

(Why) Does Comment Presentation Order Matter for the Effects of User Comments?

Assessing the Role of the Availability Heuristic and the Bandwagon Heuristic

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Abstract

Research has shown that user comments influence peoples' perceptions, with recent evidence suggesting that *comment presentation order* (e.g., whether comments are presented prior to/after the commented item) may alter the strength of comments' effects. Considering the implications of this finding for content producers, the informed design of experiments, and the interpretation of prior studies, this study aimed (1) to replicate a recent study on comment presentation order (Kümpel & Unkel, 2020), and (2) to identify why (negative) comments presented after an article seem to have stronger effects on users' perceptions. A pre-registered experiment with 325 participants provided inconclusive evidence of the predicted presentation order effect and did not allow for further investigations of the underlying reasons. Overall, the findings highlight the ongoing need for studying the conditions under which effects of user comments occur.

Keywords: online news, user comments, social media, journalistic quality, presentation order, elaboration, bandwagon perceptions

(Why) Does Comment Presentation Order Matter for the Effects of User Comments?**Assessing the Role of the Availability Heuristic and the Bandwagon Heuristic**

User comments—defined here as public statements about (news) content in online media—have repeatedly been shown to affect peoples’ judgments and perceptions (for an overview see Ksiazek & Springer, 2018). Among other outcomes, experimental research has identified effects of user comments on third-person perceptions (e.g., Chen & Ng, 2016), perceptions of public opinion (e.g., Zerback & Fawzi, 2017), or journalistic quality (e.g., Prochazka et al., 2018). However, considering recent changes in information environments—provoked by news providers moving their comment sections to social network sites (SNS)—researchers have started to investigate whether the associated shift in *comment presentation order* might influence the effects of user comments (Kümpel & Unkel, 2020). While news websites have traditionally placed comments below the article, suggesting that the article is read beforehand, SNS invite users to first turn to the comments—already available in the SNS feed together with a short teaser of the article—and then read the linked full story afterwards. Investigating whether this changes the effects of user comments, a recent study found that presentation order seems to matter; but only for negative user comments (Kümpel & Unkel, 2020). Specifically, it was found that comments criticizing the quality of a journalistic article that were presented *after* the article had a stronger effect on users’ perceptions of journalistic quality than those presented beforehand.

Considering the implications of this finding for news providers, the informed design of user comment experiments, and the interpretation of prior studies on the effects of user

comments¹, we aim to (1) replicate this effect of comment presentation order, and (2) identify why (negative) comments presented after an article seem to have stronger effects on users' perceptions of journalistic quality. Building on theoretical assumptions about online users' reliance on different heuristics, we focus on two related, but distinct information processing strategies that might be responsible for the observed effects: the role of the *availability heuristic* (i.e., comments have an effect because they are readily available and easy to be recalled) and the role of the *bandwagon heuristic* (i.e., comments have an effect because users believe they reflect the majority's opinion and thus jump on the proverbial bandwagon). Finding stronger evidence for the bandwagon heuristic would suggest that user comments are actually acting as exemplars (i.e., perceived to represent the opinion of larger groups, see Peter et al., 2014; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017) and that the effects of comments are social in nature. However, finding stronger evidence for the availability heuristic would suggest that (opinions in) comments are simply easier to recall and used for judgments because they are 'fresh' and accessible.

The Influence of Comment Presentation Order

Why should (negative) user comments matter more when they are read *after* an article? User comments in general have been conceptualized as cues that hold the potential to trigger different cognitive heuristics (e.g., Bellur & Sundar, 2014; Weber et al., 2019). Prior research in the domain of journalistic quality perceptions has shown that users have a pronounced tendency to rely on cues in the form of user comments when asked to judge the quality of news articles.

