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A walk in customers' shoes: How attentional bias modification affects ownership of integrity-violating social media posts

Abstract

The number of social media posts that expose company integrity violations has increased dramatically. In response, some companies empower employees to respond to customer blogs, which requires employees to recognize the customer's perspective. We show that Attentional Bias Modification can be used to prime employees of two global *Fortune* 100 companies with a self-sufficiency or empathy bias. The results indicate that narrative transportation, or the extent to which employees mentally enter the world evoked by a customer's story, mediates the effect of attentional bias on two relevant psychological ownership dimensions: acknowledgment of responsibility and willingness to respond. Participants with a self-sufficiency bias neither acknowledge responsibility nor want to respond. However, participants primed with an empathy bias take responsibility for the customer's case and respond to the integrity violation. We find evidence for two boundary conditions of this effect: (1) it strengthens when the employee perceives the customer's financial vulnerability as high and (2) it weakens when the customer is impolite in the blog post.

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Introduction

As social media proliferate, such that markets get defined as conversations (Searls and Weinberger 2009), the impact of public opinion changes. Whereas once customer voices may have fallen on deaf ears, today people can easily share their disappointing consumption experience with a receptive, massive audience by communicating through the rapidly growing medium of weblogs (blogs) (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010). Millions of incensed bloggers thus accused Citigroup of distorting investment research reports to manipulate consumer investment decisions. Even more than competence failures or product recalls, online accounts of unethical employee behavior erode consumer trust and dramatically influence the way they process and share information (Woodside, Sood and Miller 2008; Gartner Research 2007; *The Economist* 2006). Yet stories of unfair practices remain largely beyond the control of companies (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009). In the context of social media, statements from official spokespeople appear to be "cheap talk" (Farrell and Rabin 1996), whereas consumers might relate more with workers in the lower ranks (Gaines-Ross 2010). Therefore, an increasing number of organizations, including British Telecom, Dell, Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft, SAP, TNT, Zappos, and even the U.S. Army, now empower employees to respond personally to social media messages. In so doing, they must ensure that employees respond appropriately by putting themselves in the customer's shoes before issuing their responses to concerns voiced on blogs. However, technology constrains employee adaptability and empowerment (Bowen and Lawler III 1992; Chebat and Kollias 2000). A recent marketing decision maker survey (SAS 2009) thus identifies a demand for mental triggers that can drive employees to adopt a mindset in which they assume ownership of events that prompt customer complaints in blogs and thereby offer a response that is more likely to restore customer trust.

Notable findings in narrative transportation research may address this demand. Transportation refers to a reader's "integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events" (Green 2004, p. 248). Mounting empirical evidence indicates that being engrossed in a narrative account of someone else's experience facilitates other-regarding beliefs and intentions (Escalas and Stern 2003; Polichak and Gerrig 2002). Thus far, however, examinations of the persuasive influence of transportation focus primarily on entertainment and advertising (e.g., Green and Brock 2002; Slater "Involvement as Goal-Directed Strategic Processing: Extending the Elaboration Likelihood Model" 2002; Escalas 2007). We propose that reading customer accounts of integrity violations on blogs might cause employees to be transported into the customers' perspective, causing them to feel a sense of ownership or obligation to deal with the problem at hand. An emerging theme, integrity violation refers to the situation that occurs when one party perceives that another party is no longer adhering to acceptable or necessary principles and standards in the relationship (Ferrin et al. 2007; Kim et al. 2004; Mayer and Davis 1999). The general objective of our research is to determine how companies might use narrative transportation as a vehicle for empowering employees to take the responsibility to act in response to integrity violations in customer blogs. Specifically, we aim to make two contributions to extant research.

Earlier work by Fiske and Taylor (1991) shows that many biases occur in interpretation processes and that there will be salient differences between employees and customers regarding service encounters. Recent research demonstrates that empathy plays an important role in driving transportation in social media (van Laer and de Ruyter 2010). We extend this work in important ways. Whereas previous research focuses on narrative elements to prime peer-group blog readers to empathize with employees, we turn the perspective on its side by focusing on the employees' attentional bias to prime them to empathize with their

actual customers. While aforementioned authors assume that accused employees automatically take responsibility for the customer complaint, we empirically assess this assumption over time through the advancement of Attentional Bias Modification (ABM). An attentional bias is defined as the tendency of certain salient cues in a person's environment to preferentially draw the person's attention. ABM attempts to retrain this automatic attentional process (Koster, Fox and MacLeod 2009). To date, research on ABM has been targeted at alcohol addiction (Wiers et al. 2011) and anxiety disorders (Amir et al. 2009). We extend this emerging research stream by applying ABM to create an empathy bias for a customer's perspective so as to make employees acknowledge responsibility and display willingness to respond; an effect mediated by transportation into the customer's narrative on blogs.

A second contribution this paper aims to make is to account for boundary conditions of empathy ABM. The influence of the empathy-transportation relationship seems subject to considerable variation. In general, narrative transportation research shows that transportation varies according to the prior experience and relationship of the reader with the protagonist (Green 2004). Specifically, it has been suggested that vulnerability strengthens the influence of empathy on the projected self (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Moreover, the relationship between empathy and transportation also may depend on the manner in which customers voice their discontent (Kopelman, Rosette and Thompson 2006). For instance, customers using abusive language make it harder for employees to translate empathic feelings into transportation, as recent research on customer rage shows (McColl-Kennedy, Sparks and Nguyen 2010). We take these issues into account, unveiling two relevant boundary conditions for the empathy-transportation relationship.

Conceptual Background

Acknowledging responsibility for consequences is a key element of ownership of integrity violations. Lewicki and Bunker (1996, p. 132) argue that "taking responsibility is a

key step in trust repair." It also contributes to apologies (Lewicki and Bunker 1996; Ohbuchi, Kameda and Agarie 1989; Bottom et al. 2002). Even if employees do not attribute blame to themselves, they can influence customer evaluations by acknowledging responsibility for a negative situation. In contrast, denying all responsibility implies that the employee considers the events unimportant or insignificant for integrity perceptions or believes there were no consequences (Kim et al. 2004). In short, it seems important for effective integrity restoration that employees acknowledge responsibility irrespective of attribution of blame.

Ownership studies also stress the importance of willingness to respond (Harter, Schmidt and Hayes 2002; Vandenberghe et al. 2007; Maslyn and Uhl-Bien 2001). Employees must be willing to invest time and energy to maintain a healthy dialogue (Maslyn and Uhl-Bien 2001) and perceive that its long-term benefits are "worth" their engagement, such that their involvement and enthusiasm can lead to more customer satisfaction (Harter, Schmidt and Hayes 2002). Even in employee–customer encounters in which employees do not expect the relationship to continue, responsive employees are motivated to repair an integrity violation (Vandenberghe et al. 2007). In addition, employees generally cannot opt out of online conversations; expressions of dissatisfaction through such media are vented widely and publicly.

Alternatively, by engaging in a customer's story expressed through blogs, employees may become engrossed in the customer's experience. We pursue an in-depth understanding of transportation, which is the process that underlies this effect. Slater ("Entertainment Education and the Persuasive Impact of Narratives" 2002, p. 171) notes that readers of a narrative "typically appear to be far more engrossed in the message than are readers or viewers of news stories, speeches, ads, or social science book chapters." When a reader is transported into the narrative world, he or she leaves the immediate surroundings momentarily behind (Green and Brock 2000; Green and Brock 2002). This conceptualization distinguishes

transportation from similar phenomena that involve feelings of presence in mediated environments, unrelated to narratives (e.g., telepresence, Steuer 1992), or general tendencies to be immersed into life experiences without persuasive effects (absorption, Tellegen and Atkinson 1974; e.g., optimal experience or "flow", Csikszentmihalyi 1992). Being transported influences the processing of various narratives, ranging from branded advertisements (Escalas 2004; Wang and Calder 2009) to social media messages (van Laer and de Ruyter 2010), with important consequences for beliefs and intentions. As Slater and Rouner (2002, p. 180) establish, transportation prevents readers from generating counterarguments "even if the persuasive subtext is inconsistent with prior attitudes, beliefs, or values," such that they are more likely to accept the beliefs and intentions implied by a narrative. An important prerequisite of transportation is that people empathize with the main story character (Green 2005). When employees do so, this may lead to an acknowledgment of responsibility and willingness to respond.

