A Rhetorical Perspective on Quelling Negative Word-of-Mouth

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This research examines how consumers utilize rhetorical devices when perpetuating negative word-of-mouth (NWOM). Specifically, the research proposes that NWOM, like biological genes, spreads through evolution and natural selection. Additionally, across three studies, we identify the types of rhetorical adaptations made by consumers when committing NWOM, the effectiveness of such adaptations in perpetuating NWOM, and how to inoculate against their ill effects. The results suggest that consumers primarily employ five types of rhetorical devices when spreading NWOM and, in general, substitution devices exhibit greater effectiveness than repetition or destabilization devices. The findings also suggest that inoculation is most effective at reducing retransmissions given substitution devices.

INTRODUCTION

Negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) is recognized as a powerful and pervasive problem for many businesses (Luo, 2009). Indeed, numerous studies link NWOM to large-scale detrimental outcomes such as decreases in quality perceptions, purchase intentions, and satisfaction (e.g., Von Wangenheim, 2005). For example, failed responsiveness to a single computer malfunction by Dell Inc. precipitated NWOM by one customer who attracted more than 10,000 daily visits to his complaint blog (Beucke and Lee 2005. Unfortunately, studies tend not to look beyond the intentions of directly dissatisfied consumers to commit NWOM. In addition, original complaints, often referred to as the "tip of the iceberg" (Andreasen and Best, 1977), are not nearly as devastating as subsequent exaggerations made during message retransmissions by cynical consumers who are prepared to believe the worst about businesses (Marketing Week, 2007). Unfortunately, these potentially larger and more detrimental impacts of NWOM through viral spread are typically ignored in research.

It is through consumer adaptations that this research examines the power of NWOM to persist and persuade. Following calls to increase work in marketing rhetoric and communication effectiveness (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996), this research specifically investigates what rhetorical modifications (i.e., changes in message phrasing) consumers make when adapting and transmitting negative messages to other consumers. Rhetorical devices have been studied in both visual and verbal contexts, but only in terms of original marketing messages (e.g., Scott, 1994). However, research has yet to examine rhetoric in consumer-generated contexts such as NWOM, specifically those that run counter to intended marketing messages. Drawing from memetic theory, this research suggests that viral communications, such as NWOM, may become more effective as they are adapted and transferred from person to person (Dawkins,

1989; McQuarrie and Mick, 1996). In addition, studies support the notion that NWOM is perceived as more trustworthy than marketing messages generated by firms (e.g., Murray, 1991).

This research contributes to the growing literature on complaining in three primary ways. First, it identifies the rhetoric surrounding consumer retransmissions of NWOM. In doing so, the research details *how* consumers phrase negative messages. This research builds off of the pioneering work of McQuarrie and Mick (1996) in advertising rhetoric to develop a taxonomy of rhetorical devices employed in negative word-of-mouth. Second, this research examines the effectiveness of different rhetorical devices to spread NWOM and generate negative attitudes and behaviors toward firms. As a result, the findings of researchers such as Mothersbaubg et al. (2002) are extended into a new context. Third, the research investigates how firms can use inoculation to thwart NWOM by consumers. Specifically, the viral spread of negative messages is viewed from a biological stance whereby small doses of negative information should limit damage done by NWOM, just as weak strains of biological viruses are used to prevent physical infections in people (Cooper, 2010). As such, we hypothesize and investigate how these catalysts alter the effectiveness and ultimately the survivability of negative messages.

To accomplish the research goals, this research focuses on text-based communications. Text-based word-of-mouth (e.g., texting, email, and blogging) is rapidly becoming a primary tool through which consumers disseminate marketing information (Brown, Broderick, and Lee, 2007). As a result, there is a need to understand the specific nuances of how text-based NWOM operates and what impacts it has on the effectiveness of persuasive messages. In addition, text-based communications are easier to track and are more in line with current WOM trends (Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, and Raman, 2004).

The research is partitioned into three studies. Using memetic theory, and in line with McQuarrie and Mick (1996), Study 1 builds a theoretical framework of negative communication and identifies the most common rhetorical adaptations employed when consumers retransmit positive and negative marketing communications. Study 2 then identifies what impact specific mechanisms have on the effectiveness of negative messages. Finally, Study 3 applies inoculation theory to these impacts to determine if firms can minimize the potential damage of NWOM by spreading small doses of NWOM prior to full scale NWOM campaigns by consumers.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Research on Negative Word-of-Mouth

Negative word-of-mouth is identified as a severe and problematic form of complaint behavior (Luo, 2009). A wealth of research identifies reasons for accepting and spreading NWOM, including trust (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 2000), subject involvement (Von Wangenheim and Bayón, 2007), excitement/entertainment (Phelps et al. 2004), and strength of relational ties between communicators (Goldenberg, Libai, and Muller, 2001). Still other studies also identify the power of NWOM in eroding brand image and inciting detrimental consumer behaviors (DeCarlo, Laczniak, Motley, and Ramaswami, 2007). While existing research highlights relationships between general constructs such as message trustworthiness and behavioral intentions, it does not drill down to the message level to determine *how* different message forms (i.e., rhetorical strategies) impact the effectiveness of message retransmission. As a result, a key piece of NWOM effectiveness is missing in the literature.

Overview of Rhetoric Literature

Rhetoric consists of figurative and non-figurative language. Figurative language is often defined as colorful or artful deviations (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996), while non-figurative language is straight forward and typically meant to be taken literally. In their seminal work, McQuarrie and Mick (1996) offer a framework that lists figurative rhetorical devices by complexity and underlying function (scheme or trope). In addition, they postulate effects according to the complexity and function that are later investigated by Mothersbaugh et al. (2002). The ability to overlay this framework onto NWOM communications is provided by numerous works that show consistency in findings across conditions,

such as visual and verbal rhetoric, real magazines, and laboratory manipulated headlines (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999; Mothersbaugh et al., 2002).

Rhetorical devices are mapped along a continuum from non-figurative language to destabilization functions (e.g., messages that require deep processing and comprehension). McQuarrie and Mick (1996) suggest that moving toward destabilization enhances the appeal of messages and thus the potential for replication. Such demand for additional cognitive effort is typically associated with deeper processing of messages and thus greater retention (Dawkins 1989, p. 198). For example, tropes (e.g., destabilization devices) force deeper processing through indirect reconciliation of message incongruities (Toncar and Munch, 2001).