¹ Looking at the 13 user comment experiments discussed in Kümpel & Unkel's (2020) paper—Chen & Ng, 2016; Dohle, 2018; Kümpel & Springer, 2016; Lee & Jang, 2010; Lee, Kim, & Cho, 2017; Peter et al., 2014; Prochazka et al., 2018; von Sikorski, 2016; Waddell, 2018; Waddell & Sundar, 2017; Weber et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2015; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017—, nine opted for a simultaneous presentation of main stimulus and comments, with comments usually being placed *below* the main stimulus (e.g., a news article). Two studies presented the user comments first and the main stimulus second, while another two studies presented the main stimulus first and the user comments second. If comment presentation order indeed has a consistent influence, this has implications for the interpretation of these studies.

This is due to the fact that (1) comments are usually “more salient than the core qualities of the journalistic content” (Weber et al., 2019, p. 26) and that (2) most readers are unlikely to be particularly concerned with making quality judgments (ibid., see also Kümpel & Unkel, 2020). Although these general assumptions should be valid regardless of presentation order, we have to assume that they are stronger when comments are read after the article. Rather than taking into account all relevant information, people might rely only on the latest piece of information, because it is the easiest to bring to mind—particularly when exhibiting low levels of message-relevant elaboration (Haugtvedt & Wegener, 1994; Petty et al., 2001).

Considering our first goal of conceptually replicating the effect of comment presentation order observed by Kümpel & Unkel (2020), we start by proposing that negative user comments that are read after a journalistic article influence users’ quality perceptions of the respective article more strongly than comments that are read prior to the article. We purposefully exclude positive user comments from this study as previous investigations (ibid., see also Waddell, 2018; Waddell & Sundar, 2017; Winter et al., 2015) consistently found that “positive comments fail to have a comparable effect” (Waddell, 2018, p. 3070) on attitudes or perceptions. Thus, we assume:

H1: Negative user comments presented after a news article lead to lower journalistic quality perceptions than negative user comments presented before a news article.

The Availability Heuristic

The first mechanism we aim to test relates to the assumption that comments are simply used for (quality) evaluations, because they happen to be *available*. The availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) builds on the notion that if an information can readily be recalled, it must be (more) important and should thus be used for judgments. Although the availability

heuristic originally refers to judgments about frequency, it is also regularly referenced when it comes to the effects of user comments on perceptions or evaluations in general (e.g., Neubaum & Krämer, 2017; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017). Like all heuristics, the availability heuristic should reduce cognitive load and thus lead people to come to their judgments more quickly. However, the main aspect we are interested in is not whether the availability or the bandwagon heuristic is ‘true,’ but rather in the *relative* importance of both mental shortcuts. Should we find more evidence for the availability heuristic, previously observed effects of user comments might at least partly be a methodological artifact instead of a genuine social effect that stems from “the thoughts, feelings, communication, or behavior of one or more other people” (Kim & Hollingshead, 2015, p. 165). To test the ‘pure’ availability heuristic, we propose:

H2: As compared to negative user comments placed before an article, negative user comments presented after a news article will lead to a decrease in users’ elaboration, which will then lead to a decrease in quality perceptions.

The Bandwagon Heuristic

The second mechanism we aim to test relates to the assumption that comments set off the so-called bandwagon heuristic (Sundar, 2008)—the rule of thumb that if others think about a piece of information in a certain way, then I should think the same (*ibid.*, see also von Sikorski, 2016; Waddell, 2018). But why should a handful of user comments be perceived as representing the opinion of a larger group? Exemplification theory (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000) suggests that—due to a “deep-rooted inclination to generalize observed phenomena” (p. 11)—user comments can act as exemplars (i.e., illustrative individual cases) and thus as cues to public opinion (see also Lee & Jang, 2010; Peter et al., 2014; Zerback & Fawzi, 2017). If comments indeed act as cues to public opinion, they should trigger the bandwagon heuristic, consequently

reduce cognitive load and lead people to come to judgments more quickly. Considering the underlying assumption of a genuine *social* influence, peoples' judgments of the commented news article (in our case: quality perceptions) should then mirror the negative opinion expressed in the user comments. More formally, we propose:

H3: As compared to negative user comments placed before an article, negative user comments presented after a news article will lead to an increase in bandwagon perceptions, which will then lead to a decrease in users' elaboration, ultimately leading to a decrease in quality perceptions.

