The Impact of Negatively-valenced Influencing Behavior on other Actors in Social Networks

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Introduction

Influencing behavior as a form of Customer Engagement Behavior (CEB) has the potential to affect other customers' attitude and behavioral outcomes and likewise the value and performance of firms in different ways depending on its valence. However, despite its potentially detrimental effect, empirical work on the impact of negatively valenced engagement remains relatively scant. This article marks the first attempt to investigate the impact of the recently conceptualized negatively valenced influencing behavior (NVIB) on other actors, specifically, their attitude and behavioral intentions towards service providers

Theoretical Background

Customers rely on each other to get authoritative information (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014) and are influenced by the choices and opinions of other customers (Dholakia et al., 2004). They have resources such as knowledge, skills, time, and experience, which they contribute to firms' and other actors' resources (Alexander and Jaakkola, 2016). These resources shared through online experiences serve as a contribution into other actors' purchase processes (Bansal and Voyer 2000; Blazevic et al. 2013), and might adjust their expectations and the way they evaluate the value of offerings (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Zeithaml et al., 1993), hence their attitude and behavioural intentions (Bowden et al., 2017).

To capture this enhanced role customers play, the overarching concept of customer engagement behavior (CEB) appears in recent marketing and service research as a core concept that has an impact on customer experiences, values and performance of organisations (Alexander and Jaakkola, 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2016b). This paper studies CEB through which customers willingly contribute resources with a firm/brand focus beyond transactions and resulting from triggers (Van Doorn et al., 2010, Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). CEB has various forms that draw together a range of customer activities beyond normal transactions with 'implications for value creation' for customers, firms, and other actors (Alexander and Jaakkola, 2016, p.

21). This paper focuses on one of these forms, namely, influencing behavior which refers to customers' contribution of resources (e.g. knowledge, skills, time and experience) to adjust other actors knowledge, perception, and preferences towards a focal service provider (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). Influencing behavior is a superordinate concept where all other customers' influencing activities such as (WOM, E-WOM, Blogging…etc.) are nested within (Azer and Alexander, 2018).

Customers' positive or negative influencing behavior shared online is becoming increasingly influential in the service industry (Kumar et al., 2010; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Libai et al., 2010; Van Doorn et al., 2010), nevertheless, the majority of studies have addressed positively valenced engagement behaviors; thus largely overlooking the negative side and its ensuing implications (Bowden et al., 2017; Hollebeek and Chen, 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2016a). Specifically, NVIB which is expected to have potentially detrimental impacts being contagious and viral in nature (Bowden et al., 2017). To date, extant studies have approached a dyadic negative valence of engagement focusing predominantly on customer-to-brand interactions within contexts of specific virtual brand communities (Dolan et al., 2016; Hollebeek and Chen, 2014; Juric et al., 2016). As the literature transcends its focus beyond dyadic perspective of engagement, a need exists to better understand engagement within a network, particularly, the impact of NVIB on other actors' attitudes, and behavioral intentions towards service providers (Bowden et al., 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2016a; Hollebeek et al., 2016b).

According to Azer and Alexander (2018), NVIB refers to customer contribution of resources to negatively affect other actors' knowledge, expectations, and perception about a focal service provider. Customers engage in NVIB within online contexts using six forms either by addressing other actors (direct) or without explicitly addressing (indirect) other actors (Azer and Alexander, 2018). Figure 1 illustrates a a typology of six forms of direct (*dissuading, warning, endorsing competitors*) and in direct (discrediting, expressing regret and deriding) NVIB.
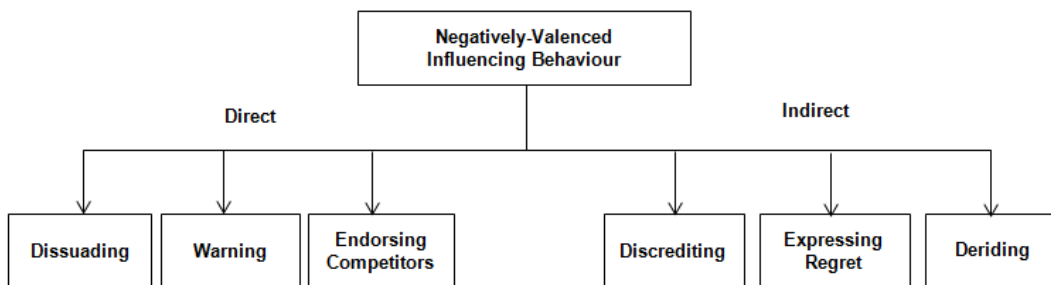

Figure 1: Direct and Indirect Forms of NVIB (Azer and Alexander, 2018)

Without directly addressing other actors, customers engage in NVIB by discrediting a service provider, by deriding a focal provider, and by explicitly express their regret for choosing this provider based on their experiences (Azer and Alexander, 2018). On the direct side, customers engage in NVIB by dissuading other actors from transacting with a focal provider, by warning them against a focal provider based on a perilous service experience or by endorsing competitors to other actors encouraging them to transact with, over a focal provider (Azer and Alexander, 2018)

According to this direct-indirect classification, the impact of direct and indirect NVIB may differ. Moreover, the heterogeneity of the six forms may result in variable impacts on other actors. Therefore, addressing the impact of NVIB from this different perspective is expected to provide a clearer view to understand the influence of customers on other actors, specifically its negative side.

