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Disclosure of Positive and Negative Experiences as Social Utility

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ABSTRACT

We propose that disclosing one's positive and negative experiences carries social utility for both senders and recipients. We show that consumers consider this utility when deciding whether to disclose their experiences with others. In three preregistered studies, consumers respond in kind to the disclosures of positive and negative experiences by others.

Disclosure of Positive and Negative Experiences as Social Utility

Sharing one's experiences with others, especially on digital platforms, has become an integral and prominent part of many consumers' lives. In this paper, we argue that consumers' decision to disclose their positive or negative experiences to other consumers - for example, by engaging in positive or negative word of mouth - is driven by a form of social utility. Specifically, we argue that context matters, i.e., a consumer's disclosure depends on what type of experiences have been disclosed by others.

Maximizing social utility through the disclosure of personal information requires emotional perspective taking, a task that people are typically not very good at (Scopelliti, Loewenstein, and Vosgerau 2015; Sezer, Gino, and Norton 2018). The disclosure of personal information is governed by two competing needs, the need to instill favorable images in others through impression management (Baumeister 1982; Leary and Kowalski 1990) and the need to belong (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Leary 2010). People often get this tradeoff wrong; self-promoters tend to overestimate recipient's positive emotions and underestimate recipients' negative emotions, and they fail to appreciate the positive effects that sharing personal failures would have on their counterparts (John et al. 2016; Wood-Brooks et al. 2019). Calibrating other's emotions may be easier when one *responds* to the disclosure of personal positive and negative experiences of a conversation partner. In such cases, it is easier to imagine how the counterpart will feel in response to one's own disclosure after having been in a similar situation.

We hypothesize that consumers are likely to respond in kind to the disclosure of personal positive and negative experiences by others. When a conversation partner discloses a personal negative experience (positive experience), the recipient attempts to reduce the social status imbalance by also disclosing a personal negative experience (positive experience) and attempts to prevent the imbalance from deepening by not disclosing a personal positive experience (negative experience). In sum, we hypothesize that in response situations, people are likely to respond in kind to the disclosure of personal positive and negative experiences by others. We tested this prediction in a set of three preregistered experiments.

In a first experiment (N = 812), we randomly assigned participants to one of eight conditions in a 2 (participant's outcome: offer vs. rejection) x 2 (counterpart's outcome: offer vs. rejection) x 2 (relationship: good vs. bad) between-subjects design. In the Participants imagined that they had recently applied to positions at companies in Silicon Valley, and that they had just completed an interview for which they had either secured an offer or received a rejection. Then, participants imagined to have unexpectedly run into Alex, an old acquaintance from college, at the airport on the way home. Alex was remembered as either likable ("You had good feelings toward him," good relationship condition) or not likable ("The contact you had did not make you like him," bad relationship condition). Next, participants imagined chatting with Alex, who in turn shared that he interviewed for a similar job, and that he was given either an offer or a rejection. To ascertain participant's propensity to disclose, we asked them to distribute 100 percentage points between two response options, (1) a message in which they only acknowledged their counterpart's outcome and (2) a message in which they acknowledged their counterpart's outcome and shared their own.

When the sender disclosed a personal success, recipients were likely to also disclose their own success. More importantly, however, when the sender disclosed a personal failure, recipients were more likely to also disclose an own failure and to not disclose their own success

than to disclose their own success. Disclosure of own successes and failures did not depend on the quality of the relationship between the two parties. These results provide initial evidence for social utility maximization.

In a second preregistered experiment (N = 794), we provide more evidence that the disclosure of personal successes/failures is driven by social utility maximization, rather than being the manifestation of a preference for the outcomes themselves captured as recipients' emotional reactions to their own successes and failures. We used the same scenario as in the previous experiment, and examined participants' feelings in response to outcomes (-100 = *Extremely bad*; 0 = *Neither bad nor good;* +100 = *Extremely good*). Participants in the experiment felt better when succeeding and worse when failing, yet these feelings did not translate into corresponding likelihoods of disclosing their successes and failures; these results indicate that the disclosure of outcomes is not a direct consequence of the preference for the outcomes themselves.

In a final experiment (N = 1614), we tested whether recipients' disclosure behavior is a response to the success/failure information per se, or a response to the sender's act of disclosing that information. The results showed that participants were more likely to disclose information on their successes or failures when their counterparts also directly disclosed their successes or failures. The pattern of disclosure observed in the first experiments replicates when the sender disclosed the information herself or himself, but was diminished when the information about the sender was disclosed through a third party. These results corroborate the idea that it is the disclosure of successes and failures within a conversation that carries social utility.

The results of these studies provide a new perspective on information disclosure. Past research suggests that consumers may be motivated by self-enhancement when disclosing their experiences to others in the form of word of mouth or when posting on social media (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; De Angelis et al. 2012; Packard and Wooten 2013; Barasch and Berger 2014; Dubois et al. 2016). Our results indicate that consumers are not uniquely motivated by self-promotional motives when choosing to disclose their experiences. Instead, consumers strategically modify their disclosure behavior. Specifically, they share or withhold their negative or positive experiences depending on the context and the requirements of the social situation. These findings enrich our understanding of what type of experiences consumers disclose, and their reasons for engaging in self-disclosure.

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