Frenemies Like These: How Expectations of the Trustworthiness of Advice From Social Network Ties Impact Decision-Making

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Using experiments, we examine consumers’ decision-making behavior in response to negative feedback from various social network ties. Strong ties and strangers, expected to be more helpful because they are benevolent, actually hinder decision making relative to weak ties. We argue that feedback from weak ties provides social capital information.

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state due to a threat to behavioral or attitudinal freedom. People engage in opposite behavior to restore the freedom and/or adopt or avoid positions on the issue (Wright and Brehm 1982). Building on Brehm’s (1966) work, other researchers proposed that people naturally vary in the degree to which they pursue these opposite behaviors and developed measures for this psychological reactance trait (Hong 1992; Hong and Page 1989). The reactance trait has been shown to be an important predictor of attitudes and behavior. For instance, individuals who score high on reactance move against expert product recommendations (Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004), and reject goals associated with relationship partners, pursuing opposite goals instead (Chartrand et al. 2007).

The second set of moderating factors in our research are situational tendencies to conform. Conformity operates largely out of awareness. Although people consider interpersonal influences the least important factor in their decisions, these usually have one of the largest impacts (Nolan et al. 2008). Moreover, imitation studies have shown that people unconsciously imitate others as the perception of others’ behaviors automatically generates behavioral outputs (Dijksterhuis and Bargh 2001) and that even brief encounters with others can increase one’s tendency to subsequently choose the same brand these others buy (Ferraro et al. 2009). In this research, we employ a scrambled sentence task to non-consciously prime conformity and non-conformity (Epley and Gilovich 1999) and assess its impact on responses to product placement in TV series, depending on different levels of perceived peer-connectedness to the series.

Peer-connectedness was manipulated by explicitly communicating the percentage of peers who are connected to the series (study 1) or implicitly, through a news article focused on Generation Y (the participants’ peer group) that presented a relevant peer as either highly connected or not connected to the series (study 2). Product placements were digitally inserted in visuals of the series. In study 2, conformity and non-conformity were primed experimentally in a first, unrelated part of the experiment, following Epley and Gilovich’s scrambled task procedure (1999) designed to generate either high or low tendency to conform. Purchase intentions for a series of brands, including the focal brands, were measured. The psychological reactance scale (Hong 1992; Hong and Page 1989) was included in a separate section. Prior consumption of focal brands and demographic information were controlled for.

The analyses reveal a three-way interaction between peer-connectedness, conformity, and reactance. Whereas there were no significant differences in purchase intentions across conditions for participants high in reactance, there was a cross-over interaction between conformity priming and peer-connectedness amongst low reactance participants. Low reactance participants were less likely to follow a peer when primed for non-conformity and more likely to follow a peer when primed for conformity. When these participants were told that the peer was highly connected to a TV series, non-conformity priming reduced intentions to buy the products placed in the series to which that peer was highly connected. However, those low reactance participants who were told that their peer was not connected to the series were more likely to want to buy the placed products when primed for non-conformity.

Together, the series of experiments identifies conditions that trigger behavioral tendencies that go counter to the direction of the perceived influence of TV series on peers. Given that detrimental consumption practices such as smoking, doing drugs, or heavy drinking (Pechmann and Wang 2010; Russell et al. 2009) are often displayed in entertainment programs, the finding that peer-connectedness information can reduce the impact of undesirable consumption images (such as smoking) suggests that it could serve as a tool to lessen the influence of TV programs on their vulnerable audiences.

REFERENCES


A Negative Judgment Gives Satisfaction Provided it Smacks of Jealousy: Why Negative Feedback from Strong and Anonymous Ties Inhibits Decision Making

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A lot of evidence supports the idea that people often seek advice from people across their social networks: friends and loved ones,
acknowledges that generally speaking, close friends and loved ones give good advice because they are trustworthy and desire for us to have positive outcomes. Although prior research does not provide a full explication of how advice of varying valences is accepted across the spectrum of social network ties, it does provide insight into what consumers do with received advice. Specifically, it suggests that advice received from people with whom we share close relationships is helpful to the extent that the advice-giver is perceived as trustworthy and that trustworthiness increases with tie strength. This idea leads to our first hypothesis: usefulness of feedback increases with tie strength. This means that feedback from strangers is least useful while feedback from strong ties is most useful.

