

# Information direction, website reputation and eWOM effect: A moderating role of product type

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Received 1 December 2006; received in revised form 1 October 2007; accepted 1 November 2007

## Abstract

This article examines how the electronic word of mouth (eWOM) information direction (positive vs. negative) and a website's reputation (established vs. unestablished) contribute to the eWOM effect. The article describes a study focusing on the moderating role of the product type (search vs. experience). The results of the experiment show that the eWOM effect is greater for negative eWOM than for positive eWOM, greater for established websites than for unestablished websites, and greater for experience goods than for search goods. The results support the moderating effects of product type on the eWOM information direction-website reputation-eWOM effect relationship. The impact of negative eWOM on the eWOM effect is greater for experience goods than for search goods. Similarly, the impact of website reputation on the eWOM effect is greater for experience goods than for search goods. The findings provide managerial implications for an Internet marketing strategy. © 2008 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Internet marketing; Electronic word of mouth (eWOM); Direction; Website reputation; Search goods; Experience goods

## 1. Introduction

The arrival and expansion of the Internet has extended consumers' options for gathering product information by including other consumers' comments, posted on the Internet, and has provided consumers opportunities to offer their own consumption-related advice by engaging in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Gruen, Osmonbekov and Czaplewski (2006) suggest that the customer-to-customer know-how exchange, a specific form of eWOM, has a

direct relationship with loyalty intentions, as well as an indirect relationship mediated through the overall value of the firm's offering. Previous research on traditional (offline) WOM suggests that factors such as source credibility (Dholakia and Sternthal, 1977) and WOM directions (positive or negative) (Arndt, 1967) are antecedents of the WOM effect.

In eWOM however, unlike the case of WOM from interpersonal sources, recommendations are typically from unknown individuals and in a text-based format. So, online consumers have difficulty in using source similarity to determine the credibility of information (Chatterjee, 2001). Therefore, in order to build effective Internet marketing strategy, marketers should understand the eWOM effect, not only in terms of source credibility, but also in terms of the message configuration (negative/positive eWOM posted on the established/unestablished website). However, little research addresses how eWOM message configurations affect the eWOM effect. Therefore, the vehicle effect is considered by incorporating a website's reputation (Shamdasani et al., 2001) as a determinant of the credibility of the eWOM-specific source.

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In addition, this study suggests the eWOM information direction as a message characteristic variable.

One interesting, but unanswered question, is does the impact of the eWOM information direction and website reputation on the eWOM effect vary with the product type? In order to address this void, this study focuses on the moderating effect of product type (search vs. experience) in investigating the impact of eWOM information direction and website reputation on the eWOM effect.

Therefore, the objectives of this study include the following points. First, to examine the impact of the eWOM information direction (positive vs. negative eWOM) on the eWOM effect; second, to investigate the influence of website reputation (established vs. unestablished website) on the eWOM effect; and finally, to examine how the interactions of eWOM information direction and website reputation with product type (search goods vs. experience goods) influence the eWOM effect.

## 2. Conceptual background and research hypotheses

### 2.1. eWOM direction

A significant finding in impression formation literature is the negativity effect, namely that people place more weight on negative information rather than positive information in the subjects' forming overall evaluations (Skowronski and Carlston, 1989). Evidence suggests that negative information is more attention grabbing in general and receives greater scrutiny than positive information (Homer and Yoon, 1992). Previous research suggests that the WOM influence appears to be asymmetrical in that a negative WOM has a stronger influence on customers' brand evaluations (Arndt, 1967; Mizerski, 1982; Richins, 1983; Wright, 1974) and on the purchase intentions of potential buyers (Brown and Reingen, 1987; Weinberger et al., 1981) than a positive WOM. These arguments offer a rationale for the following hypothesis. H<sub>1</sub>: The eWOM effect is greater for negative eWOM information than for positive eWOM information.

### 2.2. Website reputation

Source variables, whether in the form of a message spokesperson or a media vehicle itself essentially moderate the impact of a persuasive message by influencing the audience's confidence based on the endorsement by the source (Shamdasani et al., 2001). This vehicle source effect is likely to be applied to the eWOM context. Consumer confidence brought about by a credible website might influence the eWOM posted on the website.

According to Shamdasani et al. (2001), due to low barriers of entry and lack of gatekeepers on the Web, well-established and reputable websites have been more readily accepted by consumers than have unknown sites. The previous discussion suggests the following hypothesis. H<sub>2</sub>: The eWOM effect is greater for websites with established reputations than for those without established reputations.

