Satisfaction-Driven Nonresponse Bias in Consumer Feedback Surveys: Venting, Reciprocation and Exiting

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Survey completion is a critical form of consumer engagement for brands. Little research has examined why consumers respond to feedback surveys, and whether response likelihood is systematically linked to satisfaction. Anecdote and WOM predict an extreme satisfaction response bias, however we find and explicate a positive satisfaction response bias.

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SATISFACTION-DRIVEN NONRESPONSE BIAS IN CONSUMER FEEDBACK SURVEYS: VENTING, RECIPROCATION AND EXITING

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Brands use surveys to better understand satisfaction, an integral metric for predicting numerous downstream consumer behaviors including engagement (Brodie et al. 2011), loyalty, WOM, and purchase behavior (Anderson and Sullivan 1990; Mittal et al. 2005; Mittal and Kamakura 2001; Pallas, Mittal and Groening 2014). Given that consumers opt in to completing surveys, non-response bias related to satisfaction is a great concern. Existing research on Word of Mouth (WOM) and anecdotal evidence suggests the most and least satisfied customers are most likely to complete surveys, i.e. an extreme satisfaction response bias (Anderson 1998). However, research in consumer behavior also gives reason to predict either a positive or negative satisfaction response bias. In the following, we review the literature on consumers’ motives for survey completion with respect to their satisfaction, we put forth a theory of consumer satisfaction survey response bias, and report four studies which test this theory.

The literature provides support for a negative response bias through the fact that greater levels of dissatisfaction lead to an increased likelihood of complaining to the brand (Singh 1988) and increased probability of engaging in negative WOM (Hennig-Thurau 2004; Oliver 1997; Nyer 1999; Sundaram et al., 1998; Sweeney et al. 2005; Wetzer, Zeelenberg and Pieters 2007; Szymanski and Henard 2001). Research on complaining and negative WOM finds that they are expressions of consumers’ desire to vent anger and frustrations (Nyer 1999) regarding an underwhelming experience and are driven by a desire for catharsis (Alicke et al., 1992; Berkowitz, 1970). While completing a survey may offer dissatisfied consumers an opportunity to vent normally achieved through complaining or negative WOM, research suggests that the completion of a survey will not offer satisfied consumers the same value that is normally achieved by engaging in positive WOM. Specifically, because survey completion is anonymous, the topic is set by the solicitor (East, Hammond, and Lomax 2008), and the communication is one-directional, survey completion lacks the necessary means for impression management (Berger 2014).

Past work also provides reason to anticipate an extreme response bias. In addition to the fact that dissatisfaction may motivate survey completion as a way of venting, satisfaction may cause customers to feel obligated to reciprocate for past benefits a brand has provided. In fact, consumers engage in positive WOM as a way of helping the brand (Hennig-Thurau 2004; Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster, 1998) or complimenting the brand (Erickson and Eckrich 2001). We take this one step further and suggest that consumers complete a survey about a brand not simply to help the brand, but to also comply with social norms (Homans 1958). In social interactions balance is achieved through a reciprocal relationship (Bagozzi 1995; Gouldner 1960; Oliver and Swann 1989); when a brand exceeds a consumer’s expectations, thereby increasing satisfaction (Parasuraman et al. 1985; 1988), the consumer will feel obligated to reciprocate.

Notably, a third mechanism exists which may affect consumer’s behavior. Specifically, research on complaining behavior finds that complaining is a function of consumers’ ability and motivation; to complain to a brand consumers must believe has a favorable cost-benefit ratio (Oliver 1997). However, the costs and benefits of this option compete with two other options. The consumer can remain quietly loyal to the company, or they can ‘exit’ their relationship with the brand (Andreson 1988; Hirschman 1970; Maute and Forrester 1993; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). Given that exiting a brand relationship provides a substitute for complaining (Solnick and Hemenway 1992) and helps the consumer find a new solution, one should expect consumers that have the option to exit a brand to do so (a form of venting) as their dissatisfaction increases.

Based on this literature posit that when deciding whether to complete a survey about a brand three forces will influence consumers’ completion likelihood. First, increases in satisfaction will increase a consumer’s likelihood to respond to a survey about a brand, due to a greater perceived obligation to reciprocate (Homans 1958). Second, decreases in satisfaction will result in a desire to vent (Hennig-Thurau et. al. 2004), which can increase a consumers’ likelihood to respond to the survey. However, in most scenarios, consumers will choose to vent not by completing the survey, but instead by exiting their relationship with the brand (Szymanski and Henard 2001). Therefore, we anticipate a positive satisfaction response bias in most scenarios as it is almost always possible for a consumer to exit the brand relationship, but we anticipate an extreme satisfaction response bias when consumers cannot exit the brand.

