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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# The Role of Prior Attitude and Consumption Orientation in Consumer Response to Unfair Negative Word of Mouth

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how the perceived unfairness of negative word of mouth (NWOM) leads to favorable attitudes toward a product using a model that accounts for the mediation of empathy. We extend the literature by including the influence of prior attitude and consumption orientation (utilitarian or hedonic) in the framework. Three experimental studies with different degrees of unfairness are conducted to calibrate the model using the multigroup structural equation modeling (MGSEM) approach. We confirm that perceived unfairness evokes empathetic responses in NWOM receivers. The latter subsequently induces favorable post attitudes toward a product but only for highly unfair NWOM. Furthermore, prior attitude reinforces this effect by increasing empathy. However, consumption orientation does not appear to affect the above relationships significantly. The implications for eliciting benefits from NWOM are discussed.

## 1 | Introduction

Word of mouth (WOM) regarding a product influences various aspects of consumer decisions (Donthu et al. 2021; King et al. 2014). The literature shows that the effect of WOM varies depending on its valence (i.e., positive or negative). In general, positive WOM (PWOM) induces favorable consumer responses, whereas negative WOM (NWOM) works oppositely (e.g., Lee et al. 2008; Chakravarty et al. 2010). That NWOM has detrimental consequences seems straightforward because it typically conveys the defects, failures, or imperfections of a product or unpleasant shopping experience to potential consumers. For example, Lee et al. (2008) showed that the quantity and quality of negative reviews lead consumers to build unfavorable product attitudes. Chakravarty et al. (2010) found that negative movie reviews decrease occasional moviegoers' evaluation of the movie even with PWOM by movie critics. Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011) confirmed NWOM's negative impact on brand evaluation even when consumers know and favor the brand.

Verhagen et al. (2013) showed that NWOM increases consumers' likelihood of switching brands and weakens their repatronage intentions. Similarly, Ismagilova et al. (2020) pointed out that negative reviews reduce consumers' intentions to purchase the reviewed products.

Despite the abundant literature on the undesired impacts of NWOM, few studies have suggested the opposite. Sen and Lerman (2007) contended that NWOM on utilitarian products helps consumers make informed buying decisions. Doh and Hwang (2009) found that the presence of NWOM messages is positively associated with the credibility of PWOM messages posted on the same platform. The authors suggest that the absence of NWOM could damage the persuasiveness of PWOM in the long term. Berger et al. (2010) posited that NWOM can benefit unknown brands by increasing consumer awareness, purchase likelihood, and short-term sales. McGraw et al. (2015) suggested that negative messages can elicit positive consumer responses when expressed humorously.

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More recently, Allard et al. (2020) investigated how consumers positively respond to NWOM perceived as unfair. They conceptualized the fairness of NWOM messages as the degree to which receivers judge that a firm deserves the message given the sender's previous actions (Heuer et al. 1999). When a negative outcome (e.g., receiving a poor service) conveyed by NWOM is attributed to the sender's previous actions, receivers consider that the firm has been wronged, and the message is deemed unfair. The perception of NWOM unfairness gives rise to the receivers' feeling empathy for the wronged firm, motivating them to respond to the message in favor of the firm to restore negative feelings resulting from observing an unfair event. Based on this logic, Allard et al. (2020) predicted that consumers' willingness to pay for and to repurchase a product increases when they encounter unfair NWOM about it. Through a series of experimental studies, they confirmed that NWOM perceived as unfair increases consumers' willingness to pay and repatronage intentions. However, the effect is stronger when the degree of perceived unfairness is high, when the receivers take the perspective of the firm, or when the firm responds sincerely to the negative messages.

As with Allard et al. (2020), we focus on the role of consumer fairness perceptions of NWOM in deriving favorable responses. Although the influence of this construct and its boundary conditions have been verified empirically and robustly, previous research has limitations. First, it is unclear how the effect of fairness perception varies among consumers with different *prior attitudes*, defined as consumers' cognitive and emotional beliefs about a product's attributes developed prior to their encounter with NWOM. This is a critical issue because prior attitudes have been shown to govern consumers' evaluation and adoption of WOM messages (Shin and Dahana 2017). Hence, the extent to which unfair NWOM induces positive responses could depend on consumer prior attitudes. Second, previous studies overlooked the influence of consumption orientation on the relationship between fairness perceptions and consumer responses to NWOM (Allard et al. 2020). We argue that it is essential to examine how the relationship differs between utilitarian and hedonic consumptions because mental state activation differs in both situations (Sen and Lerman 2007). While purchase decisions for utilitarian products are primarily driven by rational motives, those for hedonic products are typically driven by emotional ones, such as enjoyment and esthetic feelings (Strahilevitz and Myers 1998). Hence, this feature could alter the extent to which fairness perceptions induce empathic feelings and product attitudes.

To narrow the gaps in the literature, we examine the effect of prior attitude on the *perceived unfairness* of NWOM, *empathic responses*, and *post attitude* (i.e., attitude toward a product after an encounter with NWOM). We further investigate how these effects vary between utilitarian and hedonic products. Based on extant literature (e.g., Hershcovis and Bhatnagar 2017; Gistri et al. 2018), we propose a theoretical model and hypothesize on the relationships between key variables. We conduct online experiments to collect data and verify the proposed model. Subsequently, we estimate the model's parameters and employ a multigroup SEM (MGSEM) to test our hypotheses on the moderating effect of consumption orientations. This method enables us to compare the relationships between

latent constructs of respondents belonging to different groups (Cheah et al. 2023).

This study contributes to the literature in two respects. First, it provides empirical evidence for the positive direct effect of prior attitude on empathy. This relationship holds regardless of the degree of perceived unfairness. Thus, consumers with favorable attitudes toward a product will exhibit empathic responses to the product when encountering NWOM about it, no matter whether they perceive the message as unfair or not. Second, it shows that empathic responses to a wronged product lead to favorable attitudes toward it. However, the results appear to be the same for hedonic and utilitarian products. These novel findings are useful to predict how individuals will respond to NWOM perceived as unfair.