### 2.3. Categorization of goods: search vs. experience

According to Nelson (1974), search goods are defined as those characterized by product attributes where complete information about the goods can be acquired prior to purchase; experience goods are characterized by attributes that cannot be known until the purchase and after use of the product or for which an information search is more costly and/or difficult than direct product experience (Klein, 1998). Maute and Forrester (1991) examine the applicability of this search/experience framework to the information search process. Maute and Forrester (1991) suggest search and experience qualities as moderators of the link between search antecedents and external search efforts. By extending this framework to the study of the influence of eWOM information content on the eWOM effect across product categories, this study includes Maute and Forrester's conceptualization of product information attributes as moderators of the eWOM information–eWOM effect relationship.

Past studies provide evidence attesting to the notion that the characteristics of the product (i.e., the subject of WOM communications) may affect how consumers process the WOM message (Sundaram and Webster, 1999).

If consumers have difficulty in judging product quality or if judgmental criteria are ambiguous, the value of available information for the purposes of analysis increases (Bone, 1995). This suggests that the influence of WOM may be greater in some situations than in others; specifically, WOM effects should be greater when the consumer faces an ambiguous situation (Bone, 1995).

Heightened perceived risk along the search-experience product continuum, which results from a lack of knowledge and information, increases the importance of experience (Hsieh et al., 2005). Consumers, especially when they intend to purchase experience goods, can reduce their uncertainty by referring to eWOM information, such as online consumer reviews, that typically contain expert advice and comments from experienced users. For this reason, the eWOM effect is expected to be greater for experience goods rather than for search goods, leading to the following hypothesis. H<sub>3</sub>: The eWOM effect is greater for experience goods than for search goods.

### 2.4. Interaction effect: eWOM direction and product type

Higher levels of brand familiarity, generated through direct or indirect brand-related experiences, are associated with a well developed knowledge structure about the brand and its attributes (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987). Given that consumers are not likely to change their attitudes toward familiar brands (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997), exposure of familiar brand to WOM communications, either positive or negative, is not likely to produce significant changes in consumers' preexisting brand evaluations (Sundaram and Webster, 1999). Less familiar brands, that are usually associated with consumers' underdeveloped knowledge structures, are more susceptible to change in their brand evaluations following exposure to

any new brand-related communications. Consumers, less familiar with a brand, are more amenable to processing new brand-related information and changing their brand evaluations based on the direction of the information (Sundaram and Webster, 1999). Given that finding search attributes on the Internet is easier than finding experience attributes, consumers are likely to possess a much more detailed, rich cognitive structure for search goods than for experience goods. In addition, Hoch and Ha (1986) suggest that advertising's framing (positive/negative) effect is stronger when the product is ambiguous, that is, when quality is hard for a consumer to determine. Therefore, the evaluation of experience goods, compared with search goods, may sustain greater damage in the eWOM effect due to negative information because the negative eWOM information will magnify consumers' prevailing uncertainty and fear related to their poor cognitive knowledge structure. These arguments give rise to the following hypothesis. H<sub>4</sub>: The impact difference of negative and positive eWOM information on the eWOM effect is greater for experience goods than for search goods.

### 2.5. Interaction effect: website reputation and product type

The message source is a crucial determinant of persuasion especially when consumers evaluate experience attributes for a product (Jain and Posavac, 2001). Jain and Posavac (2001) argue that when consumers have no prior knowledge of a brand's qualities, the use of high-credibility sources communicates experience attribute information more persuasively. This study includes the website reputation which is expected to serve as extrinsic cues of eWOM information quality especially in the case of purchasing experience goods.

If the consumer is exposed to eWOM information from a highly credible source (highly reputable website) endorsing experience goods, the eWOM information should be more persuasive than any eWOM information from a less credible source. This prediction should hold because it is a main effect prediction: that those highly credible sources (established reputation websites) should be more persuasive than sources with little or no credibility (unestablished websites). This believability is even more important in the ambiguous circumstance of experience goods where consumers do not possess prior knowledge or experience. H<sub>5</sub>: The impact difference of established and unestablished website's reputation on the eWOM effect is greater for experience goods than for search goods.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Research design

This study utilized an experiment that manipulated the eWOM information direction, the website reputation, and the product type, thus resulting in a 2 (positive vs. negative) × 2 (established vs. unestablished) × 2 (search vs. experience) between-subjects factorial design. Subjects were assigned randomly to the experiment's treatments.