STUDY 1

In study 1 we demonstrate that willingness to engage in WOM and willingness to complete a survey are differently related to satisfaction. To do so, we measured consumers’ willingness to complete a survey for their cable/internet provider or their willingness to engage in WOM about their cable internet provider, and consumer’s satisfaction.

METHODS

Participants in this study were 2018 subjects who were recruited from MTurk (53% female and had a mean age of 32). Consumers identified their wireless company in a drop down menu. Participants were asked “Imagine [] asked you to complete a survey, about their products and services, how likely are you to complete it?” or “How likely are you to at some point tell friends or family about your experiences with []?” (seven point scale anchored by very unlikely and very likely). Participants then indicated their satisfaction with the company on an 11-point scale (anchored by very dissatisfied and very satisfied).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A regression analysis revealed an interaction of satisfaction and condition (WOM vs survey completion), $\beta = .07; t(2015) = 2.71, p < .01$. Further analysis is withheld for brevity, but visual inspection reveals WOM induced an extreme response bias, and survey completion induced a positive response bias.

STUDY 2

In study 2 an on campus corporation run by students sent a survey to over 3000 students as part of a larger effort to understand their customers. The sample included research pool participants. After a one week delay, all participants from the research pool answered a single question about their satisfaction with the campus corporation, as part of larger research session. Student’s likelihood to respond to
the voluntary survey was analyzed according to the satisfaction data they provided in the lab.

Methods
In this study 787 subjects (49% female, average age 20) that were registered in a student subject pool were emailed a survey from a university campus organization. For the analysis, participants were coded according to whether or not they completed the voluntary emailed survey. After 1 week participants completed a series of surveys, one of which had a set of questions asked about their satisfaction with six university related entities including the campus corporation. The measure was “How satisfied are you with each of the following?” (seven point scale anchored by very dissatisfied and very satisfied).

Results and Discussion
A binary logistic regression revealed a significant positive relationship between the measured independent variable, satisfaction, and the dependent variable survey completion, $\beta = .243$ Wald $\chi^2(1) = 9.71, p < .01$.

Study 3
In study 3, participants on MTurk were asked to indicate their satisfaction with MTurk while completing an unrelated survey. Participants were then contacted 6 weeks later and asked to complete a voluntary survey regarding their satisfaction with Amazon Mechanical Turk.

Methods
Participants (1567) were recruited from MTurk, (52% were female, average age 31). All participants were paid $0.50 for completing an unrelated survey, at the end of which they were asked to indicate their satisfaction with Amazon Mechanical Turk, “How satisfied are you with Amazon Mechanical Turk?” Responses were provided on a 10 point Scale, anchored by dissatisfied and satisfied. Six weeks later participants received and email requesting that they complete a very short unpaid survey regarding their satisfaction with Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants’ completion of the survey served as the dependent variable.

Results
A binary logistic regression revealed a significant positive relationship between the measured independent variable, satisfaction, and the dependent variable survey completion, $\beta = .07$ Wald $\chi^2(1) = 6.75, p < .05$.

Study 4
Study 4 we sought to investigate the process driving survey completion. We measured participants’ willingness to complete a survey for their wireless provider, their satisfaction with the wireless provider, their agreement that completion would allow them to reciprocate, and their desire to vent by completing the survey.

Methods
Participants in this study were 1936 subjects who were recruited from MTurk (50% female and had a mean age of 31). Consumers identified their wireless company in a drop down menu. Participants were asked “Imagine [wireless company] asked you to complete a survey, about your products and services, how likely are you to complete it?” (seven point scale anchored by very unlikely and very likely). Participants then indicated their satisfaction with the company on an 11-point scale (anchored by very dissatisfied and very satisfied). Next, participants responded to the statement “Completing a survey for [company] would allow me to reciprocate for the benefits they have provided me” on a seven point scale (anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree). Participants then responded to the statement “Completing a survey for [company] would allow me to vent frustrations” on a seven point scale (anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree).

Results and Discussion
A regression was run to determine if the measured independent variable, satisfaction, predicted our dependent variable, willingness to complete a survey. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between satisfaction and likelihood of completing a survey, $\beta = .234$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 58.30, p < .001$.