## 2 | Literature Review and Hypotheses

### 2.1 | Perceived Unfairness of NWOM and Empathetic Response

The concept of fairness has been widely applied in various contexts. In this study, we focus on the fairness perceptions of NWOM about a product. This refers to the judgment of NWOM receivers on whether the NWOM sender deserves the outcome of their purchase (Allard et al. 2020). Specifically, if an NWOM sender condemns a firm despite being treated fairly, the message would be deemed unfair because the firm is considered to be doing what needs to be done (Seiders and Berry 1998). Thus, we define perceived unfairness as the degree to which NWOM receivers believe a message violates justice principles. Consistent with Allard et al. (2020), we anticipate that unfair NWOM messages induce favorable responses in consumers toward the wronged firm or its product. The logic is that perceived unfairness induces receivers' empathy for the wronged firm, and empathic responses evoke their intentions to punish the sender and protect the firm. However, unlike Allard et al. (2020), we examine the effect of this mechanism on attitudinal responses instead of willingness to pay and repurchase intention.

Empathy is a multidimensional construct that reflects an individual's response when observing other parties' experiences (Davis 1983; Losoya and Eisenberg 2001). Davis (1980) described this construct as composed of four dimensions and proposed a measurement scale called the *interpersonal reactivity index* (IRI). First, the *perspective-taking* scale measures an individual's tendency to incorporate others' perspectives. Second, the *empathic concern* scale measures an individual's tendency to experience feelings of warmth, compassion, and concern for others. Third, the *personal distress* scale measures an individual's tendency to experience anxiety and distress during crises or tense situations. Fourth, the *fantasy* scale measures one's tendency to imagine oneself as a fictional character in a book, movie, or play.

Based on Batson et al. (1995) and Jackson et al. (2005), Allard et al. (2020) define empathy as "a vicarious emotional response to observing another person's situation that is marked by the ability to feel warmth, compassion, and concern for others" (Allard et al. 2020, 90). In line with Granzin and Olsen (1991),

the authors noted that “empathy involves viewing another person's experience from that person's perspective and understanding his or her cognitive and emotional state as if it were affecting the observer directly” (Allard et al. 2020, 90). This definition is in line with the first and second dimensions of IRI (i.e., perspective-taking and empathic concern). In our context, empathy concerns how NWOM receivers adopt a firm's perspectives, feel compassion for it, and experience negative emotions toward the NWOM sender.

Empathic responses typically activate upon observing unfair events, such as in cases of bullying or lousy customer service (Ouyang et al. 2021), in which the first three dimensions of IRI may be revealed. First, unfair events impel individuals to adopt the victim's perspectives as they share feelings of pain with the victim (Davis 2018; Jackson et al. 2005). Second, observing unfair events leads people to develop sympathetic feelings of warmth, compassion, and concern about wronged individuals (Batson et al. 1981; Jackson et al. 2005). Third, unfair events often lead observers to mimic the wronged party's distress unconsciously, thus eliciting observers' feelings of anxiety or anger (Batson 2014; De Waal 2008), even when the victim is non-human such as a firm (Kirmani et al. 2017). In line with this, Allard et al. (2020) confirmed that NWOM, when perceived as unfair, induces receivers' empathic responses to wronged firms or their products.

## 2.2 | Empathetic Response and Post Attitude

Empathic responses to unfair events manifest in supportive behaviors such as punishing the perpetrator, fleeing the scene, and helping the victim (O'reilly and Aquino 2011). For instance, people tend to put perpetrators at a disadvantage (Turillo et al. 2002), assign them undesirable tasks (Reich and Hershcovis 2015), or refrain from friendly and respectful interactions with them as punishment (Hershcovis and Bhatnagar 2017). In the case of fleeing, people may resign from an organization or stop going to a store when the perpetrator is an organization or a retailer (Greenbaum et al. 2013). Examples of helping behaviors include developing favorable attitudes toward victims, comforting them, providing financial support, and defying the perpetrator (De Waal 2008; Hershcovis and Bhatnagar 2017). These behavioral responses often coincide and are not independent (Batson et al. 1981).

Regarding unfair NWOM, we anticipate that the receivers' empathic responses may elicit favorable post attitudes toward the wronged firm or product. Empathic feelings that arise from an encounter with unfair NWOM evoke negative emotions in the receiver, such as anger and irritation toward the sender (Priesemuth and Schminke 2019). These negative feelings drive receivers to reduce tension and restore fairness by adopting positive attitudes toward and supporting the wronged firm (Mitchell et al. 2015). In particular, when expressed overtly, positive attitudes toward the wronged firm can be taken as a form of resistance to the perpetrator (Hershcovis and Bhatnagar 2017). Hence, we propose the following hypothesis.

**H1.** *An empathic response positively influences NWOM receivers' post attitude toward a wronged product.*

## 2.3 | Prior Attitude and Perceived Unfairness

The degree to which WOM messages are perceived as unfair may depend on the attribution of the sender's negative buying experiences. According to the *attribution theory*, individuals seek to understand the causes of their everyday experiences (Weiner et al. 1988). How individuals attribute an event's cause governs their responses to the outcome. In the case of a service failure, consumers are more likely to feel dissatisfied and complain when they attribute the cause of failure to the firm than when they attribute it to their past behavior.

We consider individuals' attribution when observing NWOM sent by others. In this context, receivers would judge a negative experience as caused by either the sender or the firm. If individuals make sender attribution when encountering NWOM, they would perceive that the senders are responsible for the undesired outcomes and deserve unpleasant results. This implies that sender attribution of NWOM increases the perception of unfairness. By contrast, firm attribution of NWOM drives receivers to blame the firm for the unpleasant experiences (Miller and Vidmar 1981), thus weakening the NWOM's perceived unfairness.

Furthermore, whether individuals attribute NWOM messages to the sender or firm would depend on their prior attitudes toward a product. As suggested by Shin and Dahana (2017), the congruency between prior attitude and WOM valence magnifies the effect of WOM on product evaluation. Similarly, East et al. (2008) pointed out that consumers resist NWOM (PWOM) for brands they like (dislike). Ali et al. (2021) suggested that a strong favorable attitude toward a brand (i.e., brand love) motivates consumers to adopt protective behavior to defend the brand from criticism. This line of research indicates that NWOM receivers with favorable attitudes toward a product are likely to attribute the negative experience to the dispositional factors of the sender. This prediction also aligns with *cognitive dissonance theory* (Festinger 1957), which posits that individuals experience psychological stress when exposed to information inconsistent with their beliefs. These negative feelings drive them to reduce tension by seeking psychological consistency between the information and their beliefs. Hence, receivers with favorable prior attitudes are more prone to deny NWOM messages by attributing the unsatisfactory experience to the sender (Liu et al. 2010; Wangenheim 2005), leading to higher unfairness perceptions.