Rhetorical devices are common in everyday speech and are relatively universal phenomena across cultures (Pollio, Smith and Pollio, 1990). The resulting retention brought on by the use of such common rhetorical devices should also be associated with greater meme stability as original components of a message are less likely to be forgotten. The wide applicability and consistency of findings indicate that NWOM communication is a strong candidate for continued research on rhetorical device effectiveness. This research answers calls to increase such research (e.g., McQuarrie and Mick, 1996) and extends the discussion into instances where messages are mutated at some point following their initial utterance. An overview of memetic theory is provided next to detail how such mutations may enhance or detract from power and spread of such messages.

Overview of Meme Literature

Memetic theory primarily identifies how cultural meaning is generated and transferred among a population. The term is grounded in a Neo-Darwinian evolutionary approach and, therefore, emphasizes the importance of characteristics that generate staying power for cultural traditions, religion, and other normative behaviors (Dawkins, 1989). Memetic theory was introduced to the marketing literature by Gelb (1997, p. 57), who described memes as "concepts that can be seen or heard again, then again, then again without additional dissemination or effort by the original source" or "self replicating ideas that move through time and space."

Dawkins (1989) coined the term "meme" more generally to refer to such cultural replicators in order to be both phonetically consistent with the term "gene" and to follow the Greek word for imitation, "mimema." Like genes, memes are conceptualized as replicating devices that perpetuate themselves by leaping from one body to another, or rather from one mind to another (Dawkins 1989, p. 192). Just as stronger more dominant genes enhance survival and increase the chances of replication in the gene pool, so too does stronger more powerful rhetoric increase the probability of meme replication in the meme pool. In mild contrast, memes are the carriers of cultural information, rather than of genetic information. Like a biological virus, a meme "literally parasitizes [a] brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation" (Dawkins 1989, p. 192). Like genes, successfully replicating memes are imbued with certain characteristics, making them more attractive for selection. In other words, more powerful and attractive memes are more likely to survive and thrive over time than are less powerful and unattractive memes. Rumor theory and rhetoric theory both suggest that gossip and rumors spread faster when they are engulfed in intrigue and engender feelings of excitement and power over others (Difonzo, Prashant, and Rosnow, 1994).

Researchers have discussed the use of memetic theory in marketing (Gelb, 1997) and have extended the work into intervention strategies for social marketing (Saad and Peng, 2006) and the role memes play in the success of brands (Yufan and Ardley, 2007). The current paper draws on memes to explain how rhetorical devices help to perpetuate NWOM communication and ultimately how to limit such effects. In summary, a combination of rhetorical and memetic theories suggests that rhetorical devices serve as modifiers or characteristics of memes that make them more attractive for taking root in different hosts (Scott, 1994), while inoculation theory suggests that these effects can be reduced with small doses of negative information received in advance of NWOM campaigns.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THEORY DEVELOPMENT

The Role of Memes and Rhetoric in NWOM Transmissions
    The theoretical argument outlined in this section builds primarily from the work of Richard Dawkins (1989) on cultural evolution and memetic transmission. As discussed, memes are the root negative ideas consumers wish to express (e.g., poor quality) and have retransmitted through NWOM. Thus, consistent with Dawkins's view, we propose that negative word-of-mouth transmissions behave like memes and in essence fight for survival in a process of natural selection. The success of this form of complaining hinges upon the success of this fight. In other words, if consumers choose not to retransmit complaints, then the memes fail to propagate and the spread of NWOM ends.
    As a function of language, memes are often expressed via rhetorical devices (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999). The purpose of these devices is to add not only interest and complexity to messages, but also to enhance message persuasiveness by creating meaningfulness or altering mood states (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999). Rhetorical modifications that make messages more attractive for replication are likely to exacerbate NWOM problems, in that, they are more likely to spread to a wider audience, have greater impact, and endure longer (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996). There is a high probability of NWOM communications losing their intended rate of retransmission (known as fecundity) or consistency with the original message (known as copy-fidelity) during retransmission. As a result, the ability to retain both fecundity and copy-fidelity is diminished (Ward and Gaidis, 1990).
    According to Dawkins (1989), stronger messages survive longer, are spread with greater frequency, and impact recipients more heavily than weak messages. Within this framework, NWOM can be understood as deleterious if two viral conditions are met. The first condition is that to be effective as a gene or a virally spread message there must be fecundity (i.e., something that makes it desirable for retransmission). Negative messages traditionally fit this profile, as consumers seem to naturally gravitate toward information that provides shock value or offers the chance for a cathartic release of pent up negative emotions (Difonzo, Prashant, and Rosnow, 1994).
    However, messages must also retain some semblance of the original message. For example, if a consumer intends to damage Company A with NWOM, but the message mutates into a focus on Company B, then the original meme is lost. Thus, the second condition is that a message must retain some level of copy-fidelity (i.e., retain the original intent of the message). This is not to say that all parts of a message must remain the same. Rather, it suggests that the essence of the original message must remain intact. For example, retransmitting a specific complaint about a specific brand of cellular service retains copy-fidelity if the specific brand of cellular service remains the focus of the message and the message remains negative. However, focusing on cellular service in general during retransmission of the complaint destroys the original intent to focus on a specific brand. The receiver then has no idea what cellular service to avoid as a result of someone else's negative experience. Taking both fecundity and copy-fidelity into consideration, the manner in which a message is repeated or the rhetoric behind it is paramount to its effectiveness.

Fecundity
    Fecundity refers to the power of messages to replicate and involves the basic acceptability/ attractiveness of a given meme (Dawkins, 1989, p. 194). Consumer adaptations are likely to vary in message delivery, as each consumer differs in language preferences, literacy, and speech patterns (Mick, 1992). Loss of fecundity may result from poor message encoding by consumers sending messages or poor message decoding by consumers receiving messages (Dawkins, 1989). In either case, retransmission of such communications may be rendered ineffective as senders fail to effectively grab and hold the attention of receivers. As a result, receivers lose interest in passing along the memes.
    According to Dawkins (1989), fecundity requires both range and power. In other words, a message that fizzles out quickly is just as ineffective as a powerful message heard by very few. Messages must therefore have a combination of strength and reach (Silverman, 2001). This suggests that the most effective rhetorical devices must be commonly used (i.e., high frequency in normal speech) and must also

generate a strong desire to continue perpetuating the meme. To determine the commonality of rhetorical devices in everyday communications simply requires a frequency count. However, understanding the power of a rhetorical device requires comparing various devices on their ability to incite further NWOM transmissions and to commit consistent behaviors toward the focus of the message (e.g., boycotting).

