Anonymous and Unanimous: the Impact of Anonymity on Judgments of Opinion Representativeness

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Opinions can be anonymous or have the author identified. Identified authors are usually perceived as more credible, but another important factor is how representative of a larger population an opinion is. Building on attribution theories we hypothesize that identified opinions are more easily attributed to idiosyncratic characteristics of its author. In two studies we show that identified customer feedback leads to lower estimates of representativeness and the effect is moderated by expectedness of the opinion and need for cognitive closure. Both moderators are known to lead to greater engagement in causal attributions, which suggests that this is the underlying mechanism.

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money to return to the status quo. The narrow (sequential) versus broad (one stage) decision making was also included to rule out alternative explanations, such as participants inferring that a higher repair price meant that their original camera was more expensive.

An ANOVA revealed a main effect of repair cost \((F(2,98)=4.546, p<.025)\) and an interaction between repair cost level and decision format \((F(2,98)=5.267, p<.01)\). As repair prices increase, participants move from the cheapest camera model to the more expensive ones, but only in the sequential decision condition. The mean willingness to pay for each repair level in the sequential decision was \(M_{\$100}=221.88; M_{\$150}=255.56; M_{\$200}=275\). The willingness to pay means for each repair level in the non-sequential decision was \(M_{\$100}=244.12; M_{\$150}=235.56; M_{\$200}=243.75\). Although we expected that all means in the sequential decision condition would be greater than the means in no non-sequential decision, the mean difference found in the two conditions where the repair price was \$100 is not significant. These results support our proposition that the avoided loss—the repair amount—takes the form of a gain by being transferred to the product account.

This research provides support for the hypothesis that repair costs can be perceived as a gain towards the product account when the consumer decides not to do the repair, thus reducing the price sensitivity towards the replacement good. Our findings seem to be relevant both to consumers—that should be aware that money saved is not a gain—and to marketers—that could try to create strategies to sell more expensive products by framing repairs as perceived gains.

References

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John is about to write an online review about a digital camera that he just purchased. He wants his opinion to have the greatest impact possible. Should he provide an anonymous opinion or should he identify himself? Common sense and research on communication suggest that identified sources make messages more trustworthy (Rains 2007). The decision to act on an opinion, however, depends not only on its perceived trustworthiness, but also on its perceived representativeness: is the opinion representative of the population of customers or just an isolated case? The question we address is: “Are people more likely to infer a more representative (versus more idiosyncratic) opinion when the source is anonymous or identified?” Building on attribution theories, we propose that it is easier to attribute an opinion to idiosyncratic preferences when the opinion is associated with a name than when it is anonymous.

Attribution theories suggest that behaviors result from the summation of dispositions and situational factors (Jones & Davis 1965, Kelley 1967). In our research, the behavior of interest is writing the opinion or review. Thus, a product review reveals the summation of the reviewer’s dispositions and situational factors, one of which is the product’s actual performance. If a consumer who reads the review wants to infer how good the product is, he or she has to discount the reviewer’s dispositions. If the consumer can easily attribute the review to the reviewer’s dispositions, he or she will infer that the review does not say much about the product. Consequently, this consumer will think that this is an isolated opinion and not a consensus. When a person expresses an opinion that is known to be a consensus, it is difficult to attribute it to that person’s idiosyncratic dispositions. Conversely, if the opinion is known not to be a consensus, it is easy to attribute it to the person who produced it (Jones and Davis 1965).

We hypothesize that people have learned from experience that idiosyncratic opinions are strongly associated to a person’s identity whereas consensuses are weakly associated with any one person. Moreover, people use this knowledge to make the reverse causal inferences: if an opinion is difficult to link to one particular person, it is probably a consensus. Thus, we predict that if an opinion is identified (as opposed to anonymous), it is easier to make a dispositional attribution, and therefore the identified opinion is less likely to be perceived as representative that the anonymous one.