## 2.4 | Prior Attitude and Empathy

Furthermore, we anticipate that prior attitude positively influences NWOM receivers' empathic responses to wronged firms or products. First, as prior studies suggest, a highly positive brand attitude reflects strong brand attachment, a sense of belonging, and identification with the brand (Evanschitzky et al. 2006; Smith 2020). A strong identification with a brand drives individuals to take the brand's perspective when others criticize it. Any attempt to discredit a brand is deemed offensive and threatens the identity of individuals who identify with it (De Waal 2008). This is particularly true for negative reviews about identity-relevant brands posted by socially distant reviewers



(Ordabayeva et al. 2022). Second, brand identification triggers feelings of sympathy when individuals witness the brand they favor being in trouble (Gistri et al. 2018); this entails an increased sensitivity to the brand as if it were human. Consequently, individuals are likely to experience psychological distress when receiving NWOM about their favorite brands. Third, as Ali et al. (2021) suggested, strong brand attitudes lead individuals to protect their favorite brands from negative comments from others. This intent is typically followed by sympathetic feelings such as warmth, compassion, and concern for the brand. Hence, we propose.

**H2.** *Prior attitude positively influences NWOM receivers' empathic response to a product.*

## 2.5 | The Role of Consumption Orientations

Finally, we expect the mechanism discussed above to differ by consumption orientation: utilitarian or hedonic. Utilitarian (hedonic) products provide functional (experiential) benefits that satisfy consumers' instrumental (psychological or social) needs (Batra and Ahtola 1991; Li et al. 2021). According to Strahilevitz and Myers (1998), purchase decisions for utilitarian (hedonic) products are generally rational (emotional), aiming to maximize consumer utility (emotional satisfaction such as affect, enjoyment, and esthetic feelings). Thus, the buying process of utilitarian (hedonic) products primarily entails the activation of a cognitive (affective) mental state (Moskowitz and Bernstein 2000). This leads to the prediction that an encounter with unfair NWOM regarding utilitarian products will stimulate the cognitive components of empathy (i.e., perspective-taking). By contrast, an encounter with unfair NWOM regarding hedonic products is more likely to evoke the emotional component of empathy (i.e., concern for others). Davis et al. (1987) suggest that cognitive empathy is associated with positive emotional reactions, whereas emotional empathy is associated with negative emotional reactions. Because unfair NWOM typically leads to negative emotional reactions, an encounter with such messages will induce a higher degree of emotional empathy than its cognitive counterpart, which is more salient in hedonic than utilitarian consumption contexts. Hence, we propose the following relationship.

**H3.** *The influence of perceived unfairness on empathy is stronger for hedonic products than for utilitarian products.*

The nature of empathic responses influences individuals' justice sensitivity, a trait reflecting an individual's concern for maintaining justice principles (Baumert et al. 2011). Both cognitive and emotional empathy are likely to influence sensitivity to injustice positively (Decety and Yoder 2016) and govern an individual's prosocial behavior (Lockwood et al. 2014; Pang et al. 2022). However, cognitive empathy does not necessarily involve sharing emotions; therefore, it is less likely to induce prosocial or altruistic behavior (i.e., exhibiting favorable attitudes toward the victim) than its emotional counterpart (Lehmann et al. 2022). Thus, the motivation to punish the perpetrator and support the victim is greater when unfair events activate an individual's emotional than cognitive empathy. As cognitive (emotional) empathy is more prevalent in utilitarian (hedonic)

consumption contexts (Moskowitz and Bernstein 2000), we propose the following relationship.

**H4.** *The influence of empathy on NWOM receivers' post attitudes is stronger for hedonic products than for utilitarian products.*

Furthermore, the way consumers develop brand attitudes varies depending on the product type (Batra and Ahtola 1991). For utilitarian (hedonic) products, attitudes are formed based on the performance of the product's instrumental or functional (sensory, social, and experiential) attributes. Thus, for hedonic products, strong brand attitudes result in consumers' heightened emotional identification with the brand. Hence, consumers are likely to experience psychological stress when exposed to information that contradicts their beliefs about the product (e.g., NWOM) and, thus, are likely to share their pain with a brand (i.e., distress contagion), thereby increasing their empathic responses. Therefore, we propose.

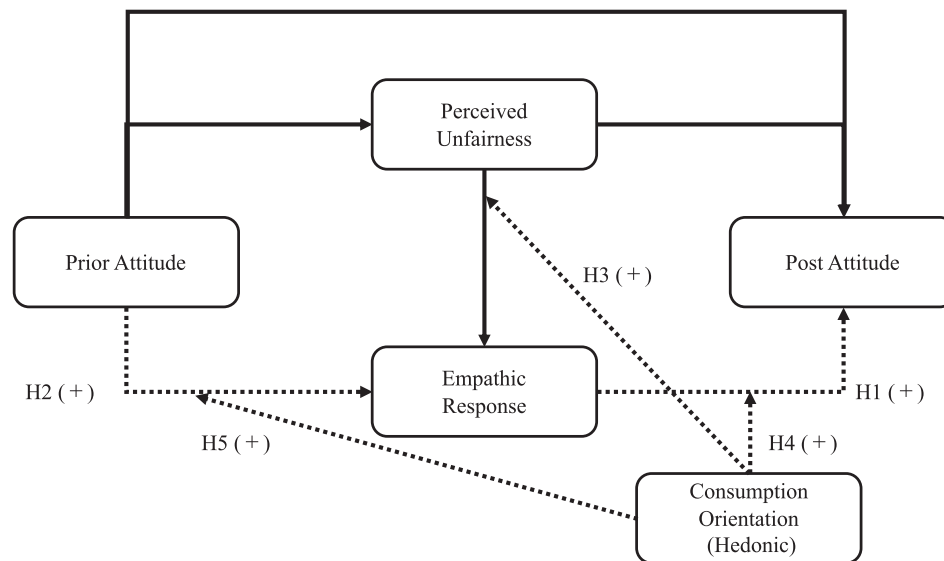
**H5.** *The influence of prior attitude on empathy is stronger for hedonic products than for utilitarian products.*

In summary, we show the proposed relationships in Figure 1. The solid lines represent the relationships verified in previous studies, whereas the dashed lines represent those examined in this study. Below, we describe the method for empirically testing our hypotheses.

