Examining the Impact of Electronic Word-of-Mouth on Consumer Responses toward Company: An Alignment-Social Influence Model

Zifei Chen

University of Miami, faychenzifei@gmail.com

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EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH ON CONSUMER RESPONSES TOWARD COMPANY: AN ALIGNMENT-SOCIAL INFLUENCE MODEL

By

Zifei Chen

A DISSERTATION

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EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-
MOUTH ON CONSUMER RESPONSES TOWARD
COMPANY: AN ALIGNMENT-SOCIAL INFLUENCE
MODEL

Zifei Chen

Approved:

Don W. Stacks, Ph.D.
Professor of Public Relations
Department of Strategic Communication

Cong Li, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Advertising, Department of Strategic Communication, and Associate Dean for Graduate Studies, School of Communication

Weiting Tao, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Public Relations
Department of Strategic Communication

Guillermo Prado, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

Michael Beatty, Ph.D.
Professor of Communication Studies
Department of Communication Studies
To address the growing demand to understand the impact of consumer advocacy and stakeholder behavior in public relations research and practices, this dissertation examined the impact of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on consumer responses. It fills the extant eWOM research gap by addressing consumers’ prior informational and attitudinal base before exposure to eWOM, and anticipated interaction (i.e., lurking and posting behavior) powered by the dynamic, interactive nature of social media. A consolidated Alignment-Social Influence (ASI) model was proposed drawing on interdisciplinary insights from public relations, marketing, consumer behavior, and psychology. Two central research questions were answered through an empirical test of seven hypotheses derived from the ASI model: (1) How do consumers respond to eWOM and adjust their company evaluation when the valence (i.e., positive vs. negative) and corporate associations (i.e., corporate ability [CA] vs. corporate social responsibility [CSR]) in eWOM are aligned (vs. nonaligned) with their prior attitude? And, (2) how does anticipated interaction on social media impact consumers’ company evaluation?

A 2 (eWOM associations: aligned vs. nonaligned) x 2 (eWOM valence: aligned vs. nonaligned) x 2 (anticipated interaction: lurker vs. poster) full-factorial quasi-
experimental design was conducted online with 226 participants from the United States. Results confirmed the ASI model. Findings from three-way interactions showed that when having positive prior CA associations with the company, lurkers who were exposed to negative eWOM about CA (i.e., aligned associations) had greater downward attitude shift and lower final company evaluation than lurkers who were exposed to negative eWOM about CSR (i.e., nonaligned associations); and such effect was fully mediated by the perceived diagnosticity of eWOM. However, posters who were exposed to negative eWOM about CA (i.e., aligned associations) had less downward attitude shift and less negative final company evaluations than lurkers. Such difference was explained by the selective processing of counter-attitudinal eWOM information and resistance to persuasion from posters when a social threat was perceived. In contrast to the disruptive effect of negative eWOM, positive eWOM helped maintain prior positive attitude but only led to minimal upward attitude shift in company evaluation.

The ASI model renders important implications for public relations theory and practices, especially for social media-related measurement and strategies. The model also expands the boundary of public relations through its interdisciplinary theoretical implications.
DEDICATION

To my beloved parents and grandparents: Thank you for your unconditional love and support every step of the way, for standing by the life and career choices I make, and for giving me the strength and determination to pursue my dream. With your love, all the efforts have become all the more worthwhile.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>ix</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1

## Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................. 8
   - The Theoretical Framework of Cognitive Corporate Associations ..................... 9
   - Corporate ability and corporate social responsibility associations .......... 10
   - The association-based synergistic model of corporate communication strategy ................................................................. 11
   - Corporate associations as prior informational and attitudinal base ........... 13
   - Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) .................................................................. 14
   - Valence of eWOM ....................................................................................... 15
   - Corporate associations of eWOM ............................................................ 17
   - The Impact of Valence and Associations Alignment ....................................... 18
   - Mechanism of the valence alignment effect: Negativity bias .......................... 19
   - Mechanism of the associations alignment effect: The search-and-alignment model ................................................................................................................................. 21
   - The Impact of Social Influence and Anticipated Interaction on Social Media 25
   - Mental rehearsal and selective processing .................................................... 26
   - Self-presentation and impression management ............................................. 30
   - The Alignment-Social Influence (ASI) Model and Summary of Hypotheses .... 34
   - Overview of the ASI model ......................................................................... 34
   - Hypotheses for empirical test ..................................................................... 34

## Chapter 3: METHOD

3. METHOD .................................................................................................................... 39
   - Data Collection and Participants .................................................................. 40
     - Data collection ......................................................................................... 40
     - Participant profile ............................................................................... 42
   - Stimuli Development ..................................................................................... 43
     - Industry and company selection ............................................................. 44
     - Manipulation of valence and associations alignment ............................... 45
     - Manipulation of anticipated interaction ................................................ 49
   - Manipulation Checks ..................................................................................... 51
   - Dependent Variables and Measures ................................................................ 52
     - Company evaluation and attitude shift in company evaluation ............... 52
     - Perceived diagnosticity of eWOM ............................................................ 53
     - Thought listing ....................................................................................... 54
     - Self-esteem ........................................................................................... 54
Experimental Procedure ................................................................. 54
  Phase one: Prior corporate association’s and company evaluation .... 55
  Phase two: Distraction task ............................................................... 55
  Phase three: eWOM valence, eWOM associations, anticipated interaction, and subsequent measures ......................................................... 56

4 RESULTS .......................................................................................... 57
  Manipulation Checks .......................................................................... 57
  Hypotheses Testing ............................................................................ 59
    Three-way interactions among eWOM valence, associations, and anticipated interaction ................................................................. 59
    Mediation effect of perceived diagnosticity of eWOM .................... 66
    Mechanism of the mental rehearsal and selective processing account ................................................................. 68
    Mechanism of the self-presentation and impression management account ................................................................. 70
    Summary ......................................................................................... 70

5 DISCUSSION .................................................................................... 73
  Interpretation of Major Findings ....................................................... 74
    The effect of eWOM valence and associations for lurkers ............... 74
    The effect of anticipated interaction on social media ....................... 77
  Theoretical and Practical Implications .............................................. 82
    Theoretical implications .................................................................. 82
    Practical implications ....................................................................... 87
  Limitations and Future Research Directions ...................................... 90
    Limitations ..................................................................................... 90
    Future research directions ............................................................... 92

REFERENCES ..................................................................................... 96

APPENDIX A ...................................................................................... 108

APPENDIX B ...................................................................................... 117
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1 The impact of valence and associations alignment for lurkers .................. 24
Figure 2.2 The three-way interaction of eWOM associations, valence, and anticipated interaction on attitude shift in company evaluation ................................................................. 33
Figure 2.3 The Alignment-Social Influence (ASI) Model ........................................... 34
Figure 4.1 Three-way interaction among eWOM valence, associations, and anticipated interaction .............................................................................................................. 62
Figure 4.2 Three-way interaction among eWOM valence, associations, and anticipated interaction on final company evaluation ........................................................... 65
Figure 4.3 Statistical model for the moderated mediation role of eWOM diagnosticity for lurkers .............................................................................................................. 68
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Information .................................. 42
Table 3.2 Experimental Groups and Cell Sizes ........................................................... 43
Table 4.1 Three-way ANOVA Test Results for Attitude Shift in Company Evaluation 60
Table 4.2 Means and Standard Deviations of Attitude Shift in Company Evaluation 62
Table 4.3 Three-way ANCOVA Test Results for Final Company Evaluation .......... 63
Table 4.4 Adjusted Means and Standard Errors of Final Company Evaluation ........ 64
Table 4.5 Conditional Indirect Effect of eWOM Associations on Attitude Shift through Perceived eWOM Diagnosticity at Different Levels of Valence Using Bootstrapping 67
Table 4.6 Conditional Direct Effect of eWOM Associations on Attitude Shift through Perceived eWOM Diagnosticity at Different Levels of Valence................................. 68
Table 4.7 Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results .................................................... 71
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The booming development of social media has drastically influenced the ways organizations and stakeholders communicate. Known as internet-based applications that “allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), social media have not only been widely adopted by companies around the globe to engage and communicate with consumers (Burson-Marsteller, 2012; McCorkindale, 2010), but have also been used by consumers to share their own experience and attitude toward companies. As Grunig (2009) pointed out, the interactivity and connectedness of social media have further broken the illusion of control. Rather than being influenced by companies in a one-way direction, consumers are constantly exposed to multiple voices from different groups (Stephen & Galak, 2012), and are able to provide their own feedback to influence others (Coombs, 2014). Such feedback provided by consumers is known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is made available to a multitude of companies and individuals online (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004).

The growing prevalence of social media has drawn a considerable amount of attention on the impact of eWOM both in the academy and the industry. Scholarly works have shown that eWOM can influence consumer responses and a firm’s financial performance from various perspectives such as valence, volume, and source credibility (e.g., Chen & Lurie, 2013; Jin & Phua, 2014; Lee & Youn, 2009; Li & Wang, 2013). Industry research has also found eWOM to be one of the most trusted formats for consumers to obtain information about companies and products (e.g., Nielsen, 2015). All these findings stress the importance for organizations to cultivate quality relationships
with consumers and to actively engage with consumers on social media in order to drive positive eWOM (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; McCorkindale, 2010).

While eWOM has been widely studied in the fields of business, advertising, and marketing, understanding of its impact is still relatively limited in public relations scholarship. Serving as a management function that “establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics [stakeholders] on whom its success or failure depends” (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 5), public relations not only requires understanding of management and organizational behavior, but also stakeholders’ behavior and the underlying psychological mechanism. Previous studies on organization-public relationships (OPRs) revealed positive word-of-mouth and advocacy to be valuable outcomes of quality OPRs (e.g., Bruning, 2002; Men, 2014). Furthermore, in the New Model for Activating Corporate Character and Authentic Advocacy (2012), the Arthur W. Page Society pointed out that creating advocacy and understanding how and why individuals advocate are important roles and skill sets for chief communication officers (CCOs) in today’s enterprise. As an indicator of how consumers think about a company, eWOM to an extent reflects perceived company reputation (Brønn, 2010) and OPRs. Therefore, better understanding and prediction of the impact of eWOM is crucial for both public relations scholarship and practices.

Driven by the increasing demand to understand eWOM and stakeholder behavior on social media, this study sets out to examine and predict the impact of eWOM on responses from an important stakeholder group—consumers. Specifically, it addresses two gaps in the current scholarship of eWOM and proposes a consolidated model
informed by theories from multiple disciplines including public relations, marketing, consumer behavior, and psychology.

The first gap lies in consumers’ pre-existing attitude prior to learning information through eWOM. Previous studies mostly investigated the impact of eWOM based on the content *per se*—as well as other heuristics cues, such as source and volume. Yet it is worth noting that eWOM does not exist in a vacuum. That is, when consumers are exposed to information in eWOM, they would have already had prior knowledge of and attitude toward a company or a product. Consequently, eWOM information should be perceived as either aligned (i.e., consistent and commensurable) or nonaligned (i.e., inconsistent and noncommeasurable) with their prior informational and attitudinal base, leading to different levels of attitude shift.

To address this gap, this study draws insights from the theoretical framework of cognitive corporate associations. This theoretical framework posits that consumers form their attitude toward company through two dimensions of corporate associations—corporate ability (CA) and corporate social responsibility (CSR)—in either a positive or negative manner, with CA associations focusing on a company’s *expertise* in producing good quality products and services, and CSR associations focusing on a company’s *social performance* of being a good member in society (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Kim, 2011). Such prior corporate associations may be formed based on consumers’ direct and indirect experience with a company such as exposure to corporate communication messages and product purchase (Kim & Rader, 2010; Tao, 2015). When talking about a company, the two association dimensions and their valences should also be reflected in the consumer-generated eWOM (Fraustino & Connolly-Ahern, 2015; Chen & Hong, 2015).
Consequently, when exposed to eWOM, one may perceive it as either aligned or nonaligned with the associations and valence previously held toward the company. For example, one may originally perceive Uber as a company with good CA by offering affordable and convenient transportation services. On social media, people may read other consumers’ eWOM about Uber’s services (i.e., CA) in either a positive or negative light, or eWOM from other consumers about Uber’s treatment of employees or philanthropic performance (i.e., CSR) in either a positive or negative way. The alignment (vs. nonalignment) between the valence and associations in eWOM and consumers’ prior attitude would then lead to different levels of attitude shift and adjusted company evaluation. To predict the impact of the alignment between the valence and associations in eWOM and that of consumers’ prior attitude, this study integrates theoretical insights from the negativity bias effect (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finenauer, & Vohs, 2001) and the search-and-alignment model of judgment revision (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002) that center on the psychological mechanisms of information accessibility and diagnosticity (i.e., relevance and usefulness of information [Ahluwalia, Unnava, & Burnkrant, 2001]).

The second gap in extant eWOM literature concerns the two-way and interactive features of social media. Rather than merely on the receiving end of eWOM information, consumers may also actively engage in conversations by posting their own opinions about the company online (Schlosser, 2005). To date, relatively little research has incorporated this interactive perspective when examining eWOM’s impact. The two-way, dynamic nature of social media has increased complexity on eWOM’s impact as consumers’ opinions may not only be influenced by the content of eWOM from others,
but also the *mentality of interacting with those who may or may not have aligned opinions with them* (Moe & Trusov, 2011; Schlosser & Shavitt, 2002; Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012). Anticipated interaction necessitates the segmentation of consumers into two types on social media: *lurkers* who merely seek information and do not anticipate to post and interact with others; and *posters* who anticipate to post their own views on social media and interact with others (Edelmann, 2013; Morrison, Cheong, & McMillan, 2013).

In this light, this study extends beyond the one-way influence mechanisms of information accessibility and diagnosticity for lurkers, and integrates theories from social influence and anticipated interaction (e.g., Duhachek, Zhang, & Krishnan, 2007; Schlosser, 2005) to predict eWOM poster impact. Based on the mechanisms of mental rehearsal and selective processing, and self-presentation and impression management, two sets of competing predictions were proposed, respectively.

To sum up, this study aims at answering two research questions to fill in the above-mentioned research gaps:

1. How do consumers respond to eWOM and adjust their company evaluation when the valence and corporate associations in eWOM are aligned (vs. nonaligned) with their prior attitude?

2. How does anticipated interaction on social media impact consumers’ company evaluation after exposure to eWOM?

The questions were then answered through a consolidated *alignment-social influence* (ASI) model that entailed seven sets of propositions. Seven specific hypotheses were derived and empirically tested using a 2 (eWOM associations: aligned vs. nonaligned) x 2
(eWOM valence: aligned vs. nonaligned) x 2 (anticipated interaction: lurker vs. poster) between-subjects experiment online.

By proposing and testing the ASI model to predict eWOM impact on consumer responses, this study helps contribute to both public relations theories and practices. Theoretically, the proposed ASI model provides insights on the how’s and why’s of consumer attitude formation in the multi-source, multi-audience environment of social media. This model not only examines consumers’ attitudinal outcomes (e.g., company evaluation), but also their informational outcome (e.g., perceived diagnosticity) through which the attitudinal outcomes incur (Michaelson, Wright, & Stacks, 2012). Drawing insights from multiple disciplines, this study takes an open-system approach (Broom, 2006) to expand the scope of public relations theory building and offers an integrated, dynamic perspective to understand the impact of eWOM and consumer advocacy. Furthermore, it also advances the application of the cognitive corporate associations theoretical framework by examining the effect of eWOM specifically related to CA and CSR as either aligned or nonaligned with consumers’ prior associations bases.

Practically, through investigation of eWOM, this study addresses the call from Arthur W. Page Society (2012) regarding the impact of advocacy. By focusing on the psychological mechanisms of consumers and “putting the public back in public relations” (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009, front cover), the ASI model and findings from a rigorously designed experiment provides insights for public relations professionals to not only understand, but also predict the impact of eWOM on social media. As such, professionals can be better informed and educated in their day-to-day environmental scanning and social monitoring.
in order to prevent potential crisis triggered by negative eWOM and achieve optimal attitudinal and behavioral outcomes from positive eWOM.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

This research proposes an alignment-social influence (ASI) model that draws theoretical insights from multiple disciplines including public relations, marketing, consumer behavior, and psychology to explain and predict the impact of electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) on consumer responses. The model incorporates the informational and attitudinal base consumers hold prior to learning information presented in eWOM, and the social influence aspect as consumers anticipate to interact with others on social media. This chapter explicates the theoretical groundwork based on which the model is conceptualized. Specifically, it consists of the following parts.

First, the key constructs under study are elucidated. The theoretical framework of cognitive corporate associations is introduced. Built on this foundation, the association-based synergistic model of corporate communication strategy is reviewed. After reviewing corporate associations, the concepts related to eWOM are explained, with particular focuses on the valence and corporate associations of eWOM.

Following the explication of key constructs, the theoretical foundations are reviewed upon which seven sets of propositions are drawn. First, the theories underlying the alignment aspect—negativity bias and the search-and-alignment model of judgment revision—are discussed. The alignment aspect of the model mainly focuses on the processing mechanisms for lurkers, namely those who do not anticipate to post on social media or interact with other consumers. Next, the theories and mechanisms of the social influence aspect are reviewed. The social influence aspect of the model mainly centers on the mechanism for posters, namely those who anticipate to post on social media and
interact with other consumers via eWOM. Two competing sets of predictions are put forward for the social influence aspect based on selective processing and impression management, respectively.

This chapter is concluded by consolidating all propositions into the ASI model. Based on this model and the propositions, seven specific hypotheses were then derived.

**The Theoretical Framework of Cognitive Corporate Associations**

Consumers hold different kinds of information in their memory about a company. Based on the information stored in memory, consumers form psychological associations with the company (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Kim, 2014). Such associations are known as consumers’ cognitive corporate associations, serving as a generic label of what a person knows about a company (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Corporate associations encompass knowledge, beliefs, perceptions, inferences, and attitude, as well as emotions and feelings (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Madrigal, 2000). Different from product and brand associations, corporate associations are about the perceptions based on overall information of a company rather than a specific product, service, or brand (Dacin & Smith, 1994).