Method

To test the hypothesized effects (see Figure 1), an experiment with German online users was conducted between February 17 and March 3, 2021. Participants were randomly distributed to one of two groups (negative comments presented before the article *vs.* negative comments presented after the article). Participants were first asked to read a news article, with a Facebook teaser of said article containing two negative user comments displayed either *before* or *after* the article. We then assessed participants' journalistic quality perceptions, their bandwagon perceptions, and their degree of elaboration while providing the quality perceptions.

All data, analysis scripts, and materials are available in an OSF repository: <http://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/VFRMB>. The hypotheses and the data analysis plan were preregistered following a template for experiments (van 't Veer & Giner-Sorolla, 2016) on February 15, 2021: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/HKZPV>.

Participants

Participants were recruited from a pool of about 70,000 German residents who signed up for the non-commercial online access panel *SoSci Panel* (Leiner, 2016). An accuracy in

parameter estimation (AIPE; Maxwell et al., 2008) simulation approach was used to determine a minimum sample size of 300 participants to reliably estimate effects within an expected credibility interval width of 0.5 (see the preregistration form for details). The final sample consists of 325 participants (self-identified gender: 56% female, 43% male, 1% non-binary; age: $M = 44.5$, $SD = 15.9$) after applying all exclusion criteria (insufficient stimulus engagement, failed treatment check, missing data, and predefined outliers; see preregistration form for details). As an incentive for participation, three 25€ vouchers for an online bookstore were raffled among all participants who completed the study.

Stimuli

Just like in the to-be-replicated original study (Kümpel & Unkel, 2020), participants were asked to read and evaluate an article that was allegedly published by the German regional news website *Stuttgarter-Zeitung.de*. The article was about 420 words long and focused on the Supply Chain Act ('Lieferkettengesetz'), a legislation obliging German businesses to implement due diligence in their supply chains in regard to ethical and ecological aspects.

In the two experimental groups, a Facebook teaser for the article containing two negative comments was displayed either before or after the article on a separate questionnaire page. These comments—identical in wording to those of the original study—criticize the article's writing style, quality of research, and impartiality, thus referring to key aspects of journalistic quality (see Urban & Schweiger, 2014). The Facebook teaser also features the article's headline, lead, and teaser image. Apart from the comments, no further social cues (i.e., reactions) were present.

Measures

Journalistic Quality Perceptions

Participants were asked to rate the journalistic quality of the news article on a 7-item scale ranging from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 7 (*does fully apply*). The items focused on various aspects of journalistic quality (e.g., impartiality, comprehensiveness, comprehensibility) and were adopted from Jungnickel (2011). Participants' overall journalistic quality perceptions were then calculated with a mean index of all seven items, with higher values indicating a higher perceived journalistic quality ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.05$, $\omega = .82$).

Degree of Elaboration

Participants' degree of elaboration on the journalistic quality perception scale was measured as their response latency for said scale (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Weber et al., 2019). Response latencies on two other 7-item scales—need for cognition (Müller et al., 2016; surveyed before the stimulus) and need for consistency (von Collani & Blank, 2013; surveyed after the stimulus; negative items inversed)—served as the baseline. Response latencies (in ms) were measured for each of the three scales' remaining six items after participants had responded to one item of the respective scale. All latencies were then subjected to a negative reciprocal transformation (Fazio, 1990). The calculated mean baseline response latency was subtracted from each journalistic quality perception item latency, and the results were then averaged. Larger values thus indicate higher response latency and, consequently, a higher degree of elaboration ($M = -0.07$, $SD = 0.33$).

Bandwagon Perceptions

Building on previous research (Waddell & Bailey, 2017; Waddell & Sundar, 2017; Xu, 2013), we developed a 5-item scale ranging from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 7 (*very likely*) to measure

bandwagon perceptions. Participants were asked how likely it is that other people “will not like the article,” “will have a negative opinion about the article,” “mistrust the article,” “consider the article to be of inferior quality,” and “would advise their friends to not read the article.”