## 3 | Materials and Methods

### 3.1 | Procedures

Using an online research platform (Prolific), we conducted a pilot and three studies via internet-based experiments with a sample of consumers in the United States. To check for robustness, we used NWOM messages with different degrees of unfairness in the three studies: highly unfair (Study 1), moderately unfair (Study 2), and slightly unfair (Study 3). The basic experimental designs are the same in all studies. We assigned each subject to either a utilitarian or hedonic product group and asked them to pay close attention to the images of the product and report their purchase experiences with it and their prior attitudes toward it. Subsequently, we showed them fictitious NWOM and PWOM messages about the product and asked them to read the messages carefully. Thereafter, we asked them how they would agree with several statements regarding the key constructs: perceived unfairness of NWOM, empathic response, and post attitude toward the product. Each study was conducted separately with the aim of collecting responses from experimental subjects. It should be noted that Study 1 was divided into two waves. In the first wave, we did not measure prior attitude as described previously, while in the second wave (and in the other two studies), we measured all constructs in our model. Hence, the subjects completed the above process twice, with different stimuli (fictional WOM messages and product images). Although we used the same measurement scales in the two waves of Study 1, we argue that repeated measurement is unlikely to be a serious issue because we used different stimuli (i.e., WOM messages and products) in both waves. Table 1 shows the list of our studies.



**FIGURE 1** | Conceptual model.

**TABLE 1** | Study list.

	Stimuli (NWOM)	Stimuli (Product)	Measured concept	Sample size (passed the attention check)
Wave1 of Study1	Highly unfair NWOM 1	Vitamin (Utilitarian), Snack (Hedonic)	Perceived Unfairness, Empathic Response, Post Attitude	$n = 427$
Wave2 of Study1	Highly unfair NWOM 2	Printer (Utilitarian), Speaker (Hedonic)	Prior Attitude, Perceived Unfairness, Empathic Response, Post Attitude	
Study2	Moderately unfair NWOM			$n = 391$
Study3	Slightly unfair NWOM			$n = 388$

### 3.2 | Experiment Stimuli and Questionnaire Design

We developed fictitious NWOM messages using utilitarian and hedonic products as stimuli. Following Lu et al. (2016), we selected vitamin pills and snacks as utilitarian and hedonic products in the first wave of Study 1. In the subsequent studies, we used a printer and audio speaker as utilitarian and hedonic products, respectively. The prices of both products are roughly equivalent in both studies (about USD 10 for the former and about USD 80 for the latter). The fictitious PWOM and NWOM messages were designed to be as close as possible to those typically encountered in online shopping sites (Allard et al. 2020). Figure 2 shows the fictitious PWOM and NWOM messages used in each study. In study 1, we used different PWOM messages in both waves, potentially affecting the estimation results. However, we argue that the effect is ignorable because we asked the subjects to focus on NWOM messages in the subsequent steps.

We referred to Alpert and Kamins (1995) scale to measure prior and post attitudes and adopted Allard et al. (2020) scale to measure perceived unfairness and empathic responses. We

asked the participants their degree of agreement with statements in the measurement scales using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). In addition, we asked questions about purchase experience, age, and gender, which we treated as control variables. Furthermore, two types of attention-check questions were asked. The first was a simple selection of one option (i.e., please select “Disagree” for the following statement), and the second was a question regarding the product and the NWOM content they saw (i.e., please select the option that best describes the product and the negative review you have just seen.). All questions were asked in English. The measurement scales are listed in Table 2.

### 3.3 | Analytical Method

The analytical procedure proceeds as follows. First, we evaluated the reliability and validity of the measurement scales. We used Cronbach's  $\alpha$  (Cronbach's  $\alpha \geq 0.70$ ; Hair et al. 2010) as indicators of internal reliability, factor loadings from the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA; factor loadings  $\geq 0.5$ ; Hair et al. 2010) and average variance extracted (AVE  $\geq 0.5$ ; Fornell and Larcker 1981) as indicators of convergent validity, and

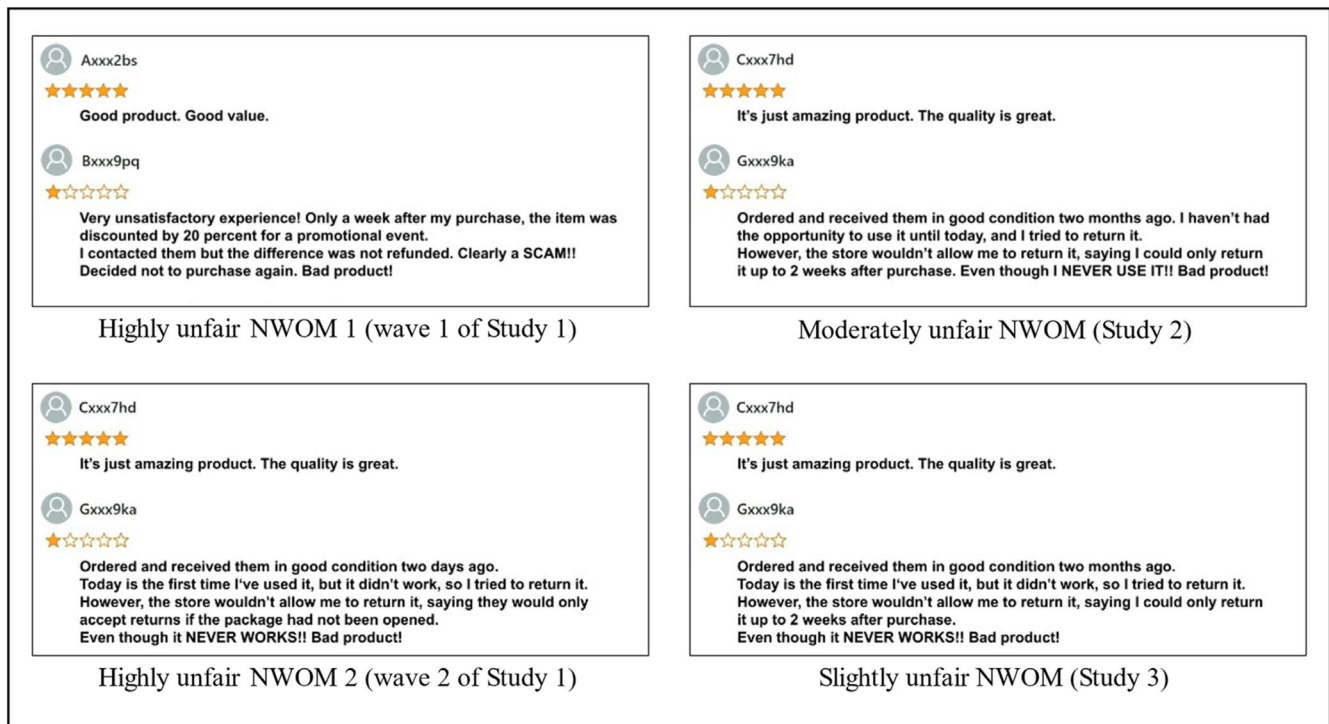


FIGURE 2 | Experimental stimuli.