Mediation analysis was conducted following Process Model 74. Satisfaction served as the independent variable which predicted likelihood to complete a survey, obligation to reciprocate and desire to vent as mediators. The model allowed the effect of the mediators on the dependent variable to be moderated by the independent variable. A bias corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the moderated mediation of the obligation to reciprocate and the desire to vent revealed the mediating effects were moderated by the independent variable based on 10,000 boot strap samples (.01 to .02) and (0.00 to 0.01) respectively. The results reveal that obligation to reciprocate (+) and desire to vent (-) mediate the relationship between satisfaction and response likelihood. Further they reveal in line with our theory obligation to reciprocate is a particularly strong mediator for satisfied consumers and the desire to vent is a particularly strong mediator for dissatisfied consumers.

Study 5a
In study 5a and 5b we manipulate consumers’ satisfaction and ability to exit a brand, to test the prediction that the ability to exit a brand moderates the effect of satisfaction on response likelihood. We predict that for consumers who are able to exit, a positive satisfaction response bias will emerge, and for those not able to exit, an extreme satisfaction response bias will emerge.

In study 5a, consumers read a short scenario regarding their experience with a cable company. Satisfaction was manipulated through service quality and included three levels, dissatisfied, neutral, and satisfied. The manipulation of the ability to exit stated that participants had ‘been with the company for a year but were able to exit or that they had ‘been with the company for a year but that the provider was the only provider in the area.’

Methods
For this study, 364 subjects were recruited for MTurk (50% were female, average age was 30). The study manipulated satisfaction and ability to exit in a 3 x 2 orthogonal design. After reading the scenario, participants first indicated how likely they would be to complete a survey sent by the company in the scenario, “How likely would you be to complete the survey?” (9 point scale, anchored by very unlikely and very likely). They then indicated their satisfaction with the company “How would you rate your satisfaction in this scenario” (7 point scale, anchored by very unsatisfied and very satisfied).

Results
The results indicate the manipulation of satisfaction was successful ($M_{dissatisfied} = 1.6, M_{neutral} = 4.5, M_{satisfied} = 6.2$) F(1, 363) = 194.44, $p < .001$. An ANOVA testing the effect of satisfaction and ability to exit on likelihood to complete a survey revealed a significant interaction, F(2, 363) = 3.02, $p < .05$. T-tests revealed that for consumers that were not able to exit, those who were dissatisfied were more likely to respond to a survey ($M = 6.1$) than those who were neutral ($M = 5.1$), t(121) = 2.1, $p < .05$, and that there was no effect for those who could exit $p > .1$. 

Participants in this study were 1936 subjects who were recruit-
Study 5b

In study 5b, consumers read a short scenario regarding their experience purchasing a TV. Satisfaction was manipulated through product quality included and three levels, dissatisfied, neutral, and satisfied. The ability to exit was operationalized through a manipulation of an option to return the TV (present not present).

Methods

For the study, 242 subjects were recruited for MTurk (53% female, average age 31). The methods closely matched those of study 4a, with a couple exceptions; responses to the likelihood to complete a survey were on a seven point scale and responses to satisfaction with the company were on an 11 point scale (same anchors were used).

Results

The results indicate the manipulation of satisfaction was successful (M_dissatisfied = 2.6, M_neutral = 6.7, M_satisfied = 10.7) F(1, 242) = 1706.07, p < .001. An ANOVA testing the effect of satisfaction and ability to exit on likelihood to complete a survey revealed a significant interaction, F(2, 241) = 4.09, p < .05. T-tests indicated that for consumers who were not able to exit, those who were dissatisfied were more likely to respond to a survey (M = 4.1) than those who were neutral (M = 2.9), t(78) = 3.10, p < .01, and that there was no such effect for those who could exit p > .1.

General Discussion

Together the studies reported here indicate that when consumers are able to exit a brand, there is a positive satisfaction response bias for survey completion. In contrast, the results demonstrate that when consumers cannot exit a brand, an extreme satisfaction response bias exists. We additionally demonstrate that survey completion is driven by and obligation to reciprocate and a desire to vent, the latter of which only drives survey completion when a more attractive alternative option (exiting the brand) is not available.

In addition to demonstrating existing assumptions regarding survey response have been mistaken, this research adds to our understanding of reciprocity between brands and consumers as well as consumer venting behavior. The findings suggest consumers will engage with a brand as an act of reciprocity based on their satisfaction, adding to past research which has found consumers reward firms for their overall effort according to reciprocity norms (Morales 2005). The work also identifies exiting behavior as a form of venting for dissatisfied consumers. Importantly, this reality suggests that brands may frequently miss out on feedback from their dissatisfied consumers, impeding the process of improvement.

REFERENCES