Copy-Fidelity

According to Dawkins (1989), the consistency of a meme over time (i.e., its copy fidelity) is just as important as its fecundity. If the original message is lost or no longer recognizable, intuition suggests that it is likely to lose its intended persuasive effect. However, this does not require that every replication be an exact copy (Dawkins, 1989, p. 195). Rather, it means that the basic original idea (meme) must remain intact. For example, the use of a synonym does not constitute an exact replica of a word, but the similarity is great enough for the words to act as reasonable substitutes. If this were not true, then all academic papers would have to be filled with exact quotes from prior works rather than paraphrases or citations that simply support a new author's ideas. Further, any stated agreement between two people would be meaningless without such a principle (Dawkins, 1989, p. 196).

As a result of consumer involvement in NWOM perpetuation, the rhetorical content, and perhaps the meme itself, may change as messages pass among consumers (Villanueva et al., 2008). Specifically, different consumers are likely to rephrase messages in different ways, subjecting the memes to potentially new perceptions (desirable or undesirable). Simple examples exist in mistranslation across international borders, such as the Chevy Nova, whereby "no va" means "it won't go" in Spanish (Valencia, 1983).

More extreme examples exist in rumors and gossip, which are types of messages that often retain high levels of fecundity (i.e., consumers desire to pass them on), but are often impaired by gross losses in copy-fidelity. This is because such messages, while interesting, typically contain embellishments, abstractions, and omissions that obliterate the original intent and content (Skurnik, 2005). An example of a press release gone wrong is of a voice coach singing backup for a country music star on a television show. The original intent of the message was to bolster the value of the voice coach's business by indirectly linking it to a country music star. A fan of the singer took license with the message stating that the voice coach claimed to have taught the singer how to sing. A huge uproar ensued in which both the voice coaching business and the press release firm were bombarded with e-mails from angry fans. In essence, the message was changed in phrasing from "sang together on the same show" to "taught her how to sing." Such detrimental results highlight the potential strength of WOM transmissions, as well as the importance of message composition. In this instance, changing a few key words replaced the intended positive meme with a strongly negative meme.

Differential Effects on Consumers

For NWOM to take hold and gain momentum, the rhetoric employed likely must go beyond simple frequency of use and ignite both attitude and intention. Previous research indicates that figurative language requires more in-depth processing than nonfigurative language and tropes require more processing than schemes (Mothersbaugh et al., 2002). Further, tropes are considered to be more complex and clever than schemes, leading to the notion that differences in required processing of different rhetorical devices affect consumer judgments and outcomes (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996). According to the original framework developed by McQuarrie and Mick (1996), schemes include repetition (low complexity) and reversal (high complexity), while tropes include substitution (low complexity) and destabilization (high complexity) (see Figure 1).

Repetition is a type of rhetoric that includes devices such as alliteration, climax, assonance, hypotaxis, pleonasm, enumeration, parallelism, and epistrophe. It is shown to generate greater confidence and comprehension among receivers, leading to positive perceptions of messages (Ha and Hoch 1989). Further, repetition helps to add explanation to messages (Harris 2002). Greater detail aids readers in understanding both subtle nuances of messages as well as understanding the larger purpose of those messages (McQuarrie and Mick, 2003; Mick, 1992).

Reversal is similar to repetition, in that, it relies on a consistent structure. The increase in complexity of this type of scheme is owed to the mirror image form required for repeating the structural elements. For example, repetition might involve simply repeating the exact same phrase (e.g., "Attack the market. Attack the market."). Reversal, however, reorders the structural components so that the message is not simply redundant, but rather involves an interesting twist (e.g., "Attack the market before the market attacks you."). In this form, the original message of "attack the market" is followed by a powerful warning "before the market attacks you" that is similar in structure, but adds emphasis while also repeating the same words from the original message. Such rhetoric is often found in advertising, but intuition suggests that they are less likely in common speech due to depth of thinking required to effectively transpose sentence components.

Substitution is also common and includes devices such as anacoluthon, exclamation, parataxis, and zeugma. Substitution forces consumers to fill in blanks or switch words in order to correctly comprehend a message. Such alterations create intrigue and cause greater message processing. In addition, such simplification glosses over the obvious and includes implicit content in order to skip non-essential components are add haste and brevity to a message (Toncar and Munch, 2001). In other words, simplifying removes unnecessary clutter from arguments so that listeners can focus on key details of an argument. As technology accelerates, messages are being simplified at an increasing rate due to the availability and popularity of such communications media as texting, online social networks, and email (Nasco and Bruner, 2002).

A step beyond substitution in terms of complexity is destabilization, wherein consumers often must translate messages beyond a literal or impossible state in order to comprehend them. More complex messages typically generate greater pleasure in reading and comprehending of text (McQuarrie and Mick, 1999). For example, hyperbole and synecdoche are often used to shock or add intrigue to statements. As with more complex schemes, complex tropes such as destabilization are less likely found in common speech than less complex rhetorical devices.

In line with the original McQuarrie and Mick (1996) work, we assert that more complex messages are more engaging, require deeper processing, and ultimately perpetuate more negative behavioral intentions. As a result, the following hypotheses are postulated:

> H1: *Tropes are more effective than schemes in generating negative behavioral intentions toward brands.*
>
> H2: *More complex messages are more effective than simple messages in generating negative behavioral intentions toward brands.*

Inoculating Against NWOM

Inoculation theory pertains to the influence of information on perceptions of future inconsistent messages (McGuire, 1962). The intent is to make consumers feel more knowledgeable about the subject, thus causing them to view new information as redundant or irrelevant. Ideally, the new information is then simply ignored and the NWOM campaign fails to take root. Inoculation theory suggests that future negative information can be thwarted by anchoring consumers with positive beliefs. For example, Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz (2009) show that introducing corporate social responsibility information prior to the release of information regarding socially irresponsible behavior effectively reduces perceptions of corporate hypocrisy. Most firms, however, are constantly attempting to bolster brand perceptions, which may have the added effect of inoculating consumers by anchoring them to positive beliefs. However, such efforts do not always appear to effectively inoculate consumers (e.g., Failure of the Toyota Prius braking system or the BP oil spill).

