How Consumption Experience Valence and Perceived Assortment Size Interact to Shape Word-Of-Mouth Sharing

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We propose that consumers are more likely to share positive (negative) experiences with others after choosing from assortments perceived as larger (smaller). Four experiment provide evidence for the effect and the underlying role of consumers’ feelings of pride resulting from the interaction between consumption experience valence and perceived assortment size.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

One dimension of word-of-mouth (WOM) that has received ample attention due to its impact in shaping the success or downfall of products is information valence. Following separate investigations of factors encouraging either positive or negative WOM (PWOM or NWOM) in isolation, recent work turned to examine how socio-psychological factors affected the sharing of PWOM and NWOM (De Angelis et al., 2012; Dubois, Bonezzi, and De Angelis, 2016).

This study turns to another key aspect of a consumption experience by examining the extent to which a consumer had access to choices at the time of purchase. We propose that the size of the assortment consumers choose from can shape their tendency to share their positive versus negative experiences. Specifically, we hypothesize that larger, compared to smaller, assortments enhance consumers’ likelihood to share positive experiences but impair consumers’ tendency to share negative experiences. This hypothesis is rooted in the idea that a consumer experiences increasing feelings of control over her decision-making process as the size of the assortment she chooses from increases (e.g., Inesi et al., 2011). As a result, greater (vs. smaller) assortments elicit an internal attribution process whereby a consumer tends to increasingly attribute the outcome of her decision-making to her actions (Weiner 1985). Because attributing outcomes to themselves triggers feelings of pride (or lack thereof; Smith and Lazarus 1993; Tracy and Robins 2007), we propose that perceived assortment size interacts with consumer experience valence to shape feelings of pride. In turn, we expect that consumers’ likelihood to share their positive versus negative experiences will be a function of their feelings of pride. In particular, we posit that consumers having a positive experience might feel increasingly proud as assortment size increases, while those having a negative experience might feel decreasingly proud as assortment size increases. Consequently, consumers will be more (less) likely to engage in WOM as assortment size increases when having positive (negative) consumption experiences.

Experiment 1 aimed to provide initial evidence for the basic effect. One hundred thirty-two respondents were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions (positive vs. negative experience) whereby they recalled and described either a positive or a negative experience. Perceived assortment size was assessed by asking respondents to indicate how many options were available with a product or service. Perceived assortment size increased (.44, t = 2.46, p = .02). Additionally, regression predicting WOM likelihood from feelings of control, experience valence and their interaction revealed a significant interaction between feelings of control and experience valence (b = .20, t = 2.53, p = .01), suggesting that higher levels of feelings of control, compared to lower levels, triggered higher WOM likelihood for positive experiences but lower WOM likelihood for negative experiences.

Experiment 2a (199 respondents) differed from Experiment 1 because we manipulated assortment size. Replicating Experiment 1, we again found the predicted interaction (b = .28, t = 2.39, p = .02). Importantly, consistent with Experiment 2a, results revealed that the effect of assortment size on feelings of control was positive and significant (b = .62, t = 5.78, p < .001), while the regression predicting WOM likelihood from feelings of control, experience valence and their interaction revealed a significant interaction between feelings of control and experience valence (b = .25, t = 3.56, p < .01). Finally, Experiment 3 (132 respondents), tested whether trait-level pride (Tracy and Robins 2007) interacted with perceived assortment size and experience valence to affect WOM likelihood. Results showed a significant three-way interaction effect (b = .09, t = 2.07, p = .04). Additionally, simple slope analysis (Aiken and West 1991) revealed that at mean and high levels of pride the interaction of perceived assortment size and experience valence was positive and significant (b = .16, t = 2.10, p = .04; b = .32, t = 3.17, p < .01), while it was not significant at low levels of pride (b = .01, t = -.02, ns). These results suggest that the basic effect shown in Experiment 1 occurs for consumers with higher rather than lower levels of dispositional pride.

Overall, this research advances knowledge of when individuals are more likely to share positive versus negative WOM by testing the role of the size of the assortment at the time of purchase in shaping feelings of pride and ultimately guiding what information consumers are likely to share.

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