TABLE 2 | Measurement scales.

Construct		Item	Source
Prior attitude	1	I favor this product.	Alpert and Kamins (1995)
	2	I like this product.	
	3	I have a negative impression about this product. <sup>a</sup>	
Perceived unfairness	1	The negative review was fair. <sup>a</sup>	Allard et al. (2020)
	2	The negative review was deserved. <sup>a</sup>	
	3	The negative review was justified. <sup>a</sup>	
	4	The negative review was reasonable. <sup>a</sup>	
Empathic response	1	I have empathy for this company.	Allard et al. (2020)
	2	I have sympathy for this company.	
	3	I have compassion for this company.	
Post attitude	1	I hate this product. <sup>a</sup>	Alpert and Kamins (1995)
	2	I dislike this product. <sup>a</sup>	
	3	I have a positive impression of this product.	

<sup>a</sup>Reversed items.

the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT  $\leq 0.85$ ; Henseler et al. 2015) as indicators of discriminant validity.

Second, following Anderson and Gerbing (1988), after confirming the CFA fit, we calibrated a structural equation model (SEM) using pooled data (i.e., utilitarian and hedonic). The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR  $\leq 0.08$ ), robust comparative fit of index (CFI  $\geq 0.95$ ), and robust root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA  $\leq 0.10$ ) were used as goodness-of-fit

indicators (Hu and Bentler 1999). Since a binary variable (i.e., purchase experience) is included in the model, we used the robust maximum likelihood (MLR) method, which is robust to deviations from normality.

Third, following Vandenberg and Lance (2000), we split the data into hedonic and utilitarian subsamples and subsequently examined the econometric invariance of the factor loadings for both groups in a multigroup confirmatory factor analysis

**TABLE 3** | Results of the pilot study.

Measured construct	Stimuli	Used study	Mean	Sd
Degree of unfairness	Highly unfair NWOM 1	Wave 1 of Study 1	—	—
	Highly unfair NWOM 2	Wave 2 of Study 1	5.54	1.73
	Moderately unfair NWOM	Study 2	3.97	1.76
	Slightly unfair NWOM	Study 3	2.27	1.18
Hedonic scores	Vitamin	Wave 1 of Study 1	1.76	1.16
	Snack	Wave 1 of Study 1	5.62	1.66
	Printer	Wave 2 of Study 1, Study 2, Study 3	1.77	1.13
	Speaker	Wave 2 of Study 1, Study 2, Study 3	5.39	1.76

Note: The highly unfair NWOM 1 was not pretested because of its different structure from the others.

(MGCFA) using the likelihood ratio test. Upon adjusting the factor loadings for both groups and confirming the MGCFA fit, multigroup structural equation modeling (MGSEM) was performed. Finally, we conducted a series of likelihood ratio tests for the models with and without equivalent coefficient constraints to confirm the significance of the differences in the path coefficients.

### 3.4 | Pilot Study

We conducted a pilot study to ensure the difference in the degree of NWOM unfairness in the three studies and the consumption orientation for each product pair (i.e., vitamin pills vs. snacks, printer vs. speaker). Participants ( $n = 160$ , prolific) were assigned to one of the products and NWOM messages and subsequently asked to evaluate the consumption orientation of the product and the unfairness of the message. Following Lu et al. (2016) and Yin et al. (2017), we provided the definition of hedonic and utilitarian products (i.e., utilitarian products are those perceived as “useful, practical, functional, something that helps you achieve a goal or solve a specific problem”, whereas hedonic products are those perceived as “pleasant and fun, something that is enjoyable and appeals to your senses”), before asking them to evaluate the product. We used a 7-point Likert scale to measure the product’s consumption orientation (1 = utilitarian, 7 = hedonic).

Finally, we conducted a Tukey’s HSD test on unfairness and consumption orientation for 154 respondents who passed the attention test. The results suggest that the degree of unfairness is significantly different for the three NWOM messages ( $p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, the degree to which the products are perceived as providing hedonic values significantly differs between each product pair ( $p < 0.01$ ). Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation of the constructs measured in the pilot study.

## 4 | Results

### 4.1 | Assessment of the Measurement Model

After excluding the subjects who did not correctly answer the attention-check questions, the final sample size was 427 in Study 1, 391 in Study 2, and 388 in Study 3. First, we examined

the reliability and validity of the measurement scales used in all studies. We confirmed that all indicators met the criteria (Cronbach’s  $\alpha \geq 0.70$ , factor loadings  $\geq 0.5$ , AVE  $\geq 0.5$ , and HTMT  $\leq 0.85$ ), suggesting that the measurement scales were statistically acceptable. Furthermore, the goodness-of-fit indices for the CFA model calculated in each study were SRMR = 0.066, CFI = 0.975, RMSEA = 0.097 (Study 1 wave 1), SRMR = 0.091, CFI = 0.948, RMSEA = 0.114 (Study 1 wave 2), SRMR = 0.082, CFI = 0.959, RMSEA = 0.098 (Study 2), and SRMR = 0.095, CFI = 0.950, RMSEA = 0.107 (Study 3). Although a few indicators did not satisfy the threshold value, we consider that the performance of the model is acceptable as the remainder suggested a good model fit.

### 4.2 | Assessment of the Structural Model

The goodness-of-fit indices for the structural equation model were SRMR = 0.053, CFI = 0.971, RMSEA = 0.082 (Study 1 wave 1), SRMR = 0.079, CFI = 0.947, RMSEA = 0.097 (Study 1 wave 2), SRMR = 0.070, CFI = 0.955, RMSEA = 0.086 (Study 2), and SRMR = 0.082, CFI = 0.948, RMSEA = 0.092 (Study 3). Most of the indicators met the threshold value, suggesting good model accuracy. Table 4 shows the standardized estimates,  $p$ -values, and upper and lower limits of the 95% confidence intervals of the path coefficients.

