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Publication date

2024

Document Version

Author accepted manuscript (AAM)

Published in

Proceedings Book AIRSI2024 The Metaverse Conference goes offline Zaragoza University, Spain 10 - 12 June 2024

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Christ-Brendemühl, S., Könsgen, R., Schaarschmidt, M., Price, M., & Russell, M. (2024). Coping with immersive negative employer ratings: An employee perspective. In *Proceedings Book AIRSI2024 The Metaverse Conference goes offline Zaragoza University, Spain 10 - 12 June 2024* (pp. 146-149). Article 35.



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Coping with immersive negative employer ratings: An employee perspective

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Type of manuscript: Extended abstract

Keywords: Employee rating platforms; Negative word-of-mouth; Moral disengagement

Introduction

Online reputation systems (ORS) are large-scaled Internet platforms that collect, distribute, and aggregate feedback and word-of mouth (WOM) about products, services or companies as such (Dellarocas 2003). Although there is a wide range of marketing and business research on ORS, the vast majority of extant studies focusses on consumer reviews of products and services and associated electronic WOM (e.g., Pavlou and Dimoka 2006; Gauri et al. 2008). Largely neglected, however, are reviews by and for employees (Schaarschmidt et al., 2021; Yoganathan et al., 2021). Being a subcategory of ORS, employee rating platforms enable current or former employees to evaluate their employer, giving worker WOM a digital room (Satzger and Vogel, 2023). The basic idea of such a rating platform is that job seekers can acquire firsthand knowledge on the organization (Dabirian et al. 2016). However, WOM on employer rating platforms also reaches the company's current employees. This fact, which is widely neglected by extant research, appears to be crucial, as these reviews often offer opinions and experiences that are withheld in daily work life, and could severely influence employees' perceptions of their job, their coworkers and the entire organization. Accordingly, review-created WOM on employer rating sites could have a crucial influence on organizations that goes beyond the attraction (or repulsion) of potential employees. To address this research gap, we aim to explore how employees cope with fear of interpersonal conflicts at work as a consequence of negative employee reviews. We further assume that employees' coping strategies have effects on their turnover intentions and off-job recovery. From a theoretical strand, this study uses Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping to unravel how employees cope with negative WOM-induced stress caused by other employees.

Background

Stress is defined as "a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her

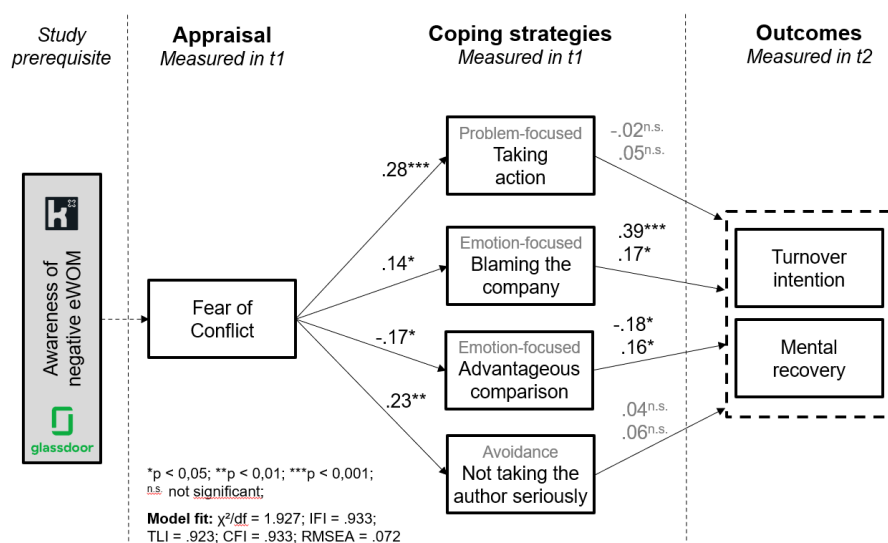
well-being” (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, p. 19). In previous literature, stress has mainly been investigated concerning the relationship between individuals’ perceived level of stress and related outcomes, such as interpersonal conflict and job satisfaction (Jena 2015). In this study, we focus on interpersonal conflict as a form of stress (primary appraisal) that results from negative WOM by other employees. Problem-based and emotion-based coping are typical strategies to cope with review-induced stress.

A second theoretical stream with links to this research is moral disengagement theory. Moral disengagement theory (MDT) is grounded in social cognitive theory and provides a useful theoretical lens to understand why people are able to engage in socially inappropriate behavior while nevertheless perceiving their behavior as ethical (Bandura 1989). Examples of bad or immoral behavior include undermining colleagues, organizational corruption, criminal computer behavior, and social loafing. According to MDT, individuals curb a sense of dissonance and reconcile their unethical behavior by invoking a series of beliefs that vindicate their immoral behavior. In our study, we focus on “attribution of blame” (i.e. blaming the company) and “advantageous comparison” (i.e. in other companies it is even worse) as forms of moral disengagement and also include problem-based or -focused coping as well as avoidance. Both theory streams help in developing a model that explains how negative WOM-induced stress leads to employees’ turnover intentions and off-job (mental) recovery. Specifically, we posit that awareness of negative online reviews induces fear of interpersonal conflict at work, which in turn affect problem-based, emotion-based, and avoidance coping (see Figure 1)

Methodology

To test the set of hypotheses, we conducted a time-lagged predictive study with 188 employed respondents (39.9% female, M=34.9, SD=10.6) recruited via the crowdsourcing platform Clickworker. As a requirement, respondents needed to have read at least one negative review about their employer in the last six month. (The period of six month had emerged from a pretest with N=74 software developers.). We used established scales and Likert-Scales throughout the survey (excluding demographics and controls). We measured all variables of interest in t1 and received 348 responses. About one week later, all participants were invited to share their evaluations of turnover and mental recovery again, which led to the sample of 188 respondents.

Figure 1. Conceptual model



Results and Discussion

A CFA revealed that the data is appropriate for further investigations (e.g., convergent and discriminant validity is given). The results (based on AMOS with maximum-likelihood estimator, Figure 1) indicate that fear of interpersonal conflict relates to problem-based coping ($\beta = .28, p < .001$), forms of emotion-based coping (i.e. moral disengagement; $\beta = .14, p < .05$ for “blaming the company”, and $\beta = -.17, p < .05$ for advantageous comparison), and avoidance ($\beta = .23, p < .01$). However, surprisingly, problem-based coping has no effect on turnover intentions and off-job recovery. Only emotion-focused coping strategies relate significantly with the outcomes. For example, advantageous comparison has a negative effect with turnover intention ($\beta = -.18, p < .05$) and a positive effect on off-job-recovery ($\beta = .16, p < .05$) while blaming the company has positive effects on both turnover intention ($\beta = .39, p < .001$) and mental recovery ($\beta = .17, p < .05$).

Contribution

To the best of our knowledge, this study is among the first that studied the effect of negative employee WOM on other employees instead of customers or job seekers. We are confident that the results have the potential to shed new light on the consequences of immersive electronic WOM on employees.

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