Participants’ overall bandwagon perceptions were then calculated with a mean index, with higher values indicating a higher bandwagon perception ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.35$, $\omega = .91$).

Results

All hypotheses were tested with a Bayesian serial mediation model as specified in Figure 1, with comment presentation order as the independent variable, journalistic quality perceptions as the dependent variable, bandwagon perceptions ($M1$) and degree of elaboration ($M2$) as serial mediators, and uninformative priors using the R package *brms* (Bürkner, 2017). Journalistic quality perceptions, bandwagon perceptions, and degree of elaboration were standardized for the model to allow for the interpretation of standardized coefficients. All coefficient estimates are displayed in Table 1.

Both the direct effect of comment presentation order on journalistic quality perceptions (c' : $Mdn = -0.15$; 89% CI [-0.31; 0.01]; $pd = .93$) and the total effect (c : $Mdn = -0.14$; 89% CI [-0.32; 0.03]; $pd = .91$) provided uncertain evidence for the existence of the presentation order effect. Likewise, both hypothesized indirect effects of comment presentation order on journalistic quality perceptions through degree of elaboration (a_2b_2 : $Mdn = 0.00$; 89% CI [-0.01; 0.02]; $pd = .58$) and through bandwagon perceptions and degree of elaboration ($a_1d_2b_2$: $Mdn = 0.00$; 89% CI [0.00; 0.00]; $pd = .50$) were not supported by the model. Thus, $H1$, $H2$, and $H3$ had to be rejected. Notably, we observed a very likely existing effect of bandwagon perceptions on journalistic quality perceptions (b_1 : $Mdn = -0.33$; 89% CI [-0.41; -0.24]; $pd > .99$), with quality perceptions being lower the higher the bandwagon perceptions.

Discussion

This study set out to replicate a recently observed effect of negative user comments presented after a news article having a stronger effect on users' perceptions of said article than user comments presented beforehand (original study: Kümpel & Unkel, 2020). This replication effort seemed necessary as the original pre-registered study predicted the opposite (i.e., negative comments would have stronger effects when presented beforehand). Moreover, our aim with this study was to identify possible reasons for the existence of the effect. Specifically, we focused on the role of two heuristics: the *availability heuristic* (i.e., comments have an effect because they are readily available and easy to be recalled) and the *bandwagon heuristic* (i.e., comments have an effect because users believe they reflect the majority's opinion and thus jump on the proverbial bandwagon).

Our pre-registered online experiment with 325 participants provided inconclusive evidence of the predicted presentation order effect. While the probability of the direction of the effect being negative (as hypothesized in H1) is 93%, this is still below the threshold set for a successful replication. Even if the effect exists, it is likely to be rather small and negligible with the 89% credibility interval spanning from -0.32 (which is approximately the strength of the effect found in the original study) to 0.03 (which would suggest that the effect is practically equivalent to zero). Assuming that the presentation order effect is indeed very small or even absent, we might conclude that (1) prior user comment experiments can be interpreted regardless of the order in which the stimulus was presented, and (2) that news providers do not have to feel overly apprehensive about the information environment in which comments on their work appear. Accordingly, we found no support for H2 and H3, that is, comment presentation order did neither affect participants' degree of elaboration nor their bandwagon perceptions (and,