Whereas empathy is conducive to taking the customer's perspective, employees commonly adopt a different attentional bias. Most boundary-spanning operations can be characterized as a transaction-oriented environment in which expected outputs (kpi's) are emphasized (Vohs, Mead and Goode 2008). Such a performance-focused context has been shown to elicit a self-sufficiency bias (Fiske and Taylor 1991). A self-sufficiency bias suggests an attentional bias based on individualism and self-reliance, which generally leads to a lack of responsibility and fear of commitment (Tang et al. 2008; Zhou, Vohs and Baumeister 2009; Small, Loewenstein and Slovic 2007; Frank, Gilovich and Regan 1993). People with a self-sufficiency bias prefer that others do not depend on them and behave accordingly. When primed with self-sufficiency, people also are less communally motivated (Tang et al. 2008), stay separate from others (Zhou, Vohs and Baumeister 2009), perform

socially insensitive acts (Small, Loewenstein and Slovic 2007), and make self-interested moves when faced with social dilemmas (Frank, Gilovich and Regan 1993).

In contrast, recent research (e.g., Raney 2004; Zillmann and Bryant 1994; Nabi and Krcmar 2004) suggests that people who read personal narratives and use empathy as a significant cue display altruistic, unselfish behaviors. Because empathy promotes a sense of common fate and togetherness with the other party, it likely enhances other-regarding biases in response to personal narratives. An empathy bias regards the customer as a social being and implies greater concern for the customer. Empathic employees thus should be socially sensitive and want to work to restore the integrity perceptions of the customer. In the following section we develop hypotheses on the impact of aforementioned attentional biases on transportation and its subsequent acknowledgment of responsibility and willingness to respond.

Hypotheses Development

We propose that an empathy bias drives acknowledgment of responsibility and willingness to respond, through transportation. Empathy here is not a stable trait or service outcome but rather a mental driver or transitory mindset. Because descriptions of integrity violations in blogs usually are personal (Adaval and Wyer 1998), an activated empathy bias may make employees feel relatively more transportation, compared with their response from a self-sufficiency bias. After they have been transported, people generally exhibit positive responses and often change their view to support the protagonist (Green and Brock 2002; Green and Brock 2000; Slater and Rouner 2002). An empathy bias therefore should imply that employees temporarily share the emotions of customers and get transported into the narrative, which could have desirable impacts on their acknowledgment of responsibility and willingness to respond. An activated attentional bias of the self instead should mean that self-sufficient employees are less transported into the blog post, compared with employees with

empathy biases; they also should be less likely to feel responsible or respond to the integrity violation. It may thus be possible to influence employees' acknowledgment of responsibility and willingness to respond just by varying their attentional bias (constant blog posts, *ceteris paribus*). We hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: An empathy bias leads to greater transportation than a self-sufficiency bias.

Hypothesis 2: Transportation leads to greater (a) acknowledgment of responsibility and (b) willingness to respond.

Hypothesis 3: An empathy bias indirectly leads to greater (a) acknowledgment of responsibility and (b) willingness to respond than a self-sufficiency bias, which is mediated by transportation.

Above, we propose that an empathy bias encourages transportation more than a self-sufficiency bias does. To determine the nature of this distinction, we undertake a conceptual investigation into empathy's robustness. That is, perhaps individuals with higher levels of empathy may be more sensitized to the plight of victims of integrity violations. Particularly in a context of increasing impoverishment and social exclusion, employees may be more sensitized to the plight of those customers who have a higher need to manage their financial resources appropriately and make sustainable borrowing decisions. In relation to such customer vulnerability, Fiske and Taylor (1991) argue that "As the consequences of an action become more severe, they become more unpleasant, and the notion that they might be accidental becomes less tolerable: The fear that the same thing might involve the self becomes a realistic possibility." Thus in case of highly financially vulnerable customers, empathic employees should be more easily transported. So therefore, we propose that the impact of empathy on transportation will be higher in case employees perceive customers as financially more vulnerable, and we hypothesize

Hypothesis 4: A customer's financial vulnerability moderates the relationship between ABM and transportation such that the effect of ABM on transportation increases when a customer's financial vulnerability is high.

We test these four hypotheses with an extensive pretest and two field studies.

Empirical Studies

Pretest Method

Before conducting the main studies, we went through a process of elaborate pretesting. The rationale behind these efforts was to ascertain that the following objectives could be realized. First, we examined whether the Attentional Bias Modification word search puzzles, which we constructed, appropriately modified empathy and self-sufficiency. Second, the pretest determined whether the blog post, which we investigated, met four necessary criteria to produce transportation and subsequential effects.