Biological definitions of inoculation differ from the current marketing view, in that, a weak strain of a virus is first introduced to allow an immune system to adjust and overcome a stronger strain (Foulkes and De Gruttola, 2003). This is akin to introducing weak negative information prior to reception of strong negative information. Introducing positive information first is thus closer to taking vitamins or antibiotics than it is to inoculation per se. Extending from the work of Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz (2009), several

theories support inoculation through the introduction of weak negative information. For example, research on categorization suggests that consumers conserve cognitive effort by reapplying existing knowledge to new instances (Sujan, 1985). In this case, the strength of new negative information is reduced by a tendency to view it as *not much worse* than what is already known. Hence, new perceptions are mapped onto an existing, more moderate, scheme. In a similar vein, assimilation theory suggests that consumers use existing information as a benchmark for evaluating new information (Myers-Levy and Sternthal, 1993). Thus, new perceptions gravitate toward existing ones because of the creation of and desire for stable memes in the consumer's mind (Dawkins, 1989, p. 199). This suggests that the strength of harsher new information may be halved by the presence of much weaker negative information. Prior exposure to a message is therefore expected to reduce reliance and acceptance of new information about the subject. In essence, such exposure may *inoculate* consumers by preempting NWOM with information that reduces attention to or concern for new messages.

As discussed, rhetorical devices differ in their intensity and potential for effective retransmission of NWOM. Given the potential for such differences, inoculation may also differ in its effectiveness. For example, a weak biological virus such as chicken pox is rather easy to inoculate against, while stronger viruses such as HIV are much more difficult. Hence, we expect that inoculation is less effective in curbing negative behaviors and enhancing positive behaviors when stronger rhetoric (e.g., exclamation) is employed. As a result, we offer the following hypotheses:

> H3a: *Given inoculation, schemes result in less negative word-of-mouth than do tropes.*
> H3b: *Given inoculation, schemes result in greater search behaviors than do tropes.*
> H3c: *Given inoculation, schemes result in greater purchase intentions than do tropes.*

Summary and Preview

The previous sections summarized the literatures related to NWOM communications, the use of rhetorical devices in consumer generated messages, and the application of memetic theory in understanding the viral spread of negative ideas via text-based NWOM. A conceptual framework was developed and hypotheses proposed relating to how rhetorical devices in text-based NWOM likely affect consumer judgments given inoculation attempts by firms. We now turn our attention toward three studies designed to explore the McQuarrie and Mick (1996) taxonomy with regard to NWOM communications and test the proposed hypotheses.

In order to examine the use of rhetoric in the text-based NWOM context, Study 1 adapts the methods used by McQuarrie and Mick (1996) to examine the frequency of rhetorical devices in text-based NWOM communications. A taxonomy of rhetorical devices is generated that extends the original advertising context of McQuarrie and Mick's (1996) work to text-based NWOM. Study 2 further investigates the effectiveness of the rhetorical devices identified in Study 1. Specifically, Study 2 assesses the behavioral intentions of consumers following exposure to specific types of rhetorical devices. In Study 3, the effectiveness of rhetorical devices under conditions of inoculation or no inoculation is examined.

STUDY 1: RHETORICAL DEVICES USED IN COMMITTING NWOM

Marketing functions have a great deal of control over how advertising and other promotional messages are created and transmitted. Indeed, managers of these functions take proactive steps, choosing the words and pictures used in the messages and the channels of transmission in ways designed to maximize persuasive effects. Once messages are received by consumers, firms no longer have absolute control over them. This is typically the case from the start with negative messages such as bad publicity or customers sharing negative experiences about a firm. In addition, even positive messages may be interpreted differently, reducing a message's effectiveness or creating an undesirable effect (Mick, 1992). Before examining the effects of rhetoric in text-based WOM, we must first determine which types of rhetoric are used in the context of text-based WOM. In their seminal work, McQuarrie and Mick (1996) identify a number of rhetorical operations and specific devices frequently used in magazine

advertisements. As a result, a taxonomy is suggested to exists, whereby different types of rhetorical devices are more effective than others under certain circumstances. In Study 1, procedures were adapted from McQuarrie and Mick (1996) to facilitate the collection of multiple forms of text-based WOM. Specifically, the data were allowed to drive the taxonomy and highlight potential differences in the complexity and effectiveness of each rhetorical device within the context of text-based WOM communication. This procedure was completed with two separate methods in order to examine the robustness of the taxonomy. The largest sample was generated through negative consumer comments posted to a political video. A follow up sample affirmed the frequency of rhetorical devices, while focusing on email messages.

Research Design

Participants for Online Comments

Data were acquired from 1,276 online comments posted in response to the YouTube video "Bill O'Reilly Freaks Out! 'SHOVE IT!'" (found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WObY922U-Mssite) as of June 4, 2010. The video was chose for its high view rate (over 600,000 times prior to data collection) and for the ability of such pundits to generate a wide range of responses.

Procedure for Online Comments

Comments were entered into a language searching algorithm programmed in PHP and designed to locate patterns of strings consistent with the various types of rhetorical devices. For example, exclamations were searched by exclamation point, words with more than one capital letter, and a list of known exclamations such as "hey" and "check this out."

Participants for Email

Study participants were 49 undergraduates enrolled in a marketing course at a large public university in the U.S. who volunteered to participate for extra credit. The proportion of males to females (53%) was approximately equal and the median age was 22 (age range 20-55).

Procedure for Email

In a classroom setting, students were randomly assigned to serial networks of four and told that they would be writing e-mails to one another about a story. The news story was given only to the first person in each network. The topic of the news story was about divorce in a down economy. Consistent with Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, and Raman (2004), participants were told to write pass-along emails as though they were received from someone they knew, passed along to someone they knew, and personalized.

After the first person read the story, that person was then asked to write an email to the second person in their network as if to a friend, focusing on trying to convince them to read the same story. After reading the email, the second person in the network wrote a new email to the third person as if writing to a friend to convince them to read the story they just heard about. This was done to push the NWOM farther away from the source at each retransmission to see how the NWOM changed as a result of only consumer intervention. This procedure continued until the last person in the network had read the last email about the story. Each person in the network answered questionnaires about the experience.

Method and Results for Email and Video Comments

Units of Analysis

Harris (2002) identifies 60 rhetorical devices in his book *Writing with Clarity and Style: A Guide to Rhetorical Devices for Contemporary Writers*. This book was used as the basis for categorizing statements made in the emails. Each email was examined in totality, as well as piecemeal, to determine what devices were employed, which typically yielded multiple devices per email. Initially, two raters categorized the emails with an initial inter-rater reliability of 75%. Disagreements were discussed and moderated by a third rater specializing in rhetorical devices.

Pretest

To ensure that the news story and advertisements were perceived as positive, they were pretested with a group of 50 undergraduates enrolled in a marketing class at a large public university in the Southeast U.S. Participants volunteered in return for extra credit in the course. The participants were simply asked to read each story or advertisement and rate the extent to which it was positive or negative on a five-point Likert scale (1=Very Negative; 5=Very Positive). The results suggest that each news story or advertisement was perceived as positive. The divorce story rating (mean = 1.94, $p < .001$) was significantly more negative than neutral (3). Due to potentially different perceptions of politically charged videos, any test of general negativity would be meaningless. Therefore, only the negative comments were analyzed from the online video.

