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The Review-Writing Effect: Writing a Review Amplifies Evaluations and Connections More Than Rating Does

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Consumers are asked to evaluate more experiences and products than ever before. But how does expressing their views in these feedback requests affect them? A series of online and lab studies show that writing reviews impacts consumers' retrospective evaluations. The effect is driven by evaluative clarity and interaction focus.

[to cite]:

Matthias Fuchs and Gerald Häubl (2020) , "The Review-Writing Effect: Writing a Review Amplifies Evaluations and Connections More Than Rating Does", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 48, eds. Jennifer Argo, Tina M. Lowrey, and Hope Jensen Schau, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 340-341.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/2661691/volumes/v48/NA-48>

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The Review-Writing Effect: Writing a Review Amplifies Evaluations and Connections More Than Rating Does

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The era of ubiquitous consumer feedback solicitations is upon us: When buying products online, consuming meals in a canteen, or going through airport security, one would be hard-pressed not to be asked to constantly rate and review.

For managers, the appeal of constantly measuring consumers' satisfaction with their offerings seems clear. By better understanding what consumers think, they can react and improve their products and experiences. But is the same true for the consumer? Are quick and easy feedback requests advisable from a consumer perspective? In particular, how does writing reviews impact consumers' mental states when compared to rating the same product?

Prior work has shown writing to lead to a search for meaning and understanding through its syntax: Writing organizes memories by forcing writers to build causal structures into their disclosures (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, and Dickerhoof 2006; Singer 2004; Smyth, True, and Souto 2001). This constitutes the first hypothesized psychological process ignited by review-writing: Compared to rating, we argue that review-writing can increase evaluative clarity (i.e., consumers' clarity of their evaluation of a product or experience, based on "understanding" by Moore 2012), which in turn polarizes their views.

In addition to the first process, we propose that review-writing sets consumers' focus on the social aspect of the interaction. This phenomenon has been referred to as "interpersonal involvement" (Chafe and Danielewicz 1987; Jahandarie 1999; Tannen 1985) or "interaction focus" (Shen and Sengupta 2018). We hypothesize that interaction focus strengthens their connection to the producer (based on self-brand connection by Escalas 2004), which constitutes the second hypothesized psychological process ignited by review-writing: Compared to rating, we argue that review-writing may lead to a greater interaction focus, which induces a stronger connection to the producer, which increases retrospective enjoyment.

Lastly, we derive a theoretical moderator of the review-writing effect from global matching models of memory (Kelly and West 2017). According to these models, "human memory is a vast collection of episodic memory traces, each of which is a record of an event or experience" (Hintzman 1984, p. 96). Following this theory, review-writing should encode more memory traces than rating does. At the same time, the absolute number of extant memory traces associated with a product can conceptually be viewed as familiarity with the product (Dougherty, Gettys, and Ogden 1999). This leads us to our prediction that the review-writing effect will be less pronounced for familiar products and experiences.

The two psychological processes ignited by review-writing and their moderator, familiarity, are summarized in these hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Review-writing increases retrospective enjoyment of the reviewed product or experience.

Hypothesis 2: The positive effect of review-writing on retrospective enjoyment (H1) is attenuated when consumers' familiarity with the product or experience is high.

142 MTurk workers participated in study 1 in exchange for payment. Participants were randomly assigned to either the review-writing or the rating condition. Participants were asked to watch an enjoyable video ("Minions – The Competition"). While watching the video, they were asked to indicate their momentary enjoyment every 30 seconds. In the review-writing (rating) condition, participants read that the producer of the video is asking them for written (rated) feedback on the experience's systematic cues (Chaiken 1980; Petty and Cacioppo 1986), which were identified in a pre-study. As hypothesized, there was a significant effect of review-writing on retrospective enjoyment ($F(1, 138) = 2.43, p = .04$, using momentary enjoyment as a linear and quadratic covariate in this and all subsequent ANCOVAs, Estimated Marginal $M_{\text{RevWrit}} = 5.51, M_{\text{Rating}} = 5.20$).

244 MTurk workers participated in study 2 in exchange for payment, which was a 2 (review-writing or rating) \times 2 (familiar or unfamiliar song) between-subjects study. In the unfamiliar song condition, study participants listened to the song "Loving is Easy" by the artist "Rex Orange County" and in the familiar song condition, participants listened to the song "Happy" by "Pharrell Williams". The study was identical to study 1 in all other aspects. A t-test revealed a significant difference in aided awareness between the popular and unpopular song ($M_{\text{familiar}} = 6.05, M_{\text{unfamiliar}} = 1.82, t(218) = 23.066, p < .001$, no covariates). As hypothesized, a 2 \times 2 ANCOVA revealed a significant interaction of review-writing and familiarity on retrospective enjoyment ($F(1, 238) = 6.12, p = .01$). In the unfamiliar condition, review-writing increased retrospective enjoyment ($M_{\text{RevWrit}} = 5.62$) versus rating ($M_{\text{Rating}} = 5.14$). In the familiar condition, review-writing did not influence retrospective enjoyment ($M_{\text{RevWrit}} = 5.53$) compared to rating ($M_{\text{Rating}} = 5.68$).

104 students at a Swiss university participated in study 3 in exchange for payment, which was a lab study. Participants tasted a mostly unfamiliar, foreign brand of jam. Study 3 differed from the previous studies in two ways: First, we used retrospective evaluation as an extension of our dependent variable. Second, at the end of the study, participants could choose to reduce their payment by 0.50 CHF (\$ 0.53) and receive a 28g miniature jar of jam of the same brand (36% chose to purchase the jam). A 2 \times 2 ANCOVA revealed that the effect of review-writing near-significantly interacted with previous awareness of the foreign brand ($F(1, 99) = 3.89, p = .05$). When participants were unfamiliar with the brand ($M_{\text{Fam}} - SD_{\text{Fam}}$), review-writing increased their retrospective evaluation ($M_{\text{RevWrit}} = 5.24, M_{\text{Rating}} = 4.94$). This effect subsided when participants were familiar with the brand ($M_{\text{RevWrit}} = 5.16; M_{\text{Rating}} = 5.06$). A logistic regression revealed that retrospective evaluation was a significant predictor of jam purchase ($b = .77, p < .01$). As retrospective evaluation increased by one unit, the probability of purchasing the jam increased by 68%.

This research features 4 major contributions: First, while previous research has focused on consumer feedback from the perspective of managers, we do so from the perspective of consumers. Second, this research more generally advances our understanding of how articulating one's views for others affects internal states. Third, this research extends the application of global matching models of human memory. Lastly, this research contributes by showing that also the mode of recording answers impacts mere measurement effects (not only measuring vs. not measuring).

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