Word of Mouth As Compensatory Consumer Behavior: Can Talking About Brands Restore Consumers’ Self-Concepts After Self-Threat?

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This research shows that following self-threat, consumers’ self-concepts can be restored by spreading word of mouth (WOM) about a brand that is symbolically congruent with the threat domain. Psychological discomfort is shown to mediate this relationship and self-esteem serves as a moderator.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Self-threat occurs when a person encounters information that calls into question the positivity of a given self-view (Gao et al. 2009), resulting in psychological discomfort (Festinger 1957). Symbolic self-completion (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1981) is one strategy (Mandel et al. 2017) consumers deploy in response. As supported by the compensatory consumption literature, products can be consumed for psychological value (Ariely and Norton 2009) and their symbolic associations incorporated into consumers’ self-concepts (Belk 1988).

Self-threat also affects consumers’ decision to spread WOM. People are more likely to spread WOM about symbolic products (Chung and Darke 2006) that signal identity-related aspects of their self-concepts (Berger 2014), and to spread WOM after self-threat (Packard and Wooten 2013). We propose that WOM can actually resolve specific, self-concept related self-threats when spread about a brand that is symbolically congruent with the threat domain, termed a restorative brand. Under self-threat, consumers who spread WOM about a restorative (non-restorative) brand should exhibit higher (lower) self-perceptions on the threatened attribute (H1). Further, psychological discomfort should mediate the interactive effect of threat and brand restorativeness on self-perceptions (H2). Evidence suggests that self-esteem may moderate the proposed effects as low-esteem consumers feel lower self-efficacy (Sherer et al. 1982) and exhibit stronger attachment to symbolic brands (Dommmer et al. 2013). Under self-threat, spreading WOM about a restorative (non-restorative) brand will enhance (reduce) self-perceptions on the threatened attribute through psychological discomfort for low self-esteem consumers (H3).

Study 1: Participants (n = 128, average age 36, 46% male) were randomly assigned to a condition where they wrote about a time they acted ethically (no self-threat) or unethically (self-threat). Participants were also randomly assigned to a restorative (picture of Brawny paper towel packages) or non-restorative (picture of Brawny paper towels with original packaging) brand condition. All participants spread WOM by commenting on a mock Brawny Facebook page. Participants rated self-perceptions of ethics using items adapted from Reed, Aquino, and Levy (2007; α = .60).

A two-way ANOVA with threat and brand (IVs) and self-perceptions of ethics (DV) revealed a direct effect of threat (F(1, 124) = 13.82, p < .001; no threat: M = 5.56, SD = .81; self-threat: M = 4.97, SD = 1.07), qualified by a significant threat by brand interaction (F(1, 124) = 3.77, p = .05). Probing the interaction reveals that self-threatened consumers exhibit higher self-perceptions on the threatened attribute after spreading WOM about a restorative (M = 5.21, SD = .96) versus non-restorative (M = 4.67, SD = 1.14) brand (F(1, 59) = 4.01, p = .05). Self-perceptions of self-threatened consumers who spread WOM about a restorative brand did not significantly differ from consumers who did not experience self-threat (p = .18), supporting H1.

Study 2: Participants (n = 140, average age 36, 48% male) completed a fake IQ assessment and were randomly assigned to a self-threat condition. Half were told their IQ was above average (no threat), half were told their IQ was below average (threat). Participants were randomly assigned to a restorative (Special K cereal) or non-restorative (Lucky Charms cereal) brand condition. All participants spread WOM by posting comments to a mock Facebook page for the brand. Participants reported self-perceptions of intelligence (α = .79) using items adapted from Rick and Schweitzer (2012). Psychological discomfort (α = .81) was measured with items adapted from Elliot and Devine (1994).

A two-way ANOVA with threat and brand as IVs, covariate age, and self-perceptions as DV resulted in no main effect for brand (p = .50) or threat condition (p = .36), but the predicted threat by brand interaction emerged (F(1, 135) = 5.19, p < .05), replicating the same pattern observed in study 1.

PROCESS model 7 (Hayes 2013; 5,000 bootstrap resamples) supports psychological discomfort as a mediator of the threat by brand interaction self-perceptions (index of moderated mediation: .54, 95% CI = [.1038, 1.054]). The interaction affects psychological discomfort (b = -1.19, t = -2.47, p < .05) and psychological discomfort reduces self-perceptions (b = -.45, t = -9.68, p < .001). For the non-restorative brand, the indirect effect suggests psychological discomfort explains threat’s negative effect on self-perceptions (.57, 95% CI = [-.9741, -.2211]), but was not significant for the restorative brand (.03, 95% CI = [-.3378, .2575]). Self-threat negatively affects self-perceptions through heightened psychological discomfort when WOM is spread about a non-restorative brand, partially supporting H2.

Study 3 mirrors study 1, except all participants (n = 224, average age 38, 40% male) were exposed to self-threat and completed three items measuring trait self-esteem (α = .87; Rosenberg 1965), along with items measuring self-perceptions (α = .64) and psychological discomfort (α = .82).

PROCESS model 1 was significant (R² = .17; F(3, 220) = 15.45, p < .001). Direct effects of brand (b = 1.20, t = 2.24, p < .05) and self-esteem (b = .41, t = 5.85, p < .001) were qualified by an interaction (b = -1.19, t = 2.02, p < .05) revealing a significant positive influence of restorative brand WOM on self-perceptions when self-esteem is at or below 4.73 (b = .29, t = 1.98, p < .05). PROCESS model 7 (5,000 bootstrap resamples) supported moderated mediation (.05, 95% CI = [-.1111, -.0045]). The interaction significantly affects psychological discomfort (b = -.24, t = 2.21, p < .05), reducing self-perceptions (b = -.21, t = -4.47, p < .001). For low self-esteem consumers, spreading WOM about the restorative brand positively affects self-perceptions by reducing psychological discomfort (indirect effect: .08, 95% CI = [.0023, .2051]), supporting H3 and clarifying H2.

In closing, the current research reveals that following self-threat, spreading WOM about restorative brands can repair consumers’ self-concepts. This effect is shown to be mediated by psychological discomfort and moderated by self-esteem. It would be beneficial for future research to examine how these findings extend to the purchase of restorative brands. Similarly, it would be advantageous for research to examine additional moderators to these effects and to compare the current results to instances where WOM is not spread.

REFERENCES