Methodology

This paper conducted three experiments using the conceptualized forms to investigate the impact of NVIB on other actors' attitude and behavioral intentions towards service providers. We used a scenario based approach adapting TripAdvisor reviews. Appendix A provides the scenarios of the first experiment as an example. The first experiment (independent sample t-test) compares the impact of direct and indirect NVIB. Sample recruited: 100 third year undergraduate students (females 65%, average age = 21.31 years, $SD = 1.29$). The second experiment (2×2 Factorial Design) investigates the impact of NVIB alongside group norms represented by high and low aggregate ratings. Sample recruited: 120 undergraduate students (females 55%, average age = 20.10 years, $SD = 1.07$). The third experiment (6×2 Factorial Design) investigates the impact of the six forms juxtaposed with equal and higher volumes of positive reviews. Sample recruited by MTURK: 1200 individuals (females 50.8%, average age = 40 years, $SD = 1.23$).

Findings

The results of the three experiments showed that both direct and indirect NVIB negatively impact other actors' attitude and behavioral intentions towards service providers, with a relative strength of direct over indirect NVIB. Additionally, the second and the third experiments showed this relative strength when NVIB is accompanied with aggregate ratings and different volumes of positive reviews. The results also showed that the heterogeneity of the six forms resulted in variable impacts of each. On the direct side, engaging in NVIB by warning and dissuading other actors have greater influence compared to endorsing competitors, while on the indirect side; a higher negative influencing power of derision compared to both discrediting and expressing regret is demonstrated. In the three experiments, the paper confounded for the credibility of forum, general attitude towards checking

online reviews, and motives of reviewers, the results show no effect of any of these variables.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper is of the first empirical studies on the impact of NVIB, specifically by providing evidence on its impact on other actors' attitude and behavior and contributes to the emerging CEB literature in three ways. Firstly, this paper demonstrates the degree of influence of NVIB in particular the relative strength of the influence of direct over indirect NVIB. The second and the third studies show this relative power even when accompanied with excellent aggregate ratings given to service providers or a higher volume of positive reviews.

Secondly, this paper shows that the heterogeneity of NVIB forms has resulted in variable impacts. On the direct side, the results show that warning and dissuasion forms of NVIB have greater influence compared to endorsement of competitors. Based on the results we can posit that directly addressing other actors not to transact with a focal provider is more powerful to adjust their attitude and intentions than when provide customers with alternatives (competitors). On the indirect side, the results show a higher negative influencing power of derision compared to both discrediting and expressing regret forms of NVIB. The influential nature of derision might relate to the power of sarcasm being more retainable and memorable (Giora, 2002). Additionally, the results demonstrate a relatively lower influence of expressing regret for choosing a focal provider compared to discrediting a focal provider.

The paper also shows the impact of NVIB alongside the impact of the group norms. Additionally, this paper reveals the relative strength of negative over positive valence and the power of NVIB over volume of positive. Moreover, the results provide a new insight towards understanding the superordinate concept of influencing behavior. The paper shows that customers may influence each other in many ways, even anonymously, regardless of factors such as forum credibility, recipient utilitarian value, and tie-strength between source and recipient that play a central role in the influence of a focal message as indicated in the traditional research on WOM and e-WOM (e.g. Coulter et al., 2012; Trusov et al., 2010).

Accordingly, investigating direct and indirect NVIB shows how they differ in their impact; similarly, the heterogeneity of its six forms reveals variable impacts on other actors' attitude and behavioral intentions. Therefore, it is necessary for practitioners to better understand the degree of influence of NVIB and to differentiate between direct and indirect NVIB rather than conceiving them as homogenous. Practitioners may develop effective monitoring and mitigating strategies focusing on the degree of

influence of NVIB as it differs along with its impact on other actors' attitude and behavioral intentions towards service providers.

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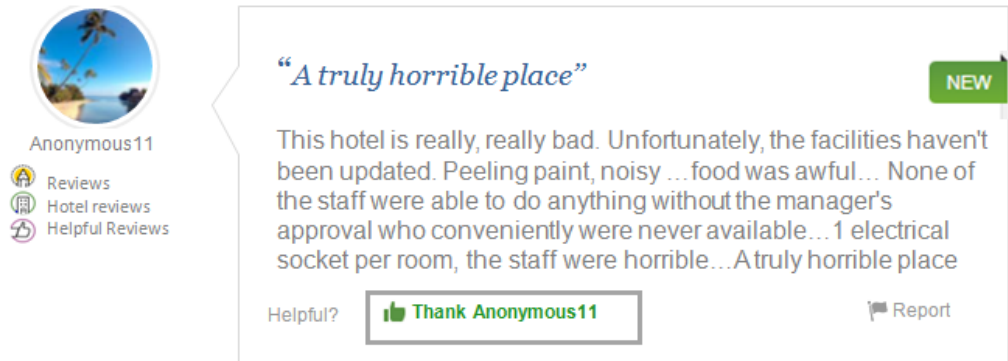
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Appendix A

Scenario of Indirect NVIB

You are planning a vacation and while checking Hotels at the planned destination on TripAdvisor, you came across this review:

Scenario of Direct NVIB

You are planning a vacation and while checking Hotels at the planned destination on TripAdvisor, you came across this review: