

The influence of online vindictive messages on attitude towards the brand

Abstract: Because of its audience and ease of use, the Internet is a particularly powerful tool for spreading messages. Consumers therefore increasingly use it to communicate very bad experiences about companies, with the aim of damaging these companies' reputations. This paper studies the effects of a vindictive message on attitude towards the brand among consumers exposed to that message. Results show a negative effect of exposure to a vindictive message on attitude toward the brand; this depends on the response provided by the company (offering apologies vs. not).

Keywords: Revenge, Dissatisfaction, Word-of-Mouth

Track: Consumer Behavior

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 77000 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*. Hasan Syed whose outpourings express the wish to harm the brand's reputation after being dissatisfied, is far from an isolated example. This wish to harm in response to a loss incurred is typical of the phenomenon of revenge and finds a fertile ground on Internet, where messages can be not only approved by other Internet users, but also spread very easily. The content of these messages and their readers are thus particularly dangerous weapons against the company's reputation and brand image. So far, academic research on revenge against companies has mainly focused on vindictive consumers themselves (Bechwati and Morrin, 2003; Ward and Ostrom, 2006; Funches et al 2009; Grégoire et al. 2010; Grégoire and Fisher; 2008). Few studies have examined how consumers' vindictive messages on the Internet influence bystanders' attitudes. The aim of this paper is to highlight the impact of exposure to vindictive messages on the exposed consumers' attitudes to the brand.

2. Vindictive messages: definition and effects

A vindictive message can be defined as the expression by a consumer of extreme dissatisfaction for which s/he holds the company responsible and who seeks to obtain a maximum audience. This phenomenon can be conceptualized as a form of 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 do harm. In philosophy, revenge consists of inflicting harm on others in symbolic or imaginary compensation for harm suffered because of him. In psychology, Aquino, Tripp and Bies (2006) define it 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 and Hunt, 2000). In the context of consumption, Bechwati and Morrin (2007) suggest making a distinction between the act of revenge as such and a consumer's desire for revenge, that they define as "a feeling of retaliation towards the company, often after a highly unsatisfactory consumer experience, that translates into the wish to harm the company". The desire for revenge is thus different from simple (even strong) consumer dissatisfaction because it incorporates the intention to act. Revenge differs from anger or rage, because it is less spontaneous and more premeditated.

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 Internet). If the first present 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, the second type of act 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. In this

situation, the avenger aims to harm the company's reputation by making it publicly responsible for the prejudice suffered, using aggressive language and seeking to communicate the message widely. Vindictive messages are thus a specific form of negative electronic word-of-mouth characterized by their extreme nature and their intention to harm. In order to do this, 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. In this research, we study vindictive messages online by taking the viewpoint of consumers exposed to these messages. The first question we ask is the following: what are the consequences of a vindictive Internet message on exposed consumers? More specifically, what is the impact on these consumers' attitude to the brand and on their intention to forward the vindictive message?

3. The impact of exposure to a vindictive message on the attitude towards the brand

Many information sources are likely to influence consumers' attitudes towards brands; this has led several authors to focus on the respective impacts of these information sources. For example, word-of-mouth, has been shown to have more impact than commercial sources, especially because it is perceived as less biased and thus more credible (Richins, 1983). Lee and Cranage (2014) showed that negative eWOM is perceived to be more credible, useful, and persuasive than positive eWOM. Furthermore, individuals pay more attention to negative than positive information. Laczniak, de Carlo and Ramaswami (2001) used attribution theory (Jones and Davis, 1965) to show that when receivers of word-of-mouth attribute responsibility for a negative brand evaluation, their attitude towards the brand is impacted negatively. When acts of revenge on Internet take the form of consumers' highly negative messages that clearly blame the brand, we expect these to influence exposed consumers such that:

H1: Exposure to a vindictive message on Internet has an unfavorable influence on the attitude of Internet users towards the brand targeted by this action.

When consumers take revenge through Internet, it is not rare to find the company concerned offers apologies to the avenger. By doing this, the company assumes the consequences of the event without however trying to reduce the negativity perceived by the public (Bobocel and Zdaniuk, 2005). For example, Dens et al. (2015) studied response strategies used by service providers to answer negative online reviews, and the impact of each strategy on bystanders' attitudes. They showed that the more negative the ratio of negative reviews, the more effort the organization must exert to respond to the dissatisfied consumer and convince other Internet users of its good intentions. The effectiveness of any compensation also depends on the type of relationship between consumer and company (measured in terms of trust, commitment and social benefits). If the relationship is of high quality, a formal apology from the company is more important than material compensation. If the relationship is weak, the material value of the compensation is more important than the company's apology (Grégoire et al. 2009). Compared to companies that do not issue apologies, customers of those who do apologize are more likely to believe that the company can neither control nor avoid the problem causing the dissatisfaction (Hill and Baer, 1994). An apology therefore reduces the process that attributes blame to the company. As several studies carried out in a context of compensation for services show, it also allows enhances feelings of distributive justice thereby increasing feelings of satisfaction (Patterson et al., 2006).

H2: Internet users exposed to vindictive messages then to a positive response from the company (apology), have a less negative attitude towards the brand than those exposed to vindictive messages with no such apology.

To test these two hypotheses, we used an intergroup experimental methodology. We designed a fictitious scenario with a vindictive message inspired by a real case found on the Web. This scenario was presented to two groups of students. The scenario showed a consumer (Arnaud Dezonet) who had bought a Sony camera in the United States. The camera broke down in France and the client sought in vain to have it repaired under guarantee. He relates his story and his bitter feelings on his blog. In order to make the scenario more realistic and to be able to measure the subjects' prior attitudes towards the brand without having to create these artificially, we used a real well-known brand: Sony. The realistic nature of the scenario was tested just after subjects read about it using two items measured on 5 point Likert scales: *"I find this story realistic"* (average of 3.96 with a standard deviation of 1.029), and *"This situation could happen or has already happened to me or to somebody I know"* (average 3.60, standard variation 1.117). The scenario can thus be considered as realistic. In order to simulate both types of company response, we created two experimental conditions. In the first, representing the absence of apology from the company, respondents read the following sentence at the end of the story: *"Some time after his story had been spread on Internet, Sony France had issued no apology to Arnaud Dezonet"* In the second condition, representing an apology from the company, they read *"Some time after this story had been spread on Internet, the head of customer services at Sony France contacted consumer Arnaud Dezonet to apologize on behalf of the company"*.

The aim of this study being to evaluate the impact of a vindictive message (with or without a response from the company), on exposed consumers' attitude, we made three measures of attitude towards the brand (7 items, seven points semantic scale) : Fig. 1): prior to revenge (Attitude 1, Cronbach-alpha = 0,731), after exposure to the act of revenge (Attitude 2, Cronbach-alpha = 0,727) and after exposure to the company's reaction to this act (Attitude 3, Cronbach-alpha = 0,781).

The measurement of attitudes 1, 2 and 3 were separated by 35- 40 minutes. In order to avoid any bias of memorization and contamination among these measures, respondents carried out distractive tasks between each of them, consisting of responding to questions about themes totally independent of those of the study.

In order to have a simultaneous view of the influence of revenge and that of company reactions on the attitudes of exposed individuals, we carried out an ANOVA with repeated measures. The results (Table 1) show a significant effect of revenge on the attitude of exposed individuals towards the brand (test $F(1,864 ; 316,842) = 109,771 ; p < 0,001$), and a significant interaction effect between revenge and the company's reaction to this revenge ($F(1,864 ; 316,842) = 4,466 ; p = 0,014$).

Table 1– The impact of exposure to revenge and company response on attitudes towards the brand

Source	Sum square	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Partial η ²
Attitude	106,39	2	57,08	109,77	0,000	0,39
Attitude X Brand response	4,33	2	2,32	4,47	0,014	0,03
Error	164,76	317	0,52			

