Feeling Stupid About Nothing: Inferring Competence From Externally Caused Negative Outcomes

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Across three studies we demonstrate that uncontrollable, unforeseeable, and essentially random negative outcomes can influence competence perceptions. We demonstrate that consumers who believe, in hindsight, that they could have done something to avoid a negative outcome feel incompetent, even when the outcome is clearly random and uncontrollable.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
It is easy to think of personally dissatisfying consumption experiences. Maybe it was from receiving horrible service at a restaurant, a product not living up to its claims, or being ripped off by a salesperson. In either case, these experiences are typically unexpected and essentially random. Sometimes, they just happen. Since they are firm-caused, consumers should not feel any self-blame (e.g., Folkes 1984; Weiner 1980; 1995; 2000). There is, however, research that has examined how victims of horrible crimes and diseases sometimes blame and feel worse about themselves for having these externally caused experiences. We seek to clarify this discrepancy and provide evidence for when people feel worse about themselves (i.e., decreased self-esteem and feel incompetent) following externally caused consumption outcomes.

In this current research, we argue that consumers can feel incompetent for firm-caused dissatisfying outcomes, while simultaneously feeling dissatisfied with the firm for causing the dissatisfying outcome. Although these ideas have not received much attention in the context of consumer decisions, there is variety of evidence in the victimization and health literatures that is consistent. For example, victims of rape typically take some responsibility for the attack (Littleton, Magee, and Assom 2007). Similar attributions of self-blame have been shown for victims of spinal cord injury and cancer, even when the objective circumstances indicate the victim had little control over their outcome (e.g., Bearison et al. 1993; Bulman and Wortman 1977; Burgress and Haaga 1998; Davis et al. 1996; Fogel 2004; Glinder and Compas 1999; Malcarne et al. 1995). Overall, existing work has shown that victims of various misfortunes, from real life crime, accidents, and illness, will take some blame for what happened to them, even when the outcome was caused entirely by another party or was essentially random. From this, we ask, can consumers blame and feel worse about themselves for firm-caused dissatisfying outcomes? If so, when is this likely to occur? And what impact can this have on the consumer?

Reasons behind blaming the self appear to be mixed (Littleton et al. 2007). However, in the victimization literature, Davis et al. (1996), provides evidence that after controlling for causal attributions, individuals who perceived the negative outcome to be more avoidable were more likely to foster feelings of self-blame. This is because attributions of causality (i.e., the who or what that caused the negative outcome) should be conceptually different from what the victim believes they could have done in hindsight to avoid the negative outcome. We suggest many analogous situations can exist in a consumer context. For example, consumers having the freedom to choose whatever store they want versus being restricted in their choice will increase the perception that a negative outcome was, in hindsight, avoidable. From this, we predict that consumers will feel incompetent following firm-caused dissatisfaction when they believe, in hindsight, that they could have done something to avoid it. In other words, even though the consumer blames and is dissatisfied with the firm, under conditions of increased perceptions of avoidability consumers will also feel as an incompetent consumer.

SUMMARY OF STUDIES AND RESULTS
Three studies were conducted to demonstrate that firm-caused dissatisfaction can lead to feelings of incompetence (Study 1, 2, 3), that this effect is moderated by perceived avoidability (Study 2 and 3), and that these perceptions can arise from truly random negative outcomes (Study 3).

In study 1, participants were asked to either describe four Satisfying or four Dissatisfying firm-caused consumption experiences they recently had for which the outcome was unforeseeable, unintended, unexpected, and/or they could not have planned for it to have occurred. Results find that recalling firm-caused dissatisfying experiences compared to satisfying ones increase self-reported feelings of incompetence (M = 3.09 vs. 2.42; F(1, 60) = 6.77, p < .05).

In study 2, participants read a scenario depicting them having a lot of time (Avoidable) or little time (Less-Avoidable) to make a necessary purchase that later turned out to be a firm-caused dissatisfying or normal experience. A significant Dissatisfaction X Avoidability interaction (F(1, 96) = 7.55, p < .01) indicated that the effect of a firm-caused dissatisfying experience on feelings of incompetence is smaller when the situation is perceived to be non-avoidable (M = 3.92 vs. 3.22; F(1, 96) = 2.07, p > .10) than when it is perceived to be avoidable (M = 4.78 vs. 2.68; F(1, 96) = 39.81, p < .001).

Study 3 was a behavioral experiment that manipulated participants actual outcome to be a random negative or neutral outcome and also manipulated whether the situation was perceived to be more vs. less avoidable. Specifically, all participants entered into a lab and were given a chocolate bar to keep. However, all participants then drew from a lottery (Avoidable) or had a ticket drawn for them (Less-Avoidable) to see if they would keep their chocolate bar or not. Results showed a significant Random Outcome X Perceived Avoidability interaction (F(1, 131) = 4.17, p < .05) indicating that the effect of randomly losing a chocolate bar, versus not, on feelings of incompetence is larger when participants pick their own lottery ticket (M = 3.08 vs. 2.33; F(1, 131) = 8.47, p < .01) and smaller when participants had their ticket picked for them (M = 2.80 vs. 2.79; F < 1).

CONCLUSION
These results demonstrate that consumers can feel incompetent for negative outcomes they did not cause. Since perceptions of competence is a central component to self-identity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, demonstrating that this can be influenced by firm-caused dissatisfaction is very interesting. Existing research examining firm-caused dissatisfaction would assume the consumer to be a blame externalizer. However, we provide evidence that consumers’ sense of self is fragile and under certain circumstances they can feel incompetent for essentially random and uncontrollable negative outcomes. Future research examining consumer reactions to firm-caused dissatisfaction should consider these findings and how feelings of incompetence can influence their reactions and future behaviors.

REFERENCES