### 3.2. Development of stimuli

An in-depth focus group, involving eight participants, was conducted to brainstorm for search and experience goods. From the list of 20 products generated, 6 products were then chosen to be included in the pretest.

Based on Nelson (1974), product type was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = product quality can be evaluated prior to purchase, 5 = product quality cannot be evaluated until purchase and use of the product) for a sample of 20 males and 20 females. The results indicated that the product type mean for a language school program was the highest and the TOIEC (Test of English for International Communication) book was the lowest. The means difference of these two products was significant ( $M_{\text{book}}=1.5$ ,  $M_{\text{language school}}=4.4$ ,  $t(39)=-25.76$ ,  $p=.000$ ), while evaluations made by male and female respondents for these two products showed no significant difference. According to the FGI (Focus Group Interview) and pretest results, the TOIEC book for search goods and the language school program for experience goods were selected for the main experiment.

*Development of websites and eWOM.* In order to ensure consistency across treatments, all treatment web pages were created from one actual web page, keeping an identical style and layout throughout, differing only in the Internet shopping mall name, product type, and eWOM information direction, that constituted the manipulation.

After reviewing samples of eWOM posted on the website, a panel of doctoral candidates and marketing faculty familiar with eWOM literature generated a list of eight key items for each product.

The website reputation was manipulated by selecting an actual Internet shopping mall. Interpark.com (opened as an Internet shopping mall first in Korea in June, 1996) was selected as an established website. Zoamart.com (a start-up Internet shopping mall in Korea) was selected as an unestablished website.

Fictitious brand names were created ("Point" for the TOIEC book and "Nice" for the language school program) to avoid possible error sources. Fig. 1 displays sample experimental stimulus.

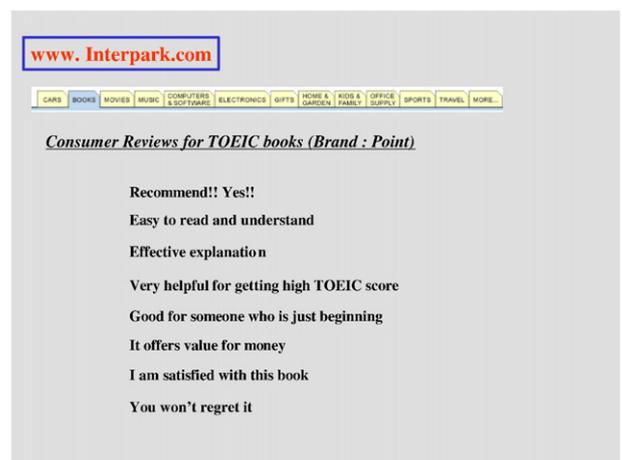


Fig. 1. A sample experimental eWOM (positive/search/established).

### 3.3. Pretesting

Pretests were conducted with a sample of 20 males and 20 females. To assess the positivity/negativity of the framing manipulation, the subjects rated the extent to which they felt that the eWOM information stressed the negative/positive aspects of the discussed object on a 5-point scale (1 = negative information to 5 = positive information). The website reputation was measured with 10 items on a 5-point semantic differential scale ( $\alpha=0.92$ ), adapted from Shamdasani et al. (2001), measuring the website's reputation in terms of its expertise and trustworthiness. The order effect was controlled by randomizing the arrangement of eWOM information. The pretest results suggest that the eWOM direction ( $M_{\text{negative}}=1.5$ ,  $M_{\text{positive}}=4.7$ ,  $t(39)=-29.24$ ,  $p=.000$ ) and website reputation (mean value of 10 items) ( $M_{\text{unestablished}}=1.6$ ,  $M_{\text{established}}=4.0$ ,  $t(39)=28.92$ ,  $p=.000$ ) measures yield significant differences in the expected direction. These results indicate that the manipulations of the eWOM information direction and website reputation are successful.

### 3.4. Measures

The eWOM effect was measured by 3 items on a 5-point ratings of agreement (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with the following three statements adapted from Jeon and Park (2003): (1) I will refer to this eWOM information in a purchase decision. (2) Overall, I think this eWOM information is credible. (3) This eWOM information will crucially affect my purchase decision. The reliability coefficient for the scale was 0.73. The eWOM information direction, website reputation, and product type were measured for the same items for the pretests.