As expected, perceived unfairness has a significant positive impact on post attitude in all studies ( $\gamma = 0.401$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\gamma = 0.344$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\gamma = 0.345$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\gamma = 0.281$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, the variable also significantly increases empathic responses ( $\gamma = 0.255$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\gamma = 0.208$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\gamma = 0.285$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\gamma = 0.257$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), in line with Allard et al. (2020) findings. Thus, we confirmed that people tend to feel more empathy for a product when they perceive NWOM as unfair. However, the effect of empathic responses on post attitude was mixed. The path coefficient was positive and significant in the first wave of Study 1 ( $\gamma = 0.196$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), but not significant in other studies ( $\gamma = -0.015$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ;  $\gamma = -0.087$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ;  $\gamma = 0.036$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Thus, H2 is only partially supported. We conjecture two possible explanations for this. First, the type of products used in the first wave of Study 1 differs from those used in the other studies. In the former study, we used low-involvement products, while in the latter



**TABLE 4** | Estimation results of the structural model.

Consequence	Antecedents	Study 1 (wave 1)		Study 1 (wave 2)		Study 2		Study 3	
		Highly unfair		Highly unfair		Moderately unfair		Slightly unfair	
		Std. Est	p	Std. Est	p	Std. Est	p	Std. Est	p
Prior Attitude	Purchase experience	—	—	<b>0.453</b>	0.000	<b>0.294</b>	0.000	<b>0.356</b>	0.000
	Age	—	—	<b>0.072</b>	0.087	0.013	0.778	0.001	0.977
	Gender	—	—	<b>−0.101</b>	0.021	−0.061	0.223	−0.071	0.144
Perceived Unfairness	Prior attitude	—	—	<b>0.105</b>	0.088	<b>0.130</b>	0.015	−0.003	0.961
	Purchase experience	−0.019	0.688	<b>−0.093</b>	0.096	0.062	0.215	0.055	0.298
	Age	0.040	0.420	0.032	0.496	0.058	0.284	0.018	0.729
	Gender	<b>−0.120</b>	0.014	−0.051	0.284	0.074	0.145	<b>0.181</b>	0.000
Empathic Response	Prior attitude	—	—	<b>0.410</b>	0.000	<b>0.415</b>	0.000	<b>0.358</b>	0.000
	Perceived unfairness	<b>0.255</b>	0.000	<b>0.208</b>	0.000	<b>0.285</b>	0.000	<b>0.257</b>	0.000
	Purchase experience	−0.023	0.632	−0.055	0.276	<b>−0.077</b>	0.075	−0.023	0.608
	Age	−0.003	0.945	−0.020	0.673	−0.028	0.523	<b>−0.219</b>	0.000
	Gender	0.051	0.296	<b>0.093</b>	0.038	0.021	0.635	−0.022	0.633
Post Attitude	Prior attitude	—	—	<b>0.610</b>	0.000	<b>0.578</b>	0.000	<b>0.423</b>	0.000
	Perceived unfairness	<b>0.401</b>	0.000	<b>0.344</b>	0.000	<b>0.345</b>	0.000	<b>0.281</b>	0.000
	Empathic response	<b>0.196</b>	0.000	−0.015	0.757	−0.087	0.103	0.036	0.605
	Purchase experience	<b>0.188</b>	0.000	<b>−0.125</b>	0.004	−0.031	0.478	−0.016	0.729
	Age	−0.047	0.340	0.040	0.288	0.009	0.836	−0.027	0.560
	Gender	−0.061	0.159	<b>−0.085</b>	0.024	0.038	0.332	−0.032	0.482

Note: Bold font indicates significant estimates at  $\alpha = 0.1$ .

studies we used high-involvement products. Second, we did not measure pre attitude in the first wave of Study 1, and did not consider the direct effect from pre attitude to post attitude. The positive path from pre attitude to post attitude may have led to these conflicting results, as the size of the effect of empathic response on post attitude was reduced to a level where it could not be detected in this study.

The effect of prior attitude on empathy was positive and significant ( $\gamma = 0.410$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\gamma = 0.415$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\gamma = 0.358$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), in support of H3. Thus, we confirmed that people exhibit strong empathic responses when their favorite product is wronged. Furthermore, the effect of prior attitude on perceived unfairness was significant in Study 2 using moderately unfair NWOM ( $\gamma = 0.130$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) but not significant in other studies ( $\gamma = 0.105$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ;  $\gamma = -0.003$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). The results indicate that although a favorable prior attitude leads to stronger empathic responses, its positive influence on perceived unfairness holds only when NWOM messages are seen as neither too extreme nor only mildly unfair. These findings add a novel condition to Chang and Wu (2014) suggestion that consumers with favorable brand attitudes (commitment) tend to attribute the negative experiences conveyed through NWOM to the senders.

### 4.3 | Multigroup Analysis

To test for the moderating effect of consumption orientation, we estimated two multigroup (i.e., utilitarian and hedonic) models, one of which assumed the same factor loadings between groups, and the other imposed no constraints. Likelihood ratio tests were then implemented to compare the accuracy of these competing models. The results suggested that there was no significant difference between the constrained and unconstrained models in the first wave of Study 1 ( $p = 0.916$ ) and Study 3 ( $p = 0.099$ ), but there were significant differences in the second wave of Study 1 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and Study 2 ( $p = 0.006$ ). Based on these results, we calibrated the corresponding MGSEM under the assumption of invariant factor loadings. The goodness-of-fit indices of the models were SRMR = 0.053, CFI = 0.968, RMSEA = 0.083 in the first wave of Study 1, SRMR = 0.066, CFI = 0.956, RMSEA = 0.092 in the second wave of Study 1, SRMR = 0.069, CFI = 0.958, RMSEA = 0.087 in Study 2, and SRMR = 0.083, CFI = 0.944, RMSEA = 0.093 in Study 3, indicating good performance. Tables 5 and 6 show the standardized estimates and  $p$ -values of the model's coefficients.

