When Sharing Isn’T Caring: the Influence of Seeking the Best on Sharing Favorable Word of Mouth About Unsatisfactory Purchases

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We find that a goal of attaining the best, or maximizing, enhances consumers’ tendency to share favorable (rather than unfavorable) word of mouth about dissatisfying purchases, in an effort to persuade others to make the same bad purchases, and thereby turn their own objectively poor outcomes into relatively better ones.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Past word of mouth (WOM) research typically finds that, if consumers share WOM with others, it tends to be consistent with actual perceptions (Berger 2014). Thus, a negative consumption experience, such as an unsatisfactory purchase, tends to elicit negative (vs. positive) WOM. In our work, we consider when the opposite may be true. Specifically, we examine the possibility that a goal of attaining the best, or maximizing, enhances consumers’ tendency to share favorable WOM about unsatisfactory purchases.

Prior research demonstrates that when consumers have a goal of attaining the best, they are concerned with not only getting the best, but also being best relative to others (Weaver et al. 2015). When those seeking the best, or maximizers, make an unsatisfying purchase, it signals that they have failed to attain an objectively optimal outcome, which elicits strong negative feelings (e.g., regret; Schwartz et al. 2002). However, their objectively poor decision can still be relatively good if others make the same poor decision, which can be encouraged by speaking favorably about the bad purchase (Berger 2014). Extending this notion, we propose that maximizers (vs. non-maximizers) will be more likely to share favorable WOM about their unsatisfactory purchase, because they want others to make the same poor decision to enhance the relative standing of and subsequent feelings toward their own outcome.

We further posit that maximizers will only exhibit this behavior when sharing WOM with interpersonally close (vs. distant) others, as close others are a more consequential source of comparison (Festinger 1954), making their outcomes especially important in determining the relative standing of consumers’ own choices. Finally, we consider the downstream consequences of maximizers’ conduct, proposing that when they successfully persuade others to make their same poor purchase, they will feel better about their own purchase, but will also experience heightened feelings of guilt because of their deceptive behavior (Hoffman 1982). We tested and found support for our predictions in five studies.

In study 1, participants recalled a past unsatisfactory purchase, then listed either a close friend (close other) or acquaintance (distant other). All participants then reported their likelihood of recommending their purchase (sharing favorable WOM) to the other. They also indicated how much better they expected to feel about their own purchase if the other made the same purchase. Finally, after a filler task, participants reported chronic maximizing tendencies (Diab et al. 2008).

Supporting our predictions, maximizing had no effect on word of mouth in the distant other condition (β = .06, t = .53, p = NS). However, in the close other condition, it enhanced the tendency to share favorable word of mouth about unsatisfying purchases (β = .34, t = 2.83, p < .01). Moreover, this effect was mediated by maximizers’ heightened expectations that they would feel better about their own purchase if close (but not if distant) others made the same purchase (95% CI = .0087 to .0649).

Study 2 manipulated maximizing via an essay task, then asked participants to imagine three scenarios in which an unsatisfactory purchase was either completed or merely considered. After imagining each scenario, participants listed a close other and reported their likelihood of recommending and saying good things about their purchase (favorable WOM) to that other (7-pt scales). Consistent with expectations, when the purchases were completed, participants in the maximizing condition were more likely to share favorable WOM (M = 4.36) than those in the non-maximizing condition (M = 3.68; p < .05). However, this effect was unexpectedly reversed when the purchases were merely considered, as participants in the maximizing condition were marginally less likely to share favorable WOM (M = 3.04) than those in the non-maximizing condition (M = 3.71; p = .07).

Study 3 was similar to study 1, but after listing a close other and indicating their likelihood of saying good things and encouraging the other to make their same unsatisfying purchase (favorable WOM), they also reported their concern with enhancing the relative standing of their purchase, and how much better they expected to feel about their own purchase if the other made the same purchase. As predicted, maximizing promoted the tendency to share favorable WOM about unsatisfying purchases (β = .11, t = 1.94, p < .05), and this effect was mediated by maximizers’ heightened concern with enhanced relative standing, which led them to believe they would feel better about their purchase if a close other made the same purchase (indirect effect = .019, 95% CI = .0015 to .0436).

Study 4 replicated past studies in an actual choice context, and considered the downstream consequences of maximizers’ behavior. Participants (students) reported chronic maximizing tendencies, then completed a pen task in which they chose a pen from two options, learned their chosen pen was supposedly inferior (unsatisfying), and then anonymously shared WOM (how favorable their own pen was) with a purported fellow student, who would later choose from the same assortment, and whose choice would be revealed. Participants also indicated their expected decision regret if the fellow student chose the same pen. Supporting predictions, maximizing enhanced the tendency to share favorable WOM (β = .33, t = 2.52, p < .05), because maximizers expected their decision regret would be reduced if the fellow student chose their pen (indirect effect = .095, 95% CI = .0026 to .2830). Following a 10-minute delay, participants learned the fellow student had supposedly chosen their pen, and they indicated their actual choice regret, as well as current feelings of guilt. While maximizers’ choice regret was diminished following this information (β = -.36, t = -2.75, p < .01), their guilt was enhanced (β = .28, t = 2.07, p < .05).

Study 5 was identical to study 4, except it manipulated whether the purported fellow student would choose between participants’ pen and a superior or an inferior alternative. In the former condition, maximizing’s positive effect on WOM was replicated (β = .37, t = 3.06, p < .01), but in the latter condition, it was attenuated (β = .007, t = .05, p = NS).

REFERENCES