Research from different disciplines including business, marketing, public relations, and advertising demonstrates that corporate associations serve as valuable and strategic assets for companies to sustain their competitive advantage (Dowling, 1993; Hall, 1993), build and nurture company-stakeholder relationships (Kim, 2011; Kim & Rader, 2010), and drive positive brand attitude and purchase intention (Kim, Haley, & Koo, 2009).
Corporate Ability and Corporate Social Responsibility Associations

Drawing insights from corporate image, reputation management, and organizational behavior (e.g., Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Fombrun, 1996), Brown and Dacin (1997) identified two dimensions of corporate associations—*corporate ability* (CA) associations and *corporate social responsibility* (CSR) associations. CA associations refer to a company’s expertise and ability in producing and delivering quality products and services; whereas CSR associations are related to a company’s activities and status regarding its societal obligations such as environmental, social, and ethical practices (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Both dimensions come from consumers’ direct or indirect experiences with a company including previous product purchase, knowledge of the company’s past behavior, and exposure to information related to the company from various sources (Kim & Rader, 2010; Madrigal, 2000; Tao, 2015).

Research shows that corporate associations serve as the memory and psychological foundations on which consumers form their evaluations of the company, its products/services, as well as subsequent purchase intention (e.g., Brown & Dacin, 1997; Kim, 2011; Marquina & Morales, 2012). Specifically, CA associations help provide inferences related to the company’s product attributes, thereby directly influencing consumers’ company and product evaluations. CSR associations, although not provide directing product-relevant attributes, offer an overall context from which consumers can directly form company evaluations; allowing them to make further inferences that indirectly impact their product evaluation (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Kim, 2011). This theoretical framework taps into the mechanism through which consumers form their attitude and behavioral intention and renders key insights for companies to adopt.
effective positioning strategies as they intend to establish and enhance stakeholders’ certain associations. For example, a company may adopt CA strategy to build and reinforce CA associations by stressing on the aspects related to product expertise, superiority of technology innovation, and industry leadership. It may also adopt CSR strategy to strengthen CSR associations by emphasizing its social performance such as commitment to diversity, environmental consciousness, and philanthropy (Brown & Dacin, 1997).

**The Association-Based Synergistic Model of Corporate Communication Strategy**

To further elucidate how companies generate desired attitudinal and behavioral outcomes via corporate associations, public relations and communication scholars have developed a synergistic model of corporate communication strategy as an extension of the corporate associations theoretical framework. This model entails a threefold corporate communication typology that companies use to build and cultivate intended associations with stakeholders: (1) CA strategy, (2) CSR strategy, and (3) hybrid strategy (Kim & Rader, 2010; Kim, 2011). Among them, CA strategy aims to build CA associations, focusing on showcasing the company’s ability and expertise related to its products and services; CSR strategy aims to build CSR associations, emphasizing on displaying the company’s social responsibility performance; hybrid strategy combines both the CA and CSR components and intends to build both associations (Kim, 2011).

The association-based synergistic model of corporate communication strategy stresses on the connection between corporate communication strategies and the corporate associations they intend to generate (Kim & Rader, 2010). This model also synthesizes other typologies of strategies identified in previous literature. For example, Schumann
and colleagues (1991) have proposed the classifications of sales-related, good-will-related, and hybrid/umbrella advertisements. Similarly, Drumwright (1996) classified corporate campaigns based on economic, non-economic, and mixed objectives. Moreover, from the perspective of legitimacy theory, Tao and Wilson (2016) further pointed out that the CA and CSR dimensions reflected in Kim and colleagues’ (Kim & Rader, 2010; Kim, 2011) synergistic model can also speak to the two dimensions of legitimacy: pragmatic legitimacy that demonstrates how a company follows the desired functional attributes, and social legitimacy that relates to a company’s contributions to the welfare at the societal level (Handelman & Arnold, 1999). The pragmatic legitimacy and social legitimacy correspond to the CA and CSR dimensions, respectively (Tao & Wilson, 2016).

Based on the theoretical framework of corporate associations and the synergistic model of corporate communication strategy, a stream of research has empirically examined the adoption of these corporate communication strategies and their effectiveness in generating intended outcomes. The adoption of these strategies has been documented by a series of content analyses of companies’ communication strategies on corporate websites (Kim & Rader, 2010), Facebook (Fraustino & Connolly-Ahern, 2015; Sung & Kim, 2014), and Twitter (Tao & Wilson, 2015). The effectiveness of the association-based communication strategies on generating outcomes such as enhanced company evaluation, product evaluation, corporate reputation, and purchase intention has been supported by empirical evidence from lab and field experiments using both fictional and real companies (e.g., Beren, Riel, & Bruggen, 2005; Chen & Hong, 2015; Kim, 2011; Tao & Wilson, 2016). Based on such evidence, it is recommended that public relations
and corporate communication professionals incorporate an association-based communication typology in their practices to effectively cultivate relationships with consumers via highlighted corporate associations.

**Corporate Associations as Prior Informational and Attitudinal Base**

The CA/CSR typology of corporate associations and the synergistic model of corporate communication strategy emphasize the important basic assumption that consumers’ evaluations toward a company and its products do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, these evaluations are formed based on the two dimensions of cognitive associations (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Kim, 2011). This assumption necessitates the examination of consumers’ informational and attitudinal base prior to learning a company’s information and its communication strategies. That is to say, consumers may have *already* formed certain types of associations (i.e., CA, CSR, or both/hybrid) in a certain valences (i.e., positive or negative) with a company before exposure to further information about the company and its communication messages.

As corporate associations are cognitive and memory-based, the underpinning of this theoretical framework can be traced to the Associative Network Theory (ANT) of memory (Anderson, 1983; Anderson & Bower, 1974). ANT posits memory as a network of interconnected conceptual nodes representing different pieces of information with varied associative strength (Anderson, 1983; Collins & Luftus, 1975). In this way, different pieces of information about a company are stored in consumers’ memory as interconnected conceptual nodes and are retrieved through the process of spreading activation once initiated by a shared cue—e.g., the company name (Collins & Luftus, 1975). Extending this notion, information regarding the dimension and valence of prior
corporate associations would be retrieved when consumers are exposed to subsequent information of the company, thereby influencing the way they think and feel about the company (Chen & Tao, 2016).

In public relations research, the effects from consumers’ informational and attitudinal base is investigated mostly in the context of corporate crisis, where CA and CSR associations are examined as the baseline context prior to a crisis. Through a series of experimental studies, previous scholars tested the role prior corporate associations play when different types of crises occur (e.g., Kim, 2013; Kim, 2014; Sohn & Lariscy, 2015; Tao, 2015). In today’s connected world, crisis events can be triggered and amplified on social media. Crises, however, are highly negative events that can seriously impact stakeholders’ perception of a company (Coombs, 2014; Zyglidopoulos & Phillips, 1999). What occurs more often on social media are comments—and sometimes complaints—from consumers. Such complaints, if not signaled at the pre-crisis stage and handled appropriately, can become full-blown crises later on (Coombs, 2014). Therefore, it is not just important to study CA and CSR associations as baselines in crisis communication, but they are crucial to understand how consumer voices on social media, when having mixed valences and associations from consumers’ prior informational and attitudinal base, would impact consumer responses toward company. The next section reviews the concept of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that addresses consumer voice on social media.

**Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)**

The comments made by consumers on social media about a company or its products are commonly known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). eWOM is defined
as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). Nowadays, with the growing use of social media, eWOM has become a major and highly trusted source for consumers to obtain company and product information (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Nielson, 2015). This is because, unlike information generated by a company itself, eWOM cannot be as easily manipulated and serves greater warranting value (Walther & Parks, 2002). As such, it is important for public relations and corporate communication professionals to closely monitor online conversations and engage consumers on social media (McLennon & Howell, 2010).

The impact of eWOM has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly work in the fields of business, marketing, and advertising. Previous research has investigated the influence of eWOM on consumer responses and organizational performance from various aspects including valence (Lee & Youn, 2009), volume (Li & Wang, 2013), extremity (Lee, Rodgers, & Kim, 2009), temporal contiguity (Chen & Lurie, 2013), and source credibility (Jin & Phua, 2014). In this section, two important aspects—valence and corporate associations of eWOM—are examined for the proposed alignment-social influence model.

**Valence of eWOM**

The *valence* of eWOM refers to the positive or negative nature of information contained in eWOM (Li & Wang, 2013). As collective signals of a company’s reputation (Amblee & Bui, 2011), positive and negative eWOM can lead to polarized effects, with positive eWOM generating more positive outcomes and negative eWOM leading to more
negative results. It was found that eWOM valence can spill over to the valence in
different consumer responses and communication outcomes, such as product judgment
and brand evaluation (Lee et al., 2009), purchase intention (East, Hammond, & Lomax,
2008), willingness to recommend (Lee & Youn, 2009), as well as actual purchase
behavior (Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009). Moreover, eWOM valence was also found to influence
organizational performance and business outcomes such as a revenue and sales volumes
(Basuoy, Chartterjee, & Ravid, 2003; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004).

In addition to polarized impact, previous research has also generally demonstrated
a negativity bias effect. That is to say, the impact from negative eWOM is usually more
salient than that from positive eWOM. For example, Hornik, Satchi, Cesareo, and Pastore
(2014) found that negative eWOM messages got disseminated faster, longer, and were
better assimilated than their positive counterparts. Lee and Youn’s (2009) findings
showed that the effect from negative eWOM would override the influence of social
media platform, generating detrimental effects on willingness to recommend across
different eWOM platforms. In two studies about the impact from eWOM valence and
extremity, Lee and colleagues (2009) found extremely negative reviews about a product
generated stronger influence on brand attitude than extremely positive reviews. The
eWOM valence negativity bias effect found in marketing and advertising research
warrants greater attention to the influence from eWOM in public relations research,
especially for the cultivation of consumer-company relationships and pre-crisis
environmental scanning. The mechanism of the negativity bias effect is further elaborated
in the next section of this chapter.
Corporate Associations of eWOM

Aside from valence, eWOM also carries specific dimensions of information about a company. Based on the reviewed theoretical framework of corporate associations, it is argued that eWOM would also reflect the CA and CSR dimensions of a company’s performance. However, little extant research has been conducted regarding the corporate associations embodied in eWOM. In a content analysis of Fortune 500 companies’ Facebook posts and wall comments from consumers, Fraustino and Connolly-Ahern (2015) found that, in response to companies’ utilization of the association-based corporate communication strategies, comments from consumers also exhibited different focuses on CA or CSR associations. Such findings provide empirical support for the CA and CSR dimensionalities carried by eWOM.

Extending from Fraustino and Connolly-Ahern’s (2015) findings, Chen and Hong (2015) examined the valence of eWOM corresponding to CA and CSR associations in an experimental setting. Their results showed that eWOM carrying CA/CSR associations with different valences would generate intended positive or negative CA/CSR associations, respectively.

Both Fraustino and Connolly-Ahern’s (2015) and Chen and Hong’s (2015) studies, however, only examined eWOM concurrently with the corporate communication messages generated by companies. An often-times overlooked aspect in previous eWOM studies is that the influence of eWOM does not come into effect without the baseline context of consumers’ prior knowledge and attitude about the company. This study addresses this gap by taking into account the knowledge and attitude consumers have previously formed with a company, and how the alignment between eWOM valence and
associations and consumers’ prior informational and attitudinal base influence their attitude shift in company evaluation, as well as subsequent company evaluation. The next section details the mechanisms through which eWOM valence and associations, when aligned (vs. nonaligned) with prior valence and associations, impact consumer responses.

**The Impact of Valence and Associations Alignment**

As discussed earlier, consumers may form positive or negative attitudes toward a company based on CA or CSR associations through their previous direct and indirect experiences with the company, and they will consequently perceive the valence and associations in eWOM from other consumers as either aligned or nonaligned with their own, resulting in judgment revision and attitude shift.

Previous research in psychology, marketing, and consumer behavior on cognition and information processing suggests that people tend to make judgment revision based on the accessibility and diagnosticity (i.e., relevance and usefulness of information [Ahluwalia et al., 2001]) of the different pieces of information they receive (e.g., Herr, Kardes, Kim, 1991; Lynch, Marmorstein, & Weigold, 1988). Based on this general assumption, two specific frameworks—negativity bias (Baumeister et al., 2001) and the search-and-alignment model (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002) explain the mechanisms of valence and associations alignment between consumers’ previous informational and attitudinal base and information presented in eWOM. In this section, the theoretical foundations are mainly used to explain the mechanism of attitude shift after exposure to eWOM for lurkers, namely those who are only exposed to different pieces of information but do not anticipate to interact with other consumers on social media.
Mechanism of the Valence Alignment Effect: Negativity Bias

Negativity bias refers to the phenomenon that positive information is valued less than negative information (Baumeister et al., 2001). This effect has been well documented in previous research. Earlier psychological research found that negativity bias existed in impression formation. For example, Fiske’s (1980) experimental findings showed that negative information of person attributes were weighted more heavily than positive information, and therefore had larger influence on impression formation. Such negativity bias effect stems from integration bias (Fiske, 1980). That is to say, rather than weighting different attributes equally, people tend to weigh certain attributes and information more heavily than others when they try to form an impression about a person or object (Skpwronski & Carlston, 1989). Consequently, attributes that are considered more useful and informative would receive more weight during information processing and become more influential in impression formation (Fiske, 1980). Negative information, as compared with positive information, stands out as being rarer and is therefore perceived as more diagnostic (i.e. useful and informative) and given more weight (Fiske, 1980).

Extending from these findings, and as discussed in the previous section, the negativity bias effect has also been empirically evidenced in previous studies on the impact of eWOM valence, with negative eWOM generating more salient impact than positive eWOM (e.g., Hornik et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2009). A well-supported explanation is that social norms generally lead people to provide more positive information about a company and its products through word-of-mouth (Mizerski, 1982), resulting in more prevalent positive information than negative information. This assumption has been
supported by industry research evidence that consumers tend to post positive eWOM more than negative eWOM after their purchase experience (Bazaarvoice, 2011). As such, negative eWOM is regarded rarer and more diagnostic as compared with positive eWOM, thus would receive greater weight when consumers evaluate a company and its products (Chen & Lurie, 2013).

When taking into account consumers’ attitudinal base with a company, the valence of eWOM should be considered as either aligned or nonaligned with consumers’ prior attitude. Specifically, for companies that have cultivated positive associations with their consumers through corporate communication efforts, positive eWOM would confirm consumers’ positive attitude, and no biased processing will be present. Hence, consumers’ attitude shift in their company evaluation after exposure to eWOM would be minimal, and the final company evaluation would remain positive. On the other hand, if consumers who have positive prior associations with a company are exposed to negative eWOM, they will be forced to rationalize nonaligned valence, thus requiring more elaborated information processing. As negative information is considered more diagnostic (Baumeister et al., 2001; Fiske, 1980), the information in negative eWOM becomes more salient and will receive greater weight, thereby leading to greater attitude shift in a downward direction, as well as an overall more negative final company evaluation. As such:

**Proposition 1:** When having positive prior associations with the company, consumers who are exposed to negative eWOM will a) produce greater attitude shift in company evaluation and b) generate lower company evaluation than consumers who are exposed to positive eWOM.
Mechanism of the Associations Alignment Effect: The Search-and-Alignment Model

When exposed to information presented in eWOM, consumers may not only see it as either aligned or nonaligned with the valence of the company they previously hold, but also see it as either aligned or nonaligned with the corporate associations they have previously formed. For example, if a consumer has previously stored CA information in memory, then the CA attributes included in eWOM would be considered as aligned associations; the CSR attributes in eWOM would be considered as nonaligned associations.

The mechanism of the impact from such associations alignment can be explained by the search-and-alignment model of judgment revision proposed by Pham and Muthukrishnan (2002). Their model draws insights from mental representation in judgment revision (e.g. Hogarth & Einhorn, 1992) and explains the process through which people revise their judgment after exposure to counter-attitudinal information (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002). The model focuses on the accessibility and diagnosticity of information on judgment formation (Herr et al., 1991), and also draws on insights from resistance to persuasion (e.g., McGuire, 1961, 1964; Burgoon, Miller, Cohen, & Montgomery, 1978). It provides a two-stage process to explicate the underlying mechanism regarding how people would use their prior knowledge to resist challenge information or revise judgment (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002).

To wit, when counter-attitudinal (i.e., challenge) information is learned, people first actively search in their memory about the target information (i.e., information previously learned and stored in memory) that can support their prior attitude (Kunda, 1990). Such target information is retrieved to elaborate any refutational (i.e. in line with
prior attitude) or supportive (i.e., in line with challenge information) thoughts (McGuire, 1964). When the target information becomes more accessible, it will be more readily available to resist attitude change and judgment revision. This stage is called the “refutational search” in the search-and-alignment model. The magnitude of attitude change, in this regard, is negatively associated with the accessibility of previously learned information (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002, p. 19).

The second stage in the search-and-alignment model involves “alignment and damage assessment” (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002, p. 19). In this stage, the retrieved target information is used to evaluate the diagnosticity of subsequently learned counter-attitudinal information. The evaluation of diagnosticity then entails a process of mental comparison and structural alignment as people try to match between what they previously and subsequently learned (Medin, Goldstone, & Markman, 1995). When the attributes in the challenge information align with the prior knowledge, they should be perceived as more diagnostic, thus generate more elaboration, receive larger weight, and lead to greater judgment revision and attitude change toward the direction of the challenge information (Fabrigar & Petty, 1999; Muthukrishnan, Pham, & Mungale, 1999). In this regard, the impact from subsequently learned challenge information on judgment revision is mediated by the diagnosticity of that information (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002). The increase of diagnosticity would lead to increased attitude change and judgment revision.

Pham and Muthukrishnan’s (2002) search-and-alignment model explains the empirical findings in some earlier research and has also been supported in later studies. The attributes tested for information alignment have included those of image appeals versus quality appeals (Petty & Wegener, 1998), affective versus cognitive attitude
(Fabrigar & Petty, 1999), attribute-specific versus abstract positioning (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002), as well as performance-based versus value-based positioning (Pullig, Netemeyer, & Biswas, 2006).

Applying the search-and-alignment model to explain the alignment between consumers’ previous associations with a company and the corporate associations embodied in eWOM they are subsequently exposed to, it can be argued that, consumers who have a certain type of prior positive corporate associations with a company will undergo the memory searching and attribute alignment process after exposure to negative eWOM about a company. When presented such challenge information, consumers will try to search what they have stored in memory to refute the challenge. Aligned associations would be more easily retrieved and then used to assess the diagnosticity of the challenge information in eWOM. As a consequence, diagnosticity should be highest for negative eWOM with aligned associations because of (1) negativity bias, and (2) aligned challenge for elaboration, resulting in greater attitude shift in company evaluation, as well as more negative final company evaluation. On the other hand, the difference of associations alignment would not be salient for those who are exposed to positive eWOM due to a lack of required diagnosticity. It is also worth noting that such propositions drawing from the search-and-alignment model only deal with consumers who are merely information recipients on the internet without anticipated interaction with other consumers (i.e., lurkers). Therefore, the following propositions are derived for lurkers.