As aforementioned, we constructed Attentional Bias Modification word search puzzles for empathy and self-sufficiency. To rule out the possibility that either technique failed to modify the desired concept, we also included a control condition. Therefore, the pretest used an empathy versus self-sufficiency versus control ABM between-subjects design. Below each puzzle, we provided a list of 12 words embedded in the matrix, and in all cases, the same set of 6 neutral words appeared in this list (book, bottom, building, green, jump, and metal). In the empathy ABM condition, the other 6 words were those used by Mikulincer and colleagues (2001)—compassion, moved, softhearted, sympathy, tender, and warm (see Figure 1)—to connote empathy for others.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The self-sufficiency words came from Vohs, Mead, and Goode (2006): capital, check, profits, raise, revenues, and wealthy. They should activate self-sufficiency. In the control condition,

the 6 remaining words had no specific connotation (i.e., going, is, printer, purple, top, and win). These words also came from Vohs, Mead, and Goode (2006).

To assess the degree of empathy that the word search puzzles primed, we adapted Davis's (1983) empathic ability items to make them appropriate to our blog post context, such as "While I was reading the blog post, I imagined how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me" and "I did not get extremely involved in the blog post" (reversed). In the blog post a customer "Paul" described an integrity failure during a financial service encounter (see Appendix), and we checked whether the blog post met the following four criteria.

First, following Green and Brock (2002), we checked whether participants perceived the blog post as a narrative. We asked participants to respond to an instrument provided by Woodside, Sood, and Miller (2008) about the blog post's storytelling features, using ten semantic scales (e.g., "detriments/clear-cut situations," "argument logic/personal evolution or change"; α = .85).

Second, for them to assess ownership, participants should be able to recognize the nature of the violation (Lewicki and Bunker 1996). We asked them what the accusation brought into question: "primarily the financial advisor's competence (e.g., knowledge of finance)," "primarily the financial advisor's integrity (e.g., willingness to bend the rules)," or "neither of the above."

Third, the cause for the integrity violation should be attributable to both employees and customers (Folkes and Kotsos 1986). We relied on standard measures of causal attribution of blame (Pham et al. 2010; Fenigstein and Levine 1984). That is, we assessed causal attribution of blame by asking participants to divide 100 points across the customer and the financial advisor.

Fourth, the blog post needed to feature unfavorable consequences for the customer, for which an employee plausibly could acknowledge some responsibility. Participants completed a task similar to the causal attribution of blame measure. They assessed the extent to which they thought the financial advisor should take responsibility for the consequences of selling the investment fund to the customer (up to 100%).

We also tested whether participants were equally susceptible to empathy and self-sufficiency. The different participant groups would need to be homogeneous in this respect for us to compare ABM effects. Therefore, we used Tang and colleagues' (2008) love of money scale to measure individual aspirations for and attitudes toward money and Reynolds's (2008) moral attentiveness scale to measure their tendency to overrepresent or exaggerate moral experiences.

Participants. From a medium-sized university, a sample of 105 business graduate students participated; they should have a reasonable understanding of a financial services context. The participants were 23 years of age on average (18–29 years), and 55.2% were women.

Pretest Results

Material checks. Responses to the material checks revealed that the blog post met all four criteria. To check the narrative format criterion, we examined whether the participants correctly identified the narrative blog post format. They rated it significantly above the neutral midpoint of the aggregated scale ($t_{(104)} = 16.94$, $p < .001$), which indicated that they perceived the format as significantly narrative ($M = 5.48$, SD = .90), across all ABM conditions ($F_{(2, 102)} = 1.91$, $p = .153$). For the identification of the violation, almost all participants (102 of 105) reported that they thought that the financial advisor's integrity came into question. The remaining responses did not show a correlational pattern across ABM conditions ($\chi^2_{(4)} = 3.68$,

p = .452).[1] We also assessed whether the participants could attribute blame to the financial advisor or the customer; blame was convincingly attributed to neither (M = 51.43, SD = 35.58, ranging from 0 to 100). Thus, participants across all ABM conditions were equally ambiguous in attributing blame ($F_{(2, 102)}$ = 2.06, p = .133). Finally, we concluded that the acknowledgment of responsibility criterion was met. The ABM should have influenced this perception, so we performed a paired-samples *t*-test to compare attributions of blame against the acknowledgment of responsibility in the control condition. The test revealed that participants' acknowledgment of responsibility was significantly greater than their attribution of blame (mean difference = 19.41, SE = 4.53; $t_{(33)}$ = 4.29, p < .001).