Drawing from McQuarrie and Mick (1996), devices are categorized by their underlying rhetorical function. Such a breakdown is valuable, as it is the function behind the device that is expected to give messages their persuasive power rather than the device itself, which is a simple selection and order of words. The overarching delineation in the framework is between figurative (artful deviations) and nonfigurative text (plain). Figurative is then broken down into the rhetorical operations of schemes (excessive repetition) and tropes (irregularity). Next, the rhetorical operations are broken down into repetition, reversal, substitution, and destabilization.

In the current research, no instances of reversal (e.g., "master your rage or rage will be your master") were discovered. The other categories are the same as those of McQuarrie and Mick (1996), but contain devices specific to the present word-of-mouth research rather than that of the original magazine advertisement research. Definitions of each function are combined with those of Harris (2002) in order to remain consistent with the original McQuarrie and Mick (1996) framework and include rhetorical devices specific to NWOM communications not utilized by advertisers. Specifically, repetition refers to the reuse of either phrases or formats, and includes alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds), epistrophe (repetition of a word or phrase at the end of successive sentences), climax (building successive phrases in order of importance), pleonasm (being redundant), assonance (repetition of vowel sounds), and parallelism (a recurring syntactical similarity), enumeratio (detailing points to make them more forceful), and hypotaxis (subordinating one clause to another clause). The substitution category includes anacoluthon (finishing sentences with different grammatical structures than that of the beginning of the sentence), exclamation (a word or phrase used to lend emphasis, often interrupting a phrase), parataxis (writing successive independent clauses with or without conjunctions), and zeugma (a grammatically correct linking of two or more parts of speech by another part of speech). Destabilization creates an indeterminate state that must be reconciled in order to be comprehended. This function includes hyperbole (exaggerating conditions for emphasis) and synecdoche (a part stands for or is used in place of the whole). Definitions and examples of the rhetorical devices are shown in Table 1.

Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the most commonly used rhetorical devices by scheme (repetition or reversal) or trope (substitution or destabilization) classification in the context of text-based WOM so that the effects of each type could be examined in study 2. The most frequently used device classified as a repetition scheme was hypotaxis ($n_{comments} = 470$; $n_{email} = 22$), while the most frequently used tropes were exclamations ($n_{comments} = 732$; $n_{email} = 25$) and personification ($n_{comments} = 235$; $n_{email} = 15$) (see Figure 2).

TABLE 1
RHETORICAL DEVICE DEFINITIONS

Device	Definition	Example
Repetition		
Alliteration	Repetition of consonant sounds	*She must be a super saver*
Assonance	Repetition of vowel sounds	*Laugh out loud*
Climax	Building successive phrases in order of importance	*I've been there, done that, and got the t-shirt to prove it.*
Enumeratio	Detailing points to make them more forceful	*What a cowardly, spiteful, volatile, power-hungry, egotistical maniac of a man.*
Epistrophe	Repetition of a word or phrase at the end of successive sentences	*I've seen combat. If watching Die Hard 20-30 times is combat. Playing a lot of Halo must also be combat.*
Hypotaxis	Subordinating one clause to another	*One couple divorced and still had to live together because they couldn't financially afford to be apart.*
Parallelism	A recurring syntactical similarity	*This guy is so stupid and he is so mean.*
Pleonasm	Using redundant words	*I hate and loath him*
Substitution		
Anacoluthon	Finishing sentences with different grammatical structures than that of the beginning of the sentence	*Check this moron out, stupid comments huh?*
Exclamation	A word or phrase used to lend emphasis	*HEY! CHECK THIS OUT!!!*
Parataxis	Writing successive independent clauses with(out) conjunctions	*I saw this comment, laughed at how dumb it was, and then cried b/c of how sad it really is*
Zeugma	Grammatically linking two or more parts of speech via one other part	*This guy and his show are moronic*
Destabilization		
Epithet	An adjective that qualifies a subject	*A lopsided battle*
Hyperbole	Exaggerating conditions beyond reality	*You won't believe this*
Personification	Giving non-human objects human characteristics	*This economy is crazy*
Synecdoche	A part stands for or is used in place of a whole	*The divorce people*

Study 1 Discussion

Having identified the common rhetorical devices used by consumers in NWOM communications, the effectiveness of each type of device needs to be established to determine if NWOM is as powerful as currently thought. In Study 2, the effectiveness of the common devices collected from the content analysis in Study 1 is examined.

The results of Study 1 highlight rhetorical devices commonly used by consumers when committing NWOM behaviors. Traditional definitions of advertising effectiveness are composed of two characteristics, reach and power (Silverman, 2001). A strong message will be ineffective if a desirable number of target audience members are not reached. A weak message that reaches many people will be just as ineffective. Therefore, effective messages are those that possess both reach and power. This suggests that a necessary but insufficient condition for rhetorical device effectiveness is the frequency of use. For instance, a rarely employed device may be very effective with its audience, but rendered ineffective by its lack of frequency in the NWOM chain. To examine the effectiveness of different rhetorical functions, Study 2 analyzes the power behind the common rhetorical devices.

STUDY 2: EFFECTIVENESS OF RHETORICAL DEVICES

For NWOM to take hold and gain momentum, the rhetoric employed likely must ignite both attitude and intention. This study, therefore, examines the extent to which the functions of different rhetorical devices impact consumer attitudes toward a brand and their intention to pass along the word-of-mouth communications they receive. Study 2 examines the effectiveness of each of these functions with respect to a non-figurative control. Each of the functions is expected to contribute to message effectiveness in a different way. The goal of Study 2 is to locate the most effective function within the most common types of rhetorical devices. Such an analysis fills a gap by covering both message power and potential for reach.

Research Design

Participants

A sample of 124 consumers participated in the study as part of a paid panel (compensation was approximately $5 in exchange for a 10 minute survey) from an online survey administration website. The sample had slightly more females than males in each rhetorical condition (Exclamation = 62.9% female – Hypotaxis = 71.0%) and had a median age group of "40s" across all conditions. On a seven-point Likert scale, the sample committed a moderate amount of text-messaging (Control = 3.67 – Personification = 4.16), relatively little emailing (Exclamation = 2.11 – Control = 2.75), and a moderate amount of WOM (Exclamation = 3.66 – Personification = 4.52).