Study 1
The first study was a 2 (anonymity: anonymous vs. identified) X 2 (opinion valence: positive vs. negative) between-subjects factorial. Participants (n=251) read a scenario where they took the role of a restaurant manager. They were told that they had received some customer feedback. Then they read the feedback which was either positive or negative. In the identified condition, the last line of the feedback form displayed a name—purportedly of the customer who wrote the feedback. Participants in the anonymous condition did not see any name.
Two names were used: one common and one uncommon. After reading the feedback, all participants were asked to estimate the percentage of the restaurant’s customers that shared the same opinion as presented in the form.

We obtained a significant interaction between opinion valence and anonymity. People in the negative condition estimated the opinion to be less general in the identified condition (43% of the population of consumers) than in the anonymous condition (53%; F(1,109)=4.16, p<0.05). In the positive condition, there was no significant difference between estimates based on identified and anonymous opinions (55% vs. 53% respectively). The significant difference found in the negative conditions is consistent with more dispositional attributions being made when the name was presented than when it was absent. The lack of a significant difference in the positive conditions might have happened because people did not generate causal attributions. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that negative events generate more spontaneous causal attributions than positive events (Gilbert & Malone 1995). This happens because negative events are usually unexpected, especially given our scenario where participants acted as the restaurant manager. Positive events can lead to spontaneous causal attributions, however, if they are unexpected (Kanazawa 1992). In study 2 we lead participants to engage in causal attributions by using expected versus unexpected reviews. In addition, we measure Need for Cognitive Closure (NFCC), an individual characteristic that should influence the extent to which people make causal attributions (Kruglanski, Webster, & Klem 1993; Webster & Kruglanski 1994).

Study 2

The second study was a 2 (reviews: expected vs. unexpected) x 2 (anonymity: anonymous vs. identified) between-subjects factorial. Participants (n=144) were told they would read a product review purportedly picked at random from Amazon.com. Participants read a review confirming or disconfirming prior experimentally manipulated–expectations. Anonymity was manipulated just like in study 1. In addition to percentage estimates, we measured the predictability and need for order and structure subscales of the NFCC Scale. We predicted that individuals high in these scales will make more dispositional attributions because dispositional attributions make the world seem more predictable.

We obtained a 3-way interaction between NFCC, expectedness, and anonymity. There was no effect of anonymity among individuals low in NFCC. Among individuals high in NFCC, there was a significant interaction between expectedness and anonymity (F(1,63)=8.17, p=.006): unexpected anonymous reviews were estimated to represent 59.8% of consumers who had used the product whereas unexpected identified reviews were estimated to represent 43.9% of consumers (F(1,34)=3.08, p=.058). Expected reviews showed the opposite pattern: identified reviews were estimated to represent 82.5% of consumers whereas anonymous reviews were estimated to represent 64.6% of consumers (F(1,29)=4.9, p=.035). Whereas the results for unexpected reviews are in accordance with our predictions, those of expected reviews were not predicted.

We showed that anonymity increases perceived representativeness of opinions. Our results suggest that causal attributions underlie the effect. In future studies we will test the process by directly manipulating ease of attribution and how these inferences influence attitudes and choice. This research contributes to the literature in representativeness judgments and word-of-mouth.

Bibliography


Developing Positive Attitudes and Strong Goals to Purchase Products of Fantasy

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Individuals often fantasize about obtaining better products such as a better car, a new HDTV, or a dream vacation. Yet, as ubiquitous as such fantasies are, they are often times not realized. Oettingen (1996) has suggested that how individuals think about the future may be important in understanding how they come to set, and commit to, goals to achieve fantasies. In her Fantasy Realization Theory (FRT), Oettingen (1996) offers three ways an individual might deal with fantasies about the future, ultimately influencing goal formation and commitment. Two of the possibilities create a readiness to act that is independent of individuals’ expectations, whereas the third entails an expectancy-based readiness to act.