Righteous Indignation: When Anger Consumption Makes You Feel Better

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Righteous Indignation: When Anger Consumption Makes You Feel Better

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Half of all Americans are angrier today than they were a year ago,” says a new survey (Esquire 2016). In addition, 68% of the respondents also reported hearing or reading something in the news that makes them angry at least once a day. Why do people consume things (e.g., news) that make them angry? Is getting angry always negative?

Anger is defined as a strong negative feeling of being upset or annoyed (Averill 1983), and one might therefore expect people to refrain from consuming anger-eliciting items. However, we suggest, and show, that sometimes people deliberately engage in, rather than avoid, the consumption of items that elicit anger. Based on findings about the instrumentality of anger in protecting the self in confrontational contexts (McCullough et al. 1997; Parrott 2001; Tamir et al. 2008; Tamir and Ford 2011; Tiedens 2001), we propose this consumption of anger-eliciting items may happen when a conflict accompanies the consumption. Specifically, we suggest that when people experience a conflict between their personal attitudes and the message conveyed by a consumed item, anger will increase that item consumption. We further suggest that in such cases, the anger-involved consumption may help people feel better about themselves, sustaining their sense of righteous indignation.

A set of studies provides empirical support for the consumption of anger-eliciting items, its underlying mechanism, and the favorable consequences of such consumption in terms of self-perceptions.

A pilot study (n=116) demonstrated consumers deliberately consume items they expected to elicit anger. Participants reported that even when they expected the consumption to make them angry, they read articles (78%; significantly greater than 50%, p<.001) and blogs (62%; significantly greater than 50%, p=.01) and watch television programs (48%; not different from 50%, p>.7).

Study 1 (n=90) showed consumers might consume more of an anger-eliciting item when they experience a conflict between their attitudes and the message conveyed by that item. Participants, who voted for either a left-wing or a right-wing party in the last pre-election survey, rated a satirical television program, which was known for its left-wing political bias. After participants watched a short clip of that program, we played an additional section and let participants decide at which point to withdraw from watching. We regressed the log-transformed watching time on political opinion, anger ratings, and their interaction, while controlling for conventional motivations to consume a satire—fun and interest. The results showed a significant interaction between political opinion and anger (F(1,84)=5.89, p=.02). As predicted, the more anger eliciting the program was, the more time right-wing voters (who were in higher conflict) watched it (β=.22; SE=.09; t(84)=2.44; p=.02). However, anger did not affect left-wing voters’ watching time (p>.3). This effect remained significant after we controlled for participants’ television-watching habits and general interest in politics.

Study 2 (n=145) further supported the effect of anger on consumption of conflictual items, and showed the instrumentality of anger-involved consumption for self-perceptions. Study 2 therefore revealed a link between conflict, anger, consumption, and self-perceptions. Participants read about a parliament member who accused another parliament member with muscular dystrophy of double voting. Participants who were assigned to the low-conflict condition also read that the focal parliament member had been genuinely concerned about double voting, whereas participants in the high-conflict condition read that this parliament member had been repeatedly teasing the disabled member. Participants reported their level of anger and then received an article that provided additional information about the incident. After reading, they indicated how much they elaborated on the article (as a proxy to consumption), and reported their self-perceptions. We regressed elaboration on conflict, anger, and their interaction. The results showed a marginally significant interaction between conflict and anger on elaboration (F(1,141)=3.53, p=.06). As predicted, the angrier participants in high-conflict were, the more they elaborated on the article (β=.35; SE=.12; t(141)=2.91; p=.004). However, anger did not affect elaboration of participants who were low in conflict (p>.5). We also conducted a moderated-mediation analysis with self-perception as the dependent variable, anger as the independent variable, elaboration as the mediator, and conflict as the moderator. As expected, greater anger increased elaboration only in high (vs. low) conflict, which in turn elevated participants’ self-perceptions (β=.04; SE=.03; 95% CI: 0.04 to 0.12). By contrast, we found no significant indirect effect when conflict was low (95% CI: -0.02 to 0.05).

If people in conflict consume the anger-eliciting item to feel better about themselves, then only when the message the consumed item conveys is relevant (vs. non-relevant) to the conflict anger should increase consumption among people who experience a conflict. Study 3 (n=129) tested this hypothesis by manipulating both conflict and the extent to which the consumed message was relevant to the conflict. We told residents of a specific city about either a politician’s acts that impair the city’s unique identity or tourist activities in the city, and then asked them to report their willingness to read an article about either topic. A regression analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction between conflict, relevance, and anger (β=.10; t(121)=2.23, p=.03). As expected, we found anger increased participants’ willingness to read the article only when they experienced a conflict and the article was relevant to that conflict (β=.55; t(121)=3.63, p=.004; all other p’s>.1).

Taken together, these results provide evidence for deliberate consumption of anger-eliciting (conflictual) items, and they suggest the anger involved in the consumption of conflictual items provides consumers with a sense of righteous indignation: when consumers experience a conflict between their attitudes and the message an item conveys, anger-involved consumption of that item seems to prompt improved self-perceptions.

Our research contributes to a better understanding of the evasive interplay between emotions and consumption, identifying situations in which the experience of anger—a negative emotion—causes people to consume more, rather than less, of the anger-eliciting item. From a practical perspective, our findings undermine the commonly held view that people are only motivated to avoid unpleasant feelings in general, and anger in particular.

REFERENCES

