Unfair Or Unfavorable?: Social Comparisons and the Spontaneous Activation of (Un)Fairness Concerns

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The purpose of this research is to identify conditions when consumers are more or less likely to spontaneously frame unfavorable situations in terms of fairness violations. We further identify how and when these spontaneous fairness judgments coincide or do not coincide with solicited fairness judgments. In our study, we find that consumers rate service failures as unfair when explicitly asked about it but do not naturally frame these situations in terms of fairness unless social comparison information is present. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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Unfair or Unfavorable? Social Comparisons, Attributions of Responsibility and the Spontaneous Activation of (Un)Fairness Concerns

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Fairness judgments are an important determinant of satisfaction and other behaviors directed towards the firm (e.g. Gregoire and Fisher, 2008). Fairness and unfairness judgments are also assumed to arise across a wide variety of different circumstances, including, for example, as a consequence of firms’ service failures (e.g. rude or slow service; Tax, Brown and Chandrashekaran 1998). We question whether fairness is psychologically meaningful in these situations or if it simply reflects general dissatisfaction with the circumstances.

We argue that if explicitly asked, consumers can always form fairness judgments by assessing whether they are deserving of a given outcome or treatment. Generally speaking, they are likely to see themselves as deserving of favorable outcomes/treatments and undeserving of unfavorable ones. Thus, when consumers are asked to rate service failures, when they are unfavorable, they are likely to report them as unfair. We argue, however, that service failures do not necessarily naturally elicit fairness concerns. For instance, imagine a situation where you go to a restaurant and your server is rude. If you were explicitly asked about fairness, the extant literature suggests that you would likely indicate that the situation was relatively unfair in that you do not believe that you deserved to be treated in that way (Smith, Bolton and Wagner 1999; Tax, Brown and Chandrashekaran 1998). However, without being asked about fairness, how likely are consumers to frame the situation in terms of fairness? It seems unlikely. Taking steps to address this apparent conflict, the current research investigates a) when consumers are more or less likely to spontaneously frame a situation in terms of unfairness and b) how these spontaneous fairness judgments relate to solicited fairness judgments.

We argue that fairness violations are more likely to be spontaneously activated when deservingness concerns are salient. Deservingness assessments have been shown to be important in shaping fairness judgments (Feather 1999). Many theories of distributive justice suggest that fairness occurs when people receive in proportion to what they deserve (Adams 1965; Feather 1999). Unfairness results when that person’s deservingness is violated. Although typically discussed in terms of distributive injustice, deservingness seems important in assessing service failures. We argue that being explicitly asked about fairness demands that the consumer consider whether they deserve the service failure. The result is that consumers are likely to deem service failures as unfair irrespective of whether they actually framed the situation in terms of fairness. In contrast, we argue that the spontaneous activation of fairness concerns requires that some aspect of the situation makes deservingness salient. Of interest then is what makes deservingness salient?

We predict, initially, that social comparisons make deservingness salient, thus making consumers more likely to spontaneously consider the fairness of their outcome. The logic here is that, when some other consumer receives more favorable treatment (e.g., a better price or quicker service), deservingness is activated by the presence of a clear standard for what they should have received (i.e., the same as the other consumer). We suggest that the relative concreteness of this standard increases the likelihood that the consumer will expressly consider whether they received what they deserved. We test these ideas in Study 1.
STUDY 1

In Study 1 we manipulated the presence or absence of a service failure (by varying the speed of service at a restaurant), as well as the presence or absence of social comparison information, leading to a 2 x 2 (Social Comparison Information: Yes, No) x 2 (Service Speed: Normal, Slow) between-subjects experiment. Before responding to any measures, we asked participants to list all relevant thoughts, which we coded for fairness concerns. Participants were also directly asked whether they naturally thought about fairness when reading the scenario. Finally, we asked participants to rate the extent to which the situation was unfair using standard measures.

