When Words Hurt - Emotional Contagion in a Company's Facebook Apology

Madeline Barth, University of Mannheim, Germany
Elisa Konya-Baumbach, University of Mannheim, Germany

The research investigates the contagion of negative emotions in corporate apologies in Facebook using an online experiment and an eye tracking study. The results reveal that while apologies reduce consumers’ sadness triggered by a crisis, emotional contagion attenuates this mitigating effect and negatively influences consumers’ willingness to forgive the company.

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Sustaining Behavioural Change: The Power of Positive Emotions
H.P. Samanthika Gallage, Nottingham University, UK
Teresa Heath, Nottingham University, UK
Caroline Tynan, Nottingham University, UK

INTRODUCTION
This study explores emotions experienced by consumers who give up excessive drinking and considers how these emotions help consumers to sustain their healthy consumption behaviours. Current studies mostly focus on changing risky consumption behaviours (excessive drinking, smoking and gambling), rather than sustaining the positive behavioural change, which is a key challenge for consumers (Peattie and Peattie 2009; Scammon et al. 2011). Negative emotional appeals such as guilt and fear have been widely used to discourage these unhealthy consumption behaviours (Antonetti, Baines, and Walker 2015; De Hoog, Stroebe, and de Wit 2007). However, negative emotional appeals can encourage maladaptive responses that could be damaging for healthy behaviour (Hastings, Stead, and Webb 2004) and some authors urge the use of positive emotions such as hope, love, and excitement to sustain a behavioural change (Peter and Honea 2012). Yet, we know little about positive emotions experienced by consumers who transit from a risky behaviour to a less risky behaviour (Fry 2014) and how these emotions may help them to sustain this change. As this study demonstrates, these emotions can be fundamental in the process of achieving and sustaining responsible drinking behaviour.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
Alcohol has consistently been promoted through fun and excitement (Smith and Foxcroft 2009), which has made excessive drinking common amongst young people in the UK (Hackley et al. 2013; Measham and Brain 2005). Thus, alcohol is embedded in the culture of the UK (Piacentini and Banister 2006) and thereby young people are “invited to binge” (Haydock 2015, 1057). Countering this dominant practice is challenging for individuals because it can lead to their stigmatisation (Piacentini and Banister 2006) or exclusion (Cherrier and Gurrieri 2013). While this was found to cause negative emotions such as tension, shame (Piacentini, Chatzidakis, and Banister 2012), stress and agony (Fry 2014), the positive emotions that emerge while opposing dominant consumption practices have been neglected. Nevertheless, resisting overconsumption can lead to happiness (Cherrier 2009) and life satisfaction (Boujbel and D’Astous 2012). Peter and Honea (2012) also suggested that positive emotions associated with optimism are a key driver for sustaining a pro-social behaviour.

Alcohol consumption as a symbolic act (Szmigin et al. 2011) helps define young drinkers’ self- and social identities, and their behaviour (Fry 2010; Piacentini et al. 2012). In these circumstances, for individuals to alter and sustain responsible alcohol consuming practices they need to change their social roles and social groups (Piacentini et al. 2012) and develop a new identity contrary to the dominant culture (Fry 2014). According to theories of social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1986) and self-identity (Stryker 1968) these new identities require recognition and validation from others. Success or failure in enacting a new identity may cause strong emotional reactions (Stets and Burke 2014). Thus, gaining validation for an identity or meeting one’s identity expectations produces positive emotions and failure to do so produces negative emotions (Turner and Stets 2005). Therefore, in this situation positive emotions emerge when individuals are able to validate their sober self (Cast and Burke 2002) and when individuals are able to achieve a match between an ideal sober self with the actual performance of the self (Turner and Stets 2005). Positive emotions linked to the sober identity strengthens the commitment towards that identity (Stryker 1980), which will aid in sustaining the behavioural change.

METHODOLOGY
We adapted a narrative methodology which is suited to deep exploration of: context-specific consumption (Shankar, Elliott, and Goulding 2001), such as drinking alcohol; turning points in life (Barrios, Piacentini, and Salciuviene 2012); and identity-related concepts (Ricoeur 2002). Data was collected using narrative interviews (Fry 2010; Szmigin et al. 2008) with 25 self-reported ex-binge drinkers who had given up excessive drinking for 6 months or more (Peter and Honea 2012). Taking the view that reality is socially constructed (Hudson and Ozone 1988), we let participants elaborate on the construction of their emotions (Shankar et al. 2001) when countering the UK heavy-drinking culture. Participants were aged 19-35 and interviews lasted 90-150 minutes. In order to enrich narratives and obtain insights about emotional changes (Tenn, Suls, and Affleck 1991), an event-based online diary was also used. The 25 interviewees were asked to note their alcohol-related experiences and associated emotions, over a period of 8 weeks (Burton and Nesbit 2015). We conducted a thematic analysis of the data (Davis and Francis 2014). After gaining a grasp of the overall shape of the data (Riessman 2008), we coded it using NVivo 11 (Ryan and Bernard 2003; Spiggle 1994). Codes were guided by identity theories, and the emotions literature (Miles and Huberman 1994). Some categories emerged from the data itself (Miles and Huberman 1994). Finally, the themes were discussed and modified by the three researchers until reaching a consensus (Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION
This section explains emotions experienced by individuals who give up excessive drinking. Participants experienced emotions that are complex and sometimes “bittersweet" (Price et al. 2000, 186). In most cases, happiness and pride were prominent. These emotions were described as enduring or self-fulfilling and enabled participants to overcome negative emotions such as sadness, loneliness and nostalgia. Equally, feelings of hope and relief about their “new”, “better” selves were intertwined with embarrassment, shame and guilt about their past drinking selves. As our participants indicate, the positive emotions experienced helped them to maintain their new sober, or responsible drinking, behaviour.

Self-Fulfilling Happiness as Opposed to Temporary Enjoyment
Most of our participants reported experiencing happiness as a result of quitting excessive alcohol consumption. Mogilner, Aaker, and Kamvar (2012) suggested that happiness can be twofold: on the one hand associated with excitement, elation and enthusiasm; and on the other with calmness, peacefulness and serenity. Our participants’ experiences seem to be of the latter type; for example, Jacob says:

*I think I am definitely happy now. Hmmmm I feel that I am wasting less time because of being hungover. (…) I guess if you see on social media you see pictures of people that post when they..."