Do the Ones We Love Sometimes Hurt Us the Most: the Role of Relationship Norms on Consumers’ Perception of Fairness and Brand Evaluations

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Prior work on fairness perceptions has found that in order to assess overall fairness of an event, people sometimes focus on distribution of the final outcome while at other times they focus on how they are treated by others in their interaction. This distinction between distributive fairness and interactional fairness can be of particular importance in a brand context since a better understanding of what influences a consumer’s perceptions of fairness would go a long way in not just managing consumer complaints but also improving the long-term health of the brand.

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Do The Ones We Love Sometimes Hurt Us The Most: The Role of Relationship Norms on Consumers’ Perception of Fairness and Brand Evaluations

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Prior work on fairness perceptions has found that in order to assess overall fairness of an event, people sometimes focus on distribution of the final outcome while at other times they focus on how they are treated by others in their interaction. This distinction between distributive fairness and interactional fairness can be of particular importance in a brand context since a better understanding of what influences a consumer’s perceptions of fairness would go a long way in not just managing consumer complaints but also improving the long-term health of the brand.

Prior work has found that there is a two-way interaction between distributive and interactional fairness (Blodgett, Hill and Tax 1997). In other words, it has been found that issues of interactional fairness become especially relevant when the outcome is perceived to be distributively unfair. Thus, prior work suggests that when faced with a failure of product performance or service delivery, marketers need to take special care about how the consumers are treated by them. This research explores the question of whether the type of relationship that consumers have with a brand, in fact, influences the degree to which this attention to interactional fairness might be relevant. Thus, the primary goal of this work is to use a relationship framework to study differences in consumers’ sensitivity to different aspects of fairness, which in turn influences their responses in the face of a negative brand experience.

Two types of consumer-brand relationships are examined—exchange relationships in which people provide benefits to others in order to get something back in return; and communal relationships in which benefits are given to take care of others’ needs and to demonstrate concern for their well being (Clark and Mills 1993). It is hypothesized that, since, consumers in an exchange relationship attend to what they get and what they give, they would be influenced more by issues of distributive fairness. On the other hand, since, communal consumers attend to whether or not they are cared for in the relationship, they would be influenced more by issues of interactional fairness. Thus, a three-way interaction is hypothesized between relationship type, distributive (un)fairness and interactional (un)fairness. In other words, it is expected that consumers would be more sensitive to issues of interactional fairness when facing low rather than high level of distributive fairness, and this effect would be stronger for communal rather than exchange consumers. Further, this research explores the differences in the behavior of communal and exchange consumers as the level of interactional fairness changes.

Experiment 1 uses a scenario-based stimuli to test for a three-way interaction between relationship type, distributive fairness and interactional fairness. The relationship norms were first manipulated by getting the participants to read a description of their interaction with a hypothetical takeaway restaurant. Participants then read a description of a specific interaction—which resulted in different outcomes that were either distributively fair or unfair, and either interactionally fair or unfair. Participants then gave rating on different items that tapped into brand evaluation, quality of relationship, and future intentions. Results supported the hypothesis for all three dependent variables. It was found that negative effect of distributive unfairness was mitigated as a result of the interactional fairness and that this effect was stronger for communal relative to exchange consumers. Results of the experiment highlight that communal consumers evaluate the brand better than exchange consumers when faced with interactional fairness and evaluated the brand much worse than exchange consumers when faced with interactional unfairness. This suggested that the two relationships lead to some different processes that might be insightful to investigate.

Some recent work in organizational behavior suggests that there is threshold number of violations of fairness that must take place before a decision maker rejects a given alternative (Gilliland, Benson, and Schepers 1998). These authors suggest that beyond a threshold number of violations, the situation is judged to be unfair regardless of the number of violations. Given the evidence on the existence of a threshold of rejection, it is reasonable to expect participants to show a threshold of rejection to changes in the level (intensity) of interactional unfairness rather than only to the number of violations. Additionally, given that communal consumers are more sensitive to issues of interactional fairness, one would expect communal consumers to be more likely to have such a threshold of rejection more than exchange-oriented consumers. Experiment 2 tested this hypothesis.

Experiment 2 used a similar manipulation of relationship norms as was used in the first experiment. In this experiment, it was also decided to have four different levels of interactional fairness (poor, low, medium, and high). Thus, it was a 2x4 between subjects design. As before, participants read a description about an interaction with a brand (in this case an audio store), and then gave their response to items that tapped into their perception of brand evaluation, quality of relationship, and future intentions. Results suggest that communal consumers are more likely to show a threshold of rejection (somewhere between high and medium levels of interactional fairness) than exchange consumers. Specifically, results showed that exchange consumers lower their brand evaluations in a more linear fashion with each lower level of interactional fairness. In contrast, communal consumers lower their brand assessment dramatically between high and medium levels, beyond which their response too follows a more linear function.

In addition to being theoretically interesting this research outlines some important implications for marketers who sometimes struggle with handling consumer complaints.

References