*Covariates.* Past research suggest that brand familiarity affect consumer purchase decisions (Lane and Jacobson, 1995). Consumers are likely to behave in a similar pattern when processing eWOM information. Thus, eWOM familiarity are likely to affect eWOM-based purchase decisions. To control for the eWOM familiarity effect, eWOM familiarity is included in the model as a covariate. eWOM familiarity was measured with 3 items on a 5-point semantic differential scale ( $\alpha=0.82$ ), using statements adapted from Kent and Allen (1994): Regarding eWOM information, I am (1) unfamiliar/familiar, (2) inexperienced/experienced, and (3) not knowledgeable/knowledgeable.

### 3.5. Experimental procedure

Undergraduate students, taking business classes at a major university in Seoul, had notice of an online experiment. Class assistant requested webmaster to post a notice/link concerning the online experiment on the several classes' websites. In order to motivate subjects to respond, the subjects were given free meal vouchers upon their survey submission. The online survey was programmed such that respondents would be assigned randomly to one of the eight conditions in the experiment, with

Table 1  
ANCOVA results

Source	df	MS	F-value
Covariate			
eWOM familiarity	1	6.24	22.98***
eWOM information direction (A)	1	22.54	82.99***
Website reputation (B)	1	29.25	107.70***
Product type (C)	1	49.45	182.06***
A × B	1	0.06	0.20
A × C	1	1.31	4.81*
B × C	1	2.13	7.86**
A × B × C	1	3.75	13.79***
Error	431	0.27	
Total	439		

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

the cell having the least responses given priority, hence ensuring equal cell sizes. A short description of the websites was given; then, subjects were shown the eWOM information direction, website reputation, and product type combinations as designated by the treatment cell. Following this exposure, eWOM effects were measured based on the eWOM stimuli the subjects had just seen. Covariates and manipulation checks for experimental stimuli were then measured (with the same items for pretests), followed by questions about general demographics.

## 4. Analysis and results

A total of 440 responses were collected with 55 responses in each of the eight treatment conditions. Respondents were aged 19–28 with 55.5% men and 44.5% women. All experimental manipulations were again assessed and found to be effective in the main study.

### 4.1. Hypothesis testing

The hypotheses were tested using a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  analysis of covariance with eWOM familiarity as covariate. ANCOVA results are available in Table 1. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of the eight cells involved in the experimental design for this study. Fig. 2 illustrates the summary of hypotheses testing. As shown in Fig. 2, all the hypotheses are supported. Figs. 3 and 4 display the interaction effects for eWOM information direction-product type and website reputation-product type.

The ANCOVA results (see Table 1) include statistically significant 3-way interaction effect ( $F(1, 431)=13.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The structure of the observed 3-way interaction appears in Fig. 5.

Comparisons show that the impact on the eWOM effect resulting from negative eWOM with established websites is significantly greater than positive eWOM for search goods (3.6 versus 3.0;  $p < .001$ ) and experience goods (4.4 versus 4.0;  $p < .001$ ). However, this difference is insignificant in the case of the eWOM for search goods posted on the unestablished websites (3.0 versus 2.9;  $p > .20$ ). In contrast, for experience

Table 2  
The cell means and standard deviations for the eWOM effect

eWOM information direction	Established reputation		Unestablished reputation		
	Search	Experience	Search	Experience	
Positive	3.0 (0.53)	4.0 (0.44)	2.9 (0.44)	3.1 (0.48)	3.3 (0.63)
Negative	3.6 (0.51)	4.4 (0.41)	3.0 (0.68)	3.9 (0.70)	3.7 (0.76)
Total	3.3 (0.59)	4.2 (0.47)	3.0 (0.58)	3.5 (0.70)	
	3.7 (0.68)		3.2 (0.70)		

Note: The standard deviations are in parentheses.

goods, negative eWOM with unestablished websites result in significantly greater impact on the eWOM effect than positive eWOM (3.9 versus 3.1;  $p < .001$ ).

### 5. General discussion, implications, and limitations

#### 5.1. General discussion

First, the eWOM effect is greater for negative eWOM than for positive eWOM. In addition, whereas most previous research has focused on the negativity effect and the reasons for that effect, this research shows that the product type associated with the eWOM discussions moderates this effect. Specifically, the negativity effect appears to be more significant when the eWOM is for experience goods rather than for search goods.

