Shifting Perceptions of Negative Experiences Through Word-Of-Mouth: Episodic Dismissal and Asymmetric Effects of Valence on Consumer Evaluations

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Previous research finds that negative (vs. positive) experiences weigh disproportionately on consumers’ evaluations of products and services. However, the present research shows that evaluations formed by negative (vs. positive) experiences are actually more malleable and more susceptible to being changed via social influence through word-of-mouth sharing.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Negative product and service experiences often have such an impact on consumers that they can be vividly recalled for a long time afterwards (Mittal, Ross, and Baldasare 1998). As a result, research finds that negative (vs. positive) experiences weigh disproportionately on consumer evaluations such as attitude, satisfaction, and repurchase intentions (Dempsey and Mitchell 2010). Understandably, this has made marketers extremely sensitive to the ramifications of disappointing their customers. However, can the very thing that makes negative experiences so vivid and memorable also make the evaluations associated with them more susceptible to change? The current research examines how consumers who have had negative (vs. positive) product and service experiences respond to social influence in a dyadic word-of-mouth sharing situation. We find an interesting asymmetry, such that evaluations formed by negative (vs. positive) experiences are more malleable and more susceptible to change when consumers are exposed to the contrasting evaluations of others. Drawing from literature on memory, cognitive processing, and balance theory, we argue that this effect is driven by consumers’ greater tendency to dismiss their own negative (vs. positive) experiences as being formed by isolated or “one off” events, a behavior we refer to as “episodic dismissal,” in order to reduce perceived dissimilarities with a close other.

**Study 1**

We conducted a 2 (participant’s experience: positive vs. negative, between) × 2 (close other’s evaluation: contrasting vs. similar, between) × 2 (participant’s evaluation: before vs. after sharing word-of-mouth, within) mixed subjects study. We first asked participants to write about a negative (vs. positive) service experience (Zhang et al. 2014). We then asked three questions measuring initial consumer evaluations of the experience: attitude, satisfaction and re-purchase intentions, which we combined to form an evaluation index. All participants then imagined sharing the experience they wrote about with a close friend. In the similar close other evaluation condition, participants further read “to your surprise, your close friend responds that he/she also really likes (dislikes) the product or service, and appears satisfied that the two of you share the same opinion.” In the contrasting evaluation condition, participants read “to your surprise, your close friend responds that he/she actually really likes (dislikes) the product or service, and appears perplexed that you both don’t share the same opinion.” We found a significant three-way interaction $F(1,263)=4.39, p=.04$. In particular, participants who had a negative experience upwardly revised evaluations when the close other was revealed to have a contrasting (e.g. positive) evaluation ($t_1=2.60, t_2=3.00, p=.000$). However, participants who had a positive experience did not revise their evaluations when the close other had a contrasting evaluation ($t_1=5.96, t_2=5.92, p=.ns$).

**Study 2**

We tested whether social distance moderates the results from study 1, such that consumers align negative evaluations with close others, but not with distant others. We used a 2 (participant’s experience: positive vs. negative, between) × 2 (partner’s social distance: high vs. low, between) × 2 (participant’s evaluation: contrasting vs. similar, between) × 2 (participant’s evaluation: before vs. after sharing word-of-mouth, within) mixed subjects design. Our manipulations were the same as in study 1, however, in this study, participants in the high (versus low) distance condition were asked to imagine an interaction with an acquaintance instead of a close friend. We found a significant four-way interaction $F(1,455)=4.87, p=.03$. Specifically, in the low distance condition, we again found that participants who shared a negative experience upwardly revised their evaluations when close others had a contrasting (vs. similar) evaluation ($t_1=2.60, t_2=2.94, p=.000$). However, participants who shared a positive experience did not change their evaluations in either the contrasting or similar close other conditions. In the high distance condition, these results were reversed. Participants who shared a negative experience became significantly more positive when the distant other had a similar (vs. contrasting) evaluation ($t_1=2.22, t_2=2.53, p=.000$), whereas there was a non-significant revision of evaluations among participants who shared a positive experience in both the contrasting and similar distant other conditions.

**Study 3**

We examined whether our results are driven by “episodic dismissal” (e.g. participants’ greater tendency to dismiss negative (vs. positive) experiences as isolated or “one off” events when motivated to align their evaluations with a close other. We conducted a 2 (participant’s experience: positive vs. negative, between) × 2 (close other’s evaluation: contrasting vs. similar, between) × 2 (participant’s evaluation: before vs. after sharing word-of-mouth, within) mixed subjects study. The procedure was the same as in study 1, however, following the imagined interaction, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they considered the experience they shared to be an episodic or “one off” event (e.g. “To what extent do you feel that your experience with this product or service was an isolated event and not representative of the product in general?”). We found a significant three-way interaction $F(1,230)=9.35, p=.003$ with a pattern of results similar to the previous two studies. Importantly, we also found moderated mediation, such that participants episodically dismissed negative (vs. positive) experiences after sharing them with a contrasting close other (95% CI exclusive of $0 [-.27, -.02]$).

**Study 4**

We attempted to replicate our results in an actual word-of-mouth sharing interaction using the same design as studies 1 and 3. Participants shared a negative or positive on-campus service experience with a confederate who had either a contrasting or similar evaluation. We again found a significant three-way interaction $F(1,208)=12.92, p=.000$ with a pattern of results similar to the previous two studies. In sum, we demonstrate that consumers are more likely to change negative (vs. positive) evaluations of products and services when sharing word-of-mouth exposes them to the contrasting evaluation of a close other. We show that the valence of their product and service experiences determines the extent to which consumers can subsequently be influenced to change their evaluations. We demonstrate that consumers are better able to dismiss negative (vs. positive) experiences as isolated events in the face of contrasting opinions, thereby engaging in “episodic dismissal.”
REFERENCES