The determinants of approval of online consumer revenge

Gisèle de Campos Ribeiro, Raphaëlle Butori, Emmanuelle Le Nagard

ESSEC Business School, France

A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Because of its audience and ease of use, the Internet is a particularly powerful tool for spreading the vindictive messages of highly unsatisfied customers who wish to harm companies’ reputations.

This article aims to identify the determinants of bystanders’ approval of an online vindictive message and to assess the impact of this approval on their intention to forward the message to other Internet users. We conduct three studies to show that 1) bystanders’ approval of the vindictive message explains their intention to forward it, 2) the approval of the message is related neither to the balance between the initial harm suffered by the avenging consumer and the consequences of his/her revenge on the company, nor to the presence of apologies from the company; rather it is related to bystander consumers’ empathy with the avenger and their attribution of blame to the company as well as their previous purchasing experience.

1. Introduction and context

In September 2013, a passenger, Hasan Syed, lost his luggage when flying with British Airways; the airline was unable to give any information as to the whereabouts of the lost bags. Syed then spent almost 1000 dollars sponsoring a tweet to 77,000 of the brand’s followers denouncing the company’s inefficiency in the following terms: @BritishAirways is the worst airline ever. Lost my luggage and even can’t track it down Absolutely pathetic #British Airways. Six hours after the tweet went live and was picked up by news website Mashable, it had been read by thousands of Twitter users, retweeted and commented on.1

In July 2014, Ryan Block, an American Internet entrepreneur and his wife Veronica Belmont attempted to disconnect their Comcast service over the telephone and were repeatedly blocked by the Comcast representative in a call which lasted 18 min. The last 8 min of this phone call were recorded by Mr. Block and posted to Reddit; it immediately went viral across the Internet. The story was mentioned by several media, including Time.2 It is also on Ryan Block’s Wikipedia page.

These examples show how two highly dissatisfied customers used the media to denounce companies’ failure to deal with their dissatisfaction, stating the facts and pointing out the company’s responsibility for the loss incurred. Consumers like Hasan Syed or Ryan Block, whose outpourings express the wish to harm the brand’s reputation after being dissatisfied, are far from isolated examples.

The risk of having unsatisfied customers express their displeasure is a big one according to Arizona State University’s 2015 Customer Rage Survey: two-thirds of all complaint respondents said they were very or extremely upset, 86% shared their story with friends or other people, and 10% threatened to contact the media. Moreover, between 2011 and 2015, online posting of customer problems increased significantly from 19% to 30% on social networking sites, and from 1% to 3% on social media sites (where pictures or videos can be posted).3 By going public with the reason for their dissatisfaction, whether on Facebook, other social media, a specific website or a video, and by clearly pointing to the company’s responsibility for their dissatisfaction, discontented consumers display their desire to harm the company concerned. This wish to harm in response to a loss incurred is typical of the phenomenon of revenge and finds fertile ground on Internet, where messages can be not only seen by other Internet users, but also spread very easily. Such vengeful messages can therefore be considered particularly dangerous weapons against companies’ reputation and brand image. There are two reasons for this. First, consumers exposed to online revenge may be directly influenced by this and may alter their attitude towards the company concerned. For example, Kucuk (2008) and Krishnamurthy and Kucuk (2009) showed that anti-brand sites negatively influenced brand value. Second, these same consumers may in turn become actors of revenge by spreading the message on Internet.

1 Wakefield, Jane "Promoted tweet used to complain about British Airways", Technology reporter, 3 September 2013.
3 The Customer Rage Survey (2015) used a representative sample of 1000 American households to study the most serious problems that they experienced with products or services within the last 12 months. https://epicconnections.com/wpcontent/uploads/2016/04/DialogDirect_CustRage_Guide_v5.0.pdf
either through social media platforms or blogs (Grégoire, Salle, & Tripp, 2015; Kucuk, 2010). They then contribute to the venegful message’s effectiveness by increasing its audience.

So far, academic research on revenge against companies has mainly focused on the characteristics and motivations of vindictive consumers (Bechwati & Morrin, 2003; Funches, Markley, & Davis, 2009; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Grégoire, Lauffer, & Tripp, 2010; Obeidat, Xiao, Iyer, & Nicholson, 2017; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Though a recent stream of research has developed around the question of how exposed consumers react to brand denigration initiatives (Kucuk, 2016a) and decode negative messages (Kucuk, 2015), few studies have examined how consumers’ vindictive messages on the Internet influence bystanders’ attitudes and intentions (McGraw, Warren, & Kan, 2015). In this context, the objectives of this article are twofold: 1) to identify the determinants of bystanders’ approval of online vindictive message, and 2) to assess the impact of this approval on the intention to forward such messages to other Internet users.