**Proposition 2-1 (for lurkers):** When having positive associations with the company, a) lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM with aligned
associations will produce greater attitude shift in company evaluation than lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM with nonaligned associations; whereas b) lurkers who are exposed to positive eWOM with aligned associations will not differ from lurkers who are exposed to positive eWOM with nonaligned associations in their company evaluation attitude shift.

**Proposition 2-2 (for lurkers):** When having positive prior associations with the company, a) lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM with aligned associations will generate lower company evaluation than lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM with nonaligned associations; whereas b) lurkers who are exposed to positive eWOM with aligned associations will not differ from lurkers who are exposed to positive eWOM with nonaligned associations in their company evaluation.

**Proposition 3 (for lurkers):** The two-way interaction effect of eWOM valence and associations on attitude shift in company evaluation for lurkers will be mediated by the perceived diagnosticity of eWOM.

Figure 2.1 maps out the inter-relationships among these propositions.

Figure 2.1. The impact of valence and associations alignment for lurkers
The Impact of Social Influence and Anticipated Interaction on Social Media

By far, the above review of literature has explained the mechanism of impact from the alignment of valence and associations between consumers’ prior informational and attitudinal base and eWOM on consumers’ attitude change and final company evaluation from the account of information accessibility and diagnosticity. However, what is missing in the current account to predict the effect of eWOM is the dynamic, interactive, and two-way communication nature of social media (Li & Li, 2014). Unlike what is predicted in the search-and-alignment model (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002) alone, consumers who are exposed to eWOM may not necessarily process the information as a passive recipient. Rather, the dialogic and participatory features of social media allow stakeholders and consumers to be not only information receivers, but also content creators to share information and interact with others (Coombs, 2014; Grunig, 2009). In this regard, the impact of eWOM cannot be fully examined without taking into consideration such bilateral influence.

The two-way communication and interactive features of social media necessitate further investigation of eWOM’s impact on attitude formation and judgment revision by incorporating the influence of social interaction. That is to say, in some situations, consumers may merely seek out information about a company, whereas in other situations they may consider sharing their own opinions with others while receiving information at the same time. For the latter, social interaction is anticipated (Duhachek et al., 2007). While the concept of anticipated social interaction has already been tested in interpersonal and group communication settings and is not novel to social media (e.g., Duhachek et al., 2007; Tetlock, Skitka, & Boettger, 1989), the internet and social media
have made interaction and consumer feedback both easier and thus used to a greater extent than before (Grunig, 2009).

In the online environment, such anticipated interaction is made possible via the expectation to post reviews of a company or product on the internet, which is likely to be seen, shared, liked, or commented by others (Schlosser, 2005). As such, consumers can be segmented into two different types: (1) lurkers, who seek and utilize the information they obtain from the social media community but rarely post messages, and (2) posters, who share their views with others via user-generated content such as eWOM (Edelmann, 2013; Morrison et al., 2013; Nonnecke & Preece, 1999). The importance of this segmentation is empirically justified by previous online communication research in knowledge sharing and social support where differences were found between lurkers and posters (e.g., Hung, Lai, & Chou, 2015; Morrison et al., 2013; Petrovčič & Petrič, 2014).

Drawing insights from information processing and social influence, previous research in social psychology and consumer behavior suggests that anticipated social interaction should change the way people process information and make judgments and evaluations (e.g., Duhachek et al., 2007; Schlosser & Shavitt, 2002). However, to date, a consistent explanation for the poster’s processing mechanism has yet to be found. The next section proposes two sets of competing predictions regarding anticipated interaction influence.

**Mental Rehearsal and Selective Processing**

The first set of predictions are proposed based on the account of mental rehearsal and selective processing required by the consumer. Unlike lurkers, when exposed to eWOM and asked to provide their opinions, posters will mentally prepare what they
would like to say to others (Schlosser & Shavitt, 1999, 2002). Previous research in social
psychology suggests that such mental rehearsal can have disruptive impact on people’s
attitude formation and judgment revision because attitude can be influenced by the
direction of what people prepare to discuss (e.g., Moore, 2002; Schlosser & Shavitt,
Specifically, Schlosser and Shavitt (2002) proposed a “rehearsal-weight explanation,”
which posits that when consumers mentally prepare for social interaction, their attitude
toward a company or a product would be influenced by what is salient in the attributes
they mentally rehearse. Consequently, it is likely that even though some attributes are
less important and diagnostic for evaluation, when mentally rehearsed by those who
anticipate interactions, they should be weighted more heavily during information
processing and thus have larger influence on attitude formation (Schlosser & Shavitt,
2002). The “rehearsal-weight explanation” has been empirically supported through a
series of experiments (e.g., Schlosser & Shavitt, 1999, 2002). Depending on the attributes
being mentally rehearsed, attitudes of those who anticipate interaction become either
more or less extreme than those who do not anticipate interaction (Schlosser & Shavitt,
2002).

Extending from the premise of mental rehearsal, previous literature on persuasion
and consumer psychology helps further explain what attributes would get rehearsed for
those who anticipate social interaction when group information is in conflict (i.e.,
nonaligned) with prior attitude. It has been argued that when nonaligned valence from a
group’s attitude is presented to individuals who anticipate interaction with that group,
they will perceive a threat to their own prior belief and attitude (Aronson, Blanton, &
Cooper, 1995; Duhachek et al., 2007). In the face of such threat, a defensive mechanism will be induced, leading to selective processing of the information from the group that contains conflicting valence (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005; McGuire, 1961, 1964). When asked to provide their own judgment, they will mentally rehearse what they would like to say to others in their own evaluation (Schlosser & Shavitt, 2002). Because of the selective processing of group information, they are less likely to incorporate attributes from group information of conflicted valence (Duhachek et al., 2007). According to the rehearsal-weight account explained earlier, it can be reasoned that for those with positive prior attitude in a negative group, even if negative information is generally considered more diagnostic, such negativity bias will be counteracted by the selective processing of negative information from the group. Instead, the positive attributes from prior knowledge will be mentally rehearsed and, hence, become more salient. Furthermore, the mechanism of selective processing also suggests that perceived threat would be most salient when the information of conflicting valence is directly related to the aspects of belief previously held (Aronson et al., 1995; Baumeister & Jones, 1978).

Based on this reasoning, it can be argued that unlike that for lurkers, when posters who have positive prior associations with a company are exposed to negative eWOM with aligned associations, the perceived threat should be most direct and salient, leading to selective processing of the information contained in eWOM that counters negativity bias; whereas when they are exposed to negative eWOM with nonaligned associations, the perceived threat should not be salient enough to induce selective processing and a negativity bias effect would obtain. On the other hand, when posters who have positive prior associations with a company are exposed to positive eWOM, no threat will be
perceived regardless of the alignment of associations, thus minimum attitude shift is expected and the final company evaluation would remain positive. Hence, the following propositions are put forward:

**Proposition 4-1 (for posters—competing prediction A, mental rehearsal and selective processing account):** When having positive prior associations with the company, a) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM with aligned associations will produce less attitude shift in company evaluation than posters who are exposed to negative eWOM with nonaligned associations; whereas b) posters who are exposed to positive eWOM with aligned associations will not differ from posters who are exposed to positive eWOM with nonaligned associations in their company evaluation attitude shift.

**Proposition 4-2 (for posters—competing prediction A, mental rehearsal and selective processing account):** When having positive prior associations with the company, a) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM with aligned associations will generate higher company evaluation than posters who are exposed to negative eWOM with nonaligned associations; whereas b) posters who are exposed to positive eWOM with aligned associations will not differ from posters who are exposed to positive eWOM with nonaligned associations in their company evaluation.

In addition, if the mental rehearsal and selective processing mechanism of attitude shift for posters holds, it should be evidenced in the amount of eWOM information one incorporates in the thought process. Consolidating what has been postulated for lurkers and posters:
Proposition 5: (mechanism of competing prediction A): a) (based on the weighting of diagnostic information in the search-and-alignment model)
Lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM with aligned associations are more likely to incorporate eWOM information in their thoughts than the rest of the lurkers; b) (based on selective processing for posters) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM with nonaligned associations are more likely to incorporate eWOM information in their thoughts than the rest of the posters; and c) (consolidating the information-weighting for lurkers and posters) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM with aligned associations are less likely to incorporate eWOM information in their thoughts than lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM with aligned associations.

Self-presentation and Impression Management

An alternative account of the influence from anticipated interaction is based on the theories of self-presentation and impression management. The terms “self-presentation” and “impression management” are often times used interchangeably, referring to the process through which people intend to influence others’ perceptions towards them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In this process, individuals consciously behave in certain ways to cultivate a desired impression from others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). With the prevalent adoption of social media today, increased attention has been given to self-presentation and impression management online (e.g., Lampel & Bhalla, 2007; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Walther (1996) suggests that, compared to face-to-face settings, individuals can be more at ease to selectively present their “selves” in the online environment.
Unlike lurkers, posters’ opinions may be influenced by others and biased towards the direction of other people’s opinions (Ratner & Kahn, 2002). As they anticipate interaction, posters may be driven by impression motives and undergo the self-presentation process, thereby making biased judgments (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005; Schlosser, 2005). Such biased judgment would become especially salient when the valences between one’s prior attitude and others’ opinions are in conflict (i.e., nonaligned).

Previous research suggests that posters with a positive prior attitude, their attitude would be influenced to a larger extent when others’ opinions are negative (vs. positive) (e.g., Schlosser, 2005). This is in line with the negativity bias effect; negative information is generally considered more diagnostic, those who provide negative evaluation should be perceived as more intelligent and competent (Amabile, 1983). Therefore, when exposed to negative eWOM, posters, driven by the motive to appear more intelligent in front of others, are more likely to conform by providing more negative, diagnostic information (Schlosser, 2005). As the diagnosticity of negative information is considered higher when the associations between prior attitude and eWOM are aligned (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002), it can be further reasoned that such downward adjustment of evaluations when exposed to negative eWOM with aligned associations would be even lower for posters than that for lurkers; whereas the downward shift of evaluation would not be as salient for those who are exposed to negative eWOM with nonaligned associations due to lack of diagnosticity. In contrast, positive eWOM does not create conflicting valences for posters holding positive prior attitude and would not trigger the self-presentation concern to appear more intelligent by being more critical. Therefore, the attitude shift would be
minimal for posters who are exposed to positive eWOM regardless of associations alignment, and the final evaluation would remain positive.

**Proposition 6-1 (for posters—competing prediction B, self-presentation account):** When having positive prior associations with the company, a) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM with aligned associations will produce greater attitude shift in company evaluation than posters who are exposed to negative eWOM with nonaligned associations, and b) such attitude shift will be even greater than that for lurkers; whereas c) posters who are exposed to positive eWOM with aligned associations will not differ from posters who are exposed to positive eWOM with nonaligned associations in their company evaluation attitude shift.

**Proposition 6-2 (for posters—competing prediction B, self-presentation account):** When having positive prior associations with the company, a) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM with aligned associations will generate lower company evaluation than posters who are exposed to negative eWOM with nonaligned associations, and b) the evaluation will be even lower than that for lurkers; whereas c) posters who are exposed to positive eWOM with aligned associations will not differ from posters who are exposed to positive eWOM with nonaligned associations in their company evaluation.

Furthermore, if the account of self-presentation and impression management holds, the impact from negative eWOM should be more salient for posters with lower self-esteem. This is because impression management is used to enhance one’s self image and maintain self-esteem (Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988). Individuals with low self-esteem, in this
regard, are more likely to engage in impression management than individuals with high self-esteem in order to feel better about themselves (Angelis, Bonezzi, Peluso, Rucker, & Costabile, 2012; Brown et al., 1988). Therefore, to further test this mechanism:

**Proposition 7 (mechanism of competing prediction B):** For posters who are exposed to negative eWOM, attitude shift in company evaluation will be greater in the downward direction when self-esteem is lower.

To sum up the predictions for lurkers and posters, Figure 2.2 lays out a model that specifies the three-way interaction among the effects eWOM associations (aligned vs. nonaligned with prior attitude), eWOM valence (aligned vs. nonaligned with prior valence), and anticipated interaction (lurker vs. poster) on consumers’ attitude shift in company evaluation.

*Figure 2.2.* The three-way interaction of eWOM associations, valence, and anticipated interaction on attitude shift in company evaluation
The Alignment-Social Influence Model and Summary of Hypotheses

Overview of the Alignment-Social Influence Model

Based on the preceding propositions regarding the impact of eWOM valence and associations alignment with consumers’ prior attitude, as well as the different processing mechanisms for lurkers and posters, a consolidated alignment-social influence (ASI) model is proposed (see Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3. The Alignment-Social Influence (ASI) Model

Hypotheses for Empirical Test

To empirically test the proposed ASI model, this study uses positive CA associations as consumers’ prior informational and attitudinal base with a company. The alignment between eWOM valence and associations and that of consumers’ prior attitude is then operationalized through positive and negative eWOM about CA and CSR, respectively. In this regard, positive (vs. negative) eWOM signals alignment (vs.
nonalignment) of valence, and eWOM about CA (vs. CSR) signals alignment (vs. nonalignment) of associations. Anticipated interaction on social media is operationalized via posting and lurking behavior on Twitter during information processing and when making company evaluations (Duhachek et al., 2007; Schlosser, 2005).

This study uses positive CA associations as the baseline attitude for several important practical reasons. Previous research found that CA strategy was in the dominant position when it comes to companies’ association-based communication strategies on different social media channels (e.g., Fraustino & Connolly-Ahern, 2015; Tao & Wilson, 2015). Yet in today’s turbulent marketplace, companies are facing increasing demand for both quality of products/services and socially responsible conduct from consumers (Marquina & Morales, 2012). By using positive CA associations as the prior attitude and presenting positive or negative eWOM about CA or CSR subsequently, this study helps reflect the common practices and phenomena in public relations and corporate communication. It also provides the basis for future research to incorporate different baselines and platforms for replications and extensions.

With positive CA associations as the prior attitude, the following seven sets of specific hypotheses corresponding to each proposition are derived and empirically tested.

**H1:** When having positive prior CA associations with the company, consumers who are exposed to negative eWOM will a) produce greater attitude shift in company evaluation and b) generate lower company evaluation than consumers who are exposed to positive eWOM.

**H2-1 (for lurkers):** When having positive prior CA associations with the company, a) lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA will produce
greater attitude shift in company evaluation than lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR; whereas b) lurkers who are exposed to positive eWOM about CA will not differ from lurkers who are exposed to positive eWOM about CSR in their company evaluation attitude shift.

**H2-2 (for lurkers):** When having positive prior CA associations with the company, a) lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA will generate lower company evaluation than lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR; whereas b) lurkers who are exposed to positive eWOM about CA will not differ from lurkers who are exposed to positive eWOM about CSR in their company evaluation.

**H3 (for lurkers):** The two-way interaction effect of eWOM valence and associations on attitude shift in company evaluation for lurkers will be mediated by the perceived diagnosticity of eWOM.

**H4-1 (for posters—competing prediction A, mental rehearsal and selective processing account):** When having positive prior CA associations with the company, a) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA will produce less attitude shift in company evaluation than posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR; whereas b) posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CA will not differ from posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CSR in their company evaluation attitude shift.

**H4-2 (for posters—competing prediction A, mental rehearsal and selective processing account):** When having positive prior CA associations with the company, a) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA will generate
higher company evaluation than posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR; whereas b) posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CA will not differ from posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CSR in their company evaluation.

**H5: (mechanism of competing prediction A):** a) Lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA are more likely to incorporate information appeared in eWOM in their thoughts than the rest of the lurkers; b) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR are more likely to incorporate information appeared in eWOM in their thoughts than the rest of the posters; and c) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA are less likely to incorporate information appeared in eWOM in their thoughts than lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA.

**H6-1 (for posters—competing prediction B, self-presentation account):** When having positive prior CA associations with the company, a) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA will produce greater attitude shift in company evaluation than posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR, and b) such attitude shift will be even greater than that for lurkers; whereas c) posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CA will not differ from posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CSR in their company evaluation attitude shift.

**H6-2 (for posters—competing prediction B, self-presentation account):** When having positive prior CA associations with the company, a) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA will generate lower company evaluation
than posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR, and b) the
evaluation will be even lower than that for lurkers; whereas c) posters who are
exposed to positive eWOM about CA will not differ from posters who are
exposed to positive eWOM about CSR in their company evaluation.

H7 (mechanism of competing prediction B): For posters who are exposed to
negative eWOM, attitude shift in company evaluation will be greater in the
downward direction when self-esteem is lower.

Next, chapter three presents the research method this dissertation uses to
empirically test the proposed model and hypotheses.
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

This study employed a quasi-experimental design to test the alignment-social influence (ASI) model and the proposed hypotheses. Experimental design in general is known as the most robust kind of research and is frequently used in the fields of psychology, communication, consumer behavior, marketing, and advertising. While less often used in public relations research in the industry, experiments are of great use for the investigation of public relations theory that helps establish causal linkages among variables to inform better practices (Stacks, 2016). For example, the Coombs (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory has been primarily tested empirically through experiments to help offer insights for best practices in crisis communication and management. With independent variables being purposefully manipulated, an experimental design can help establish a time order to demonstrate causal relationships and allows for control over influence outside of what is being studied (Stacks, 2016; Wrench, Thomax-Maddox, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2013).

A quasi-experimental design is suitable in this study because the proposed alignment-social influence model aims at advancing public relations theory building and predicts causal relationships with specific directions. Moreover, the theoretical foundations that lay the groundwork for the mechanisms of the predicted directions were previously empirically tested through experiments (e.g., Duhachek et al., 2007; Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002; Schlosser & Shavitt, 2002). However, because the experimental design did not include randomly selected participants in control conditions (Campbell & Stanley, 1963), a quasi-experimental design was employed to empirically test this model.
Specifically, a 2 (eWOM associations: aligned vs. nonaligned with prior associations) x 2 (eWOM valence: aligned vs. nonaligned with prior valence) x 2 (anticipated interaction: lurker vs. poster) full-factorial between-subjects experiment was conducted, with all three factors manipulated. Four pretests were conducted to test the appropriateness of the manipulations, and a main experiment was carried out using the finalized stimuli.

This chapter first describes the data collection and participant profile. Then, the development of stimuli is presented in detail. The manipulation checks and dependent measures are described afterwards. Finally, the experimental procedure is articulated.

**Data Collection and Participants**

**Data Collection**

Data were collected for four pretests and one main experiment. All participants were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is an online labor marketplace powered by Amazon.com where businesses and researchers can register as “requesters” to recruit participants by posting human intelligence tasks (HITs) and offering a small amount of monetary incentives (Amazon Mechanical Turk, n.d.). Individuals can sign up as “workers” using valid email address and identity to complete the HITs and receive incentives. Upon each worker’s completion of a HIT, the requester can approve or reject the HIT based on its quality. MTurk is now regarded as a source to obtain high-quality yet inexpensive data and is frequently used for data collection in psychology and social sciences research (Burhmeister, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). In public relations research, MTurk has been widely used to obtain data for both surveys and experimental designs in recent years (e.g., Hopp & Gallicano, 2016; Kim, 2016; Li, 2015; Tao, 2015). In this experiment, a questionnaire was created and then developed as
a Qualtrics intelligent computerized instrument and then posted to MTurk as a HIT. Upon completion of the HIT, each participant received a system-generated unique code to submit to MTurk to be offered $1.50 from the researcher.

While one may argue about the representativeness of data collected from MTurk due to its relatively low incentive, previous empirical studies have shown that the representativeness of data obtained via MTurk generally surpasses that of convenience and student samples, and is similar to those from traditional samples recruited through sampling firms (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Buhrmester et al., 2012; Mason & Suri, 2012). Therefore, this data collection method was deemed appropriate for this study.

**Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

To further improve the data quality from MTurk, it is recommended to adopt a 90% and higher approval rate of HITs completed by workers for behavioral research (Mason & Suri, 2012). In this study, the approval rate for the four pretests was set at 95% and above, and the main experiment set at 98% and above. The qualification criteria of “MTurk Masters” (i.e., workers with high degree of accuracy by consistently completing HITs for various requesters [Amazon Mechanical Turk, n.d.]) was not applicable for this study (Bates & Lanza, 2013). In addition, the main experiment also requested workers not to have completed more than 500 HITs in the past to avoid professional survey takers from entering the task. The location for workers was restricted to be only in the United States.

In the questionnaire (see Appendix A), several attention check questions were incorporated where participants were asked to select the correct answers upon reading the materials or to select a specific response for a question. One filter question was also
added for participants to guess the purpose of the study to avoid demanding characteristics. Those who failed to answer the attention check questions correctly or guessed close to the purpose were excluded from the final sample. In addition, MTurk provides downloadable tables of worker IDs and lifetime approval rate (i.e., the approval rate by a specific requester). Such information was carefully examined to ensure no duplicated entries were included.

**Participant Profile**

After applying the above-mentioned inclusion and exclusion criteria, a final sample of 226 participants was retained from the 303 total responses for the main experiment, yielding an effective response rate of 73.6%. Among them, 32.3% were male and 67.7% were female. The average age was 34.45 (SD = 10.91). The majority of participants were non-Hispanic white (76.5%), had a bachelor’s degree (41.2%), and were with an annual income of below $60,000 (65.0%). All participants were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions. Table 3.1 illustrates the descriptive statistics for participants’ demographic information in the main experiment. Table 3.2 shows the category and cell size for each experimental group.

Table 3.1

**Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (M = 34.45, SD = 10.91)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American (Non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian/White (Non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>76.5%</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/Hispanic</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American/American Indian</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school/GED</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate degree (2-year college degree)</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree (4-year college degree)</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate degree</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional degree (MD, JD)</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 or under</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,001 to $40,000</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,001 to $60,000</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60,001 to $80,000</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$80,001 to $100,000</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,001 or higher</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2

**Experimental Groups and Cell Sizes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experimental Groups</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lurkers exposed to positive eWOM about CA</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lurkers exposed to negative eWOM about CA</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lurkers exposed to positive eWOM about CSR</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lurkers exposed to positive eWOM about CSR (MD, JD)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters exposed to positive eWOM about CA</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters exposed to negative eWOM about CA</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters exposed to positive eWOM about CSR</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters exposed to negative eWOM about CSR</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stimuli Development**

The study consisted of three independent variables, namely eWOM valence, associations, and anticipated interaction. This section lays out how independent variables were manipulated. Four pretests were conducted prior to the implementation of the main experiment to ensure the appropriateness of the stimulus materials as well as the intended effects carried by the manipulations.
Industry and Company Selection

To prevent confounding effects from participants’ previous knowledge and attitude, a fictitious company was used. Prior to developing the stimuli, two pretests were conducted to select an appropriate company type and name.

The first pretest (pretest 1) was conducted to select a company type for the experiment via an online survey \((N = 46)\) on MTurk. Ten industry types\(^1\) were provided based on previous studies about corporate associations (e.g., Brown & Dacin, 1997; Fraustino & Connolly-Ahern, 2015; Kim & Radar, 2010; Park & Kim, 2015; Tao, 2015), as well as the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). A series of seven-point semantic differential scales were employed to test participants’ familiarity, knowledge, and experience with the ten different company types. Among them, the company type of athletic footwear yielded an overall moderate to high levels of familiarity \((M = 4.52, SD = 1.43)\), knowledge \((M = 4.02, SD = 1.60)\), and experience \((M = 3.80, SD = 1.75)\). Therefore, it was selected as the company type to be used.

After the company type was selected, a second survey (pretest 2) was conducted to select a name for a fictitious athletic footwear company with 40 participants on MTurk. Participants were asked to evaluate the appropriateness, believability, memorability, and familiarity with six different fictitious names for an athletic footwear company based on a series of seven-point semantic differential scales.\(^2\) Repeated measure ANOVAs showed that among the names provided, “Amspire Sports,” along

\(^1\) The ten industry types in pretest 1 included: 1) clothing companies; 2) food manufacturing companies; 3) toothpaste companies; 4) fast food restaurants; 5) athletic shoes; 6) sportswear companies; 7) laptop computer companies; 8) toy manufacturing companies; 9) automobile companies; 10) mobile phone companies.

\(^2\) The six fictitious company names in pretest 2 included: 1) Ellip Inc.; 2) Alacrity Sports; 3) Sigma Fit; 4) H&G Footwear; 5) Amspire Sports; 6) Vicsight, Inc.
with “Sigma Fit,” generated higher scores on appropriateness, believability, and memorability than other names (all \( p < .05 \)); yet participants indicated higher level of familiarity with “Sigma Fit” than with “Amspire,” \( M_{\text{diff}} = .60, p = .067 \). Therefore, in overall, “Amspire Sports” was considered the most appropriate name to be used in the stimuli as it generated moderate to high levels of appropriateness (\( M = 4.67, SD = 1.54 \)), believability (\( M = 4.75, SD = 1.60 \)), and memorability (\( M = 4.23, SD = 1.53 \)), and low level of familiarity (\( M = 2.58, SD = 1.76 \)). In addition, none of the participants reported that they had heard of the company name before. Results also showed that participants in general hold a moderately favorable attitude toward the athletic footwear industry (\( M = 4.93, SD = 1.21 \)).

**Manipulations of Valence and Associations Alignment**

The manipulations of the alignment between eWOM valence and associations and consumers’ prior attitude were implemented in two parts. The first part was the cultivation of consumers’ informational and attitudinal base prior to exposure to eWOM. In this study, all participants were shown the same materials in order to form positive prior CA associations. The second part included exposure to eWOM that carried either positive (i.e., aligned) or negative (i.e., nonaligned) valence about CA (i.e., aligned) or CSR (i.e., nonaligned) to manipulate alignment with consumers’ prior valence and associations.

**Baseline: Positive Prior CA Associations**

To cultivate consumers’ positive prior CA associations, participants were first asked to read a brief overview on the background information of the fictitious athletic footwear company “Amspire.” Following the overview, they were shown a press release
issued by Amspire that marked its fifteenth anniversary in business and emphasized its CA attributes, including research and innovation, manufacturing of products, quality, and market success. For example, to stress research, innovation, and product quality, the press release stated “Powered by AmspireX Lab, a state-of-the-science research facility, Amspire’s team of researchers have tested numerous ideas in pursuit of enhancing performance, reducing injury risk, and delivering innovative, high-quality, and stylish athletic footwear products to customers.”

A press release was selected to manipulate positive prior CA associations for several reasons. First, as discussed in the review of literature, consumers’ prior associations with a company can be cultivated via their direct and indirect experience with a company, and association-based corporate communication strategies have been found to effectively cultivate the intended associations (Fraustino & Connolly-Ahern, 2015; Kim, 2011). Second, the attributes and information from corporations’ and businesses’ communication efforts (i.e., product booklets and advertisements) have also been used to form consumers’ preliminary attitude with a company in empirical tests of the search-and-alignment model (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002). Therefore, the press release, as a common tactic of corporate communication, was deemed as an appropriate vehicle to cultivate consumers’ baseline associations.

The content of the press release was created in several steps. First, the attributes of CA were reviewed from the CA associations measurement scale as well as empirical evidence from previous studies. Research shows that product service and quality, manufacturing, and innovation and research are some of the most frequently used CA attributes in association-based corporate communication strategies (i.e., Fraustino &
Connolly-Ahern, 2015; Kim & Rader, 2010). Therefore, these attributes were incorporated in the press release content. Second, some well-known real-world athletic footwear companies’ (e.g., Nike, Adidas, New Balance, Reebok, Asics) press releases and company information were examined. The fictional press release was then drafted following the format and style of the real-world ones. Third, stimulus materials from previous studies (e.g., Tao, 2015; Tao & Wilson, 2016) regarding the cultivation of corporate associations were examined to further tailor the content of the press release. Finally, five graduate students and public relations professionals were asked to read the press release. Revisions were incorporated based on their feedback. The complete text of the background information and press release used in the experiment can be found in Appendix B.

**eWOM Valence and Associations**

Twitter, a microblogging social media platform, was selected as the channel to carry eWOM because microblogging has become a popular platform of eWOM communication in recent years (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009). The manipulations of eWOM valence and associations were incorporated in a series of tweets from consumers containing the hashtag of the company name (i.e. “#Amspire”) presented in a screenshot. Content of tweets were altered for four different conditions to reflect different valence and corporate associations: (1) positive eWOM about CA (100 words), (2) negative eWOM about CA (98 words), (3) positive eWOM about CSR (103 words), and (4) negative eWOM about CSR (109 words). The differences in message lengths of tweets across different conditions were minimal, and the volumes of tweets were consistent for the four conditions. Nine tweets were presented in each condition. Such
volume was selected following previous experimental designs using Twitter messages (e.g., Li & Li, 2014). Consumer information included name, Twitter handle, and profile pictures were kept consistent for all conditions; the demographics were carefully designed to reflect diversity in gender and ethnicity (see Appendix B).

Specifically, in the conditions where eWOM were positive (conditions 1 and 3), six out of the nine tweets were positive, two negative, and one neutral. In the conditions where eWOM were negative (conditions 2 and 4), six out of the nine tweets were negative, two positive, and one neutral. Such design, rather than all tweets being positive or negative, was adopted out of concerns for external validity and believability of the design as in real world, it is unlikely that all eWOM’s would be all positive or negative.

In the conditions where eWOM were about CA (conditions 1 and 2), consumers tweeted about Amspire’s product quality, manufacturing, and innovation. For example, a positive tweet about Amspire’s CA stated “Just got my new pair of #Amspire tennis shoes! Exactly the quality claimed :)” A negative tweet about Amspire’s CA showed “Just got my new pair of #Amspire tennis shoes! Not quite the quality claimed :(.” In the conditions where eWOM were about CSR (conditions 3 and 4), consumers tweeted about Amspire’s environmental responsibility, commitment to public health, and care for community. For instance, a positive tweet about Amspire’s CSR said “Just bought another pair of #Amspire shoes! Supporting a company with environmental consciousness :).” A negative tweet about Amspire’s CSR showed “Not buying another pair of #Amspire shoes! Staying away from a company with no environmental consciousness :(.”
The content of the eWOM information was created and revised in the following steps. First, the commonly used CA and CSR attributes in corporate communication, as well as social media comments from consumers were examined based on previous empirical findings (e.g., Fraustino & Connolly-Ahern, 2015; Tao & Wilson, 2015). Second, consumers’ tweets about some well-known sportswear companies were examined on Twitter to provide inferences for content creation. Third, after the tweets were created, five graduate students and public relations professionals were asked to read the tweets. Suggestions were incorporated based on feedback. A complete set of tweets for the four conditions can be found in Appendix B.

**Manipulation of Anticipated Interaction**

Anticipated interaction was manipulated in several steps. First, before exposure to eWOM, posters (i.e., those who anticipate interaction) were instructed that they were to post their opinions about Amspire Sports on Twitter using “#Amspire,” which would be seen or commented by other consumers on Twitter; whereas lurkers (i.e., those who do not anticipate interaction) were merely asked to read the eWOM. Second, to enhance the manipulation of anticipated interaction, posters were also asked to write down the text for a tweet that contains “#Amspire” after they collected thoughts and before they evaluated the company. Third, posters and lurkers were provided different versions in the instructions throughout the evaluation phase. Posters were reminded that they would post their opinions and would have their thoughts and evaluations shared with fellow consumers whose tweets they read earlier; whereas lurkers were simply asked to provide their evaluations. Such manipulation approach followed the procedure used in previous
studies of social influence and anticipated interaction (e.g., Duhachek et al., 2007; Schlosser, 2005; Schlosser & Shavitt, 2002).

Specifically, in the first step, lurkers were shown the following instructions prior to reading eWOM:

In the next screen, you will read nine (9) tweets made by consumers about their thoughts on Amspire. The tweets are the latest search results under the hashtag #Amspire and were captured with screenshots. After reading the tweets, you will be asked to rate your thoughts and evaluation of the company Amspire Sports.

Posters were told the following before reading eWOM:

In the next screen, you will read nine (9) tweets made by consumers about their thoughts on Amspire. The tweets are the latest search results under the hashtag #Amspire and were captured with screenshots. After reading the tweets, you will share your thoughts and evaluation of the company Amspire Sports with your fellow consumers (including those who tweeted #Amspire in the next screen). Also keep in mind that you will be asked to write texts for a tweet containing #Amspire to showcase your opinions, which is to be seen or commented by other consumers on Twitter.

In the second step, only posters were asked to complete the following tweeting task:

Now in the space below, please write down the text for a tweet within 140 characters that contains #Amspire to share your opinion with the consumers whose tweets you read earlier. Please keep in mind that the content of your tweet is to be seen or commented by other consumers on Twitter.
In the third step, the instructions differed for posters and lurkers when asked to complete the dependent measures. For example, for the subsequent company evaluation measure after exposure to eWOM, lurkers were shown the following instruction:

Please indicate your agreement now towards the following statements ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

The instruction for company evaluation that posters read was as follows:

Please indicate your agreement now towards the following statements ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” You will share your thoughts and evaluation of the company Amspire with fellow consumers whose tweets you read earlier.

The manipulation for anticipated interaction can be found in the complete questionnaire in Appendix A.

**Manipulation Checks**

To examine whether the message manipulations carried their intended effects, two pretests (pretests 3 and 4) were implemented before the stimuli were used in the main experiment. Specifically, pretest 3 was conducted with 41 participants on MTurk to test if the press releases drove the intended positive CA associations and company evaluation. Participants were shown the press release content and were asked to rate 12 seven-point Likert scaled statements that combined and randomized both CA associations (e.g., “I associate Amspire Sports with innovative products” and “I associate Amspire Sports with good quality products”) (α = .90) and CSR associations measures (e.g., “I associate Amspire Sports with environmental responsibility” and “I associate Amspire Sports with a great care for communities”) (α = .92) (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Kim, 2011). Afterwards,
they were asked to complete the company evaluation measure (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Kim & Rader, 2010; Kim, 2011) (α = .95). In addition, the diagnoscticity level (Ahluwalia et al., 2001; Klar, 1990) of the press release for CA (α = .94) and CSR (α = .98) were measured, respectively.

Pretest 4 was conducted with 45 participants randomly assigned to one of the four eWOM groups (i.e., positive CA, negative CA, positive CSR, negative CSR) on MTurk to examine if the tweets carried the intended valence and associations. After reading eWOM, participants were asked to evaluate the extremity of valence based on a nine-point semantic differential scale ranging from most negative to most positive (Muthukrishnan et al., 1999). They were then asked to report on measures for CA associations (α = .96), CSR associations (α = .97), as well as diagnosticity measures for CA (α = .96) and CSR (α = .98), respectively.

To further ensure the manipulated effects, manipulation check questions were also incorporated in the main experiment. First, following the press release, participants were asked to complete the CA associations measure (α = .86). Second, following the exposure to eWOM and completing the dependent measures, participants were asked to complete the combined and randomized statements from CA (α = .90) and CSR associations measures (α = .90). The second manipulation check question was placed after the dependent measures to prevent biased evaluation when certain attributes were reminded.

**Dependent Variables and Measures**

**Company Evaluation and Attitude Shift in Company Evaluation**

Company evaluation was measured using five items adopted from Brown and Dacin (1997), Kim and Rader (2010), and Kim (2011). All items were measured using a
seven-point Likert-type scale anchored by 1 “strongly disagree” and 7 “strongly agree.” These items have been used in previous empirical test of the cognitive corporate associations theoretical framework. The items include: (1) I think this company is attractive; (2) I think Amspire is reliable; (3) I think Amspire is trustworthy; (4) I like Amspire; and (5) My overall impression about Amspire is favorable. These items were asked after participants read the press release (time 1), and were asked again after exposure to eWOM (time 2). The reliability of this measure was satisfactory for both time 1 ($\alpha = .91$) and time 2 ($\alpha = .98$).

