

**The Persuasiveness of Electronic Word of Mouth on Sport Consumer Behavior: An Elaboration Likelihood Model Perspective**

*Megan B. Shreffler, University of Minnesota*

*Stephen Ross (Advisor), University of Minnesota*

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**Finalist**

**(including questions)**

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The global Internet audience continues to rapidly grow, as the number of Internet users reached over 2.1 billion at the onset of 2012, which is considerably higher than the 1.2 billion users in 2006 (Plunkett Research, Ltd., 2012). With the unrelenting growth in technological advances, the Internet has provided organizations with a competitive platform from which they can market products and services directly to consumers (Lin, Lee, & Horng, 2011). In addition to being a marketing channel for organizations, the Internet also provides consumers with an outlet through which they can express their opinions and persuade others to purchase products or services, while simultaneously monitoring the opinions of others in an electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) format (Goyette, Ricard, Bergeron, & Marticotte, 2010). The notion of eWOM is that individuals share personal knowledge and experiences about a company with others in a consumer-to-consumer format (Sernovitz, 2009). It is through the sharing of information through eWOM channels that consumers can be persuaded to change their attitudes toward the attitude object that is being discussed.

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1981, 1986) provides a valuable framework for the understanding of the persuasiveness of the eWOM phenomenon through online reviews, and its impact on the purchase intentions of consumers. Within the ELM, attitude change can occur through two routes of influence, the central route and the peripheral route. Those who process information through the central route emphasize argument-based processing, scrutinizing the merits and relevance of the arguments before forming an attitude about a product or advertisement. Attitudes that are formed or changed through the central route have been purported to be persistent, predictive of behavior, and resistant to change (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Individuals who process information through the peripheral route, on the other hand, make less effort cognitively and rely on alternative means such as number of arguments and the physical attractiveness of endorsers when forming attitudes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). According to the ELM, people's elaboration levels directly influence the route to persuasion, while also providing understanding as to how people deal with persuasive messages. Those in a high elaboration likelihood state are more likely to engage in thoughtful information processing and be persuaded by the quality of the argument, while those in low elaboration likelihood state are more likely to base their attitude change on peripheral cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

This particular study utilized eWOM communication through online reviews as a source of persuasion, and explored the attitudes and behaviors of consumers following exposure to eWOM activity about *Chicago Bears Bar*, a hypothetical sports bar that would be considered a brand extension of the Chicago Bears football team. Previous research on brand extensions found that if consumers perceive the parent brand to be high in quality, then they will also consider the brand extension to be high quality (Bottomley & Doyle, 1996; Bottomley & Holden, 2001). For this reason, team identification, or the perception of fans regarding the connection between themselves and the Chicago Bears, was included in this study as a moderating variable. The rationale for the inclusion of team identification as the moderating variable is found in the impact that team identification has on the consumption behavior of fans, as research has illustrated that the greater the level of identification one has with a team, the more likely he or she is to consume the products of the organization (Cohen & Garcia, 2005; Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009). For the aforementioned reasons, the purpose of this study was to examine the persuasiveness of eWOM through online reviews in influencing the behaviors and attitudes of consumers, which was measured through attitudinal measures and actions, including purchase intentions and likelihood of recommending the sports bar to family and friends. This purpose was accomplished through the use of an online experiment, in which participants were randomly assigned to a factorial design that was manipulated at two levels, message quality and quantity of reviews, with the moderating variable, team identification also being measured.

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Hypothesis testing was conducted through a 3-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) with results showing a significant main effect of argument quality [ $F(1, 12) = 27.07, p = .001$ ]. As supported by the ELM, a significant effect of argument quality x identification interaction [ $F(1, 13) = 29.00, p = .001$ ] emerged from the ANOVA examining behavioral intentions. The argument quality x identification interaction suggests that highly identified individuals took the central route in formulating their behavior intentions. This same ANOVA, using behavioral intentions as the dependent variable, produced a significant interaction with argument quantity x identification [ $F(1, 4) = 9.09, p = .047$ ]. When conducting an ANOVA to examine the dependent variable of attitude toward the online reviews, argument quantity was found to have a main effect on attitude [ $F(1, 7) = 12.21, p = .009$ ]. Furthermore, an argument quality x identification interaction was found in the 3-factor ANOVA [ $F(1, 6) = 9.85, p = .019$ ].

Three major findings emerged from the results of the study. First, high quality reviews were found to have a significant positive impact on behavioral intentions. This finding aligns with propositions proposed in the ELM, and is desirable by sport organizations because attitudes formed or changed through this central route are persistent, resistant, and predictive of behavior (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Second, the results suggest that fans with low levels of identification are influenced more by the quantity of online reviews than the quality of the reviews, which is indicative of the peripheral route of persuasion. This result suggests that individuals with low levels of identification rely on peripheral cues, the number of reviews in this instance, in the forming and changing of their attitudes. Finally, the study also illustrates that fans with high levels of identification rely on the quality of arguments when forming their attitudes toward the messages. This finding lends theoretical support to the ELM, as the ELM purports that the more interest an individual has in the subject of the message, the higher the chances that he or she will elaborate on the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).