Negative Word-Of-Mouth and Trait Self-Esteem: the Inverse Effects of Self-Liking and Self-Competence

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By adopting a two-dimensional view of self-esteem, results show that individuals high in self-liking will be more likely to share WOM while those high in self-competence will be less likely to share WOM. However, this only holds in cases of sharing WOM about negative consumption experiences.

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Negative Word-of-Mouth and Trait Self-Esteem: The Inverse Effects of Self-Liking and Self-Competence

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this research, we examine the relationship between trait self-esteem and the desire to share WOM, revealing a complex and surprising effect. Prior research has largely adopted a single-dimension view of self-esteem (Rosenberg 1986). However, by adopting the two-dimensional view of self-esteem (i.e., self-liking and self-competence), we find that each dimension affects WOM behavior differently following an unsatisfying consumer experience. Specifically, as self-liking increases people tend to share their experiences through WOM more often, but increased levels of self-competence actually results in decreased sharing through WOM. Where as the two-dimensions of self-esteem has no impact on WOM behaviour following a satisfying experience. We argue that this occurs because sharing WOM about negative experiences can be very harmful to an individual’s sense of self. Therefore those high in self-liking feel protected from the potential damaging impact of sharing negative WOM and share more WOM than compare to individuals with low self-liking. However, those high in self-competence are deterred because sharing negative WOM will contradict their sense of self as a competent individual, unable to fulfill their desired intentions as a consumer.

Theoretical Framework

Sharing WOM not only conveys information about the brand, but it also signals information about the speaker and his or her capabilities as a consumer. This consumer-related signaling explains how WOM, particularly WOM, serves a consumer-enhancement motive (e.g., Barash and Berger 2013; De Angelis et al. 2012; Paddock and Wooten 2013). Conversely, sharing WOM about a negative consumption experience potentially damages the social self by demonstrating poor choices and potentially deters the sharing of WOM (Philp and Ashworth 2014). But how does the two-dimensions of self-esteem impact WOM behavior?

Considering that individuals with high self-liking are less susceptible to the influences from others (Clark and Goldsmith 2005; Damon & Hart, 1988; Rosenberg, 1986; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001), and should be more confident in their belief that others see them positively. This positive self-perception should shield them from any possible negative implications that sharing negative WOM may have. Therefore, the possible social costs to sharing negative WOM is decreased, leading to less reluctance to share the negative experience.

Hypothesis 1: As the self-liking dimension of self-esteem increases, people will be more likely to share WOM about negative product experiences.

Considering the other dimension of self-esteem, self-competence, other predictions arise. Confidence in their ability to fulfill their desired intentions drives self-perceptions of competence, which should also include the ability to make smart consumption decisions. When purchases do not result in the expected outcome, this indicates an inability to achieve desired consumer intentions, and thus reflects poorly on one’s competence. Therefore, sharing a negative consumption experience should contradict how individuals with high self-competence see themselves and impair typical self-protection strategies (Baumeister 1982; Mussweiler, Gabriel & Bodenhausen 2000). In short, sharing WOM about a negative consumption experience contradicts self-perceptions of competence, so people should be more reluctant to engage in WOM about dissatisfying experiences.

Hypothesis 2: As the self-competence dimension of self-esteem increases, people will be less likely to share WOM about negative product experiences.

Method

Participants completed a survey where the initial question asked them to describe a recent purchase that either met their expectations or did not meet their expectations. The questionnaire following this task asked participants questions regarding their WOM behavior pertaining to this experience, their level of dissatisfaction towards the experience, and their trait self-esteem. Each scale was embedded in a variety of other measures related to their described purchase experience.

Results and Discussion

To understand how self-liking and self-competence influence the WOM behavior, we performed a hierarchical regression. Anderson (1998) pointed out that the relationship of satisfaction follows a U-shape, where more WOM is shared about experiences that were highly satisfying or dissatisfying. Thus, following Anderson’s (1998) lead, we proceeded with our analysis under the expectation that dissatisfaction-satisfaction should have a quadratic relationship with WOM behavior.

Our analysis includes the composite of WOM shared as the outcome variable, and the composites for dissatisfaction with the purchase experience, self-liking, and self-competence as predictors. The results demonstrate that the relationship of satisfaction on WOM is quadratic (β = .13, p < .001) with a significant portion of the variance explained over the linear effect (ΔR² = .11, F(1,393) = 48.97, p < .001).

Adding self-liking and self-competence to the model provides initial support for H1 and H2. As individuals’ reported self-liking increases, they are more likely to share that experience through WOM (β = .33, p < .001). Furthermore, as individuals’ reported self-competence increases, we see the predicted inverse reaction—people are less likely to tell others about the experience through WOM (β = -.20, p < .10). Adding the interaction terms of self-liking X satisfaction and self-competence X satisfaction under the next step in the regression supports our hypotheses that these differences only exist during the sharing of more negative WOM. Results find that as satisfaction with the purchase experience decreases, people who report higher self-liking are more likely to share WOM (β = .10, p < .05), while people reporting higher levels of self-competence are less likely to share their experiences (β = -.11, p < .05).

Conclusion

This research explores the impact of self-esteem on WOM. Adopting a two-dimensional view of self-esteem we find that as self-liking increases people are more likely to share negative WOM, while increased self-perceptions of self-competence tend to impede...
the likelihood of sharing negative experiences through WOM. Self-esteem’s impact, however, only occurs with dissatisfying experiences as compared to satisfying experiences. The research adds to the literature by presenting negative WOM as self-damaging and poses questions for exploring deterrents to sharing WOM rather than only motivations.

REFERENCES