Procedures

To examine the effectiveness of the different rhetorical device functions, negative email manipulations were created from the rhetorical devices most common to each rhetorical function from Study 1 along with a non-figurative control email devoid of rhetorical devices. This resulted in four email conditions: exclamation, hypotaxis, personification, and a control. The manipulations for each rhetorical device are shown in Appendix A.

To test for differences in effectiveness among rhetorical functions, we designed a four-group between-subjects experiment. The most common rhetorical device for each rhetorical function (Repetition = Hypotaxis (n = 492); Substitution = Exclamation (n = 757); Destabilization = Personification (n = 250)) was selected for further analysis. Participants were randomly assigned to each rhetorical or control condition and read a negative WOM email statement about a new brand of cell phone and accompanying service and then answered questions about the email.

Pretest

A pretest of the manipulations was conducted with 16 professors of English located at universities across the US and maintaining a focus in rhetoric and composition or technical communication. In an online survey, participants were first given explanations of the three types of rhetorical functions drawn from Study 1 along with a fourth function we termed "deflecting," which included dirimens-copulatio (mentioning a balancing or opposing fact) and antonagoge (placing a good point next to a fault). This extra term was used as a comprehension check, as it was not included in any of the manipulated email statements. Participants were then shown each email and asked to rate the degree to which each email represented the implanted functions on a seven-point semantic differential scale (1 = not at all representative; 7 = very representative). The order of emails was randomized to reduce potential order effects. The comprehension check yielded no higher than a response of two for the representativeness of "deflecting" in any of the emails. Thus, the pretest supports the adequacy of the rhetorical manipulations.

Scales

All behavioral constructs were measured on seven-point Likert scales (1 = Very Unlikely; 7 = Very Likely). Negative word-of-mouth intentions were measured by two items – "Say negative things to others about Lodi" and "Say negative things to others about the xtreme." Search intentions were measured by three items – "Go to lodixtreme.com," "Look for more information about Lodi," and "Look for more information about the xtreme." Purchase intentions were measured by four items – "Consider buying from Lodi," "Consider buying an xtreme," "Buy from Lodi," and "Buy an xtreme."

Results

To determine the most effective and least effective rhetorical functions, a MANOVA was run first on NWOM, search, and purchase intentions with device type as the independent variable. The MANOVA was significant (λ = .77, $F(9, 299.50)$ = 3.82, $p < .001$), indicating the presence of at least one significant univariate effect. Univarite tests showed that NWOM ($F(3, 124)$ = 5.99, $p < .001$) offered significant differences, while search ($F(3, 124)$ = .437, $p > .72$) and purchase ($F(3, 124)$ = .643, $p > .58$) intentions failed to exhibit significance differences. To assess the order of effectiveness among the devices individual t-tests were conducted on NWOM. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
EFFECTIVENESS RESULTS

Rhetorical Device	Negative Word-of-Mouth Intentions		Search* Intentions	Purchase* Intentions
Exclamation	4.07	abc	3.49	2.57
(n=31)	(1.71)		(2.10)	(1.79)
CONTROL	2.65	a	3.05	2.42
(n=31)	(1.71)		(1.77)	(1.51)
Personification	2.27	b	2.95	2.22
(n=31)	(1.32)		(1.96)	(1.27)
Hypotaxis	2.00	c	2.83	2.08
(n=31)	(1.13)		(1.65)	(1.29)

Difference is significant at $p < .05$ = a
Difference is significant at $p < .01$ = b
Difference is significant at $p < .001$ = c
*No significant differences in the means.

The results suggest an order of effectiveness for intent to transmit further NWOM. Specifically, exclamation is significantly more effective than all other forms of figurative or non-figurative device. This suggests that substitution is perhaps the most effective means of convincing consumers to pass along word-of-mouth. In addition, both personification and hypotaxis are not significantly different than the non-figurative control and actually exhibit lower mean intentions to pass along the message. This suggests that repetition and destabilization are no more effective than non-figurative language. Hence, order of complexity and gradient of deviation do not necessarily combine to enhance message effectiveness. Rather, it seems that a high gradient of deviation with low complexity is perhaps optimal. Such a finding is consistent with the literature on self-esteem, which suggests that most people enjoy moderate challenges (e.g., decoding and encoding language substitutions) (cf. Payne, Youngcourt, and Beaubien, 2007). Too little challenge is just as likely to fail as too much challenge.

Study 2 Discussion

Study 2 highlights the importance of rhetorical device and function in generating intentions to retransmit negative WOM messages. Specifically, the findings indicate that consumers are more likely to retransmit negative messages when they contain a substitution function device such as exclamation. Having identified rhetorical devices tied to effective NWOM, we now turn our attention to reducing its spread and impact. Study 3 examines the impact of inoculation efforts on effective and ineffective rhetorical devices to determine if inoculation attempts are likely to diminish NWOM retransmission or likely to exacerbates such problems.

STUDY 3: INOCULATION EFFECTS

Research Design
Participants

A sample of 120 students participated in an online experiment in exchange for extra credit in a marketing class at a large Southwestern U.S. university. Each condition included approximately the same percentage of females (40.0-56.7%) with median age groups ranging from 20s-30s. Participants in each group committed relatively high amounts of text-based communication through texting (means = 6.07-6.70) and emailing (means = 6.57-6.75). In addition, use of social media (means = 4.83-5.67) and committing of word-of-mouth (means = 5.53-6.27) were also high. Frequency was measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = never; 7 = very frequently). Participants were randomly assigned to study conditions by random numbers. As a result, demographics of participants for each condition were well matched on gender, age, and behaviors.

Procedures

Study 3 utilizes a 2 (exclamation v. hypotaxis) x 2 (inoculated v. not inoculated) full factorial between-subjects design to test Hypotheses 3a-3c regarding the effectiveness and potential for perpetuation of NWOM given the presence or absence of an inoculation. The inoculation and control conditions via social media are shown in Appendix B. Inoculation was manipulated by altering the headline story in the middle of the screen. Those in the inoculation condition viewed a headline about trouble with a fictitious company's new phone. Those in the control condition saw the real headline of the day pertaining to a devastating earthquake in Haiti. A negative headline was used to avoid potential confounds due to positive, neutral, or negative stories. A test of 46 undergraduates revealed that both headlines were perceived as negative and that the control headline was not significantly more negative than the inoculation headline ($p > .15$). Each was asked to imagine that this was the homepage of a social media site they recently joined and to read the page as though it was their homepage. A check of familiarity indicated that none of the respondents maintained an account with this specific social media outlet.