Attitude shift in company evaluation was then measured as the difference score between time 1 and time 2 (i.e., time 2 evaluation score subtracted by time 1 evaluation score). This approach is adopted from previous studies measuring attitude change (e.g., Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000; Tao, 2015). Previous research shows that the reliability of the difference score would only be violated under two conditions: (1) when the standard deviations of the two scores are equal ($\lambda = \sigma_1/\sigma_2 = 1$); and (2) when the correlation between the two scores is large ($\rho \approx 1.00$) (Collins, 1996). In this study, the standard deviation for company evaluation at time 1 (SD = .97) was different from that at time 2 (SD = 1.69), $\lambda = .97/1.69 = .57$. Furthermore, the correlation between company evaluation scores at time 1 and time 2 ($\rho = .40$) was low to moderate and deviated from the critical threshold ($\rho \approx 1.00$). Therefore, the reliability of the change score does not pose a potential concern in reliability.

**Perceived Diagnosticity of eWOM**

The perceived diagnosticity of eWOM was measured using three items on a seven-point semantic differential scale adopted from Ahluwalia and colleagues (2001)
and Klar (1990). In this measure, participants were asked to “To me, the information I see from the tweets is _____ to my evaluation about the company.” The three items were: (1) not at all helpful/very helpful; (2) not at all useful/of very great use; and (3) extremely irrelevant/extremely relevant. The internal consistency for the diagnosticity measure was satisfactory ($\alpha = .93$).

**Thought Listing**

To test the mechanism of mental rehearsal and selective processing and the difference in information processing between lurkers and posters, a thought listing task was solicited following the procedures from previous studies on anticipated interaction and social influence (e.g., Duhachek et al., 2007; Schlosser & Shavitt, 2002). The thought listing measure was adopted from the cognitive-response measure by Cacioppo and Petty (1981), in which participants were asked to write down everything they were thinking and feeling about Amspire Sports by listing five thoughts in a concise manner.

**Self-Esteem**

To further test the mechanism of self-presentation and impression management, ten items were adopted from Rosenberg (1965) to measure participants’ self-esteem. All items were based on a seven-point Likert-type scale with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 7 indicating “strongly agree.” Examples of the items include “on the whole, I am satisfied with myself,” “at times I think I am no good at all,” and “I feel that I have a number of good qualities.” The Cronbach’s alpha for the self-esteem measure was .92.

**Experimental Procedure**

The experimental procedure consisted of three phases following an informed consent page that discussed the purpose of the study and information regarding duration,
risks, benefits, anonymity, and confidentiality. On average, the experiment took 18.58 minutes to complete.

**Phase One: Prior Corporate Associations and Company Evaluation (Time 1)**

This phase aimed at cultivating participants’ prior positive CA associations and obtaining their baseline evaluation of the company “Amspire Sports.” In this phase, all participants were asked to read a brief overview of the company, which included basic information such as logo, year of establishment, headquarter location, and primary products. Following the overview, participants were shown a press release issued by Amspire that intended to build their positive prior CA associations with the company. It took 1.78 minutes (i.e., 106.84 seconds) to read the overview and press release on average. After reading the materials, participants were asked to complete two attention check questions, manipulation check questions of the CA associations measure, and to provide their company evaluation (time 1). In addition, an open-ended question was provided asking participants to describe Amspire as a company to enhance their memory of positive prior CA associations.

**Phase Two: Distraction Task**

In the second phase, a distraction task was implemented following the experimental design paradigm of previous memory, information processing, and social influence research (e.g., Burk & Srull, 1988; Duhachek et al., 2007; Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002). The distraction task also helped to mimic the reality where consumers would receive different pieces of information about a company at different time points. In this study, participants were shown a fruit picture matrix and were asked to complete a series of tasks including selecting and counting different kinds of fruit
pictures before proceeding to the next phase. This form of distraction was used because it did not pose similar information to that in the stimuli, thereby avoiding potential cognitive overload. On average, the distraction task lasted 4.34 minutes (i.e., 260.65 seconds).

**Phase Three: eWOM Valence, eWOM Associations, Anticipated Interaction, and Subsequent Measures**

After completing the distraction task, participants were first randomly assigned to either the lurker or poster condition and read the instruction that served as part of the manipulation for anticipated interaction. Lurkers and posters were then each randomly assigned to one of the four versions of tweets reflecting positive CA, negative CA, positive CSR, and negative CSR. On average, it took 1.90 minutes (i.e., 113.87 seconds) to complete reading the instruction and eWOM information. The duration did not differ between posters (M = 125.93) and lurkers (M = 103.22), $F(1, 224) = .79, p = .376$, par. $\eta^2 = .004$; nor did it differ from the time participants spent reading the overview and press release in phase one, $F(1, 225) = .15, p = .697$, par. $\eta^2 = .001$. Afterwards, lurkers and posters proceeded to provide answers for the thought listing task, diagnosticity measure, and company evaluation (time 2), respectively. Participants were then asked to complete the CA and CSR associations measures as manipulation checks and the self-esteem measures. Demographic information was collected toward the end of the study. In addition, participants were asked to guess the purpose of the study, which served as a filter question to avoid demand characteristics. Finally, they were debriefed the true purpose of the study and thanked.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This study experimentally examined the impact of eWOM on consumer responses by taking into account (1) the alignment between eWOM valence and associations and consumers’ prior attitude, and (2) consumers’ anticipated interaction on social media. Based on a review of previous literature, seven sets of propositions were derived and seven hypotheses tested the proposed alignment-social influence (ASI) model through an online experiment with consumers in the United States. This chapter reports the results of the study.

Manipulation Checks

To check if the manipulations carried the intended effects, two pretests (pretest 3 and 4) were implemented prior to using the stimulus materials in the main experiment.

Pretest 3 aimed at testing if the press release shown in phase one carried the intended positive CA associations. Results from 41 responses recruited via MTurk showed that the materials generated significantly higher CA associations ($M = 5.43, SD = .99$) than CSR associations ($M = 4.17, SD = 1.23$), $t(40) = 6.46, p < .001$. The company evaluation generated by the press release was positive ($M = 5.29, SD = 1.14$). In addition, participants indicated significantly higher diagnosticity level of the press release for CA ($M = 5.15, SD = 1.45$) than for CSR ($M = 3.48, SD = 1.79$), $t(40) = 5.93, p < .001$. Overall participants deemed the press release realistic ($M = 5.27, SD = 1.18$). Therefore, the press release was deemed successful in cultivating positive CA associations at baseline and was used for phase one in the experiment.
Pretest 4 tested if the tweets shown in phase three carried the intended valence and associations. Results from 45 different MTurk participants assigned to one of the four eWOM conditions (i.e., positive CA, negative CA, positive CSR, negative CSR) showed that tweets of negative CA ($M = 2.13, SD = 1.13$) and CSR ($M = 2.63, SD = 1.24$) yielded low company evaluations; whereas tweets of positive CA ($M = 5.60, SD = .71$) and CSR ($M = 5.80, SD = .61$) generated high company evaluations. For corporate associations, results showed high CA associations ($M = 5.18, SD = .50$) for positive CA tweets, and low CA associations ($M = 2.27, SD = 1.24$) for negative CA tweets. Likewise, positive CSR tweets yielded high CSR associations ($M = 5.67, SD = .73$), and negative CSR tweets yielded low CSR associations ($M = 2.07, SD = .99$). In addition, CA-related tweets ($M = 5.45, SD = 1.18$) were perceived more diagnostic than CSR-related tweets ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.45$) in providing CA information; whereas CSR-related tweets ($M = 5.23, SD = 1.39$) were perceived more diagnostic in providing CSR information than CA-related tweets ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.76$) (all $p < .05$). In addition, results on the extremity of valence found that there was no significant difference in terms of extremity for positive CA ($M = 8.09, SD = .30$) and CSR ($M = 8.18, SD = .60$) conditions ($p > .05$), or for negative CA ($M = 2.73, SD = 1.56$) and CSR ($M = 2.50, SD = 1.00$) conditions ($p > .05$), thereby eliminating valence extremity as a potential confounding variable. Hence, the content in the tweets was used for phase three in the experiment.

Two additional manipulation check measures were analyzed from the experiment. First, following the press release, participants reported high CA associations ($M = 5.05, SD = .95$) that was significantly higher than the mid-point (i.e., 4 out of the 7-point scale), $t(225) = 16.50, p < .001$; company evaluation at time 1 did not differ across the eight
conditions, \( F(7, 218) = 1.03, p = .408, \) par \( \eta^2 = .032. \) Second, the manipulation check measures of CA and CSR associations after exposure to eWOM showed that positive CA tweets yielded high CA associations \( (M = 5.13, SD = .88), \) and negative CA tweets yielded low CA associations \( (M = 2.78, SD = .96), \) positive CSR tweets generated high CSR associations \( (M = 5.63, SD = .87), \) and negative CSR tweets generated low CSR associations \( (M = 2.61, SD = 1.16). \) Therefore, the manipulation checks from both the pretests and internal to the experiment indicated that the manipulations successfully created their intended effects.

**Hypotheses Testing**

**Three-Way Interactions among eWOM Valence, Associations, and Anticipated Interaction**

Hypothesis 1 (H1-a and H1-b) predicted the effect of eWOM valence on (a) consumers’ attitude shift in company evaluation, and (b) final company evaluation. Hypotheses set 2 (H2-1 and H2-2) predicted the effect of eWOM valence and associations on the dependent variables for lurkers. Hypotheses sets 4 (H4-1 and H4-2) and 6 (H6-1 and H6-2) predicted the effect of eWOM valence and associations on attitude shift, as well as final company evaluation for posters, based on two competing theories, respectively.

To examine the effects of attitude shift in company evaluation, a three-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was conducted, with eWOM valence, associations, and anticipated interaction as three dichotomous independent variables, and attitude shift (i.e. the change score of time 2 company evaluation subtracted from time 1 company evaluation) as the dependent variable. To examine the effects on final company
evaluation, a three-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) test was performed, with eWOM valence, associations, and anticipated interaction as three independent factors, time 2 company evaluation as the dependent variable, and time 1 company evaluation as the covariate.

**Effects on Attitude Shift in Company Evaluation**

Taken together, H1a, H2-1, H4-1, and H6-1 hypothesized the effect of the three factors on attitude shift in company evaluation, and were tested in the three-way ANOVA model. Results showed a significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 218) = 5.676, p = .018$, par. $\eta^2 = .03$. In addition, there was a significant main effect for valence, $F(1, 218) = 247.11, p < .001$, par. $\eta^2 = .53$. No other significant main effects or two-way interactions were present. Table 4.1 presents the overall results from the ANOVA test.

**Table 4.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>Par. $\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associations * Valence</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.841</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations * Anticipated interaction</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.474</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence * Anticipated interaction</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations * Valence * Anticipated interaction</td>
<td>6.68</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>.018*</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Adjusted $R^2 = .53$; *$p < .05$. *** $p < .001$*

The significant main effect for valence indicated that the downward attitude shift of company evaluation was greater when consumers were exposed to negative eWOM ($M = -.2.00, SD = 1.36$) than the upward attitude shift of company evaluation when they were exposed to positive eWOM ($M = .28, SD = .75$). Therefore, **H1-a was supported**.
To further analyze the results from the three-way interaction, simple main effects were examined. Specifically, for lurkers, upward attitude shifts between those who were exposed to positive eWOM about CA ($M = .41, SD = .83$) and CSR ($M = .37, SD = .62$) were not significantly different, $F(1, 218) = .02, p = .886$, par. $\eta^2 < .001$; whereas lurkers who were exposed to negative eWOM about CA ($M = -2.51, SD = 1.24$) had greater downward attitude shift than those who were exposed to negative eWOM about CSR ($M = -1.75, SD = 1.32$), $F(1, 218) = 7.20, p = .008$, par. $\eta^2 = .032$. Therefore, **H2-1 was supported.** For posters, the upward attitude shifts between those who were exposed to positive eWOM about CA ($M = -.04, SD = .77$) and CSR ($M = .40, SD = .72$) were not significantly different, $F(1, 218) = 2.16, p = .144$, par. $\eta^2 = .010$, nor were the downward attitude shifts between those who were exposed to negative eWOM about CA ($M = -1.79, SD = .99$) and CSR ($M = -1.93, SD = 1.69$), $F(1, 218) = .22, p = .639$, par. $\eta^2 = .001$. That is also to say, lurkers had greater downward attitude shift than posters when they were exposed to negative eWOM about CA, $F(1, 218) = 5.74, p = .017$, par. $\eta^2 = .026$.

Therefore, the difference between lurkers and posters in general showed partial support for **H4-1 and rejected H6-1.** Table 4.2 summarizes the cell sizes, means, and standard deviations of attitude shift in company evaluation for the eight experimental conditions. The three-way interaction effects on attitude shift is depicted in Figure 4.1.
Table 4.2

Means and Standard Deviations of Attitude Shift in Company Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anticipated interaction</th>
<th>Valence</th>
<th>Associations</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lurker</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>-2.51</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>CSR</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>CSR</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>-1.75</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poster</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>-1.79</td>
<td>.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>CSR</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>CSR</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>-1.93</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Figure 4.1. Three-way interaction among eWOM valence, associations, and anticipated interaction on attitude shift in company evaluation](image)

*Effects on Final Company Evaluation*

H1-b, H2-2, H4-2, and H6-2 together hypothesized the effect of the three factors on consumers’ final company evaluation, and were therefore tested in the three-way ANCOVA model. Company evaluation at time 1 served as a covariate to control any effect that may come from the different baseline evaluations. Results obtained a
significant three-way interaction among the three independent variables on final company evaluation, after controlling for baseline evaluation, \( F(1, 217) = 4.91, p = .028, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .02 \). A significant two-way interaction was also present for the effect from valence and anticipated interaction, \( F(1, 217) = 4.10, p = .044, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .02 \). In addition, the main effects from valence \( (F(1, 217) = 299.96, p < .001, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .58) \) and associations \( (F(1, 217) = 5.62, p = .019, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .03) \) were both significant. No other significant main effect or two-way interactions were found. Table 4.3 summarizes the ANCOVA results.

Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Par. ( \eta^2 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time 1 company evaluation</td>
<td>68.73</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>67.49</td>
<td>.000***</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>.019***</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence</td>
<td>305.49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>299.96</td>
<td>.000***</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated interaction</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.728</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations * Valence</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.372</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations * Anticipated interaction</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.798</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence * Anticipated interaction</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>.044*</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations * Valence * Anticipated interaction</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>.028*</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Adjusted \( R^2 = .64; *p < .05. *** p < .001*  

The significant main effect for eWOM valence showed that those exposed to negative eWOM \( (M = 3.05) \) generated significantly lower final company evaluation than those exposed to positive eWOM \( (M = 5.40) \), after controlling for baseline company evaluation. **H1b was supported.**

The significant three-way interaction was further analyzed via simple main effect tests. Results showed that for lurkers, after controlling for baseline company evaluation, those exposed to positive eWOM about CA \( (M = 5.54) \) and CSR \( (M = 5.48) \) did not differ in their final company evaluation, \( F(1, 217) = .06, p = .802, \text{par. } \eta^2 < .001 \); whereas those
exposed to negative eWOM about CA \((M = 2.50)\) generated significantly lower company evaluation than those exposed to negative eWOM about CSR \((M = 3.28)\), \(F(1, 217) = 8.69, p = .004, \) par. \(\eta^2 = .039\). Hence, **H2-2 was supported.** For posters, after controlling for baseline company evaluation, the final company evaluations for those exposed to positive eWOM about CA \((M = 5.05)\) and CSR \((M = 5.51)\) did not differ, \(F(1, 217) = 2.73, p = .100, \) par. \(\eta^2 = .012\); nor did the final company evaluation differ for posters exposed to negative eWOM about CA \((M = 3.16)\) and CSR \((M = 3.27)\), \(F(1, 217) = 0.15, p = .699, \) par. \(\eta^2 = .001\). Furthermore, when exposed to negative eWOM about CA, lurkers had significantly lower final company evaluation than posters, \(F(1, 217) = 5.54, p = .019, \) par. \(\eta^2 = .025\), after controlling for baseline evaluations. **The results partial supported H4-2 and rejected H6-2.** Table 4.4 provides the cell sizes, adjusted means, and standard errors of final company evaluation for the eight conditions. The three-way interaction effects on final company evaluation is depicted in Figure 4.2.

Table 4.4

*Adjusted Means and Standard Errors of Final Company Evaluation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anticipated interaction</th>
<th>eWOM valence</th>
<th>eWOM associations</th>
<th>(n)</th>
<th>(M)</th>
<th>(SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lurker</td>
<td>Positive CA</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.54^a</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative CA</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2.50^a</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive CSR</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5.48^a</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative CSR</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3.28^a</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poster</td>
<td>Positive CA</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.05^a</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative CA</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.16^a</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive CSR</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5.51^a</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative CSR</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3.27^a</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* ^a Means were adjusted based on the covariate of time 1 company evaluation at the value of 5.08.
Note: Means were adjusted based on the covariate of time 1 company evaluation at the value of 5.08.

Figure 4.2. Three-way interaction among eWOM valence, associations, and anticipated interaction on final company evaluation

In addition, the significant main effect for eWOM associations showed that overall, eWOM about CA (M = 4.06) generated lower final company evaluation than eWOM about CSR (M = 4.38), after controlling for baseline evaluation. The significant two-way interaction between valence and anticipated interaction was also examined in a follow-up simple main effect test. Results showed that after controlling for baseline company evaluation, when eWOM was positive, lurkers (M = 5.51) and posters (M = 5.28) did not differ in their final company evaluation, \( F(1, 217) = 1.41, p = .237, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .006 \); whereas when eWOM was negative, final company evaluation from lurkers (M = 2.89) was lower than that from posters (M = 3.21), but not significantly lower, \( F(1, 217) = 2.82, p = .095, \text{par. } \eta^2 = .013 \). However, these results were reflected in the hypotheses testing in the three-way interaction and were therefore not the focus of the analysis.
Mediation Effects of Perceived Diagnosticity of eWOM

To better elucidate the mechanism of search-and-alignment in attitude shift, H3 hypothesized the mediating role of perceived diagnosticity of eWOM for the interaction between eWOM valence and associations for lurkers, indicating a moderated mediation effect.

The moderated mediation model was tested with the subset of data for lurkers (N = 120). SPSS PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2013) was used to conduct a bootstrapping analysis for the model.3 The significance of the mediating effect was evaluated based on the 95th percentile confidence intervals (bootstrap = 10,000 samples). As instructed by Hayes (2013), model 8 was used to examine the moderated mediation model proposed in Figure 2.1. eWOM associations was entered into the model as the predictor, eWOM valence was entered as the moderator, perceived diagnosticity of eWOM was entered as the mediator, and the change score of attitude shift was entered as the dependent variable. Both eWOM associations (CA = 0, CSR = 1) and eWOM valence (positive = 0, negative = 1) were dummy coded.