An ANOVA showed that, when explicitly asked about fairness, participants’ fairness judgments reflected both service failure and social comparison information. Specifically, social comparisons and service failures independently exacerbated perceived unfairness ($M_{s}$=3.76 vs. 5.59 and $M_{s}$=3.98 vs. 5.37, $F(1,153)$ = 77.66 and 45.05, $p < .001$). However, the thought listings indicated that participants were likely to spontaneously think about unfairness only when social comparison information was present ($q(1) = 13.30 p < .001$). While the presence or absence of service failure had no effect ($q(1) = 2.17 p > .1$), Measures of whether fairness was a spontaneous reaction to the scenario supported these results. Consumers reported being more likely to think about unfairness when social comparison information was provided ($M_{s}$=5.12 vs. 4.04, $F(1,153)=23.0, p < .001$). There was no significant difference across presence or absence of service failure ($F < 1$).

This study identifies a situation where reported fairness measures diverge from when consumers are likely to naturally think about unfairness. Specifically, consumers deemed service failures unfair when explicitly asked but did not naturally frame these situations in terms of fairness unless social comparison information was present. There are, however, situations where we would expect alignment between reported fairness and spontaneous thoughts. Specifically, when upward social comparison information is available, we expect elements of the exchange that exacerbate perceived unfairness to make consumers both more likely to spontaneously think about unfairness and to report the situation as more unfair when asked. We argue that attributions of seller responsibility for the service failure is one such element. We predict that the more consumers hold the seller responsible for the service failure, the more likely they are to naturally frame the situation as unfair and, when asked, to report the situation as more unfair. We explore these ideas in Study 2.

STUDY 2

In Study 2 we manipulated whether the seller was responsible for the service failure Information about another consumers’ superior outcome (faster service) was always present. We measured fairness in same ways as in Study 1. An ANOVA indicated that, when explicitly asked about fairness, participants reported that they perceived the situation as more unfair when they attributed responsibility to the seller ($M_{s}$=3.44 vs. 4.64, $F(1,54)$ = 7.64 $p < .01$). As expected, our analysis of the thought listings revealed that participants were also more likely to naturally think about unfairness in this situation ($q(1) = 5.35 p < .05$). Finally, when directly asked, participants reported being more likely to frame this situation in terms of fairness ($M_{s}$=3.60 vs. 4.55, $F(1,53)$=5.05 and $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

This research takes initial steps to identify certain conditions under which consumers are likely to naturally think about fairness violations (e.g., presence of social comparison information) and how these relate to reported fairness perceptions. This research suggests that while fair can be applied to a wide range of situations, doing so may entail thinking about the situation differently than how consumers naturally do. Finally, although previous research suggests that service failures such as inattentive service are by definition unfair, our research shows that, depending on the situation, consumers may not consider fairness a relevant construct.

REFERENCES


The Dissociative Nature of Product Enthusiasts

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Decades of consumer research have led to the conclusion that fans are an integral part of a product’s success. Fans can make up a substantial proportion of a product customer base, and serve as a reliable source of revenue in both good times and bad. Acknowledging the importance of strong consumer supporters, a significant body of literature in branding research has focused on brand loyalty and how to increase it (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978; Dick and Basu, 1994). Aside from providing a steady stream of consumers, efforts to promote consumer loyalists can also lead to the development of “brand ambassadors” and increased positive word-of-mouth (Godes, 2004) for the given product or brand (Godes, 2004). Furthermore, the development of brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) can result in a network of supporters who reinforce each others’ positive opinions of the brand, which can further strengthen brand loyalty among these consumers.

Given that extant literature on the many positive effects of consumer loyalists, it seems that marketing practitioners should always generate as much enthusiasm for their products and brands as possible. Yet some recent research suggests that fans of a product can ironically have a negative impact on other consumers in terms of their likelihood of purchase (Naylor et al., 2011). Specifically, this research suggests