Following a series of questions on social media usage related to a different study, participants were asked to imagine that sometime later they received one of the two NWOM messages. Half of the

participants then viewed a NWOM message in hypotaxis form, while the remaining participants saw a NWOM message in exclamation form. After viewing the NWOM messages, participants responded to a questionnaire about intentions to commit NWOM, search, and purchase, as well as demographic information.

Results

A MANOVA was first conducted to account for any potential familywise error. The results of the MANOVA were significant for the main effect of device type ($\lambda = .92$, $p < .02$), the main effect of inoculation condition ($\lambda = .90$, $p < .007$), and the interaction between device type and inoculation condition ($\lambda = .94$, $p < .09$), indicating that significant differences existed at the univariate level of analysis. The univariate results are shown in Figures 1-3. A main effect of device type is shown for NWOM ($F(1,120) = 3.79$, $p < .06$), search ($F(1,120) = 10.41$, $p < .002$), and purchase ($F(1,120) = 4.10$, $p < .05$) intentions. A main effect for inoculation condition is also shown for NWOM ($F(1,120) = 12.44$, $p < .001$), search ($F(1,120) = 6.95$, $p < .01$), and purchase ($F(1,120) = 5.56$, $p < .02$) intentions. Consistent with H3, there is a significant interactive effect of device type and inoculation condition on NWOM ($F(1,120) = 3.11$, $p < .08$), search ($F(1,120) = 6.54$, $p < .02$), and purchase ($F(1,120) = 5.05$, $p < .03$) intentions.

FIGURE 1
NWOM INTENTIONS CONTROL VERSUS INOCULATION
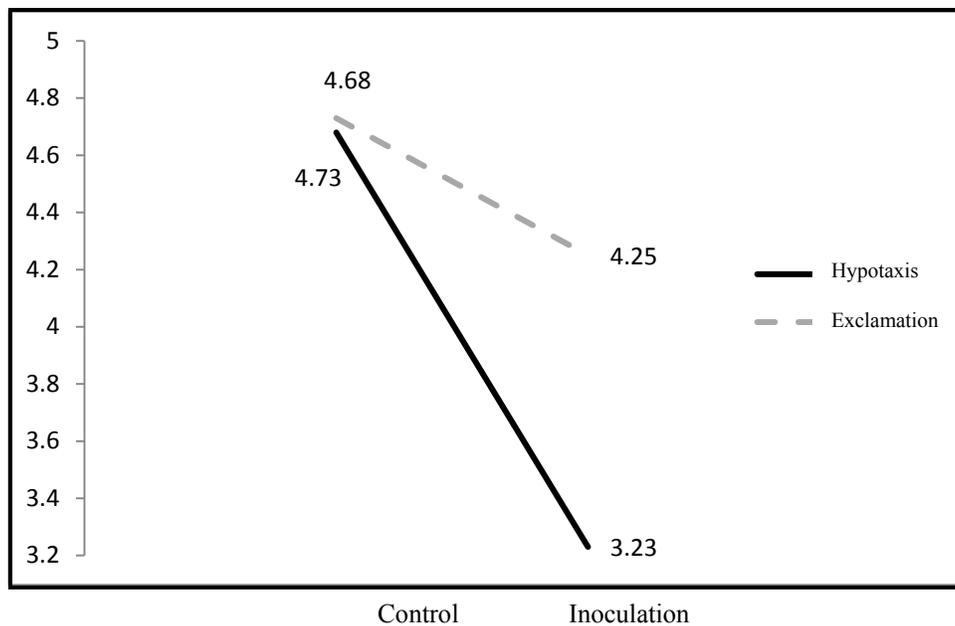
FIGURE 2
SEARCH INTENTIONS CONTROL VERSUS INOCULATION
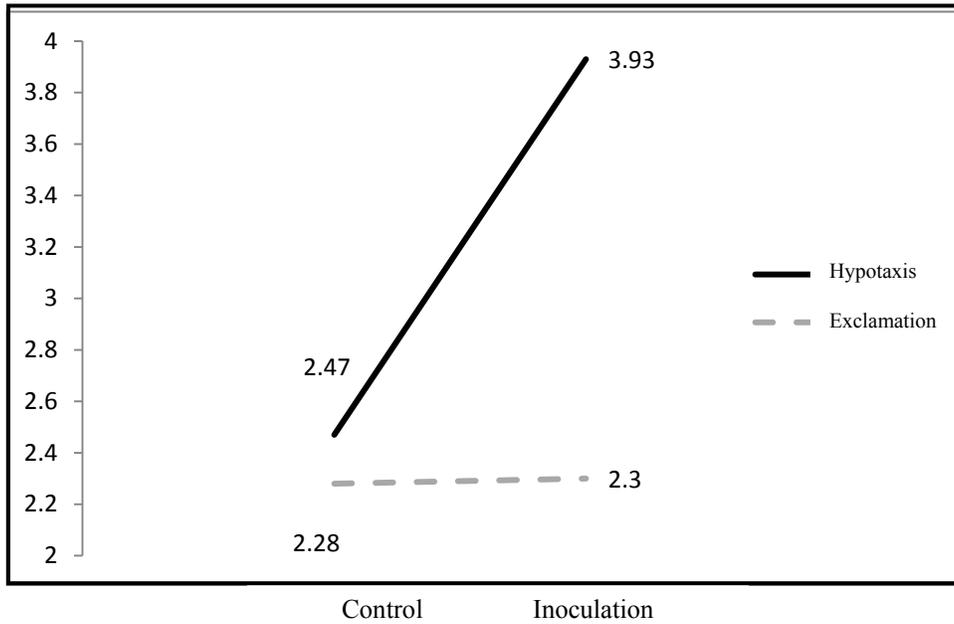
FIGURE 3
PURCHASE INTENTIONS CONTROL VERSUS INOCULATION
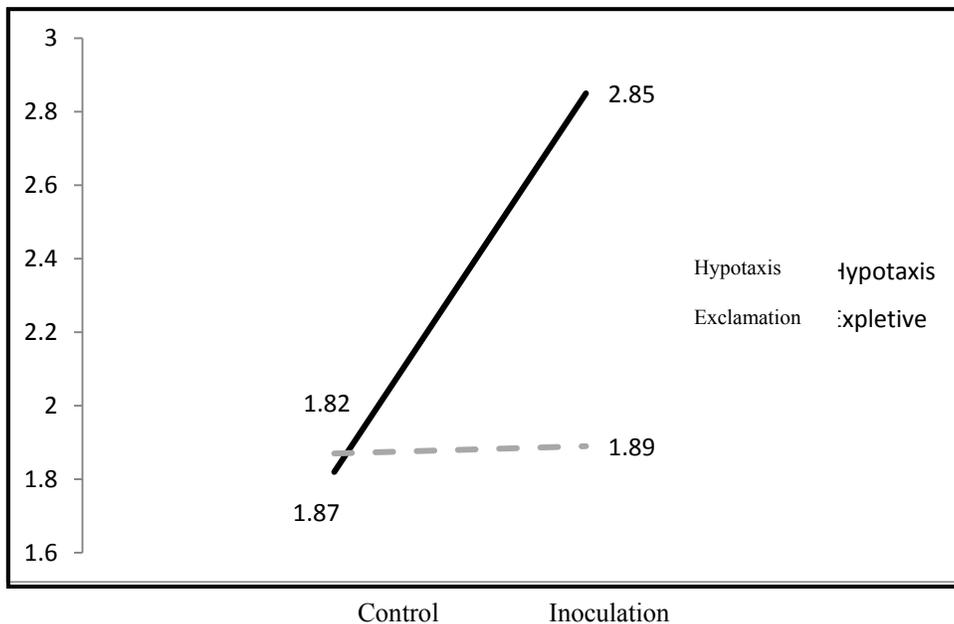
Study 3 Discussion

