In particular, all three papers reveal a distinction between insiders and outsiders, between those in the front stage and those in the back stage: who reveals? who learns? who conceals?

Because these negotiations of meaning often involve a communal process, all three papers take into account the community of other consumers. We recognize that the reception of information about a brand or practice is often received in a public setting, whether it be an online platform (paper 1), an exhibit (paper 2), or a community of peers (paper 3). As such, consumers’ understanding of the information is also shaped by others’ responses to and understanding of the information. For this reason, sociocultural factors emerge as important moderators of the responses, as documented and with social class in paper 3.

The papers in the sessions all follow the Consumer Culture Theory tradition. To tackle the complexity of this meaning-making process, the researchers employ depth interviews and netnography to gather rich consumer narratives and enable a thorough understanding of the “how” consumer choose to believe (or not) the information they receive.

We would love to have Sidney Levy discuss the intersections between these three papers. Drawing from his own research on consumers’ gullibility, he will offer his own insights regarding what and why consumers choose to believe.

“Tell Me Again How I Need ‘Healthy’ Whole Grains?!”—Collective Assessment of Online Credibility and Negotiation of Truth in Difficult Decision-Making Processes

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The constantly growing amount of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has been significantly impacting the way consumers make purchase decisions. We define eWOM as online consumer-generated content related to consumption experiences presented in various formats, including text, image, video, audio, and scale rating, on multiple platforms, including forums, review sites, social networks, blogs, microblogs, bookmarking sites, and media sharing sites. Word of mouth is the primary source for purchase referral for food and beverage brands with as many as 46% of consumers collecting information via online recommendations about food and beverages in order to make purchase decisions (Affinitive, 2012).

In this paper, we are interested in examining how consumers use online textual recommendations to inform their choice of a dietary plan or lifestyle. Often, such a choice represents a difficult decision because it involves choosing between several similarly attractive options, i.e., compromise alternatives (Simonson, 1989). The consumers then tend to seek support online and bond with like-minded individuals, as was already demonstrated in the work about online communities (Chalmers Thomas, Price, and Schau, forthcoming; Kozinets, 1999; Leimeister, Ebner, and Krcmar, 2005).

It is plausible that consumers rely on different cues to assess the credibility of information they are presented with. A long history of research finds that credibility is a multifaceted concept with two primary dimensions, expertise and trustworthiness, and secondary factors such as source attractiveness, professionalism, homophily, prior knowledge, and fairness (Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz, 1969; Moore and Rodgers, 2005). While some research has shown that eWOM may have higher credibility and relevance to customers than market-created online sources of information, other researchers warn that Internet users are increasingly indulging in content verification behaviors and are thus becoming more vigilant (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000). Various models have been used in the past decade to describe online credibility assessment (see Metzger, 2007 for a review). For instance, Cheung, Luo, Sia, and Cheng (2009) found that confirmation with eWOM receiver’s prior beliefs can be a strong informative cue to credibility. Similarly, Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders (2010) demonstrated various collective techniques for credibility assessment, including social information pooling and social confirmation of personal opinion. Finally, Mackiewicz (2010) showed how credibility can be constructed through interaction with readers.

We aim to investigate a crucial assumption in the word of mouth theory—that consumers’ messages carry far higher credibility and trust than traditional media—and answer the following research questions: 1) How does a community of consumers assess other consumers’ online credibility? 2) Which cues to online credibility (e.g., source attractiveness, expertise, homophily, etc.) does a community rely on when presented with difficult decisions? 3) How does a community of consumers approach contradicting information (before and) after making a difficult decision? 4) How do consumers deal with the perception of being different and/or deviant from the norm?

We use a longitudinal approach to investigate horizontal credibility assessment practices (on a community vs. personal level) in several online communities centered around difficult decision-making processes with salient long-term consequences: the choice of a gluten-free lifestyle. While more and more consumers are being diagnosed with various food insensitivities and illnesses such as Celiac, the choice to avoid eating grains is still considered to be quite radical. Interestingly, it is also against the common “food guide pyramids”, i.e. guides showing the recommended intake for each food group, which are published and distributed by government institutions and health officials. We conceptualize these official discourses of governments and other administrative bodies about optimal food choices and intake as the front stage (Goffman, 1959), with consumers’ lived experiences and perceptions of health make up the back stage. These experiences consequently become the focal topic of discussion and negotiation in various online platforms, such as blogs, online forums, and social networks.

Through a netnographic investigation (Kozinets, 2010), we demonstrate that the credibility assessment process is specific to the online context and can include a negotiation of truth among community members. We also observe that some cues to online credibility investigated in extant literature do not seem to carry as much weight as homophily and prior knowledge in such an assessment process. Consider Susan’s comment on one registered dietitian’s blog post that “many healthy foods are eliminated or significantly decreased including whole grains and fruits. Many nutrients and variety is also limited [from this kind of lifestyle]”: “I haven’t eaten wheat for almost 17 years. I’m at a normal weight for my height, rarely get sick, look 10 years younger than I really am, and have plenty of energy. Tell me again why eating wheat is necessary and how “unrealistic and unhealthy” this diet is?” Kate responded to the same claim with the following statement: “124 pounds down after eliminating grains, high sugar fruits and starchy (high carb) veggies. Tell me again how I need ‘healthy whole grains’?” Similar reactions were observed across other online platforms, such as social networks, where consumers tried to defend their lifestyle against mainstream recommendations. For instance, consider Andrew’s reaction to one consumer’s negative Facebook comment: “Why comment here if you don’t buy into the plan. So negative and annoying.” We observe how through their collective assessments and negotiations, the consumers reveal new information and bring forward their “truth” to front stage, and in some cases, they even drive the change of official discourse.

Our findings expand the prior work on eWOM which mostly revolved around single-purchase contexts for medium-involvement goods and services, such as books, digital cameras, and theatres. By demonstrating that a lifestyle community selectively adopts eWOM and collectively assesses credibility to negotiate the truth about the optimal eating habits with other consumers, as well as authoritative sources of information, such as fitness experts, medical doctors and dietitians, we also contribute to prior work on online communities, credibility, and difficult decision-making.

Do You Know What I Know? : Negotiating The “Secret” Brand Backstory

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Whilst many brands choose to remain tight-lipped on the magic behind their product, consumers sometimes have the opportunity to go “behind-the-scenes” or into the “backstage” where they can access the backstory or “making of” a brand. Bonus feature DVDs in the case of media brands, experiential activities such as special tours or museum exhibits (Daily Mail 2011) in the case of traditional brands offer information about the brand biography (Avery, Paharia,

Keinan, and Schor 2010), the history of the brand, hence revealing many of the brand’s secrets. Although understood as “essential to understanding aspects of its consumption” (Diamond et al. 2009, 123) the brand backstory experience itself and its contribution to consumers’ experience of the brand has not yet been deeply investigated. Of particular interest within this research is how consumers individually and communally negotiate and maintain the secretive nature of the brand backstory.

Goffman’s (1959) distinctions between the front and back regions and their functions in supporting the social performance provide a useful base to explore this phenomenon. Whereas the “front” is a social place in which “hosting” occurs, the “back” is a space where preparation for the construction of the performance occurs (e.g. kitchens, boiler rooms) (Goffman, 1959). The performance gains credence by limiting access to the backstage because revealing too much information may “discredit the performance out front” (MacCannell, 1973, 591). The backstage of a brand thus reveals its “inner workings” (MacCannell, 1973, 595), promises to be authentic (Gammon and Fear, 2006), and allows consumers access to esoteric information to which they would not otherwise be privy. Yet, we still know little about how consumers negotiate the meaning of the brand backstory and, in turn, how the revelation of brand secrets, through the backstory, affects their relationships with the brand. The wealth of literature on secrets agrees that the boundaries created by secrets regulate and manage social relationships by creating dichotomies (insiders vs. outsiders, revealers vs. concealers, revealers vs. learners etc.) (Bok, 1982; Derlega and Chaikin, 1977; Vermeir and Margócsy, 2010, Vrij et al., 2002). How, then, might consumers respond to the brand backstory, where they can access staged “secrets” about the brand?

To answer this question, this research relies on the discourses surrounding *Outrageous Fortune: The Exhibition*. This 2010 museum exhibition in Auckland, New Zealand, delved into the “behind-the-scenes” of the television series by featuring the inspirations that sparked the writers and brainstorming notes for each episode, a display of costumes and props, displays that psychiatrically dissected the personalities of the main characters, and most notably an erected stage set from the show that visitors were able to walk through and interact with. To obtain deep insights about consumers’ experiences of the brand backstory and their negotiation of the “secret”, we conducted 24 phenomenological in-depth interviews with visitors of the six-month long exhibition. Participants shared their motivations and expectations for visiting the exhibit, their general experiences of it, and their reactions to each element as well as their thoughts, feelings and actions concerning the brand after visiting the exhibit.