Attentional Bias Modification (ABM) check. Table 1 contains the dependent and control variables' average scores, standard deviations, reliabilities, and intercorrelations.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Perceived empathy was analyzed with hierarchical multiple regression analyses, which is preferable over an ANCOVA approach when no interaction term is to be included (Cohen et al. 2003). In the first step, age, gender, love of money, and moral attentiveness were entered, and they predicted 15.6% of the variance in perceived empathy ($F_{(4, 33)}$ = 1.52, p = .219). In the second step two dummy variables for empathy and self-sufficiency versus control were entered, which explained an additional 16.4% of variance in perceived empathy ($F_{\text{Change } (2, 31)}$ = 3.73, p < .05). Empathy ABM was related positively to perceived empathy (B = .39); self-sufficiency ABM was related to a negative perception of empathy (B = -.54). These results reflect that the ABM was successful.

Study 1 Method

We designed Study 1 to examine the effect of an empathy versus a self-sufficiency attentional bias across differing levels of the customer's financial vulnerability. The

[1] We conducted separate analyses for the 102 participants. The results showed a pattern similar to that for the 105 participants reported here.

experiment was conducted in an employee training context, such that we introduced it as an exercise for assessing customer profiles. Before reading a customer profile, participants received a word search puzzle, reportedly to help them relax while the training session was being prepared. Unbeknownst to participants, we primed their empathy or self-sufficiency with these puzzles, similar to the procedure in the pretest. To confirm the ABM had a sufficient impact on participants' attentional bias, we retained a control group that did not complete a puzzle. The participants then read a customer profile, which indicated prior knowledge about that customer's financial vulnerability, whether high, moderate, or low. Next, participants chose an investment fund to offer to the customer but then discovered the customer had gotten into severe financial trouble after accepting the offer, as recounted in a blog post supposedly written by this customer. All participants were instructed to process the blog post according to standard procedures for customer feedback. After reading the blog post, participants completed a questionnaire. Thus, our study used a 3 (attentional bias: empathy, control, self-sufficiency) × 3 (customer vulnerability: high, moderate, low) factorial design, with participants randomly assigned to the different groups. After all participants finished the study, we informed them of the goal of the experiment and answered any questions.

Participants. Branch managers from a global *Fortune* 100 banking group (n = 350) participated in this study; they represent an initial level of contact who have the authority to repair customer trust (according to a 2009 internal document from the banking group). These professional experts averaged 44 years of age (from 25–60 years), had 20 years of business experience, and were primarily of Belgian nationality (98.3%).[2] A small minority (1.2%) had received no diploma, 25.2% earned a secondary school diploma, and 73.6% graduated from

[2] Because the companies' working languages did not necessarily include English, we carried out International Test Commission translation and back-translation procedures on all materials and instruments.

tertiary education. The sample consisted mostly of men (75.9%), reflective of the 70% male workforce. The sample represented 246 bank branches.

Attentional Bias Modification (ABM), manipulation, and material. As we noted previously, we used the empathy and self-sufficiency ABM from the pretest. The control group did not get a puzzle.

To manipulate customer financial vulnerability, we applied the MiFID (2009); this European Commission directive prescribes, among other things, that when an employee of a financial institution gives advice, he or she must consider the customer's profile, including financial situation, investment aims, and investment knowledge and experience. The MiFID also obliges financial institutions to classify all customers according to their financial vulnerability. Therefore, we used three customer profiles to describe them, as follows: [3]

> "High": Paul has some money in a savings account, and he buys mainly savings certificates. Paul only wants investments that yield a guaranteed or predictable return. He thinks investing in stocks and shares is in fact "gambling." Thus, things like shares are lost on him.
>
> "Moderate": One-quarter of Paul's professional income goes into paying off his house and his car. Furthermore, he puts money in the bank, and he contributes to a pension fund. Safe, fixed-interest savings certificates and funds make up the principal part of his investment portfolio. On occasion, he dares to buy an equity fund with money he does not need right away.
>
> "Low": Paul devotes his investment strategy completely to "opportunities." Shares make up three-quarters of his investment portfolio. Paul knows that shares can turn out badly sometimes, but that does not put him off. On the contrary, he interprets a drop in prices as an opportunity to buy more. In his bond portfolio, he wants to have it all.