To test H3, H4, and H5, we conducted a series of likelihood ratio tests for the models with and without equivalent

**TABLE 5** | Estimation results of the multi-group structural equation modeling in study 1.

Consequence	Antecedents	Study 1 (wave 1, highly unfair)				Study 1 (wave 2, highly unfair)			
		Hedonic		Utilitarian		Hedonic		Utilitarian	
		Std. Est	p	Std. Est	p	Std. Est	p	Std. Est	p
Prior Attitude	Purchase experience	—	—	—	—	<b>0.677</b>	0.000	<b>0.247</b>	0.000
	Age	—	—	—	—	0.036	0.506	<b>0.114</b>	0.054
	Gender	—	—	—	—	−0.078	0.159	<b>−0.133</b>	0.038
Perceived Unfairness	Prior attitude	—	—	—	—	0.120	0.212	0.078	0.346
	Purchase experience	<b>−0.115</b>	0.003	0.066	0.361	−0.112	0.248	−0.073	0.272
	Age	0.050	0.469	0.015	0.837	0.029	0.665	0.032	0.617
	Gender	<b>−0.111</b>	0.099	<b>−0.134</b>	0.057	0.000	0.996	−0.098	0.137
Empathic Response	Prior attitude	—	—	—	—	<b>0.481</b>	0.000	<b>0.383</b>	0.000
	Perceived unfairness	<b>0.249</b>	0.000	<b>0.261</b>	0.000	<b>0.223</b>	0.000	<b>0.187</b>	0.002
	Purchase experience	−0.012	0.852	−0.029	0.679	−0.131	0.108	0.029	0.664
	Age	−0.016	0.825	0.015	0.822	0.092	0.167	−0.094	0.166
	Gender	0.056	0.412	0.048	0.498	0.096	0.118	0.096	0.143
Post Attitude	Prior attitude	—	—	—	—	<b>0.526</b>	0.000	<b>0.607</b>	0.000
	Perceived unfairness	<b>0.490</b>	0.000	<b>0.329</b>	0.000	<b>0.293</b>	0.000	<b>0.382</b>	0.000
	Empathic response	<b>0.258</b>	0.000	<b>0.114</b>	0.097	−0.020	0.804	0.034	0.548
	Purchase experience	<b>0.264</b>	0.000	<b>0.139</b>	0.061	−0.113	0.152	<b>−0.089</b>	0.082
	Age	−0.059	0.355	−0.032	0.641	−0.072	0.231	<b>0.125</b>	0.006
	Gender	0.003	0.955	<b>−0.134</b>	0.037	−0.045	0.445	<b>−0.110</b>	0.031

Note: Bold font indicates significant estimates at  $\alpha = 0.1$ .

coefficient constraints. As a result, except for the relationship between prior attitude and empathic response in Study 3 using slightly unfair NWOM ( $p = 0.006$ ), none was significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, the effect of prior attitude on empathic response was greater for the utilitarian product ( $\gamma = 0.433$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than for the hedonic product ( $\gamma = 0.188$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), contradicting our hypothesis. In summary, these results suggest that the relationships between prior attitude, perceived unfairness, empathic response, and post-attitude appear not to depend on consumption orientation, leading to the rejection of H3, H4, and H5. Table 7 summarizes the results of the hypothesis testing.

## 5 | Discussion and Implications

### 5.1 | Discussion on Key Findings

It is evident that NWOM perceived as unfair induces receivers' empathy for the wronged firm because individuals tend to take the perspective of others who are treated unjustly, show compassion and concern for them, and share negative feelings caused by unfair treatment (Allard et al. 2020). In this study, we anticipated that empathic responses would positively influence post attitudes. The results support this prediction but only

for NWOM perceived as highly unfair. This implies that, when observing highly unfair NWOM, receivers will adopt supportive behavior in favor of wronged products to restore fairness perceptions. The formation of favorable attitudes toward a wronged product demonstrates supportive behavioral motives, as unfair NWOM escalates the receivers' negative emotional reactions, such as anger and irritation toward the sender (Priesemuth and Schminke 2019). However, there seems to be a threshold of perceived unfairness below which empathy does not lead to favorable attitudes. Thus, NWOM messages perceived as slightly or moderately unfair are unlikely to influence individuals' post attitudes, although they may induce empathic responses.

Another novel finding is that prior attitudes toward a brand reinforce receivers' empathy for the brand when exposed to unfair NWOM. This aligns with the logic that strong brand attitudes lead to brand identification (De Waal 2008), and brand identification impels individuals to experience negative feelings and sympathy when they observe the brand they identify with being criticized (Gistri et al. 2018). The relationship may also hold because strong attitudes toward a brand motivate individuals to protect it from negative comments sent by other people (Ali et al. 2021). This finding suggests that NWOM can evoke empathic responses from individuals with strong attitudes regardless of their perceptions about the fairness of its messages.

**TABLE 6** | Estimation results of the multi-group structural equation modeling in studies 2 and 3.

Consequence	Antecedents	Study 2 (moderately unfair)				Study 3 (slightly unfair)			
		Hedonic		Utilitarian		Hedonic		Utilitarian	
		Std. Est	p	Std. Est	p	Std. Est	p	Std. Est	p
Prior Attitude	Purchase experience	<b>0.573</b>	0.000	0.016	0.818	<b>0.566</b>	0.000	<b>0.157</b>	0.055
	Age	−0.004	0.949	0.099	0.139	0.077	0.241	−0.010	0.866
	Gender	−0.028	0.651	−0.113	0.116	0.036	0.560	<b>−0.180</b>	0.006
Perceived Unfairness	Prior attitude	<b>0.145</b>	0.092	0.119	0.105	0.125	0.133	−0.082	0.361
	Purchase experience	0.036	0.678	0.037	0.599	0.040	0.657	0.002	0.974
	Age	0.012	0.869	0.103	0.190	0.047	0.563	−0.001	0.983
	Gender	0.117	0.110	0.033	0.638	<b>0.169</b>	0.022	<b>0.154</b>	0.025
Empathic Response	Prior attitude	<b>0.407</b>	0.000	<b>0.468</b>	0.000	<b>0.188</b>	0.009	<b>0.433</b>	0.000
	Perceived unfairness	<b>0.383</b>	0.000	<b>0.199</b>	0.013	<b>0.338</b>	0.000	<b>0.207</b>	0.006
	Purchase experience	<b>−0.165</b>	0.024	−0.031	0.614	<b>0.131</b>	0.061	−0.088	0.188
	Age	−0.042	0.472	−0.030	0.630	<b>−0.238</b>	0.000	<b>−0.188</b>	0.001
	Gender	−0.042	0.510	0.081	0.203	−0.083	0.203	0.025	0.702
Post Attitude	Prior attitude	<b>0.705</b>	0.000	<b>0.489</b>	0.000	<b>0.380</b>	0.000	<b>0.429</b>	0.000
	Perceived unfairness	<b>0.290</b>	0.000	<b>0.383</b>	0.000	<b>0.303</b>	0.000	<b>0.252</b>	0.004
	Empathic response	<b>−0.124</b>	0.025	−0.020	0.801	0.103	0.253	−0.034	0.722
	Purchase experience	<b>−0.149</b>	0.034	<b>0.058</b>	0.300	0.065	0.388	−0.073	0.215
	Age	0.001	0.991	0.011	0.855	−0.044	0.469	0.013	0.843
	Gender	0.083	0.116	−0.003	0.953	−0.026	0.701	−0.057	0.390

Note: Bold font indicates significant estimates at alpha = 0.1.