Given that finding search attributes on the Internet is easier than finding experience attributes, consumers are likely to possess a much more detailed, rich cognitive structure of search

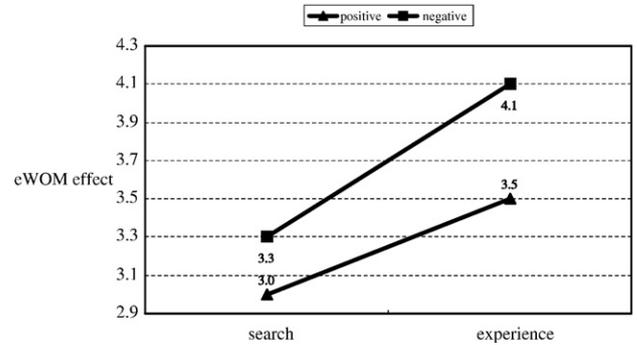


Fig. 3. The effects of the eWOM information direction on the eWOM effect as a function of product type.

goods than of experience goods. Empirical results suggest that experience goods, compared with search goods, sustain greater damage in the eWOM effect due to negative eWOM information. The reason is that the negative eWOM information magnify consumers' prevailing uncertainty and fear initiated by their poor cognitive knowledge structure of experience goods. This research provides an insight into why and how the eWOM negativity effect is different across product types.

Second, the website reputation has a significant impact on the eWOM effect. Specifically, the eWOM effect is greater for websites with established reputations than for unestablished websites. This result empirically validates the vehicle source effect (website reputation) (Shamdasani et al., 2001) in the eWOM context. This provides an insight into regarding a website's reputation as dimensions for source credibility in the eWOM context.

Another interesting finding of this study is that the impact of a website's reputation on the eWOM effect is greater for

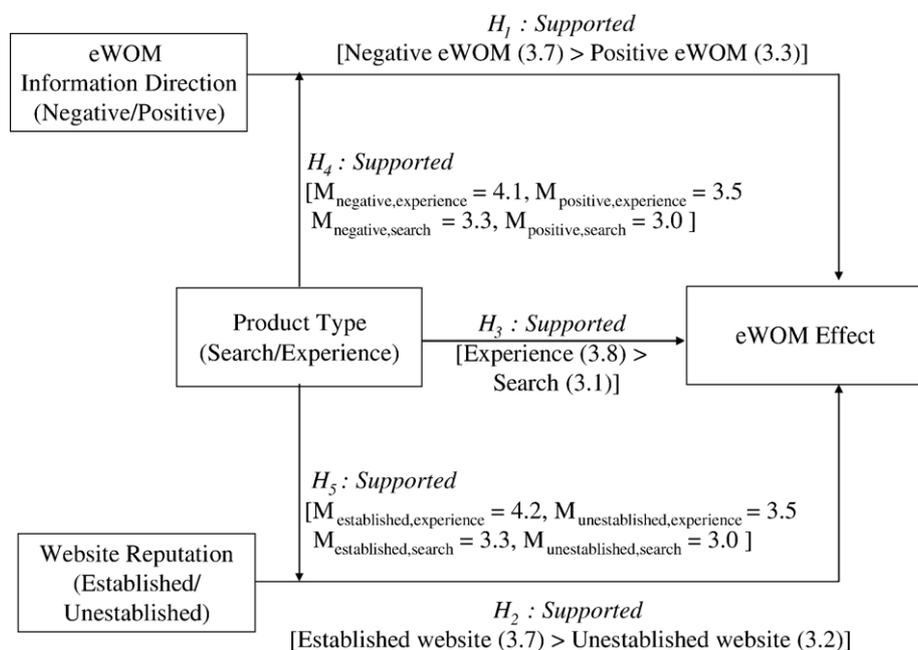


Fig. 2. A summary of hypotheses testing.

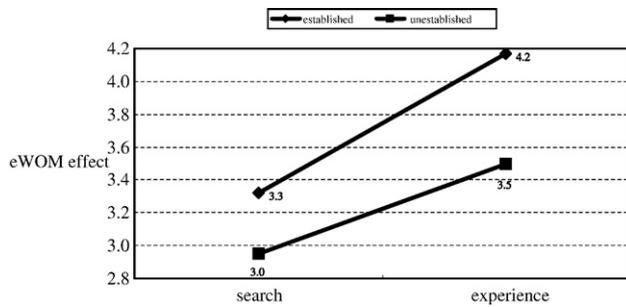


Fig. 4. The effects of website reputation on the eWOM effect as a function of product type.

experience goods than for search goods. According to Zeithaml (1988), consumers depend more on extrinsic cues such as brand name than intrinsic cues whenever evaluating a product's quality is difficult. The empirical results suggest that a website's reputation could serve as extrinsic cues of eWOM information quality especially in the case of purchasing experience goods.