consequently, had no indirect effects on journalistic quality perceptions). However, our model shows a substantial, non-hypothesized association between users' bandwagon perceptions and their journalistic quality perceptions, which occurred regardless of comment presentation order. Notably, higher bandwagon perceptions did *not* lead to a decrease in people's elaboration (and then to reduced quality perceptions)—a route that we would have expected to occur if a heuristic was at play (see our reasoning for H3). From our point of view, two explanations could account for this finding: First, the direction of effects might be different from what one might expect. Instead of others' opinions influencing one's own perceptions (a bandwagon effect), people's own perception might rub off on how they think others evaluate the article (i.e., the more negative people's own perceptions, the more they assume that others evaluate the article negatively as well). This would suggest the presence of a "false consensus effect" (Ross et al., 1977) according to which people tend to attribute their own sentiments to others. However, due to our cross-sectional design and the non-randomization of bandwagon perceptions—similar to previous studies (Waddell, 2018; Waddell & Sundar, 2017)—we can only speculate about the actual direction of effects. Second, the finding could also mean that response latencies, albeit being extensively used in prior research on heuristic information processing (for an overview see Bellur & Sundar, 2014), might not be the best proxy to determine users' degree of elaboration and/or need to be triangulated with other measures focusing on people's ease of recalling judgment-relevant information.

Overall, our results highlight the continuing need for studying the conditions under which effects of user comments occur, the necessity of replicating prior findings, and the commitment to monitor how changing information environments might (not) alter previously observed effects of user comments.

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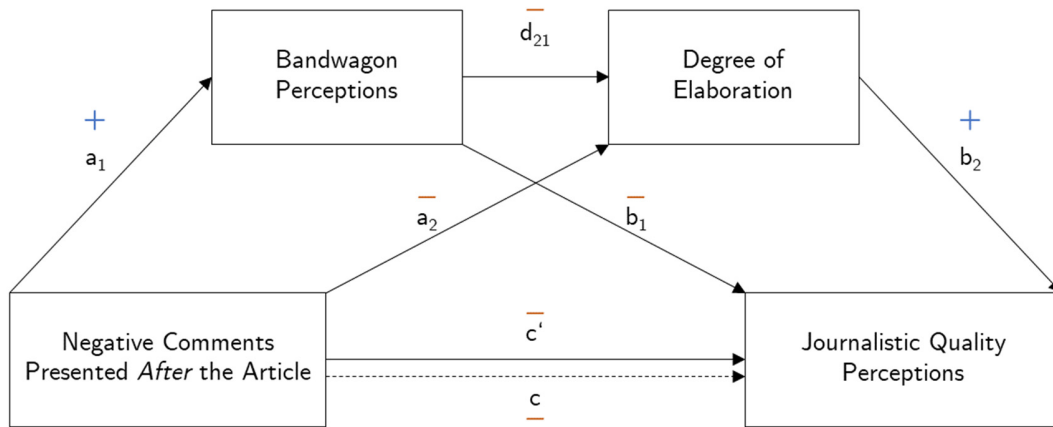
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Figure 1

Hypothesized Model



Note: Plus signs indicate positive, minus signs negative relationships.

Table 1*Coefficient Estimates of Bayesian Serial Mediation Model Predicting Journalistic Quality**Perceptions*

Path	Parameter	Median	89% <i>CI LL</i>	89% <i>CI UL</i>	<i>pd</i>
<i>Direct paths</i>					
CA → BW	a_1	-0.01	-0.18	0.17	.53
CA → DoE	a_2	0.10	-0.08	0.29	.83
BW → JQ	b_1	-0.33	-0.41	-0.24	> .99
DoE → JQ	b_2	0.01	-0.07	0.10	.61
CA → JQ	c'	-0.15	-0.31	0.01	.93
BW → DoE	d_{21}	0.03	-0.06	0.12	.71
<i>Indirect effects</i>					
CA → BW → JQ	a_1b_1	0.00	-0.06	0.06	.53
CA → DoE → JQ	a_2b_2	0.00	-0.01	0.02	.58
CA → BW → DoE → JQ	$a_1d_{21}b_2$	0.00	0.00	0.00	.50
<i>Total effect</i>					
	c	-0.14	-0.32	0.03	.91

Note: Bayesian serial mediation model as specified in Figure 1. All \hat{R} values < 1.01, indicating convergence. *CI* = Credibility interval; *LL* = Lower limit; *UL* = Upper limit; *pd* = Probability of direction; CA = Comments presented after the article; BW = Bandwagon perceptions; DoE = Degree of elaboration; JQ = Journalistic quality perceptions.