Study 3 demonstrates that inoculation is capable of limiting some of the ill effects of NWOM given the use of repetitious rather than substitutive rhetorical devices. This suggests that the form of the NWOM message is not only important in creating and spreading NWOM (Study 2 findings), but also that it is

important in limiting it. Specifically, inoculation is shown to reduce the likelihood of negative behaviors (i.e., intent to commit NWOM) and increases the likelihood of positive behaviors (i.e., search and purchase intentions) when NWOM is constructed as a scheme rather than as a trope.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The findings from these three studies highlight the effectiveness of different types of rhetorical devices in the spread of NWOM messages and the ability to inoculate consumers against them. The results suggest that repetition devices such as hypotaxis are generally less effective and easier to inoculate against than are substitution devices such as exclamations. Across the second two studies, the results are relatively consistent among behavioral intentions, suggesting not only intent to retransmit NWOM, but also to commit other detrimental behaviors when not inoculated. Taken in aggregate, the results suggest converging evidence across multiple methods regarding the importance of rhetoric in the effectiveness and elimination of NWOM communications.

A critical and perhaps paradoxical finding is the ability of negative information to inoculate consumers against future reception of NWOM. Specifically, this finding suggests that firms may be well advised to propagate weak negative information in the marketplace prior to the introduction of strong and widespread negative information. For example, rather than simply coming clean about quality control problems with the Prius braking system after the fact, Toyota might have preempted the mainstream media and social media barrage that ensued by leaking minor concerns about quality control. Such actions offer firms the chance to appear proactive and trustworthy rather than reactive and concealing in addition to their inoculation benefits.

Many firms also employ professional bloggers and other Internet and social media focused personnel to respond to text-based NWOM campaigns by interacting with consumers online. If misapplied, this proactive strategy may result in only limited gains or even further negative outcomes if personnel do not employ effective rhetorical devices in their attempts to inoculate consumers. As a result, it behooves companies to understand what types of rhetorical devices to use when interacting with consumers online in addition to those employed by consumers.

Theoretically, this research makes two important contributions to the study of consumer behavior. First, the research brings memetic theory to bear on the effectiveness of NWOM communications. Despite its noted importance in other areas of social science, memetic theory is relatively under studied in the marketing literature. The literature and findings suggest how a biological explanation accurately reflects the nature of NWOM retransmission. As such, the results suggest the importance of considering memetic theory in future NWOM research. Second, this research builds on the pioneering work of McQuarrie and Mick (1996) by extending rhetorical theory from messages typically initiated by firms with intentions of positive outcomes (i.e., advertising messages) to consumer-adapted messages that often contain malicious intentions. The results suggest that marketers can limit negative retransmissions to a certain extent through inoculation attempts.

The research results are limited to the extent that an exhaustive set of rhetorical devices was not assessed in Study 2 and Study 3 and, as in the original McQuarrie and Mick (1996) work, the rhetorical devices emphasized resulted from a particular sample within a single culture. Future research might reinvestigate the findings here with samples from other nations. For example, cultures may differ on the extent to which they employ certain rhetorical devices, how often they commit NWOM behaviors, and how easily information inoculates them against future NWOM. There may also be any other number of modifiers that impact the effectiveness of rhetorical devices. Future research should explore other such modifiers to determine which considerations are relevant to the spread of NWOM.

Other differences between the original McQuarrie and Mick (1996) work and this research are also noteworthy. Specifically, a different set of rhetorical devices is identified in this research for consumer retransmission of text-based NWOM than for magazine advertisements. Future research should continue to examine other sources of NWOM (e.g., press releases, comparative advertising, and face-to-face) to

determine not only what devices are employed in different situations, but also which are most effective at motivating undesirable behaviors.

In addition, NWOM and advertisements may employ multiple types of rhetorical devices simultaneously. As a result, it may be insightful to gauge interactive effects when combining several forms of devices in the same message as in the case of Mothersbaugh et al. (2002). Future research might therefore examine the extent to which multiple rhetorical devices create more or less effective message retransmission in NWOM communications and whether or not multiple devices generate greater levels of mutation owing to greater diversity in message structures (e.g., Areni, 2002).

A final limitation concerns the negative nature of the WOM investigated in this research. Positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) is also generated by consumers and is sought by marketers to enhance primary marketing efforts at a low cost (Silverman 2001). As a result, similar studies should be undertaken to determine the effectiveness of positive retransmission. Further, as companies would likely benefit from increased PWOM spread, the impacts of transmission detractors such as cognitive load should also be analyzed.

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APPENDIX A:
RHETORICAL DEVICE MANIPULATIONS

Exclamation
Hey! Check out this (TERRIBLE!) new phone by Lodi. It has so few capabilities and it comes with bad service too. Check out the website about it at thelodixtremestinks.com. Enjoy!

Control
I thought that you would enjoy this site about the new phone by Lodi. It is called the xtreme. It shows all of its poor features. It talks about the bad service. See for yourself at thelodixtremestinks.com.

Hypotaxis
Lodi recently came out with a new phone because their market share was slipping. It seems like another bad idea, as it does not have many features. Also, the service looks bad. So you should check out thelodixtremestinks.com.

Personification
The new phone by Lodi is so stupid. It suffers from a lack of service too. Check out this crazy website about it and let me know what you think. thelodixtremestinks.com.

APPENDIX B:
INOCULATION AND CONTROL CONDITIONS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

Inoculation Condition:

Control Condition: