Hiding From the Press: Negative Product Reviews, Feeling Incompetent, and Product Usage

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This work examines the impact of negative product reviews on consumers who already owns that particular product. Three studies find that negative press leads to an increase in the fears of appearing as an incompetent consumer and decreases their usage intentions in the future.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Negative product reviews can have far reaching negative effects on a company and the market success of product. Negative reviews and press have been found to result in decreasing sales (Basuroy et al. 2003; Reinstein and Snyder 2005), poor product evaluations and perceptions (Tybout, Calder, and Sterntahl 1981; Wyatt and Badger 1984), and even negatively impact a firm’s net present value (Goldenberg et al. 2007). However, what is less explored, is how negative product reviews can impact the consumer who may already own the product.

This current work examines how a product is portrayed in the press and how this can influence self-perceptions as an incompetent consumer and product usage intentions. Specifically, we propose that negative product reviews can negatively impact intentions to use and display the product in public, even when the initial perceptions of the product met expectations. We suggest that negative product reviews can reflect poorly on the consumer who has already bought it because it makes them appear incompetent. Even if the consumer previously enjoyed and was satisfied with the product, using it may expose to others their incompetence as a consumer. To avoid this, consumers will be less willing to use the product in public in the future.

Hypothesis 1: Dissatisfying consumption experiences will lead to a) individuals fearing that others will see them as an incompetent consumer and b) decreased product usage intentions

Although this is a simple prediction, we expand this to how negative press can also drive these feelings as well as how these feelings of incompetence can influence product usage intentions. Using certain products portray certain images. We know that individuals approach certain products for the desirable image they portray (Berger and Heath 2007; Burkett 2006; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010) and avoid certain products for the undesirable image they might portray (Ashworth, Darke, and Schaller, 2005; White and Dahl 2006). One possible undesirable image is that of an incompetent consumer. How products are portrayed in the media is one method of how items contract certain images, therefore negative press about a product not being a good value and is considered a bad purchase could be evidence that a user of that product is incompetent, despite possibly being satisfied with it. Given the public nature of product reviews, negative press regarding a product that an individual owns will signal to others that they are incompetent consumers. To avoid this undesirable image, consumers will be less willing to use the product in the future, despite being initially satisfied with it. More formally,

Hypothesis 2: Negative press regarding a product that was recently purchased will make an individual fear appearing as an incompetent consumer and decrease their usage intentions, despite their initial perceptions of the product (i.e., satisfied or dissatisfied).

Hypothesis 3: The fear of appearing as an incompetent consumer will mediate the relationship between negative press and decreased intentions to use a product that an individual already owns.

Method

Three studies were completed, seeking to understand the driving forces of the fears of appearing as an incompetent consumer as well as how negative product reviews can impact this fear and how this fear plays a role in product usage intentions.

The objective to study 1 was to initially determine that dissatisfying purchase experiences can make an individual concerned that others will judge them as an incompetent consumer and if this can impact usage intentions. Since the fear of appearing as an incompetent consumer is not a widely researched and understood self-image, this first study also seeks to understand what drives this fear more broadly. Results of a hierarchical regression find that dissatisfying experiences significantly predict the fear of appearing incompetent ($\beta = .15$, $p < .01$). Adding dissatisfaction to the model also explains a significant portion of the variance above the other factors ($\Delta R^2 = .012$, $F(1,381) = 7.55$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, the fear of appearing as an incompetent consumer significantly predicts product usage intentions ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .10$). Also, adding the fear of appearing as an incompetent consumer to the model explains a significant increase in the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .005$, $F(1,379) = 3.07$, $p < .10$).

Studies 2 and 3 extend these findings by showing that reading negative product reviews also influences the fear of appearing as an incompetent consumer. Where even after a purchase that is satisfying, reading a negative product review will increase the fear of appearing as an incompetent consumer and decrease future usage intentions. Using the Preacher and Hayes (2008) process mediation analysis shows that reading a negative product review significantly increases the fear of appearing as an incompetent consumer ($\beta = .92$, $p < .001$) and that this significantly interacts with whether or not the purchase initially met expectations ($\beta = -.97$, $p < .01$). The fear of appearing as an incompetent consumer significantly mediates the reading of a bad review on usage intentions, where as the fear of appearing incompetent increases, usage intentions significantly decreases ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$).

Conclusion

This current work points out that existing research has focused on how negative press can impact sales. In other words, how negative press can impact pre-purchase behaviors. Our research instead points out the possible impact of negative press post-purchase. We find that negative press can impact self-perceptions as an incompetent consumer, as well as increase the fears of appearing as an incompetent consumer for using a product that has had some bad press. This has further downstream effects by reducing reported usage intentions. Future research should be more interested in post-purchase behaviors, such as usage, disposal, and storage. This is a highly unexplored area in the domain of consumer research. This research helps shine some light on this behavior that is not widely developed.

REFERENCES