In the first section, we define the notion of vindictive messages according to the literature. After this, we conduct three studies to show that 1) the intention to forward the vindictive message is indeed explained by approval of this message, 2) the approval of the message is related neither to the balance between the initial harm suffered by the avenging consumer and the consequences of his/her revenge on the company, nor to the presence of apologies from the company; it is rather related to the consumer’s empathy with the avenger and his/her attribution of blame to the company and his/her previous purchasing experience. Finally, we discuss the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of our research.

2. Vindictive messages, definition and effects

An online vindictive message can be defined as the expression, on the Internet, of a consumer’s extreme dissatisfaction towards a consumption experience; the objective of this message is to harm the reputation of the company in question. Because such messages involve the desire to harm in response to a grievance caused by the company, they are a particular type of revenge. But they can also be considered as a special case of negative electronic word-of-mouth.

2.1. Online vindictive messages as a special form of consumer revenge

A vindictive message involves an effort on the part of its author (for example, making a financial effort to buy a sponsored tweet in the case of Hasan Syed). It also involves a deliberate desire to hurt the company’s reputation. In psychology, Aquino, Tripp, and Bies (2006) define revenge as the effort the victim of harm or damage makes to inflict damage, injury, unpleasantness or punishment on the party judged responsible for the harm suffered. Revenge is therefore an aggressive action consisting of seeking to hurt someone who has hurt us. It presupposes an initial prejudice and the desire to inflict harm on the entity responsible, most often to re-establish the balance of the relationship between the parties involved (Huefner & Hunt, 2000). In fact, the desire for revenge only emerges after an injustice has been suffered. It is not a defense against an apparent danger, but the reaction to a previous experience based on the conscious intention to retaliate: a tooth for a tooth (Sievers & Mersky, 2006). Revenge involves the emotion of “getting even”, putting the world back in balance (Solomon, 2013).

In the context of consumption, Bechwati and Morrin (2007, p. 441) define consumers’ desire for revenge as “the retaliatory feelings that consumers feel towards a firm, such as the desire to exert some harm on the firm, typically following an extremely negative purchase experience.” The desire for revenge is thus different from anger, rage, or simple (even strong) consumer dissatisfaction because it incorporates the intention to act.

The act of revenge on a brand or a company may take several forms. Grégoire et al. (2010) suggest classifying the different forms of revenge into two main categories: direct revenge that takes place inside the company, for example at the point of sale, and indirect revenge that takes place outside the company’s boundaries (for example, on the Internet).

For the company, if direct revenge presents a danger through the high pressure it exerts on the personnel in contact with consumers, it nevertheless remains relatively easy to manage, because the consumers at the origin of such acts are easy to identify. On the contrary, indirect revenge is far more difficult to control because it takes place outside the company. The danger comes less from the pressure exerted on personnel than on the results for the company’s reputation, which can rapidly suffer from negative messages spread on Internet (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). By spreading vindictive messages online and seeking the widest audience possible, the avenger makes the company publicly responsible for the prejudice suffered and harms its reputation.

Recent research has shown that perceived control of the online revenge activity, its expected reach and the perceived risk involved are three key factors influencing the choice of Internet for taking revenge (Obeidat et al., 2017). Avengers may also adopt different styles ranging from humorous to more aggressive or malicious attacks. For example, Kucuk (2015) has shown that when the vindictive messages are clear and amusing, the attacked company’s image and identity is hurt more than when the vindictive message is aggressive. This is the tone typically adopted by Dave Carroll in his famous video song about United Airlines.

2.2. Online vindictive messages as a special form of negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)

The growth of Internet has given consumers the opportunity to share their impressions about products, brands, services and companies through discussion forums, UseNet groups, blogs, social networking sites, etc. This form of communication was defined as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in other words, any statement by actual, potential or former customers about a product, brand or company made available to everyone via the Internet (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004).

Consumers engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior for very different reasons: altruism (to prevent others from experiencing the problems they encountered), anxiety reduction (sharing negative experiences with others helps assuage their anger), revenge (detering others from patronizing products or services perceived as uncaring about consumers, uncering about customer complaints and that therefore should not be allowed to operate) and advice seeking (sharing negative experiences to obtain advice on how to resolve their problem) (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998). In the more specific context of negative eWoM, research has shown that consumers share their bad experiences in order to prevent bystanders from patronizing a product or service, but also to take revenge (King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014; Sundaram et al., 1998; Wetzer, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2007). Online vindictive messages are thus a specific form of negative eWoM characterized by their extreme nature and their explicit intention to harm. With that aim, the vengeful consumer highlights a wrong suffered and clearly blames the company for this wrong. S/he also makes an effort to spread the message aiming to maximize the impact of revenge. Different channels can be used to do this, among them, online opinion platforms. In a study on consumers participating in online opinion...
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