Results showed that the overall model was significant and explained 65% variance of the dependent variable, $R^2 = .65$, $F(4, 115) = 52.37$, $p < .001$. Perceived diagnosticity was found to be a significant conditional mediator for the effect of eWOM associations on attitude shift. To wit, eWOM associations had a significant indirect effect on attitude shift through the perceived diagnosticity of eWOM only when valence was negative, $B = .24$, $SE = .12$, 95% CI [.06, .57]. When valence was positive, this indirect effect was not significant, $B = .01$, $SE = .08$, 95% CI [-.15, .16]. There was no significant

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3 Bootstrapping is considered a robust way to test mediation effect because unlike the Sobel test, it does not require the normal distribution assumption (Hayes, 2013; Preacher & Hayes, 2008).
direct effect from eWOM associations on attitude shift when eWOM was negative, $B = .52$, $SE = .27$, $t = 1.94$, $p = .06$; nor was there a direct effect from eWOM associations on attitude shift when eWOM was positive, $B = -.05$, $SE = .26$, $t = -.19$, $p = .85$. Such results revealed that the interaction effect between eWOM associations and valence on attitude shift for lurkers was fully mediated by the perceived diagnosticity of eWOM. Therefore, **H3 was supported**.

More specifically, for the eWOM valence was negative condition, the positive direction of the coefficient ($B = .24$) demonstrated that when eWOM associations were related to CSR (coded at the value of 1), the value of attitude shift on company evaluation would be larger than when eWOM associations were related to CA (coded at the value of 0). Because attitude shift occurred in a downward direction for the negative eWOM condition, such results indicated that negative eWOM about CSR yielded less downward attitude shift than negative eWOM about CA; whereas positive eWOM did not yield different attitude shifts under different eWOM associations conditions. **Such findings were also consistent with the ANOVA test and supported the prediction in H2-2.**

A summary of the model results can be found in Table 4.5 and 4.6, and the statistical model is depicted in Figure 4.3.

**Table 4.5**

*Conditional Indirect Effect of eWOM Associations on Attitude Shift through Perceived eWOM Diagnosticity at Different Levels of Valence Using Bootstrapping*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Moderator</th>
<th>Mediator</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$SE$</th>
<th>Bias-corrected bootstrap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(valence)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$LLCI$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eWOM associations</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Diagnosticity</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eWOM associations</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Diagnosticity</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.6

*Conditional Direct Effect of eWOM Associations on Attitude Shift through Perceived eWOM Diagnosticity at Different Levels of Valence*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Moderator (Valence)</th>
<th>Mediator</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>LLCI</th>
<th>ULCI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eWOM associations</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Diagnosticity</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>-1.9</td>
<td>-.55</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eWOM associations</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Diagnosticity</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. ***p < .001

Figure 4.3. Statistical model for the moderated mediation role of eWOM diagnosticity for lurkers

Mechanism of the Mental Rehearsal and Selective Processing Account

To further inspect the mechanism of mental rehearsal and selective processing account, a series of one-way ANOVAs with contrast coding technique were employed to test H5. This mechanism was tested following procedures used in previous studies (e.g., Duhachek et al., 2007; Schlosser & Shavitt, 2002). Specifically, the five thoughts from each participant for the thought-listing task were content analyzed. Each thought was coded as either having incorporated (coded as yes = 1) or not having incorporated (coded as no = 0) the information from eWOM in the corresponding condition, yielding an
overall score ranging from 0 to 5 for each participant. Two coders content analyzed the thoughts, and the inter-coder reliability was .90 using Holsti’s method (Stacks, 2016). Disagreement was resolved after discussion. The coded thoughts were then entered as the dependent variable for the ANOVA tests. The overall ANOVA showed that the conditions significantly differed in the amount of information from eWOM incorporated in thoughts, $F(7, 218) = 3.07, p = .004$, par. $\eta^2 = .090$. To test the specific differences, contrast coding was performed to test H5-a, H5-b, and H5-c, respectively.

H5-a hypothesized the difference between lurkers exposed to negative eWOM about CA and the rest of the lurkers. Therefore, lurkers exposed to negative eWOM about CA were coded as 3, and lurkers in each of the rest three conditions (i.e., positive CA, positive CSR, and negative CSR) were coded as -1. All posters were assigned the code as 0. Results showed that lurkers exposed to negative CA incorporated significant higher amount of information contained in eWOM than lurkers in the other three conditions in their thoughts, $t(218) = 4.33, p < .001, M_{\text{diff}} = 4.08$. Therefore, **H5-a was supported**.

H5-b hypothesized the difference between posters who were exposed to negative eWOM about CSR and posters in the other three conditions (i.e., positive CA, negative CA, positive CSR). Hence, posters exposed to negative eWOM about CSR were coded as 3, the other three poster groups were each coded as -1, and all lurker groups were coded as 0. Results showed no significant difference between posters in the negative CSR eWOM condition and posters in the other three conditions, $t(218) = .44, p = .657, M_{\text{diff}} = .42$. **H5-b was not supported**.

Finally, H5-c hypothesized the difference between lurkers and posters exposed to negative eWOM about CA. Therefore, lurkers in the negative CA eWOM condition were
coded as 1, posters in the negative CA eWOM condition were coded as -1, and the rest of the six groups were coded as 0. Results showed that lurkers in the negative CA eWOM condition incorporated greater volume of eWOM information in their thoughts than posters in the negative CA eWOM condition, $t(218) = 3.67, p < .001, M_{diff} = 1.48$. Thus, **H5-c was supported.**

**Mechanism of the Self-Presentation and Impression Management Account**

Hypothesis 7 further tested the mechanism of the self-presentation and impression management account. H7 hypothesized a correlation between attitude shift in company evaluation and self-esteem for posters exposed to negative eWOM. Specifically, when self-esteem is lower, the downward attitude shift would be greater, indicating an attitude shift score of lower value. A bivariate correlation analysis was conducted with the subset of data for posters who were exposed to negative eWOM ($N = 54$). Results showed that the correlation between attitude shift and self-esteem was not significant for posters who were exposed to negative eWOM ($r = .06, p = .643$). Therefore, **H7 was not supported.**

**Summary**

To summarize, the hypotheses based on negativity bias and the search-and-alignment model of judgment revision for lurkers were all supported, and the hypotheses based on the mental rehearsal and selective processing account for posters were partially supported; whereas those based on self-presentation and impression management were not supported. The results from hypotheses testing are summarized in Table 4.7. The next chapter discusses the findings from the results, as well as the theoretical and practical implications from this dissertation.
Table 4.7

Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negativity bias account</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1: When having positive prior CA associations with the company, consumers who are exposed to negative eWOM will a) produce greater attitude shift in company evaluation and b) generate lower company evaluation than consumers who are exposed to positive eWOM.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>For lurkers: Search-and-alignment model account</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2-1: When having positive prior CA associations with the company, a) lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA will produce greater attitude shift in company evaluation than lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR; whereas b) lurkers who are exposed to positive eWOM about CA will not differ from lurkers who are exposed to positive eWOM about CSR in their company evaluation attitude shift.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2-2: When having positive prior CA associations with the company, a) lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA will generate lower company evaluation than lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR; whereas b) lurkers who are exposed to positive eWOM about CA will not differ from lurkers who are exposed to positive eWOM about CSR in their company evaluation.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3: The two-way interaction effect of eWOM valence and associations on attitude shift in company evaluation for lurkers will be mediated by the perceived diagnosticity of eWOM.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>For posters: Mental rehearsal and selective processing account</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4-1: When having positive prior CA associations with the company, a) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA will produce less attitude shift in company evaluation than posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR; whereas b) posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CA will not differ from posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CSR in their company evaluation attitude shift.</td>
<td>Partially supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4-2: When having positive prior CA associations with the company, a) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA will generate higher company evaluation than posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR; whereas b) posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CA will not differ from posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CSR in their company evaluation.</td>
<td>Partially supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**H5:**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a)</td>
<td>Lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA are more likely to incorporate information appeared in eWOM in their thoughts than the rest of the lurkers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b)</td>
<td>posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR are more likely to incorporate information appeared in eWOM in their thoughts than the rest of the posters;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c)</td>
<td>posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA are less likely to incorporate information appeared in eWOM in their thoughts than lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**For posters:**

**H6-1:** When having positive prior CA associations with the company, a) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA will produce greater attitude shift in company evaluation than posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR, and b) such attitude shift will be even greater than that for lurkers; whereas c) posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CA will not differ from posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CSR in their company evaluation attitude shift.

**H6-2:** When having positive prior CA associations with the company, a) posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CA will generate lower company evaluation than posters who are exposed to negative eWOM about CSR, and b) the evaluation will be even lower than that for lurkers; whereas c) posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CA will not differ from posters who are exposed to positive eWOM about CSR in their company evaluation.

**H7:** For posters who are exposed to negative eWOM, attitude shift in company evaluation will be greater in the downward direction when self-esteem is lower.

Not supported
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

To address the growing demand to understand the impact of consumer advocacy and stakeholder behavior on social media in public relations research and practices, this study examined the impact of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on responses from an important stakeholder group—consumers. It fills in the extant eWOM research gap by taking into account consumers’ prior informational and attitudinal base before exposure to eWOM, and anticipated interaction with others on social media. To wit, the following two research questions were answered: (1) How do consumers respond to eWOM and adjust their company evaluation when the valence and corporate associations in eWOM are aligned (vs. nonaligned) with their prior attitude? And, (2) how does anticipated interaction on social media impact consumers’ company evaluation after exposure to eWOM?

To answer the research questions, this study proposed a consolidated alignment-social influence (ASI) model drawing from interdisciplinary theoretical insights from public relations, marketing, consumer behavior, and psychology. Based on this model, seven sets of propositions were raised. Hypotheses were then derived and empirically tested through a 2 (eWOM associations: aligned vs. nonaligned) x 2 (eWOM valence: aligned vs. nonaligned) x 2 (anticipated interaction: lurker vs. poster) full-factorial quasi-experimental design online with 226 participants from the United States. Results were analyzed using a series of statistical tests including multi-factor ANOVA and ANCOVA tests, with follow-up simple main effect analyses, moderated mediation analysis, as well as one-way ANOVA and correlation tests.
This chapter focuses on the discussion and implications of findings from this study. First, major findings are interpreted. Second, theoretical and practical implications are discussed. Finally, the chapter is concluded by the discussion of limitations and directions for future research.

**Interpretation of Major Findings**

**The Effect of eWOM Valence and Associations for Lurkers**

The first research question focuses on the impact from eWOM valence and associations on consumers’ attitude shift as well as final company evaluation. Insights from the cognitive corporate associations theoretical framework provided the groundwork regarding the two dimensions of associations consumers form with a company—corporate ability (CA) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Kim, 2011). The valence and associations in eWOM were therefore examined from the perspective as whether being aligned or nonaligned with consumers’ prior associations-based perception of a company.

The effect of eWOM valence and associations alignment was first examined for *lurkers*, namely those who are merely information recipients and do not anticipate interaction with others on social media. Informed by psychology and consumer behavior theories, hypotheses were derived based on the negativity bias effect (Baumeister et al., 2001) and search-and-alignment model of judgment revision (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002) for lurkers. These hypotheses were fully supported in this study.

Previous research has revealed a general tendency of negativity bias for the impact from eWOM, with negative eWOM having more salient influence than positive eWOM (e.g., Chen & Lurie, 2013; Hornik et al., 2015; Lee & Youn, 2009; Lee et al.,
The underlying mechanism of eWOM has been explained by the diagnosticity account. Due to its rarity, as compared to positive information, negative information would stand out and be perceived as more diagnostic (i.e., useful and informative), therefore is given more weight during information processing, leading to greater impact on one’s attitude and judgment (Baumeister et al., 2001; Fiske, 1980). Not surprisingly, this negativity bias effect was also witnessed in this study. When consumers had positive prior attitude and were exposed to positive eWOM, their company evaluation remained positive, but the upward attitude shift was negligible; whereas, when they were exposed to negative eWOM, greater attitude shift in company evaluation was observed in the downward direction, leading to more negative final evaluation. Due to negativity bias, previous research has called for closer attention on monitoring negative eWOM on social media (e.g., Hornik et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2009). This study offers further support for this call.

Consistent with what was predicted by the search-and-alignment model of judgement revision and evidenced in previous studies (e.g., Fabrigar & Petty, 1999; Muthukrishnan et al., 1999; Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002; Pullig et al., 2006), findings from this study showed that when positive prior CA associations were held, lurkers who were exposed to negative eWOM about CA had greater downward attitude shift than lurkers who were exposed to negative eWOM about CSR. This was because the CA associations in eWOM aligned with the associations consumers previously held, and would be more easily accessed during information processing in the “refutational search” stage (McGuire, 1961, 1964; Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002, p. 19). Furthermore, since negative information would be considered more diagnostic, more weight should be
exerted on the negative CA associations embodied in eWOM during consumers information processing in the “alignment and damage assessment” stage (Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002, p. 19). As a consequence, consumers reported greater downward attitude shift and lower final company evaluation. This mechanism was further supported by a content analysis of thought listing and the mediation analysis. First, results from the thought listing content analysis reported that higher volumes of information from eWOM were incorporated for lurkers exposed to negative eWOM about CA than the rest of the lurkers, indicating higher accessibility and more weight of negative CA information during the “refutational search” stage (McGuire, 1961, 1964; Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002, p. 19). Second, results from the mediation analysis showed that the perceived diagnosticity of eWOM fully mediated the effect from associations alignment on attitude shift when eWOM was negative, indicating higher diagnoscitity of negative eWOM about CA (i.e., aligned associations).

Interestingly, the effect of associations alignment was only present when eWOM valence was negative. When positive eWOM was shown, the alignment of associations between eWOM and prior attitude did not have significant impact on attitude shift. That is, when lurkers held prior positive CA associations, their company evaluation would remain positive when they were exposed to both positive eWOM about CA and CSR, yet the upward attitude shifts were nonsignificant and minimal regardless of the eWOM associations. This finding can be explained by consolidating the accounts of negativity bias and the search-and-alignment model. It is likely that, although the associations were aligned when lurkers were exposed to positive eWOM about CA, due to negativity bias effect, the positive valence would not be perceived diagnostic enough for the alignment
effect to become salient. Moreover, since positive eWOM does not challenge information, it did not trigger more elaborated information processing as did negative eWOM. This rationale was further evidenced by the results from the moderated mediation model. The model indicated that the effect of associations alignment was only present and fully mediated by perceived eWOM diagnosticity when eWOM was negative, but was not observed when eWOM was positive. Taken together, the findings for lurkers in this study have provided empirical support for the alignment aspect in the proposed ASI model.

The Effect of Anticipated Interaction on Social Media

Perhaps this study’s most interesting findings are from the effect of anticipated interaction on social media and the differences between posters and lurkers. Due to lack of consensus in previous research, two sets of competing hypotheses were proposed based on two different accounts—mental rehearsal and selective processing (Duhachek et al., 2007; Schlosser & Shavitt, 2002), and self-presentation and impression management (Schlosser, 2005).

Findings from the three-way interaction among eWOM valence, associations, and anticipated interaction showed general support for the predictions derived from the mental rehearsal and selective processing account, rather than the self-presentation and impression management account. Results revealed that posters who held positive prior CA associations with a company remained positive and attitude change was mostly negligent when being exposed to positive eWOM about CA and CSR. Although the effect from positive eWOM was consistent between lurkers and posters, the effect from negative eWOM showed a different pattern of attitude shift and company evaluations
between these two segments of consumers. To wit, when exposed to negative eWOM, the effect from associations alignment disappeared for *posters* who *anticipated* interaction with others on social media. The downward attitude shifts did not significantly differ for posters who were exposed to negative eWOM about CA and CSR. In other words, *posters* who were exposed to negative eWOM about CA had less downward attitude shift and more positive final company evaluations than *lurkers* when exposed to negative eWOM about CA (i.e., aligned associations).

These findings can be elucidated by the mental rehearsal and selective processing mechanism. Previous research suggested that when social interaction was anticipated and consumers were asked to share their opinions with others who may or may not agree with them, they would mentally rehearse what they were about to say in front of others (Schlosser & Shavitt, 1999, 2002; Tetlock et al., 1989). The “rehearsal-weight explanation” further deduced that when certain attributes were mentally rehearsed, they would receive more weight in information processing regardless of their importance or diagnosticity *per se* (Schlosser & Shavitt, 2002). When individuals holding positive prior attitude were exposed to negative information from a group and anticipated to interact with that group, they would perceive a threat to their original attitude and information stored in mind (Aronson et al., 1995; Duhachek et al., 2007). To cope with the perceived threat, they would then activate the mechanism of selective information processing as refutation to persuasive attempts (McGuire, 1961, 1964). Such threat and selective processing would then lead to less thought of the negative information from the group; rather, people focus on the attributes from their prior attitudinal base when mentally rehearsing what they would like to share in the interaction (Duhachek et al., 2007).
Consequently, those mentally rehearsed positive attributes, even though being less diagnostic, would become more salient during information processing, thereby counteracting the negativity bias and influencing the degree of downward attitude shift.

This study supported the mental rehearsal and selective processing mechanism in explaining the differences between lurkers and posters in their attitude shift and final company evaluation. Furthermore, it also extended the mechanism by testing it in the context of eWOM and incorporating the aspect of associations alignment. Specifically, it reasoned the perceived threat and selective processing would be most salient when the negative eWOM information was about CA (i.e., aligned associations). This explanation was not only empirically supported by a lesser degree of downward attitude shift for posters than for lurkers in the negative CA eWOM condition, but was also validated in the test for mechanism through content analysis of their thoughts. Results showed that posters exposed to negative eWOM about CA incorporated significantly less amount of eWOM information in their thoughts than lurkers, thereby further confirming the mechanism of selective processing that drove the predictions. Taken together, the findings on the differences between lurkers and posters in this study have also provided empirical support for the social influence aspect in the proposed ASI model.