Third, the eWOM effect is greater for experience goods than for search goods. In comparison to the offline purchase environment, the online environment is characterized by greater uncertainty because there are limited cues for information processing (Hanson, 2000). In particular, the inability of the online environment to convey sensory attributes increases consumer uncertainty for experience goods. This finding suggests that the eWOM could serve as a mechanism to reduce uncertainty especially for those who are considering purchase of experience goods. The asymmetric impact of the product type on the eWOM effect suggests that eWOM information is more useful for experience goods than for search goods.

### 5.2. Implications

This research provides a number of academic and managerial implications. First, the empirical results of this study show that negative eWOM has greater purchase influence than positive eWOM. This negative eWOM effect is especially augmented for the case of experience goods. This study makes a theoretical contribution to marketing communication literature by empirically validating the moderating role of product type in the eWOM information direction-eWOM effect relationship. This study also has managerial implications for marketing communication managers. The empirical results show that negative eWOM for experience goods should remain a high priority if only selective monitoring is possible because of marketing budget constraints. This study makes a managerial contribution to marketing practitioners by suggesting priority guidelines on the monitoring of eWOM information direction and product type.

Second, Internet marketers may offset perceived risk by enhancing positive eWOM on well-established sites. This research shows that this strategy could be more effective for experience goods, the quality of which is inherently difficult for consumers to judge, than for search goods. This implies that a

well-chosen website for eWOM placement can build and enhance eWOM effectiveness.

Finally, this study illustrates that the eWOM effect is greater for experience goods than for search goods. Therefore, Internet marketers intending to utilize eWOM strategically should make every effort to strengthen the perceived usefulness of online review especially for experience goods. For example, MISSHA, a small-sized manufacturer of cosmetics in Korea, has successfully transformed experience goods such as cosmetics into search goods by encouraging eWOM regarding consumers' positive product experience. The manufacturer provides various kinds of incentives (e.g. points) for useful online reviews.

### 5.3. Limitations and further research

This research report suffers from several limitations. First, this research focuses on product attribute-related eWOM information. However, previous literature suggests that the perceived value of negative information for analytical purposes is likely to be higher in the morality (e.g., company values) versus the ability (e.g., product attributes) domain, which leads to the greater weighting of negative information in the morality domain (Skowronski and Carlston, 1987). Thus, the findings of this study may not be generally applicable to negative eWOM information reflecting a company's values (e.g., its neglect of social responsibility). Further research could examine this issue in an experimental setting by manipulating the type of negative information (values-related versus attributes-related) (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). Second, this study does not include consumer characteristics (e.g. involvement and commitment toward the brand or product) in the experiment. Previous research suggests that the commitment of the consumer toward the brand is a moderator of negative information effects (Ahluwalia et al., 2000). Specifically, the negative effect appears to be more likely when a consumer's commitment to the target object or issue is low. Subsequent research could address this issue in an eWOM context. Finally, future research could investigate an eWOM effect model on cross-cultural basis. Considering that eWOM is global, cross-cultural research on the eWOM effect would be an interesting issue.

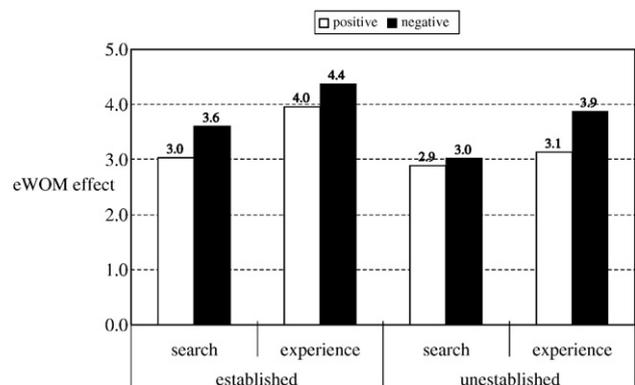


Fig. 5. The three-way interaction between the eWOM information direction, website reputation, and product type.

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