Reducing the Spoiler Effect in Experiential Consumption

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It is commonly believed that a consumer’s interest in consuming a particular narrative (e.g., a movie) will be significantly reduced after exposure to a spoiler (e.g., the murderer’s identity in a detective movie). Our study applies affective forecasting and focusing illusion bias to explain the psychological process that underlies the spoiler effect. We argue that a spoiler produces unfavorable forecasted affects because focusing illusion narrows people’s attention to the plot. Based on this premise, we suggest a method by which marketers can reduce the negative impact of spoilers on consumers’ behavior intention. These objectives will be accomplished through two experiments.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
A spoiler is a summary or description of a narrative product (e.g., comic book, movie, novel, TV drama), in which a dramatic “twist”, such as the identity of the murderer in a detective story, is revealed. The spoiler effect denotes a phenomenon that a consumer’s interest in consuming a particular narrative is reduced after exposure to a spoiler. We identify the psychological process underlying the spoiler effect, from an affective forecasting and focusing illusion perspective. Following the same logic, we further suggest a method for marketers to neutralize this effect.

Spoilers are a common phenomenon with narratives. When consumers consult external information sources, the source may intentionally or unintentionally leak information about the plot. Spoiler exposure creates a satiation effect (Redden, 2008) and an explanation effect (Wilson, Centerbar, Kermer, and Gilbert, 2005) that hinder favorable affective forecasting. As a result, intention to consume the narrative is reduced. In this research, we propose a psychological mechanism that underlies the spoiler effect and accounts for the satiation and explanation effects. We hypothesize that affective forecasting mediates the relationship between spoiler exposure and consumption intention of a narrative. Specifically, exposure to a spoiler produces an unfavorable forecasted affect, in turn reducing consumers’ consumption intention (H1).

Study 1 was designed to test H1. Participants were provided with a scenario saying that a friend phoned the participant and revealed (spoiled version) or did not reveal (non-spoiled version) the identity of the murderer of a movie that the participant was planning to see; then, forecasted affects and narrative consumption intention were measured.

We adopted Baron and Kenny’s (1986) three-step procedure to test the main and mediating effects, the first step shows that spoiler exposure was significantly related to movie-seeing intention in a negative way. The second step shows that spoiler exposure significantly affected excitement and surprise negatively. Step three shows that, when both spoiler exposure and the two forecasted affects were regressed on narrative-consumption intention, only surprise, but not excitement, was significant in explaining narrative-consumption intention. However, spoiler exposure was still significant in the model, but its $\beta$ was significantly reduced. The results suggest only a partial mediation effect between spoiler exposure and narrative-seeing intention. H1 is partially supported.

Study 2 used a 2 (ad theme: plot focused / experience focused) x 2 (spoiler exposure: yes / no) between subjects factorial design. We designed an ad slogan emphasizing outstanding audiovisual performance instead of the unpredictable plot, so some other experiential attributes are made salient when consumers forecast their affects. They then read a movie excerpt, which contained or did not contain a spoiler. Eighty students and teachers participated in this study.

In order to test the debiasing mechanism; we split the sample according to which ad slogan the participants read. We then adopted Baron and Kenny’s procedure to test the mediating effect. For the sample that was exposed to the experiential-attribute-focused slogan ($n=38$), the first step failed. Spoiler exposure does not produce a lower movie-seeing intention.

For the sample that was exposed to the plot-focused slogan ($n=42$), the first step shows that spoiler exposure significantly affects movie-seeing intention in a negative way. Step two was also successful. It shows that spoiler exposure significantly affects only two (happy and surprise) affects in a negative way. Surprise is consistently significant in both Study 1 and 2. If a participant was first exposed to a plot-focused slogan, spoiler exposure significantly reduced their forecasted happiness and forecasted surprise. Step three shows that, when both spoiler exposure and the two forecasted affects were regressed on movie-seeing intention, both happiness (at $p=.05$) and surprise (at $p=.10$) fulfill the mediating requirement by being significant in the model. At the same time, spoiler exposure becomes no longer significant after the mediator enters the model. The results suggest that forecasted affects can fully mediate the effect of spoiler exposure on the intention to purchase narratives. These results not only support H2 but also provide some evidence supporting H1.

In this paper, we introduce affective forecasting as a mediator and empirically test how it mediates spoiler exposure to reduce consumers’ narrative consumption intention. We further postulate that focusing illusion biases affective forecasting and suggest a feasible way for marketers to defocus it. Our experimental results show that the negative impact of spoilers can be controlled. These findings are particularly valuable to practitioners. They provide guidance for promotional message formulation if narrative marketers do not want consumers’ patronage interest to be hampered by spoilers.

REFERENCES