Although the hypotheses regarding posters’ selective processing of negative eWOM about CA were supported, the prediction of their processing for negative eWOM about CSR was not supported. It was predicted that when it came to negative eWOM about CSR, the perceived threat would not be salient because even though the valence of eWOM was negative, it would not pose a threat because the associations did not align with consumers’ prior attitude; thus it should not counteract the high diagnosticity level
of the negative information, thereby leading to greater downward attitude shift and lower company evaluation. However, results from the simple main effect of three-way interaction and thought listing content analysis showed that posters did not exert more weight on information from negative eWOM about CSR in their thoughts, and did not produce greater downward attitude shift in this condition as compared to those who were exposed to negative eWOM about CA. It was plausible that even though negative eWOM about CSR did not pose enough perceived threat that led to selective processing, its diagnosticity level would still be negatively impacted by the nonalignment of associations. Therefore, the extent of downward attitude shift did not differ for posters who were exposed to negative eWOM about CA and CSR.

The competing predictions for posters based on the account of self-presentation and impression management were not empirically supported in this study. This account posited that driven by the motive to appear more intelligent and capable during social interaction, *posters* who held positive prior CA associations and were exposed to negative eWOM about CA would experience even greater downward attitude shift than their *lurker* counterparts. Such prediction of self-presentation was based on the rationale of negativity bias that posters would actively engage in impression management by offering more diagnostic, negative information (Schlosser, 2005). Because of its negative valence and alignment with prior attitude, negative information about CA would be perceived as the most diagnostic and would therefore be given even higher weight by posters, leading to even lower final company evaluation. Consequently, the more a poster was driven by self-presentation motive, the greater downward attitude shift and lower company evaluation should be. However, this account was not supported by the
previously interpreted findings from the three-way interaction. Furthermore, this mechanism was also not supported as results showed no significant correlation between self-esteem, a psychological factor that should be negatively related to self-presentation motive in theory (Angelis et al., 2012; Brown et al., 1988), and the extent of attitude shift for posters.

The plausibility for the non-existence of self-presentation and impression management in this study may be explained by two aspects. First, it is possible that the nature of this online experiment did not exert enough motive for self-presentation and impression management. Although posters were told that their opinions and evaluations would be made public on social media and consequently seen, commented, liked, or shared by others, they were not told if their identity would be revealed. When consumers share their opinion online with anonymous identity, they are less likely to engage in self-presentation and impression management (Shang, Chen, & Huang, 2012). Therefore, future research might consider using anonymity as a factor to further examine the self-presentation account. Second, in this study, participants formed their prior positive CA associations via exposure to a press release issued by the fictional company. Therefore, it is likely that they would be cautioned against spreading negative information about the company due to their lack of direct experience with it. Future research could manipulate prior CA associations through direct experience or measure consumers’ CA associations with a real company to see if they will provide more negative evaluation for self-presentation purposes when they have real, direct experience with the company (vs. indirect experience from exposure to corporate communication messages) and are exposed to negative eWOM from others.
Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study examined the impact of eWOM on consumer responses toward company through a proposed Alignment-Social Influence (ASI) model. This model takes into consideration two research gaps in the extant literature on eWOM, namely consumers’ prior informational and attitudinal base before exposure to eWOM, and their anticipated interaction on social media. Results from an initial empirical test through a quasi-experimental design supported the rationale for this model. Findings from this study provide important implications for both public relations scholarship and practices.

Theoretical Implications

Implications for Public Relations Theory and Research

This study contributes to public relations theory and research from several aspects. First, this study addresses the need in public relations scholarship to better understand and predict the influence of consumer advocacy and stakeholder behavior on social media. It proposed the integrated ASI model to examine the impact of eWOM—a way of online consumer advocacy—on responses from an important stakeholder group: consumers. The two-way, interactive nature of social media have further broken the illusion of control (Grunig, 2009). The importance of engaging consumers on social media to cultivate quality relationships and drive positive eWOM has been well recognized in public relations research (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; McCorkindale, 2010). However, the extant literature in public relations mainly focused on the beneficial impact from positive advocacy (e.g., Men, 2014; Chen, Ji, & Men, 2017); the disruptive impact from negative advocacy was relatively understudied. Results from this study showed that negative eWOM had larger influence on driving previously formed positive
attitude downward than positive eWOM on driving previously held positive attitude upward. The alignment of corporate associations between eWOM and prior attitude also played an important role in driving such attitude change, especially for lurkers who do not anticipate interaction on social media. These findings lend further insights for the impact of both positive and negative advocacy from consumers on social media. They not only touched on the “what” by showing the directions and magnitude of such impact, but also the “how” and “why” by providing and testing the underlying mechanism of consumers’ information processing and attitude formation. Moreover, the different information processing mechanisms for lurkers and posters offer additional insights in understanding publics and stakeholders. The necessity to differentiate lurkers and posters also lends convergent support for the segmentation and analysis of publics to Grunig’s (1997) Situational Theory of Publics.

Second, this study expands the application of the cognitive corporate associations theoretical framework and the association-based corporate communication to the realm of eWOM and the dynamic, two-way, and interactive environment of social media. Originated from marketing research (c.f., Brown & Dacin, 1997), the theoretical framework of consumers’ cognitive corporate associations has been applied and expanded by public relations scholars in recent years. The two dimensions of corporate associations (i.e., CA and CSR) have been well documented in the corporate communication strategies adopted by companies (e.g., Fraustino & Connolly-Ahern, 2015; Tao & Wilson, 2015). Positive CA and CSR associations were shown to drive important public relations outcomes including company evaluation, product evaluation, corporate reputation, and quality organization-public relationships (OPRs) (e.g., Chen &
Hong, 2015; Kim, 2011; Tao & Wilson, 2016). This study applied this relatively new theoretical framework in public relations research to eWOM and showed that the corporate associations reflected in eWOM would impact consumers’ attitude shift in company evaluation differently depending on their alignment (vs. nonalignment) with the associations of consumers’ baseline attitude. Furthermore, by examining the CA and CSR associations in both positive and negative eWOM, it also extended the application of corporate associations found in the crisis communication literature. Previous public relations research has examined the impact from CA and CSR crises (e.g., Kim, 2013; Kim, 2014; Sohn & Lariscy, 2015; Tao, 2015), yet what occurs more frequently on social media are comments, and sometimes complaints from consumers. By tapping into the effect of negative eWOM, specifically related to CA and CSR functioning as aligned (vs. nonaligned) associations with prior attitude, this study lends further theoretical insights in understanding and predicting what type of negative eWOM would be most likely to trigger a social media crisis.

Third, the proposed ASI model not only examined attitudinal outcomes (i.e., attitude shift and final company evaluation), but also informational outcomes (i.e., information accessibility and diagnosticity; selective processing) through which the attitude shift occurs. It has been pointed out that public relations programs need to first meet the informational objectives prior to attitudinal and behavioral objectives (Michaelson et al., 2012; Stacks, 2016). Ironically, public relations research has mostly been focusing on the attitudinal outcomes and sometimes behavioral outcomes, neglecting the informational outcomes that should be met in the first step. The ASI model fills in this gap by explaining the underlying mechanism through which eWOM impacts
consumers’ attitudes. The moderated mediation model and the test of thought listing addressed the recall, retention, and diagnosticity evaluation of information that occurred prior to consumers’ adjustment in their company evaluation—a subsequent attitudinal outcome.

Finally, drawing theoretical insights from multiple disciplines, this study takes an open-system approach (Broom, 2006) to developing public relations theory and scholarship. As pointed out by Pasadeos, Berger, and Renfro (2010), public relations is now approaching tertiary development as a field, where it develops as a social science discipline. To further develop and expand theory building, Broom (2006) called for an open-system approach in public relations theory development that draws insights from interdisciplinary bodies of knowledge in order to connect with the larger scholarly community and increase public relations’ impact on other disciplines. This study follows Broom’s call and provides an integrated, dynamic perspective to better understand and predict the impact of eWOM and consumer advocacy, thereby helping bridge the boundaries between public relations scholarship and other disciplines, including marketing, consumer behavior, and psychology.

Interdisciplinary Theoretical Implications

Apart from the implications for public relations scholarship, this study also provides important interdisciplinary theoretical implications. Drawing insights from extant theories and literature in marketing, psychology, and consumer behavior, the ASI model provides further support to the theoretical development in these fields and extends these theories’ scope to the field of public relations.
This study further supported the application of negativity bias and the search-and-alignment model of judgment revision. Results on effect of eWOM valence and associations alignment for lurkers showed that the information accessibility and diagnosticity account that has been previously supported in psychology and marketing literature using different brand and product attributes (e.g., Fabrigar & Petty, 1999; Petty & Wegener, 1998; Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002; Pullig et al., 2006) could also apply to the realm of CA and CSR associations in public relations and corporate communication. Results suggests that elaborated processing exists only when people try to assess counter-attitudinal information (vs. pro-attitudinal information) as an attempt to resist persuasion (McGuire, 1961, 1964). Furthermore, the moderating role of anticipated interaction and the difference between lurkers and posters illustrates a boundary condition for the search-and-alignment process. That is, the application of the Pham and Muthukrishnan’s (2002) search-and-alignment model to the context of social media should be taken with caution as perceived threat and selective processing caused by anticipated social interaction may counteract the weight that was supposed to be put on the more diagnostic, aligned negative information.

This study also offers insights in understanding the effect of anticipated interaction on social media. Findings revealed general support for the mental rehearsal and selective processing account, rather than the self-presentation and impression management account for the social influence aspect. More particularly, it expands the findings from Duhachek and colleague’s (2007) investigation of group influence and attitude shift to the social media context, and extends its implications from coping nonaligned valence to coping both nonaligned valence and associations.
Practical Implications

This study, along with its proposed and empirically supported ASI model provide important implications for public relations and corporate communication professionals. First, the ASI model helps public relations professionals better understand and predict the impact of positive and negative consumer advocacy in the form of eWOM. Focusing on the underlying psychological mechanism of attitude change after exposure to eWOM, this study not only provides the “what,” namely the effect of eWOM valence and associations per se, but also explains the “why” regarding how consumers change their company evaluation after exposure to other consumers’ voices. Serving as a management function, and focusing on establishing and maintaining quality relationships between an organization and its stakeholders (Broom & Sha, 2013), public relations requires thorough understanding of both organizational and stakeholder behaviors. Industry thought leaders have advocated to put “the public back in public relations” and to better understand how and why stakeholders think and behave in certain ways on social media (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009, front cover). As pointed out by the Arthur W. Page Society (2012), today’s chief communication officers (CCOs) need to presume the role “as student of behavioral science” (p. 31) to better shape organizational culture, build stakeholders’ belief, and generate confidence and advocacy. The ASI model, in this regard, can serve as a guideline for public relations professionals and CCOs to understand the behavioral science beneath the impact of eWOM in order to cultivate quality company-consumer relationships.

Second, findings on the effects from eWOM valence and associations alignment help offer practical implications for more effective environmental scanning and social
media monitoring. The rapid development of technology and prevalent use of social media by both organizations and stakeholders nowadays are demanding increasing focus on social media measurement and strategies for the public relations profession (Bartholomew, 2016). Findings from this study indicate that while positive eWOM is generally beneficial to maintain the positive image and relationships a company has already built, negative eWOM can be especially detrimental by driving down evaluation of a company even when consumers’ prior attitude is positive. Such disruptive power of eWOM warrants greater efforts and attention in public relations professionals’ monitoring of social media conversations. First, it is necessary to flag negative eWOM from consumers during the day-to-day environmental scanning. In this way, companies can address concerns and issues raised by consumers in an appropriate and timely manner. Moreover, public relations professionals and social media managers should also look for key words on certain attributes that the company has spent effort on building. For example, if a company intends to build corporate character around its CA attributes such as innovation and product quality, then monitoring social media conversations on these key attributes would be extremely important. This is because negative eWOM on these CA attributes would cause even greater downward shift in company evaluation than negative eWOM on other aspects such as the company’s social performance, according to the findings from the alignment aspect of the model. This would especially be the case for lurkers as they seek information about companies online but do not post their own opinions. Such strategic way of social media environmental monitoring can be employed directly by refining key words and scope using various social media measurement tools such as Hootsuite, Brandwatch, and Radian6 (Bartholomew, 2016).
Third, the differences in terms of the impact from eWOM on lurkers and posters illuminate further insights on analyzing the publics and stakeholders on social media. Understanding the publics and stakeholders is an important step in public relations research management and strategy development (Stacks, 2016). This study empirically backed the segmentation of lurkers and posters on social media when examining the impact of eWOM. Findings generally supported the mechanism of mental rehearsal and selective processing for posters with positive prior associations with a company. It revealed that posters holding positive attitude with a company would have less downward attitude shift than lurkers when exposed to negative eWOM with aligned associations. Such findings exert much needed caution in opinion mining and listening of consumers’ social footprint (Tuten & Solomon, 2014). It is worth noting that the sentiment analysis and customer voice listening on social media, although can be conducted with greater ease thanks to the automated tools and computer technology, may present a biased evaluation due to these posters’ selective processing of counter-attitudinal information. This is because opinions and attitude from lurkers who merely seek information but do not post on social media are omitted in social sentiment analysis. Therefore, information from social sentiment analysis should be interpreted with caution as the opinion from lurkers who hold prior positive attitude may be even more negative when exposed to negative eWOM with aligned associations, indicating the actual public sentiment might not be as optimistic as what a social sentiment analysis would show. Therefore, it is recommended that public relations professionals triangulate insights from both social sentiment analysis and from more traditional form of opinion surveys in order to obtain
attitudinal outcomes from both posters and lurkers to better inform their strategy development and issues management.

Finally, findings from this study also stress the importance of behavioral-based public relations efforts beyond the message and communication-based public relations efforts in the profession. Results show that when a company’s communication-based public relations efforts, such as a press release intending to cultivate positive CA associations, is countered by negative eWOM, consumers will perceive the negative information in eWOM as more diagnostic and significantly lower their evaluation of the company. This is especially true for lurkers who are exposed to negative eWOM of aligned associations with their prior attitude. That is, when a company’s association-based communication strategies are simply talking the talk and not accepted by stakeholders, such communication efforts can be counter-productive and would actually drive more negative outcomes. Therefore, it is important for a company to walk the talk by not only effectively communicating about their CA or CSR efforts, but also incorporating these efforts into practices and organizational behavior in order to maintain and enhance reputation and quality relationships with stakeholders.

**Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Despite the important theoretical and practical contributions, this study has several limitations that should be addressed. This section discusses the limitations in this study, and concludes with suggestions of future research.

**Limitations**

This study proposed and tested the Alignment-Social Influence (ASI) model to predict the impact of eWOM. In this model, the alignment aspect entails the alignment
between consumers’ prior informational and attitudinal base and the associations and valence in eWOM. The social influence aspect taps into the anticipated interaction on social media. However, both aspects only embodied a limited scope. First, the alignment aspect treated CA and CSR associations as equally influential. However, previous research has suggested that positive prior CSR associations may create a reservoir of reputation and have a halo effect during corporate crisis events (e.g., Kim, 2014; Sohn & Lariscy, 2015). Therefore, future studies should derive specific hypotheses and test them with positive CSR associations serving as the baseline attitude.

Second, the current propositions are only derived with positive attitude at the baseline. Because of the different diagnostic levels of positive and negative information, such propositions may not hold when consumers with negative prior associations are exposed to eWOM of different valences and associations. Hence, more extant literature needs to be reviewed to drive propositions for the conditions when negative prior associations are held, and further empirical tests are needed to examine propositions with different baseline attitudes.

Third, the social influence aspect of the current model does not take into consideration perceptions regarding the level of influence participants perceive they would have on others. With different levels of perceived power, the processing mechanism may differ among posters (Li, 2015). Moreover, although the account of self-presentation and impression management was not empirically supported in this study, it should not be eliminated in this model due to the lack of a more salient trigger for the self-presentation motive. These aspects should be addressed in future research.

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4 Future research may reexamine the work of French and Raven (1959) in defining social media power as related to interpersonal power.
In addition, there are also limitations associated with the methodology in this study. While the quasi-experimental design employed in this study allowed empirical tests of causal relationships (Stacks, 2016; Wrench et al., 2013), the online setting provided limited control during the procedure. Although certain techniques were adopted to better control the time participants spent on reading the stimuli (i.e., Java codes were embedded in the Qualtrics survey software to enforce a certain amount of time to pass on the stimulus page before participants could process to the next screen), the actual attention paid to the materials cannot be fully ensured or measured. As participants completed the experimental procedure at their own locations, it could also not be ensured if they were exposed to other information that could potentially cause memory interference or cognitive overload.

**Future Research Directions**

To address the limitations mentioned earlier and to test, refine, and extend the proposed ASI model, the following directions are suggested for future research.

To test and refine the ASI model, future research needs to incorporate different corporate associations with different valence levels as consumers’ prior informational and attitudinal base. The current study used positive CA associations at the baseline. First, a replication should be conducted with positive CSR associations at the baseline to test if the predictions raised in the current seven sets of propositions and hypotheses still hold. Second, future research should also use negative CSR and CA associations as the baseline attitude, respectively, and draw additional theoretical insights to form specific hypotheses. Such adoption of negative attitude at the baseline would be considered important both theoretically and practically because it can help inform if positive eWOM
and consumer advocacy would counteract the negative perception caused by corporate crises. Third, a hybrid associations base with mixed valence should be tested. This is necessary because it better resembles the real-world scenario where consumers may have different pieces of information about a company’s CA and CSR. In addition, a hybrid association at the baseline could help incorporate the hybrid communication strategy from the association-based synergistic model of corporate communication (Kim & Rader, 2010; Kim, 2011). Finally, the current study focuses on consumers as an important stakeholder group. Future research should also be conducted with different stakeholder groups such as employees, community members, and activists to further test and refine the ASI model.

There are also several interesting directions that can be followed to extend the ASI model. Moderators can be added to both the alignment aspect and the social influence aspect of the model. First, attitude certainty may serve as a potential boundary condition for the alignment aspect of the model. Previous research has suggested that for individuals holding positive prior attitude at a high certainty level, the refutation to persuasion would be stronger when they are exposed to counter-attitudinal, negative information with aligned attributes (Pullig et al., 2006; Tao, 2015). Therefore, attitude certainty can be incorporated to extend the alignment aspect of the alignment-social influence model. Moreover, from the standpoint of resistance to persuasion, some of the earlier theories such as Tannenbaum and colleague’s (1966) concept-boost model and McGuire’s (1961, 1964) Inoculation Theory have provided convergent insights. Future research should more carefully scrutinize these theories and draw further insights to
expand the ASI model. This will also allow the ASI model to test the heuristic value of these theories, bringing a dynamic, fresher perspective to the classic works.

