The Role of Public Commitment in Shaping the Effects of Complaints and Word of Mouth on Post-Voice Satisfaction

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Data were collected from 2126 automobile owners at a service center to investigate the coping mechanisms as a result of complaining vs. negative word of mouth. We investigate the motivations behind the urge to engage in complaining behavior and negative word of mouth and measure the levels of dissatisfaction after each method of coping. We introduce the concept of public commitment to differentiate the process of word of mouth from complaining behavior and argue that this commitment will make the subject more dedicated to their level of dissatisfaction as opposed to those who complain to the company.

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An Exploration of Consumer Forgiveness Following Marketer Transgressions
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Do consumers forgive and forget marketer transgressions? Transgressions are defined as violations of relationship-relevant norms, and refer to the breaches of the implicit or explicit rules guiding relationship performance and evaluations (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). Although existing research provides some evidence to support the service recovery paradox, i.e. a successful recovery can strengthen the consumer-brand relationship (Maxham and Netemeyer 2002), there is conflicting evidence that suggests service recovery efforts cannot compensate for poor service delivery, and that consumer perceptions of the brand and future repurchase intentions are lower than they would have been if the transgression had not occurred (Andreassen 2001). This suggests that the service recovery paradox occurs less frequently than thought, and that some consumers hold grudges against marketers following a transgression (Andreassen 2001; Aron 2001).

Research on the role of consumer-brand relationships within the context of marketer transgressions also remains inconclusive. It has been suggested that consumers in close relationships with marketers are more willing to forgive marketer transgressions (Mattila 2001). It is also believed that relationships provide a ‘buffer effect’ when failures occur, with prior positive experiences mitigating consumer evaluations of service recovery (Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekaran 1998). However, a recent longitudinal study found that consumer-brand relationships suffered in the wake of transgressions (Aaker et al. 2004). This suggests that relationships can both buffer and magnify consumer responses to transgressions. Given that no service system is perfect, transgressions are possible within service encounters (Mattila 2001). Furthermore, as the frequency of interactions between the consumer and brand increases within the course of a long-term relationship, so does the likelihood of a transgression (Aaker et al. 2004). This leads to the question of whether and how consumers forgive firms for transgressions that befell their shared relationships.

The existing literature captures some aspects of consumer responses to marketer transgressions through studies on consumer complaint behaviour, service recovery and subsequent consumer evaluations of the marketer. However, none explicitly examine the phenomenon of whether and how consumers forgive brands that transgress relationship norms. A transactional focus, and an overemphasis on the concept of satisfaction and its behavioural outcomes related to service failure and recovery, has resulted in the neglect of the rich array of emotional experiences and emotional coping strategies that consumers may adopt in response to marketer transgressions (McColl-Kennedy and Sparks 2003; Stephens and Gwinner 1998; Westbrook and Oliver 1991).

To address the identified limitations and expand our understanding of how consumers respond to marketer transgressions, the present article explores the phenomenon of consumer forgiveness. The concept of forgiveness offers value to marketers because forgiveness is believed to occur within a relational context, and transgressions are proposed to affect the trajectory of the relationship (McCullough and Worthington 1999). Given that marketers are forming closer relationships with customers, and consumers form strong bonds with brands (Fournier 1998; Fournier and Mick 1999), forgiveness may better capture the range of cognitive and emotional reactions to a transgression, and provide the basis to restore the relationship to its original pre-transgression state, or minimise bad feeling and harm. This notion of forgiveness will provide a relational focus to understanding consumer responses to marketer transgressions, providing new insights into consumer’s cognitive, emotive and behavioural experiences, if, and when they come to forgive brands following a transgression. Insights into the concept of forgiveness could be utilised by scholars and marketers to improve consumer welfare and quality of life given the health and psychological benefits of forgiving documented in some medical and psychology literature (Pettitt 1987; Safer 1999; Witvliet, Ludwig, and Vander Laan 2001).

As the research aim is exploratory, data was collected via qualitative research methods. Previous research that sought to understand consumer emotions and coping strategies found qualitative in-depth interviews (as opposed to quantitative methods) provided the ‘richest’ data (e.g. Mick and Fournier 1998). Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with consumers who believed they had experienced marketer transgressions. Each interview was between thirty minutes to one hour in length and was audio taped and transcribed. Data analysis was conducted based on the seven qualitative manipulation operations described by Spiggle (1994).

The results provide evidence to suggest that the concept of forgiveness can be applied to the context of consumer-brand relationships, revealing themes that represented the triggers, processes and outcomes associated with the experience of marketer transgressions. The findings show that marketer transgressions extend beyond core service failures. For example, transgressions include various breaches of expressed and implied relationship norms. Following a transgression, consumers adopted various coping strategies and processes in re-evaluating the brand relationship. These were: service recovery, re-evaluations of the brand’s trustworthiness, apportioning blame, and reinterpretations of the brand into stereotypes. Consumers’ conceptualisations suggested forgiveness of a brand essentially involves the release of negative emotions associated with the transgression and becoming motivated to act constructively toward the relationship. A number of transgression-related outcomes were revealed, including strengthened relationship, renegotiated relationship, forced stay, exit, avoidance, revenge, and loss of faith. The results also provided evidence of various consumer benefits associated with the experience of forgiveness.

