Supporting Sacrifice or Condemning Belief: Effects of Controversial Advertisement on Positive and Negative Word of Mouth

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In September 2018, Nike released a new advertising “Believe in Something” featuring Colin Kaepernick, which drew mixed reactions from consumers. The advertising generated significant social media traffic for Nike, including 2.7 million social media mentions in the first days following the release, and an increase of 135% in brand mentions compared to the prior week (Hill, 2018). This is a unique phenomenon because this advertising caused both positive and negative word of mouth (WOM).

To understand how Nike’s advertising prompted positive and negative WOM, we conducted a survey. The questionnaire measured key motivation factors for WOM (i.e., venting, advice seeking, social bonding, impression management, support, and revenge; Berger, 2000), individual characteristics (i.e., patriotism, social dominance orientation, and league identification), positive emotions (i.e., pride, empathy, and gratitude), negative emotions (i.e., anger, shame, and contempt), and behavioral reactions (i.e., positive and negative WOM).

We recruited 254 survey participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk who met the following criteria: (a) having a Facebook and Twitter account, (b) having seen Nike’s advertisement, and (c) posting a comment about Nike on social media after seeing this advertisement.

The results showed unique differences in motivations between positive and negative WOM. The biggest motivation for positive WOM was support for Nike (M = 4.48) followed by social bonding (M = 3.73) and venting (M = 3.66), whereas the biggest motivation for negative WOM was venting (M = 4.43) followed by revenge for Nike (M = 4.08) and advice seeking (M = 3.32).

Since venting (expressing strong emotions to “blow off steam”) was found to be a key motivation for both positive and negative WOM, we developed a research model and examined which individual characteristics caused positive or negative emotions and if these emotions were actually related to positive and negative WOM.

After a confirmatory factor analysis, we conducted structural equation modeling (SEM). The results suggested an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2$/df = 1.86, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .94, SRMR = .10). We also found that patriotism had a negative relationship with positive emotions ($\gamma = -.43, p < .01$) and a positive relationship with negative emotions ($\gamma = .34, p < .01$). Social dominance orientation had a positive relationship with negative emotions ($\gamma = .46, p < .01$), but no relationship with positive emotions ($\gamma = .08, p = .35$). League identification had a positive relationship with positive emotions ($\gamma = .32, p < .01$), but no relationship with negative emotions ($\gamma = -.06, p = .54$). Finally, positive emotions had a positive relationship with positive WOM ($\beta = .16, p < .01$) and negative emotions had a positive relationship with negative WOM ($\beta = .13, p < .01$).

In sum, people with high league identification and low patriotism experienced positive emotions, which led them to post positive comments about Nike on social media. Conversely, people with high patriotism and social dominance orientation experienced negative emotions, which eventually resulted in their negative WOM. We will discuss more detailed theoretical and practical implications at the conference.