Anxiety and Ephemeral Social Media Use in Negative eWOM Creation

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Abstract

Consumers regularly share negative eWOM regarding brand experiences, yet the effects of emotions in this process are unknown. Using the framework of Stimulus–Organism–Response theory we operationalized our study in the context of ephemeral (self-deleting) social media. Across two studies, consumers experienced anxiety during the creation of eWOM, particularly after considering a negative brand experience. Anxiety was manifest in consumers’ decisions to reduce the time availability of online messages and appeased by the use of ephemeral social media. This behavior, in theory, reduces the threat to consumers’ impression management goals caused by sharing negative eWOM within their social networks. Further evidence is found as consumers limit (lengthen) message availability a) when including less (more) positive words in their messages, or b) when sharing about non-economic (economic) experiences. We discuss the implications of consumer emotion and anxiety on the availability of eWOM in social media.

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Keywords: Anxiety; eWOM; Ephemeral social media; Emotion; Negativity; Impression management; Snapchat; Instagram

Introduction

Consumers often share emotional experiences in social media, including those stimulated by brands. One’s favorite sports team losing may lead to sadness, an electronic device with a faulty part may lead to frustration, or an unpleasant interaction with a customer service representative may promote anger and the desire to share the experience. When consumers encounter negative brand experiences and subsequent emotions, they respond with coping behavior (Duhachek 2005). Coping behavior may include creating electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to complain (Stephens and Gwinner 1998) or voicing sentiment to gain benefits such as social support (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). While emotions that motivate and follow eWOM have been studied, the observation of emotion in the act of creating eWOM is a missing element. We address this in our investigation of the role of consumer anxiety in online sharing about negative brand experiences.

Anxiety, or feelings of anxiousness, apprehension or worry (Brooks and Schweitzer 2011) are widespread in online environments (Caplan 2007; Correa, Hinsley, and De Zuniga 2010), particularly among social media users (Andreassen et al. 2016). Anxiety is a negative emotional response to a stressor or threat (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). In line with the literature, we define social media as an interactive communication platform for content creation and sharing within social networks (VanMeter, Grisaffe, and Chonko 2015). The interactive component suggests anxiety is salient when creating eWOM because individuals who share content online expect their posts to be scrutinized by their audiences (Krämer and Winter 2008), thus the prospect of scrutiny produces anxiety as individuals compose messages. Furthermore, we suggest the creation and sharing of negative eWOM (i.e., eWOM containing negative sentiment) is particularly anxiety producing because negative messages are likely to conflict with individuals’ online impression management goals. The need for self-presentation as part of impression management...
(Berger 2014) is typical for consumers (Fiske 2001) and may be amplified online (Suler 2004). Thus, anxiety would be prevalent when sharing negative eWOM especially as negative information generally weighs more heavily on judgements (Anderson 1965; Hancock and Dunham 2001).

We operationalize our study in the context of ephemeral social media for two purposes. Ephemeral social media are online communication platforms in which the user predetermines the lifespan of a message/post, or message availability. One objective is to explore how anxiety and negativity manifest in consumers’ choice of message availability. The other goal is to provide insights into consumer behavior for this emerging genre of social media that to date has received little inclusion in empirical studies. In an ephemeral social media feed, a user creates eWOM that will be erased automatically or after a designated time predetermined by the user. Snapchat is the most valuable of those platforms in which the user predetermines the primary feature (i.e., self-deleting messages) to carry out a common task (i.e., creating and sharing eWOM). Little empirical work has been conducted in ephemeral social media contexts due to the difficulty of examining transient content (Piwek and Joinson 2016). Our study fills multiple gaps by exploring consumers’ negative emotion following a brand experience, the role of anxiety in creating and sharing eWOM, and ephemeral technology use behavior.

**Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses**

We operationalize negative eWOM as consumers’ social media messages related to a brand experience that contain negative sentiment. Our focus on negative eWOM is not limited to complaining. A large proportion of consumers contact brands’ customer service using social media (80%) and a portion of those may complain (20%) (Morrison 2016). However, complaining may occur for different purposes and may be directed at multiple parties (viz. friends, strangers and brands) even when the consumer is satisfied with the brand (McGraw, Warren, and Kan 2014). Thus, we emphasize negative eWOM rather than solely complaining behavior because eWOM is a general indicator of customer engagement (Van Doorn et al. 2010) that brands actively monitor and encompasses more than complaints.

Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) S–O–R theory proposes that the environment encompasses stimuli (S) that alter an individual’s internal disposition, or organism (O), that results in a conscious outward response (R). Consumer behavior studies have utilized S–O–R theory to investigate the influence of psychological variables related to the environment on individuals. For example, in a retail store environment, stimuli (social, ambient and design characteristics) may alter consumers’ organismic state (level of arousal), leading to a response (making a purchase) (Chang, Eckman, and Yan 2011). Other studies have utilized S–O–R theory to investigate how individuals browse websites (Eroglu, Machleit, and Davis 2001; Kim and Lennon 2013; Richard and Chandra 2005). S–O–R theory is applicable to our study because one’s experience with a brand is a relevant stimulus to induce emotion regarding the brand (i.e., organismic reaction) which may be expressed in eWOM (i.e., behavioral response).

We created the research model in Fig. 1 to examine the effects of brand experience on task-related emotion (i.e., anxiety when creating eWOM), message negativity and the availability of a
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