Regarding the role of consumption orientation, we expected the effect of perceived unfairness on empathy to be more pronounced for hedonic than utilitarian products. This is the case because NWOM typically leads to negative emotional reactions and eventually activates emotional empathy (i.e., personal distress). These relationships are more likely to occur for hedonic than for utilitarian consumption because consumer decision is governed by emotional motives in the former context (Moskowitz and Bernstein 2000). However, the results did not support this prediction. We conjecture this might be because unfair NWOM activates both emotional and perceived empathy, making the moderating effect of consumption orientation non-significant.

We further anticipated that empathy would strengthen post attitudes toward hedonic products more than toward utilitarian products. This is in line with Lehmann et al. (2022) findings that emotional empathy induces stronger motivation to engage in prosocial behavior than cognitive empathy, which would be more prevalent in the context of hedonic consumption. Again, the results did not support this prediction. This is probably because cognitive empathy also leads to strong negative emotions toward the NWOM sender, driving receivers to exhibit behavioral responses to restore fairness (Decety and Yoder 2016). Finally, we found that the relationship between prior attitude and empathy does not appear to depend on consumption orientation. The results suggest that attitudes stem from the

evaluation of functional (i.e., utilitarian) and enjoyment (i.e., hedonic) product attributes equally influence empathic responses to the wronged product.

## 5.2 | Theoretical Contributions

This study makes two theoretical contributions to the literature. First, it delineates how NWOM induces favorable consequences for a firm. Allard et al. (2020) empirically verified that NWOM perceived as unfair induces favorable consequences through the mediation of empathy. Their study was based on Batson et al.'s work on the affective responses frequently experienced by those who witness others' suffering, which motivates them to help the victims (Batson et al. 1981; Toi and Batson 1982). Our study extends previous research by explicitly modeling the relationships between perceived unfairness, empathic response, and post-attitude. Our findings suggest that perceived unfairness can positively affect post attitude toward the product, mediated by empathy.

Another contribution concerns the role of prior attitude in governing these relationships. It is shown that while prior attitude does not influence perceived unfairness, it can increase consumer empathy for a wronged product. Although previous studies have indicated the role of prior attitudes in influencing

**TABLE 7** | Summary of hypothesis testing results.

Hypothesis	Antecedent	Consequence	Moderator	Result (highly unfair wave 1)	Result (highly unfair wave 2)	Result (moderately unfair)	Result (slightly unfair)
H1	Empathic Response	Post Attitude		Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported
H2	Prior Attitude	Empathic Response		Supported	Supported	Supported	Supported
H3	Perceived Unfairness	Empathic Response	Consumption orientation	—	Not Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported
H4	Empathic Response	Post Attitude	Consumption orientation	Not Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported
H5	Prior Attitude	Empathic Response	Consumption orientation	Not Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported

individuals' responses to NWOM (Chang and Wu 2014; Shin and Dahana 2017), empirical evidence remains scarce. Therefore, our findings deepen the understanding of how NWOM can lead to positive consequences. Importantly, this relationship does not depend on the extent to which receivers perceive NWOM as unfair.

### 5.3 | Managerial Implications

This study offers valuable insights for practitioners who deal with NWOM concerning their products or services. Previous studies have shown that the negative impact of NWOM is generally greater than that of PWOM (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2003; Jones et al. 2009). As discussed, NWOM negatively impacts brand evaluation, attitudes, purchase intention, and brand loyalty (Chakravarty et al. 2010; Ismagilova et al. 2020; Verhagen et al. 2013). Therefore, avoiding damage caused by NWOM is critical for maintaining a firm's profitability. Allard et al. (2020) showed that firms can benefit from NWOM if receivers perceive it as unfair. Our study extends their research by providing partial evidence of the positive effect of unfair NWOM on attitudes through the mediation of empathy. Firms can harness this positive effect by responding to customer complaints immediately and courteously so as to be perceived as providing "fair" services. If a customer filing a complaint sends NWOM about a product, other customers might conceive the message as unfair because they judge the complainant to have received appropriate treatment from the firm.

In addition, the results suggest that consumers with favorable attitudes tend to be more empathetic when they receive NWOM, meaning that its positive effect is more pronounced for consumers with stronger prior attitudes, even when they do not perceive the NWOM as unfair. This again highlights how critical it is for firms to keep customer attitudes positive, as it decreases the harmful effects of NWOM and can even benefit from it. This is applicable to both hedonic and utilitarian products, so these findings are available to firms selling either type of product.

### 6 | Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The first is that the results of multiple studies regarding the impact of empathic responses on post attitude are mixed. We have discussed two possible explanations for this: differences in involvement due to product set and differences in effect size based on whether or not the direct impact of prior attitude on post attitude is considered. To test the former conjecture, additional studies using multiple products with different degrees of involvement are needed. The latter conjecture can be addressed by conducting additional studies with high power (e.g., increasing the sample size). Next, owing to the nature of the experiment, participants saw a set of one fictitious NWOM and one fictitious PWOM. Although it was designed to be as close as possible to those posted on many e-commerce sites, consumers are often simultaneously exposed to multiple messages. Thus, how consumers build perceptions of unfairness when encountering multiple messages must be investigated. In particular, it is important to understand how consumers are affected overall



when looking at unfair and fair NWOM simultaneously. Third, we used NWOM for utilitarian and hedonic products as stimuli. However, the degree of empathy could be different for NWOM in other contexts, such as stores and frontline employees. Thus, examining these relationships using data in different contexts should provide external validity for our findings. Furthermore, future research should consider measuring different dimensions of empathy to clarify how each dimension activates in different consumption contexts. Third, the experiment was conducted on U.S. consumers. As empathic behavior is prosocial and collective-oriented (Singer et al. 2006), different results may be obtained in other countries with different cultural characteristics, such as China, where individuals' orientation and behavior are more collectivistic and interdependent than in Western countries. Future research could address this issue using data from different countries. Fourth, we did not account for the potential influence of confirmation bias and contrast effects in the relationship between prior attitude and perceived unfairness. We argue that it is critical to delineate the boundaries of the effect of prior attitude to deepen our understanding of how it leads to better or worse unfairness perceptions. Additionally, future research should also consider dependent variables other than post attitude (e.g., purchase intention) to confirm how unfair NWOM leads to various behavioral responses.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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