Concealing Your Consumer Stupidity: How the Fear of Appearing As an Incompetent Consumer Reduces Negative Word-Of-Mouth

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Prior research has presented numerous factors that work in unison to increase the likelihood of sharing negative word-of-mouth (WOM). However, this research presents three studies that examine the fear of appearing as an incompetent consumer as a motivation that conflicts with these existing motivations and reduces negative WOM.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1015332/volumes/v41/NA-41

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research proposes that the decision to share negative word-of-mouth (WOM) will involve a dilemma between the various benefits of sharing negative WOM and the potential psychosocial cost of appearing as an incompetent consumer. Specifically, we suggest that dissatisfying purchase experiences—of the kind that are generally assumed to inspire negative WOM—can sometimes reflect poorly on consumers. For example, when a consumer purchased, retrospectively, an inferior product, or paid too high a price because they were not sufficiently careful, consumers may be concerned that revealing such information could cause them to appear as an incompetent consumer in the eyes of the intended recipient. To avoid this possibility, we predict that individuals will sometimes withhold or distort negative WOM.

Theoretical Development

Consumers are motivated to share negative WOM after a dissatisfying consumption experience to reduce the negative feelings from dissatisfaction (Anderson 1998). Consumers experience a variety of benefits from sharing negative WOM, such as altruism, vengeance, anxiety reduction, and self-enhancement (De Angelis et al. 2012; Hennig-Thurauf et al. 2004; Richins 1983). However, little research has examined motivations that may work against these existing motivations, and therefore reducing negative WOM.

It is known that sharing WOM can send signals and information to other people about who that individual is as a person and a consumer, including the prices paid, the decisions made, and the information obtained (De Angelis et al. 2012; Dichter 1966). In the case of sharing negative WOM, this may portray the self as an individual who is unable to get price deals, commonly makes foolish purchase decisions, does not possess superior product knowledge, and is an overall incompetent consumer.

We suggest that incompetence is an undesirable self-image that consumers will be motivated to avoid. Existing work has shown that perceived responsibility for a price deal makes a consumer feel like a “smart shopper” (Schindler 1998). Extending this principle, we suggest that perceived responsibility (or, more accurately, beliefs that the intended target might hold the consumer responsible) for a dissatisfying purchase experience will make consumers concerned about appearing as an incompetent consumer. Under these conditions we expect that consumers will be less willing to share negative WOM out of fear of appearing incompetent.

Overview of Studies

Three studies were conducted to examine this prediction by manipulating various aspects of consumer dissatisfaction and perceived responsibility and examining the impact on WOM content (Study 1 and 2) and WOM intentions (Study 3). Consistent with prior work, Studies 1 and 2 found that participants were significantly more dissatisfied and used more negative words when sharing WOM after learning that the product they purchased was available at another store for a lower price (relative to the same or a higher price). However, we also found that participants who felt more responsible for their purchase (e.g., by paying with cash instead of gift-card or when they had more time to make a necessary purchase versus no time) used significantly less negative words when sharing WOM despite the high levels of dissatisfaction. We suggest this occurred because of an increased motivation to avoid an undesirable self-image as an incompetent consumer.

Study 3 sought to measure the concern of appearing as an incompetent consumer as a mediator of this effect while extending the findings to a new dissatisfying context. Consistent with prior research, results of a process mediation analysis (Preacher and Hayes 2008) found evidence that learning a firm will charge for repairs for a manufacturer defect leads to a significant increase in dissatisfaction which also leads to a significant increase in the intention to share negative WOM. However, this negative consumption experience also leads to a significant increase in the concern of appearing as an incompetent consumer, which then significantly decreases the intention to share negative WOM. Although, this effect is moderated by warranty choice, where the concern of appearing as an incompetent consumer increases when the participant feels more responsible for opting out of the default warranty (see figure 1 and table 1).

Figure 1: Mediating Role of the Fear of Appearing as an Incompetent Consumer of the Willingness to Share Negative WOM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poor Response to Product Failure</th>
<th>Dissatisfaction</th>
<th>Willingness to Share Negative WOM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+2.4*</td>
<td>+.98*</td>
<td>* p&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opt-out of Warranty</td>
<td>Concern of Appearing as an Incompetent Consumer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+.23*</td>
<td>-1.15*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

Overall, previous WOM research has examined various motivations underlying consumers’ desire to spread negative WOM. However, the motivations identified work in unison, such that they are all expected to increase the willingness to share negative WOM. This research identifies the psychosocial cost of appearing as an incompetent consumer as a conflicting motive after a dissatisfying consumption experience that decreases negative WOM. The results of three studies further indicated that the more responsible consumers feel for their choices leading up to a dissatisfying consumption experience, the more they are concerned about portraying an undesirable self-image as an incompetent consumer. To avoid portraying this self-image, participants shared less negative WOM.

REFERENCES


### Table 1: Overview of Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Purchase Responsibility</th>
<th>Dissatisfying Consumption Experience</th>
<th>WOM Measure</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Study 1**   | Gift-Card (Low)         | Other Available Price: Lower (Dissatisfied)                                 | WOM Valence (Positive – Negative Words) | -0.85 1.67
|               |                         | Other Available Price: Same (Control)                                       |                                   | 1.84 1.52
|               | Cash (High)             | Other Available Price: Higher (Satisfied)                                   |                                   | 1.65 1.64
|               |                         | Other Available Price: Lower (Dissatisfied)                                 |                                   | 0.44 2.29
|               |                         | Other Available Price: Same (Control)                                       |                                   | 1.04 2.12
|               |                         | Other Available Price: Higher (Satisfied)                                   |                                   | 2.89 2.83
| **Study 2**   | Immediate Necessity (Low) | Other Available Price: Lower (Dissatisfied)                                 | WOM Valence (Positive – Negative Words) | -0.15 1.70
|               |                         | Other Available Price: Same (Control)                                       |                                   | 1.00 0.97
|               | Non-Immediate Necessity (High) | Other Available Price: Lower (Dissatisfied)                                |                                   | 1.12 1.32
|               |                         | Other Available Price: Same (Control)                                       |                                   | 1.07 1.61
|               |                         | Other Available Price: Higher (Satisfied)                                   |                                   | 1.15 1.41
|               |                         | Other Available Price: Lower (Dissatisfied)                                 |                                   | 0.82 0.98
| **Study 3**   | Default Warranty (Low)  | Does Not Honor Warranty (Dissatisfied)                                       | Willingness to Share Negative WOM (Harrison-Walker 2001) | 6.16 0.90
|               | Opt-Out of Default Warranty (High) | Does Not Honor Warranty (Dissatisfied)                                      |                                   | 4.81 0.87
|               |                         | Honors Warranty (Satisfied)                                                 |                                   | 5.50 1.01
|               |                         | Honors Warranty (Satisfied)                                                 |                                   | 5.43 0.87