Initial findings reveal the process of negotiating the “secret” backstory. Some visitors of the exhibition actively “worked” to gather additional information (active agents) whereas others perused the exhibition casually gaining insights about the backstory (voyeurs). In negotiating the “secretiveness” of the backstory, voyeurs do not acknowledge the constructed nature of the backstory, accepting what is presented as encompassing the entire backstory of the brand. On the other hand, active agents recognize that the exhibition backstory does not reveal all, that there are other secrets beyond what is presented; they acknowledge the commercial implications, for the producers of the exhibition, of revealing “secrets”. And, whereas all visitors understand that the creators of the backstory hold control of the “secrets,” they differ in their willingness to accept the backstory as legitimate. This is reflected in how much they, themselves, maintain the aura of secrecy, by relinquishing and revealing information provided in the backstory to others. Voyeurs maintain the confidentiality and respect for the disclosure provided to them in the secret by

either letting the information ruminate within them or disclosing to certain individuals close to them such as family members as a way to process the revelations. Active agents on the other hand are more likely to broadly disclose pieces of information to others (such as online forum members) as a way in which to demonstrate their access as an “insider” and to associate themselves with a degree of status in granting others access to the “secret”. Secrecy was maintained by concealing parts of the information gained or by emphasizing the extraordinary value of the “secret”. Common to both active agents and voyeurs however, was a desire to maintain the social boundary distinctions created by the secret, thus preserving the aura of secrecy and enhancing their personal relationship with the brand.

This research contributes to the body of research on the characteristics and nature of revealing personal secrets to others (Caughlin et al. 2005, Venetis et al., 2012; Vrij et al., 2002), by identifying the further complexities of sharing revealed secrets, not owned by the discloser.

What Does Green Mean?: Managing Divergent Meanings of Corporate Social Responsibility for Different Market Segments

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Promoting products and companies as both socially and environmentally sustainable is a core component of many contemporary marketing strategies and increasingly the concern of many consumers. A recent McKinsey study shows that although 87 percent of consumers worry about the environmental consequences of their purchases, only 33 percent intend to buy green products (Bonini and Oppenheim 2008). Marketers, it seems, are not creating CSR messages that drive most consumers to change patterns of behavior. As companies move from being evaluated not only on functional and emotional levels, but on social values as well, the question of consumer assessment of these values arises. How do consumers make meaning of CSR and what, if any, differences exist between consumers with different economic and cultural resources? How should managers reframe CSR to be more resonant with many consumer values and meanings?

In this paper, we aim to study how CSR claims exist and are interpreted within a socio-cultural system. Although previous studies have been valuable in revealing the psychological process of product and company evaluation and have begun to elucidate some of the social dynamics surrounding CSR, we still know little about the broader social and cultural context within which consumers make these value-laden evaluations. For this reason, we adopt an approach that assesses consumer judgments within a cultural framework. As many scholars have argued, brand meaning arises from the complex interplay of cultural myths and discourses with individual goals, values, and practices (Diamond et al. 2009; Giesler 2012; Holt 2004; Schau et al. 2009; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). Adopting this socio-cultural branding approach yields several benefits. First, we do not yet know how CSR brand meanings arise nor how they can be differentially interpreted by consumer segments that have different allocations of economic and cultural resources. Second, it is important to note that consumers often form judgments without deliberate reasoning (Fitzsimons et al. 2002). When it comes to issues of corporate social responsibility, knowledge is complex and ambiguous. For this reason, ‘gut feelings’, cultural myths of contamination, and halo effects from other companies in the industry easily take hold and can affect consumer judgments. It is therefore critical to examine the cultural and social context surrounding these judgments because they are the resources from which consumers draw when deciding issues of corporate social responsibility.

Through in-depth interviews with 34 informants and a critical discourse analysis, we find that consumers draw from cultural discourses of authenticity, bureaucracy, and efficiency, and filter them through their own cultural lens, as it is shaped by personal and class-based experience. When assessing the environmental and social responsibility of companies, consumers drew from three cultural discourses—authenticity, big business, and efficiency. Each discourse, we observe, is an attempt to reconcile a particular anxiety related to modernity, an attempt to overcome the commercial and functional aspects of marketplace relationships. The authentic imperative draws from modern anxieties about distance of industrial processes from nature. The liability of bureaucracy draws from fears of depersonalization and instrumental behavior of large organizations articulated by Weber (1922/1978), Whyte (1956), Foucault (1977) and others. The discourse of efficiency draws from cultural concerns of pollution, contamination, and disorder (Douglas 1966). These discourses form the network of signifiers within which CSR is debated and discussed. As our informants illustrate, these three issues are inextricably intertwined within a particular logic.

Yet we also show that bureaucracy, authenticity, and efficiency are not interpreted as one-dimensional concepts. Each threat to corporate social responsibility—authenticity, bureaucracy, and efficiency—is seen through the lens of these two class-based perspectives. We find that consumers differ markedly in their interpretation and application of these discourses according to social class. Working class consumers tend to focus on the “front stage”, scrutinizing contexts of consumption. Further, they tend to draw from the domestic order of worth that values family and local community. Professional class consumers, on the other hand, focus on the “backstage”, scrutinizing production and using the civic and marketplace orders of worth. From these findings, we provide recommendations for public policy makers and CSR-inclined companies for managing a consumer-centric CSR portfolio that is resonant with consumer meanings and values.