Second, as mentioned earlier, the social influence aspect in the current study did not take into account how posters perceive the influence they have on others when posting on social media. Future research can consider incorporating this aspect to further segment posters and extend the social influence aspect.

Third, as discussed in the interpretation of findings, it is plausible that the self-presentation and impression management account was not supported due to the lack of salience in self-presentation motive using this specific procedure. Future studies can manipulate the salience of the self-presentation motive by incorporating moderators such as anonymity, eWOM volume, and strength of social ties with consumers who provided eWOM (e.g., close friends, acquaintances, and strangers) to seek potential boundary conditions. It was also pointed out earlier that the lack of support for the impression management account might come from the differences between direct and indirect experience through which consumers form their prior attitude. Therefore, this factor can also be employed as a moderator to extend the model.

Finally, future studies can examine the ASI model in different social cultural contexts. This would be especially interesting to test the social influence effect between consumers from an individualistic cultural background and those from a collectivist background. The current study tested the model with consumers from the United States, where individualism is highly valued (Hofstede, n.d.), and found selective processing of counter-attitudinal eWOM with aligned associations. This may or may not hold should the study be conducted with participants from China, where collectivism is valued
By incorporating cultural factors, the model can extend its scope and provide further practical implications for international public relations.

To conclude, this study serves as an initial empirical test for the proposed Alignment-Social Influence model in investigating the impact of eWOM. By consolidating interdisciplinary theoretical insights, this model provides important implications for public relations theory and practices as well as interdisciplinary theories. Many promising directions can be followed to further test, refine, and extend this model, leading to a line of research that is worth exploring.
References


Kim, S., Haley, E., & Koo, G. Y. (2009). Comparison of the paths from consumer involvement types to ad responses between corporate advertising and product


Appendix A
Experimental Design Instrument

(Informed consent page)

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. The purpose of this study is to understand your perception of a company. The survey involves answering a number of questions and completing some tasks which should take about 20-30 minutes to complete. No risks or direct benefits are anticipated for your participation. Please be assured that anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can refuse to participate at any time. The research is for academic purpose only, and your identity will not be recorded or associated with your responses.

By participating in the study, you are agreeing that you are 18 years or older. You are also authorizing the Primary Investigator and his staff to access your study information as may be necessary for purposes of this study.

For your participation, you will receive $1.50 through the Amazon Mechanical Turk web system. You can only participate in this study once.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please contact researcher Fay Chen at zifei.chen@miami.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the University of Miami, Human Subject Research Office at hsro@med.miami.edu or 305-243-3195.

Clicking “next” below verifies that I understand the purposes of this survey and give my informed consent to allow my anonymous responses to be recorded for use in a communication research study.

[PHASE I: Manipulation of positive prior CA associations and baseline company evaluation measure]

[All participants were shown the background information of a fictional athletic footwear company “Amspire Sports”, followed by a press release issued by Amspire Sports that stresses on its product quality and innovation as presented in Appendix B.]

(Attention check questions)

Q1. What is the name of the company?
   o Inspire
   o Amspire
   o Empirior
   o Allipse

Q2. Which of the following statement about the company is correct?
   o The company is a company that produces clothing items for youth.
   o The company has been around for 35 years.
   o The company produces athletic footwear.
The company is located in Canada.

(*Note: for all Likert-typed attitudinal measures in this study, the scale has 7 points, with 1 indicating “strongly disagree,” 2 indicating “disagree,” 3 indicating “somewhat disagree,” 4 indicating “neither agree nor disagree,” 5 indicating “somewhat agree,” 6 indicating “agree,” and 7 indicating “strongly agree.”)

(Manipulation check—CA associations measure)

Q3. Please indicate your agreement towards the following statements ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”
I associate Amspire Sports with ______________.
- Good quality products
- Market leadership
- Expertise in the manufacturing of products
- Efficient manufacturing facility
- Innovative products
- Global success
- Good reputation (attention check please choose disagree regardless)

(Baseline company evaluation measure)

Q4. Please indicate your agreement towards the following statements ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”
- I think Amspire is attractive.
- I think Amspire is reliable.
- I think Amspire is trustworthy.
- I like Amspire.
- My overall impression about Amspire is favorable.

Q5. How would you describe Amspire as a company?
**[PHASE II: Distraction task]**

Now you will see a matrix of fruit pictures. Please read the instructions carefully and complete the following tasks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task Item</th>
<th>Task description</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>Click on</strong> the pictures of <strong>bananas</strong> appearing in the matrix to <strong>mark them with an &quot;x&quot;</strong>. Then <strong>click on them one more time to set them to red</strong> (for example ).</td>
<td>Bananas appear as or . You need to click the picture twice to get the red &quot;x.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>Click on</strong> the pictures of <strong>watermelons</strong> appearing in the matrix to <strong>mark them with a check</strong> and <strong>set them to green</strong> (for example ).</td>
<td>Watermelons appear as . You only need to click the picture once to get the green check mark.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Count the <strong>number of banana pictures</strong> and enter your answer in the box below the matrix.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Count the <strong>number of watermelon pictures</strong> and enter your answer in the box below the matrix.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Count the <strong>number of pineapple pictures</strong> and enter your answer in the box below the matrix.</td>
<td>Pineapples appear as or .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Count the <strong>number of kiwi fruit pictures</strong> and enter your answer in the box below the matrix.</td>
<td>Kiwi fruit appears as .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please note that all banana and watermelon pictures need to be clicked and set to the correct color and mark before you are able to proceed to the next section.
Please enter the total number of banana pictures you counted from the matrix: _____.
Please enter the total number of watermelon pictures you counted from the matrix: _____.
Please enter the total number of pineapple pictures you counted from the matrix: _____.
Please enter the total number of kiwi fruit pictures you counted from the matrix: _____.

[PHASE III: Manipulations of eWOM valence, eWOM associations, and anticipated interaction, and subsequent measures]

[Participants were randomly assigned as either lurkers (i.e., those without anticipated interaction) or posters (i.e., those with anticipated interaction).]

(Participants in the lurker condition were shown the following instructions.)

In the next screen, you will read nine (9) tweets made by consumers about their thoughts on Amspire. The tweets are the latest search results under the hashtag #Amspire and were captured with screenshots. After reading the tweets, you will be asked to rate your thoughts and evaluation of the company Amspire Sports. Please read those tweets CAREFULLY, because you will NOT be able to go back and review them again once you proceed with the ">>" button after it appears. When you are ready, click ">>" below (after it appears) to read the tweets in the next screen.

(Participants in the poster condition were shown the following instruction.)

In the next screen, you will read nine (9) tweets made by consumers about their thoughts on Amspire. The tweets are the latest search results under the hashtag #Amspire and were captured with screenshots. After reading the tweets, you will share your thoughts and evaluation of the company Amspire Sports with your fellow consumers (including those who tweeted #Amspire in the next screen). Also keep in mind that you will be asked to write texts for a tweet containing #Amspire to showcase your opinions, which is to be seen or commented by other consumers on Twitter. Please read those tweets CAREFULLY, because you will NOT be able to go back and review them again once you proceed with the ">>" button after it appears. When you are ready, click ">>" below (after it appears) to read the tweets in the next screen.

[Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the four versions of tweets made by consumers (i.e., positive tweets about CA, negative tweets about CA, positive tweets about CSR, negative tweets about CSR) as presented in Appendix B.]

(Thought-listing)

Q5. (Version 1—for participants in the lurker condition) Please tell us everything you are thinking and feeling as you think about Amspire Sports. You will be given the opportunity to list five thoughts. Simply write down your first thought in the first box, the second thought in the second box, etc. Please put only one thought in a box and state each thought concisely—a phrase is sufficient.

- Thought 1: ________________
- Thought 2: ________________
- Thought 3: ________________
Q5. (Version 2—for participants in the poster condition) Please tell us *everything* you are thinking and feeling as you think about Amspire Sports. You will be given the opportunity to list five thoughts and will be asked to share your thoughts with fellow consumers whose tweets you read earlier. Simply write down your first thought in the first box, the second thought in the second box, etc. Please put only one thought in a box and state each thought concisely—a phrase is sufficient.

- Thought 1: ________________
- Thought 2: ________________
- Thought 3: ________________
- Thought 4: ________________
- Thought 5: ________________

(Additional manipulation of anticipated interaction)

Q6. (Only participants in the poster condition were asked this question) Now in the space below, please write down the text for a tweet within 140 characters that contains #Amspire to share your opinion with the consumers whose tweets you read earlier. Please keep in mind that the content of your tweet is to be seen or commented by other consumers on Twitter.

(Diagnosticity measure)

Q7. On the scales below, indicate the extent to which you feel about the information you read in the tweets.

To me, the information I see from the tweets is ________________ to my evaluation about Amspire Sports.

- Not at all helpful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very helpful
- Not at all useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Of very great use
- Extremely irrelevant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Extremely relevant

(Subsequent company evaluation measure)

Q8. (Version 1—for participants in the lurker condition) Please indicate your agreement *now* towards the following statements ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

- I think Amspire is attractive.
- I think Amspire is reliable.
- I think Amspire is trustworthy.
- I like Amspire.
- My overall impression about Amspire is favorable.

Q8. (Version 2—for participants in the poster condition) Please indicate your agreement *now* towards the following statements ranging from “strongly disagree” to
“strongly agree.” You will share your thoughts and evaluation of the company Amspire with fellow consumers whose tweets you read earlier.

- I think Amspire is attractive.
- I think Amspire is reliable.
- I think Amspire is trustworthy.
- I like Amspire.
- My overall impression about Amspire is favorable.

(Manipulation check—CA and CSR associations measures, with all items randomized)

Q9. Please indicate your agreement now towards the following statements ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

I associate Amspire Sports with ____________.

- Environmental responsibility
- Innovative products
- Commitment to public health
- Efficient manufacturing facility
- Market leadership
- Social and employee diversity
- Educational commitment
- Global success
- Expertise in the manufacturing of products
- A great care for communities
- Good quality products

(Self-esteem measure)

Q10. Please indicate your agreement towards the following statements ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

- On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
- At times I think I am no good at all.
- I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
- I am able to do things as well as most other people.
- I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
- I certainly feel useless at times.
- I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.
- I wish I could have more respect for myself.
- All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
- I take a positive attitude toward myself.
(Demographic and additional questions)

Q11. What is your age? ______

Q12. What is your gender?  Male    Female

Q13. Which of the following best represents your racial or ethnic heritage?
   ○ Black/African American (non-Hispanic)
   ○ Asian/Pacific Islander
   ○ Caucasian/White (non-Hispanic)
   ○ Latino/Hispanic
   ○ Native American/American Indian
   ○ Other ______

Q14. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   ○ Less than high school
   ○ High school/GED
   ○ Some college
   ○ Associate degree (2-year college degree)
   ○ Bachelor's degree (4-year college degree)
   ○ Master's degree
   ○ Doctorate degree
   ○ Professional degree (MD, JD)

Q15. What is your annual income?
   ○ $20,000 or under
   ○ $20,001 to $40,000
   ○ $40,001 to $60,000
   ○ $60,001 to $80,000
   ○ $80,001 to $100,000
   ○ $100,000 or higher
   ○ Prefer not to say

Q16. To your best guess, what is the purpose of this study?

______________________________
(Debriefing statement)

In this questionnaire, you were asked to evaluate a company based on other consumers’ electronic word-of-mouth and your anticipation to share your opinions. Please note that the company, the products, and the messages you saw (both the article and the tweets) are ENTIRELY FICTITIOUS.

You were not told that the company, the products, and the messages were fictitious during the survey because it is believed that more authentic responses from participants can be generated, which is important for this study to get valid results.

Now that you know the true nature of the study, you have the option to have your data removed from this study. Please check below if you do not want your data to be used in this research and it will be withdrawn.

○ I DO NOT want my data to be used and would like to WITHDRAW my answers.

If you have questions, concerns, or complains, please contact researcher Fay Chen at zifei.chen@miami.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Miami, Human Subject Research Office at (305)243-3195.
Appendix B
Experimental Design Stimuli

Baseline valence and associations (shown to all participants in phase one)

Amspire Sports® is an American footwear company. This company specializes in designing, developing, and marketing a range of athletic shoes under the Amspire brand. The company was founded in March, 2002 and is headquartered in Milwaukee, WI.

In its fifteenth year, Amspire continues excellence in product quality and innovation

This March marks Amspire’s fifteenth anniversary in business. Since its launch in 2002, Amspire has been committed to producing stylish, high-quality athletic footwear and developing performance-enhancing technology.

Powered by AmspireX Lab, a state-of-the-science research facility, Amspire’s team of researchers have tested numerous ideas in pursuit of enhancing performance, reducing injury risk, and delivering innovative, high-quality, and stylish athletic footwear products to customers. As a hub of sport science knowledge, AmspireX has also established partnerships with universities and institutions in the United States to maintain cutting-edge science. Over the past 15 years, Amspire has produced more than 50 patents.

To enhance product quality, Amspire has been implementing a quality assurance program that focuses on meeting and exceeding customers’ expectations since 2004. In addition, the company has been continuously hiring employees holding advanced degrees in disciplines including design, physiology, biomedical engineering, and kinesiology.

Over the past fifteen years, Amspire has established its success in the U.S. athletic footwear market. “Looking forward, we will further our commitment in product quality and innovation,” said Eric Bert, founder and CEO of Amspire, “and I’m confident that we will continue our success for many years to come.”
Manipulations of eWOM valence and associations (randomly assigned in phase three)

Positive eWOM about CA

Justin Kim @im_justin_kim 58m
Just got my new pair of #Amspire tennis shoes! Exactly the quality claimed ;)

Shawn Williams @shawnjwill_78 3h
Awesome shoes by #Amspire—great materials & very comfy. Going to buy them again!

Emily Young @ayoung94 6h
#Amspire running shoes from @DaveKL for my bday!! gotta work out more!

Lauren K. Walter @LaurenKWalter 8h
Nice style! #amspire #running #gymfashion #shoes

Daniel M Edwards @DanielMEdwards_25 13h
Light-weight materials and supportive cushion for running #Amspire #innovation

Andy Albright @Albrightairight3 18h
Check out my new #Amspire #hikingboots
instagram.com/p/ADr3eg0kljM16/

Joshua Harris @Joshua_Harris_89 21h
Still like new after 1 year... Superior quality control—keep up the good work #amspire

Pauline Smith @PaulineSmith81 23h
#Amspire shoes are of terrible quality!! feeling terrible when running #shopfailure

Kathy Sophia Cohn @KathySophiaCohnisme 24h
Love #Amspire! True market leader in #athletic #shoes. excellent design & quality
Negative eWOM about CA

Justin Kim @im_justin_kim 58m
Just got my new pair of #AmSpire tennis shoes! Not quite the quality claimed :(

Shawn Williams @shawnwill_78 3h
Awful shoes #AmSpire—cheap materials & not comfortable. Never buying them again!

Emily Young @eyoung94 6h
#AmSpire running shoes from @DaveKL for my bday!! gotta work out more!

Lauren K. Walter @LaurenKWalter 8h
Ugly style! #amspire #running #gymfashionfail #shoes

Daniel M Edwards @DanielMEdwards_25 13h
Stiff materials and no supportive cushion for running #AmSpire #innovationfail

Andy Albright @Albrightalright3 18h
Check out my new #AmSpire #hikingboots instagram.com/p/ADr3eCGkJM16/

Joshua Harris @Joshua_Harris_89 21h
Worn out after 1 month… Superior quality control? save your lies #amspire

Pauline Smith @PaulineSmith81 23h
#Amspire shoes are of great quality!! feeling great when running #shopping

Kathy Sophia Cohn @KathySophiaCohnisme 24h
Love #AmSpire NOT! Total failure in #athletic #shoes market. terrible design & quality
Positive eWOM about CSR

Justin Kim @im_justin_kim 58m
Just bought another pair of #Amspire shoes! Supporting a company with environmental consciousness :)  

Shawn Williams @shawnwill_78 3h
Awesome #Amspire—great eco-friendly recyclable materials. Going to buy them again!  

Emily Young @eyoung94 6h
#Amspire running shoes from @DaveKL for my bday!! gotta work out more!  

Lauren K. Walter @LaurenKWalter 8h
Great #philanthropy from #amspire! #socialresponsibility #donation #charity  

Daniel M Edwards @DanielMEdwards_25 13h
Thank you #Amspire for supporting the Skin Cancer Foundation and your good deeds for #publichealth!  

Andy Albright @Albrightalight3 18h
Check out my new #Amspire #hikingboots instagram.com/p/ADr3egCkjM16/  

Joshua Harris @Joshua_Harris_89 21h
Benefiting the communities with shoe #recycling program—keep up the good work #amspire!  

Pauline Smith @PaulineSmith81 23h
Don't think #Amspire is quite keeping up with some of its #socialresponsibility programs  

Kathy Sophia Cohn @KathySophiaCohnisme 24h
Love #Amspire! A responsible #athletic #shoes company, great #givingback to society
Negative eWOM about CSR

Justin Kim @im_justin_kim 58m
Not buying another pair of #Amspire shoes! Staying away from a company with no environmental consciousness.:(

Shawn Williams @shawnwill_78 3h
Awful #Amspire—wasteful materials causing environmental damage. Never buying them again!

Emily Young @eyoung94 6h
#Amspire running shoes from @DaveKL for my bday!! gotta work out more!

Lauren K. Walter @LaurenKWalter 8h
Zero philanthropy from #amspire! #socialresponsibilityfail #donation #charity

Daniel M Edwards @DanielMEdwards_25 13h
Shame on you #Amspire for pulling away support for the Skin Cancer Foundation and not caring about #publichealth!

Andy Albright @Albrightalright3 18h
Check out my new #Amspire #hikingboots instagram.com/p/ADr3egCjM16/

Joshua Harris @Joshua_Harris_89 21h
Harming the communities with #pollution from shoe factories—stop this now #amspire!

Pauline Smith @PaulineSmith81 23h
Think #Amspire is getting to keep up with some of its #socialresponsibility programs

Kathy Sophia Cohn @KathySophiaCohnisme 24h
Love #Amspire NOT! An irresponsible #athletic #shoes company. no #givingback to society