Examining the Paradoxical Effects of Counterfactual Generation in Negative Consumption

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Generating counterfactuals of how negative consumption might have turned out better has been viewed as functional (because it helps solve problems associated with the consumption) but painful (because it accentuates negative feelings). This research teases out these two effects and argues that they are driven by different counterfactuals. To start with, this research classifies counterfactuals into process- and outcome-focused counterfactuals. Then it demonstrates that while process-focused (vs. outcome-focused) counterfactuals better help consumers solve problems associated with the consumption, outcome-focused (vs. process-focused) counterfactuals intensify negative feelings. Findings imply consumers may enjoy the problem-solving function of counterfactual generation without hurting their feelings.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

After a negative consumption experience (e.g., missed a flight), consumers often muse about how their consumption might have turned out better (e.g., “If I had taken another transport to the airport, I might have caught the flight,” or “I would have been enjoying my vacation if I had caught the flight.”) The generation of these imaginations, called counterfactual thoughts, has been viewed to pose paradoxical effects on people’s responses to these experiences. On one hand, counterfactual thoughts are functional because they provide corrective information that helps solve problems associated with the consumption (Epstude and Roese 2008; Markman et al. 1993; Roese 1994). On the other hand, they are painful to consumers because they accentuate negative feelings about the consumption (Gleicher et al. 1990; Markman et al. 1993). In this research, we attempt to tease out these paradoxical effects and argue that a counterfactual thought is not likely to exert both problem-solving and affect accentuation effects. Rather, these effects are more likely to be independently induced by counterfactual thoughts that have different structural contents.

In this research, we first propose two new types of counterfactuals, namely, process- and outcome-focused counterfactuals. Then, this classification becomes the means to tease out the two effects of counterfactual generation. We argue that while process-focused (vs. outcome-focused) counterfactuals pose a stronger problem-solving effect; outcome-focused (vs. process-focused) counterfactuals exert stronger affect accentuation effect. This implies that consumers may enjoy the problem-solving function of counterfactual generation without hurting their feelings.

To start with, this research proposes thought focus as a new dimension to classify counterfactuals into process- and outcome-focused counterfactuals. Process-focused counterfactuals focus on the process of how an imagined outcome might have been brought about (e.g., If I had taken another transport to the airport, I might have caught the flight). They mentally construct the actions (e.g., taking another transport) that, had they been taken, might have led people to the imagined outcome (e.g., had caught the flight). Outcome-focused counterfactuals, however, focus on the benefits the imagined outcome, had it been obtained, would have provided (e.g., I would have been enjoying the vacation if I had caught the flight).

We further argue that process- and outcome-focused counterfactuals have differential consequences to consumers who experienced negative consumption. First, process-focused (vs. outcome-focused) counterfactuals are more effective in promoting corrective actions for better consumption outcomes. This is because process-focused counterfactuals highlight the most promising actions (e.g., taking another transport to the airport) that, had they been taken, might have improved the consumption outcome (e.g., had caught the flight). Outcome-focused counterfactuals, however, elaborate only on how much better off consumers would have been (e.g., enjoying vacation) had they received a better-off outcome. They give no information on how this better-off outcome might have been obtained. Hence, consumers who generated process-focused (vs. outcome-focused) counterfactuals are more likely to identify the appropriate corrective actions that solve problems associated with the consumption, such that they will have an increased chance of yielding better consumption outcomes in subsequent encounters.

Second, it is argued that outcome-focused (vs. process-focused) counterfactuals are more likely to accentuate consumers’ negative feelings (e.g., disappointment and sorrow) about a negative consumption outcome. Outcome-focused counterfactuals highlight the benefits brought by the better-off imagined outcome, which contrast with the reality and induce consumers to feel worse about the factual outcome than when these benefits are not highlighted (Schwarz and Bless 1992).

We tested our contentions in a scenario-based experiment. The scenario described a situation where the participants went through some job assessments. To begin with, the participants were provided two computer programs, which were superior in different aspects, to work on in an assessment task. They were told they selected either one of the two programs and completed the task. Regardless of their program choice, however, they failed in the assessment. At this point, the participants were prompted to generate different types of counterfactuals in relations to their assessment result. The participants were then told that they were now given a second chance to complete another similar assessment using either one of the two different programs. They reported their intention to switch to another program in the second assessment and their negative feelings about their first assessment result.

We predicted that the process-focused (vs. outcome-focused) participants would have a lower switching intention, because the process-focused counterfactuals they generated helped them identify how they might have made use of the computer program they used in the first assessment to increase their chance of success. They should therefore have increased confidence in using the program again in the second assessment and hence reduced switching intention. We also predicted that outcome-focused (vs. process-focused) participants would report more negative feelings about their first assessment result.

Supporting the idea that process- and outcome-focused counterfactuals are distinct, analysis on the participants’ open-end thoughts indicated that (1) the classification on what types of counterfactuals these thoughts were had a high inter-rater agreement (.97); and (2) the two types of counterfactuals were independently manipulated. In addition, the process-focused participants, who imagined what actions, had they been taken, might have made them pass the assessment, were found to have a lower switching intention than the control and the outcome-focused participants. The outcome-focused participants, who imagined how much better off they would have been had they passed the assessment, felt more negatively about their first assessment result than did the control and the process-focused participants.

To conclude, this research not only contributes to the existing literature by showing that process- and outcome-focused counterfactuals are distinct, but it also advances our understanding on the paradoxical effects of counterfactual generation in negative consumption. It teases out these effects and demonstrates that they are independently induced by these two types of counterfactuals. The findings suggest that consumers who experienced negative consumption should (1) focus their attention on the process leading to a better-off imagined outcome, and (2) draw their attention away from how better off their consumption might have been. This will increase their chance of having better future consumption outcomes at no incremental psychological cost.
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