Research on social structure raises some doubt about the expected positive relationship between helpfulness and tie strength. Simmel (1908), for example, identified the potentially benevolent role of the stranger, who is “not bound by roots to the particular constituents and partisan dispositions of the group,” and possesses a “distinctly objective attitude [of both] indifference and involvement” (1908, 145). These prescient words aptly characterize the modern impact of input from strangers on online websites and message boards, as well as offline interactions in restaurants and hair salons. It may be that when strangers offer input, it is deemed honest and trustworthy due to the stranger’s objectivity. This leads to our second hypothesis: feedback from both strangers and strong ties is more useful than feedback from weak ties.

Nevertheless, weak ties, which are typically portrayed as untrustworthy, can be quite helpful, not due to benevolence but because they occupy “gaps” or structural holes between social network clusters (Burt 1992). Granovetter (1978; 1983) suggests that weak ties are helpful because they provide not only unique information relative to friends and loved ones, but also more reliable information relative to strangers. Granovetter also suggests that weak ties are sometimes seen as being most in competition with us. This competition takes place within the context of a “field” or social setting wherein individuals compete for social capital or the valued social relations between people (Bourdieu 1984). The quest to maximize social capital is a competition that is of great relevance, particularly when people estimate social reactions to their decisions: Making poor decisions is risky because doing so may lead to a decrease in social capital. We argue that competition for social capital is strongest between weak ties (Burt 1992; Marsden 1987). Strong ties tend to be permanent relationships which are less reliant on social capital, while anonymous relationships do not technically exist and thus do not depend on social capital. As a result, advice from weak ties, though not benevolent, is most helpful specifically because it provides social-capital related feedback. Thus, our third hypothesis is that feedback from weak ties will be more useful than that from strong or anonymous ties.

We test these three hypotheses in a series of studies. Study 1 is designed to test the three hypotheses and employs a 3 (social network tie: anonymous, weak, strong) x 2 (valence: negative, positive) x 2 (social capital signal: low, high) design with perceived trustworthiness and perceived helpfulness of the feedback as dependent measures. Results show that, regardless of valence, feedback from weak ties is perceived as less trustworthy but more helpful than feedback from anonymous and strong ties. Based on these results, perceived trustworthiness is eliminated as a potential mediator for the usefulness of feedback.

Study 3 examines social capital as a moderator of the relationship found in studies 1 and 2. Study 3 employs a 3 (social network tie: anonymous, weak, strong) x 2 (valence: negative, positive) x 2 (social capital signal: low, high) design. Results show that the helpfulness of feedback from weak ties is significantly higher when the social capital signal is stronger than when it is weaker. This suggests that weak ties are more helpful than anonymous and strong ties when making decisions because they provide valuable social capital-related information.

Together, these three studies show that feedback received from trusted sources (anonymous and strong ties) is not particularly helpful when making decisions.

This research makes two significant contributions. It advances the social networks literature by demonstrating that weak ties can be more helpful than anonymous and strong ties when making decisions, not through trust but through social-capital-related signaling. It also advances the advice acceptance literature by testing a theoretical model of consumer responses to acceptance of advice within social networks, and showing that the concepts of “trustworthy” and “helpful” are not interchangeable.

REFERENCES

Masking Behavior: Examining the Influence of Social Networks on Men’s Consumption Practices

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Recent research has explored men’s shopping behavior and consumption practices (Otnes and McGrath 2001; Holt and Thompson 2004; Tuncay and Otnes 2008). However, while past research has demonstrated the influence of peers and other reference groups in consumer behavior (e.g. Bearden and Etzel 1982; Childres and Rao 1992; Escalas and Bettman 2003), research on how men’s behaviors in the marketplace may be constrained or facilitated by their social networks has not been fully explored. For instance, Zayer and Neier (2011) discuss how men have “secret affairs” with certain brands of grooming products or fashion goods because they fear being ostracized by peers. Similarly, Tuncay (2005, 231) found that men often engage in “masking” behavior, or “actions individuals take to hide