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Consumer-to-Brand Sharing: Will Your Clients Share the Bad News?

Chris Hydock, PhD, Zoey Chen, PhD, and Kurt Carlson, PhD

Every successful firm knows that understanding consumer sentiment is essential for success. Thus, there is a significant body of research regarding consumer-to-consumer (word-of-mouth) sharing that examines how an attitude toward a brand influences consumers’ willingness to share their opinions with other consumers. However, there is limited research regarding the relationship between consumers’ attitudes toward a brand, both positive and negative, and their likelihood of sharing their opinion with the brand. Thus, our team conducted multiple studies to uncover tendencies concerning consumer-to-brand sharing and steps managers can take to receive unbiased information that is vital for a firm’s success.

U-Shaped vs. Hockey Stick-Shaped Relationships

In consumer-to-consumer (word of mouth) sharing, the majority of opinion sharing occurs among individuals with a very positive or very negative attitude towards a brand, thereby generating a U-shaped relationship (\_/) of extreme data points when graphed. Extrapolating from this consumer-to-consumer trend, one might assume consumer-to-brand sharing follows a similar trajectory. Further, data indicates that managers echo this intuition, as 63% of managers expect a U-shaped relationship. However, counter to this intuition, we demonstrate that consumers’ likelihood of sharing their opinion directly with a brand depends on several psychological mechanisms that exhibit what we deem a hockey stick-shaped relationship (/_ as opposed to \_/).

The hockey stick-shaped relationship reflects one side of the U-shaped relationship, increased sharing among individuals with a very positive attitude. Their behavior is due to reciprocity norms – as attitude become more positive, consumers are more likely to share their opinions with brands to reciprocate for benefits provided by the brand. In contrast to the U-shaped pattern of sharing consumer-to-consumer, this hockey stick-shaped relationship does not show elevated sharing among consumers with a very negative attitude. Among individuals with a very negative attitude, there are two counteracting factors that result in a null relationship between attitude and sharing. First, as attitudes towards the brand grow increasingly negative, consumers become more likely to share due to their desire to vent, in order to regulate their emotions.
more importantly, because the attitude object and audience are one and the same (the brand), people avoid sharing negative information with the attitude object, as doing so induces social discomfort. Overall, this aversion to criticizing counteracts the desire to vent, ultimately explaining the flat left side of the hockey stick (which differs from the \_/).

**Our Research and Findings**

Our team conducted seven individual studies that examined the intricacies of consumer-to-brand sharing. First, we conducted a field study regarding consumer attitude and sharing with a brand. More specifically, we studied the results of a survey sent by a campus retailer to observe the relationship between participants’ attitudes and their propensity to share their opinions. These results indicated a hockey stick-shaped relationship between attitude and sharing. Second, our team studied the robustness of our results, by testing different sharing contexts (an online comment form on the brand's website) and product categories (a wireless provider). This study provided additional evidence for the hockey stick-shaped relationship, allowing our team to focus on the underlying psychological mechanisms explaining this relationship and various moderating variables.

Our third, fourth, and sixth studies examined other influences on willingness to share negative attitudes with the brand. In our third study, our team sought to understand the role of anthropomorphism in the opinion sharing process. Previous research provides evidence that consumers ascribe human-like traits to brands, formally known as anthropomorphizing. Our research applied this psychological concept and found that among those with negative attitudes towards a brand, greater anthropomorphizing led to decreased sharing, demonstrating a moderating effect of anthropomorphism. Fourth, our team conducted a study to examine the moderating effect of individual differences in aversion to criticizing. We found that as an individual’s aversion to criticism increases, those in the negative attitude condition became less likely to share. In our sixth study, we examined the implications of the ability to exit the relationship with a brand. Our results indicate that when consumers are unable to exit (e.g. returning the product or brand switching), those with a negative attitude became more likely to share, thereby making the ability to exit an additional moderating effect.

Our fifth study examined additional psychological processes driving the relationship between attitude and sharing. We found significant evidence to suggest other factors can drive consumer-to-brand sharing, such as the effort required by consumers. Additionally, our research indicates some consumers feel compelled to share negative attitudes due to self-benefit, as opposed to a desire to vent. Finally, our seventh study examined the contrast between sharing with brands versus sharing with customers. We discovered that consumer-to-consumer sharing is less affected by an aversion to criticism relative to consumer-to-brand sharing, because the attitude object is different from the audience. On the contrary, when the object and the audience are the same (the brand), the hockey stick-shaped relationship appears.
Real Estate Implications

As a real estate agent, understanding consumer sentiment is one of the most essential business operations. Real estate is a people-based industry and feedback is indispensable in order to produce meaningful changes within your organization. Furthermore, the effects of anthropomorphism and consumers’ aversion to criticism are heightened in real estate, considering the ‘brand’ consumers are evaluating is a real person. Thus, it is probable to assume the likelihood of receiving positively biased data is even higher for real estate agents.

It is essential that agents and brokers ensure they are not missing out on negative feedback that might serve as constructive criticism. In order to do so, our team’s research indicates that incentives are effective, particularly, when sufficiently large. Specifically, large monetary incentives for feedback may overcome psychological catalysts and deterrents of sharing. Potential cost-effective approaches to increasing sharing on a large scale from all clientele include lottery-based incentives or tying feedback to future discounts.

Additionally, we have identified a few non-monetary incentives including explicit encouragement of critiques or guaranteeing that the brand will analyze all data at the aggregate level, thereby ensuring that no individual customer will be singled out due to their feedback. Overall, if these recommendations are adopted, a more representative set of feedback is likely, and your understanding of consumer sentiment will be maximized.

Recommended Reading


References

About the Authors

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Dr. Chris Hydock’s (PhD – George Washington University) research interests include marketing tactics, marketing research, and corporate political advocacy, as his overarching goal is to understand the contextual factors that influence consumption decisions and inform brand strategy. His research has appeared in leading academic journals including Management Science, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Public Policy and Marketing, Consumer Needs and Solutions, Appetite, and Behavior Research Methods, among others. Prior to his academic career at Cal Poly, Dr. Hydock was an Assistant Professor of Research at Georgetown University.

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Dr. Zoey Chen’s (PhD – Georgia Institute of Technology) research interests include online decision-making, word-of-mouth communication, social influence, and motivation. Her research has appeared in leading academic journals including Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing Research, and Journal of Marketing. Her research has been covered by newspapers and other outlets, including but is not limited to, Harvard Business Review, Entrepreneur Magazine, Psychology Today, etc. Further, Dr. Chen has received several profound honors and awards including the Provost Research Award at the University of Miami, the Watson Stalnaker Memorial Prize for Ph.D. Student Excellence, the President’s Fellowship at the Georgia Institute of Technology, and many other significant accolades.

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Dr. Kurt Carlson’s (PhD – Cornell University) specialty research area is the marketing management implications of consumer decision-making processes, including the development of brand preferences and the influence of emerging preferences on the decision-making process. His research has appeared in leading academic journals including Journal of Experimental Psychology, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, and Management Science, among others. Further, Dr. Carlson serves as the coauthor of Contemporary Brand Management and blogs for Psychology Today and Forbes. Dr. Carlson has received several significant academic accolades including the MSB Dean’s Distinguished Faculty Research Award and the Decision Analysis Society’s Publication Award.