In identifying the triggers, processes and outcomes associated with consumer forgiveness, this exploratory study makes several significant contributions to theory. It is, to the authors’ knowledge, the first empirical study conducted to observe the phenomenon of consumer forgiveness. In doing so, we respond to the limitations of existing marketing literature by extending the study of consumer reactions to marketer transgressions beyond product and service shortfalls. We also respond to the need to understand consumer emotions associated with marketer transgressions, including consumers who do not voice their complaints. The findings also offer a new, relationship approach to understanding consumer reactions to marketer transgressions that is lacking within most existing studies. The study of relational phenomena such as forgiveness extends existing knowledge to provide insights into consumer-brand relationships and the transformations that occurs following marketer transgressions. Furthermore, this study extends the Hirschman (1970) model, which is often utilised to explain...
outcomes of marketer transgressions (and service recovery), beyond the three behavioural outcomes of exit, voice and loyalty. The study of forgiveness therefore contributes to an improved understanding of consumer responses to marketer transgressions and provides important foundations for future research. Marketers can benefit from assisting consumers to achieve forgiveness even though exit may occur. Such activities reduce harmful word-of-mouth and ongoing ill feeling towards the brand. We suggest that future investigations should extend these insights to benefit consumers in a move toward transformative consumer research.

REFERENCES

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Message framing effects have been widely documented in numerous research areas. Most extant work on message framing distinguishes message frames predominantly along the outcome valence dimension and has studied positive vs. negative frame. Positive messages highlight positive consequences (i.e., gains) of complying with the ad advocacy, for example, “Don’t smoke. Quitting smoking reduces your chances of having a heart attack.” In contrast, negative messages highlight negative consequences (i.e., losses) of not complying with the ad advocacy, for example, “Don’t smoke. Smoking increases your chances of having a heart attack.”

Unfortunately, empirical evidence regarding the relative effectiveness of positive vs. negative message frame is mixed. The research efforts seeking to define the boundary conditions for the relative persuasiveness of positive vs. negative messages have largely been unsuccessful so far as well. Given the robustness of message framing effects yet the mixed empirical evidence, we speculate that (1) the framework that distinguishes only between positive and negative messages might have been limited; and (2) message framing effects might be governed by fundamental factors that go beyond information processing motive factors such as issue involvement.

We note that a crucial qualitative difference between message frames has largely been ignored, specifically, behavior outcome type (benefit vs. cost). Message frames with the same valence are not necessarily being equal, but can call attention to quite different behavior outcome types. Research has shown that individuals have markedly different sensitivity to different behavior outcome types (benefits vs. costs). Surprisingly, behavior outcome type as a primary dimension for theorizing has mostly been neglected in message framing research.

In this research, we introduced this key parameter into message framing research and made refined distinction between message frames. Specifically, we distinguished message frames along the dimension of outcome type (benefits vs. costs) in addition to the dimension of outcome valence (positive vs. negative) and studied the relative persuasiveness of four distinct message frames, namely, (1) a benefit-positive frame, which emphasizes the attainment of benefits because of complying with the message advocacy, for example, “Don’t smoke. Have a good time.” (2) a benefit-negative frame, which emphasizes forgone benefits because of failing to comply with the message advocacy, for example, “Don’t smoke. Smoking spoils a good time.” (3) a cost-positive frame, which emphasizes avoidance of costs because of complying with the message advocacy, for example, “Don’t smoke. Avoid being annoying.” and (4) a cost-negative frame, which emphasizes the incurrence of costs because of failing to comply with the message advocacy, for example, “Don’t smoke. Smoking is annoying.”

In search for fundamental factors that govern message framing effects, we examined the role of two factors. The first factor is Feature Positive Effect, that is, individuals find it easier to mentally represent a perceptual input when it is depicted as the presence of features rather than as the absence of features. This effect has been repeated demonstrated in numerous areas of research with animals and humans, but has never been studied in persuasion contexts before. A second factor is consumer regulatory focus. According to Regulatory Focus Theory, at any moment in time, an individual is guided primarily by one of two regulatory foci: a promotion focus and a prevention focus. Regulatory focus is theorized to be a goal orientation and is at a relatively higher level in goal hierarchy than specific information processing motive factors such as issue involvement. Activation of a specific regulatory focus in individuals has been shown to significantly impact their affects, cognitions, and behavior.

We conducted two experimental studies with a total of 1,162 high school students in the context of antismoking TV ads targeted at youths. A total of 719 ninth graders from three local high schools participated in Study 1. The design was a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects randomized factorial. Control groups who watched ads of non-smoking-related public service announcements were included to serve as benchmarks. Subjects were primed to activate either a promotion focus or a prevention focus using a standard procedure from the literature. Results from this experiment supported the predicted Feature Positive Effect, that is, message frames emphasizing the presence of behavior outcomes (namely, a benefit-positive frame and a cost-negative frame) were more persuasive than message frames emphasizing the absence of behavior outcomes (namely, a benefit-negative frame and a cost-positive frame) and a control group.

In addition, consistent with Regulatory Focus Theory, it was found that, for promotion-focused youths, a benefit-positive antismoking message emphasizing the attainment of benefits because of refraining from smoking cigarettes was the most persuasive among the four frames and a control group; while for prevention-focused youths, a cost-negative antismoking message emphasizing the incurrence of costs because of failing to refrain from smoking cigarettes was the most persuasive among the four frames and a control group. The increased persuasion was attributed to heightened perceived diagnosticity of information matching to youths’ regulatory focus.

Study 2 sought to replicate and extend the findings from Study 1 using a different method. Rather than manipulating regulatory focus, subjects’ chronic regulatory focus was measured using an established scale from the literature. Study 1’s manipulation of regulatory focus represented a clean approach to study the impact of this variable. As suggested in Regulatory Focus Theory, regulatory focus tends to be a quite stable individual difference factor. Thus, in Study 2, regulatory focus was measured, in order to examine how such a dispositional trait might moderate the persuasiveness of differently framed antismoking TV ads. Subjects were 443 students from another two local high schools. Results from Study 2 were virtually identical to those in Study 1 and provided convergent evidence supporting our main propositions about message framing effects.