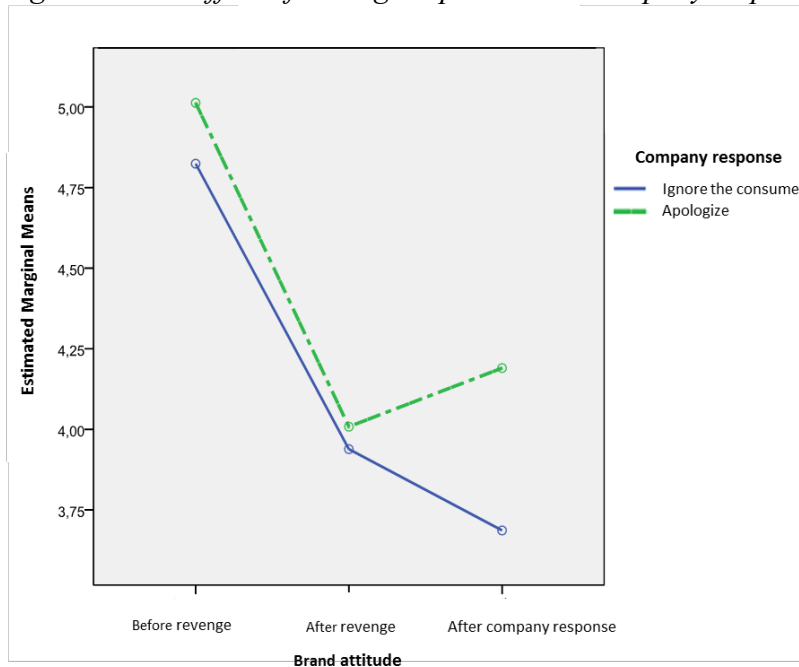
More specifically, Bonferroni's test of comparative averages (Table 2) shows that not only is the attitude towards the brand is significantly more positive before exposure to revenge (M=4,918), than afterwards (M=3,973), but also it is higher than after the company's reaction to revenge (M=3,938). Although an apology from the company does not result in a significant improvement of attitude towards the brand, (M= 4,008 vs. 4,190), an intergroup analysis shows that individuals exposed to the apology have a final attitude that is more favorable than those exposed to the lack of apology (M= 4,150 vs. 3,686; $F(1 ; 170) = 4,528 ; p = 0,035$). These results taken together, validate H1 and H2.

Table 2 – Bonferroni test on the attitude towards the brand after exposure to revenge and company response

(I) Attitude	(J) Attitude	Mean differences (I-J)	Standard error	Sig	95% Confidence interval	
					LLCI	ULCI
1. Brand attitude before revenge	2	,945*	0,083	0,000	0,743	1,147
	3	,980*	0,077	0,000	0,795	1,166
2. Brand attitude after revenge	1	-,945*	0,083	0,000	-1,147	-0,743
	3	0,035	0,064	1,000	-0,119	0,189
3. Brand attitude after apologies	1	-,980*	0,077	0,000	-1,166	-0,795
	2	-0,035	0,064	1,000	-0,189	0,119

*. Mean difference is significant at the .05 level

Figure 2 : The effect of revenge exposure and company response to the attitude towards the brand



4. Discussion and implications

Vindictive messages posted on Internet by dissatisfied consumers have two characteristics that increase their power of persuasion: 1) they come from a source that is a priori, unbiased and 2), they have negative valence. They thus have every chance of impacting exposed consumers significantly. The results of study conducted confirm that when consumers are exposed to vindictive messages on Internet, their attitude towards the brand concerned deteriorates. Companies targeted by vindictive messages can then adopt several ways to respond. They can, notably choose to remain silent, or to issue apologies to the vindictive consumer. Research has shown that apologies increase feelings of distributive justice, so we find it logical that when consumers exposed to vindictive actions on Internet know that the company has apologized, their attitude towards the brand in question is more positive than when the company remains silent. Nevertheless, even if apologizing helps companies to “limit the damage”, it does not altogether make up for deteriorating attitude subsequent to the vengeful action. The attitude of respondents in our study exposed to revenge followed by company apology still remains significantly lower on average than their attitude prior to any exposure to acts of revenge. Finally, the experiment conducted highlights the immediate impact that a vindictive online message can have on Internet users exposed to this message. However, the overall impact of a vengeful act is not limited to individuals exposed at time t. It also potentially includes all the individuals to whom the vindictive message will be transmitted. Messages posted on Internet are very easy to diffuse, their audience can then grow exponentially as individuals diffuse the content to their entourage. Thus, any act of vengeance on Internet represents a potentially very strong threat if it is diffused on a large scale. Therefore, there is a strong interest in further research in focusing on the elements that determine the intention to diffuse a vindictive message using the Internet.

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