[3] High, moderate, and low vulnerability are feigned designations. The real names represented stock market–sensitive information.

Following the customer vulnerability assessment and investment fund offer, the participants were told that customer Paul had accepted their offer. Then, they read the blog post by Paul. The pretested blog post brought the employee's integrity into question (see Appendix).

Measures. Participants answered two manipulation check questions to confirm the customer vulnerability manipulation (high, moderate, or low). The first question pertained to the estimated risk associated with the investment fund they might offer. After reading a customer profile, participants chose one of their banking group's investment funds and indicated the risk they believed it represented, according to the official European Union (EU) risk classification, which ranged from 0 (no risk) to 5 (high risk). The second question checked whether the participants recognized the customer profile: "You have just read Paul's customer profile. What level of financial vulnerability does Paul have?" The possible answers were high, moderate, or low. Table 2 contains the representative papers, illustrative example items, average scores, reliabilities, and intercorrelations of the dependent and control measures.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Study 1 Results

Manipulation and priming checks. Responses to the two checks revealed that the manipulation was successful. Participants' risk estimations differed significantly among the high (M = 1.53, SD = 1.27), moderate (M = 2.60, SD = 1.60), and low (M = 4.04, SD = 1.22, $F_{(2, 347)}$=104.61, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .366$; simple contrasts: SE = .17, $p < .001$) customer vulnerability conditions. Of 350 participants, 343 answered the customer profile question correctly ($\chi^2_{(6)} = 966.03$, $p < .001$, $\varphi = 1.63$). We excluded 7 participants who wrongly answered the customer profile question, because they likely read the profile partially or carelessly.

Another question, adapted from Green and Brock (2000), determined participants' task understanding while they read the blog post. They answered two Likert-type items, anchored by "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," regarding whether they "become Paul" and "think about what happened" (ρ = .79, p < .001). The average was significantly above the neutral midpoint of the aggregated scale ($t_{(349)}$ = 210.73, p < .001) and did not differ across ABM conditions ($F_{(2, 347)}$ = 1.05, p = .351). That is, all participants tried to recognize Paul's perspective on the narrative events (M = 3.98, SD = .18), and the task was well understood.

After the experiment, a funneled debriefing procedure was used (Bargh and Chartrand 2000). We asked participants to respond to questions about the purpose of the word search puzzle. Their responses revealed that the intent was successfully hidden; none of the participants correctly guessed the puzzle's purpose.

Hypotheses tests. Transportation was analyzed with a 3 × 3 ANCOVA, with attentional bias (empathy, control, or self-sufficiency) and customer vulnerability (high, moderate, or low) as between-subjects factors and the demographic and control variables as covariates. There was a significant interaction between ABM and customer vulnerability ($F_{(4, 323)}$ = 3.06, p < .05, η^2 = .037; see Figure 2). The main effects of ABM ($F_{(2, 323)}$ = 15.07, p < .001, η_p^2 = .085) and customer vulnerability ($F_{(2, 323)}$ = 11.50, p < .001, η_p^2 = .066) were also significant. Tests of simple effects indicated that the empathy ABM resulted in more transportation than the control (mean difference = .32, SE = .11, p < .01) and self-sufficiency attentional bias condition (mean difference = .61, SE = .11, p < .001). Transportation was also greater in the control than in the self-sufficiency attentional bias condition (mean difference = .30, SE = .11, p < .01). These results support Hypothesis 1.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Simple contrast tests also revealed that high customer vulnerability led to more transportation than moderate or low vulnerability with an empathy bias compared with a self-

sufficiency bias, in support of Hypothesis 4. Customer vulnerability levels did not result in different transportation in the control condition (see Table 3).

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Next, we tested whether transportation caused a change in acknowledgment of responsibility (Hypothesis 2a) and willingness to respond (Hypothesis 2b) and whether transportation mediated an ABM effect on acknowledgment of responsibility (Hypothesis 3a) and willingness to respond (Hypothesis 3b). Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed. The first steps included the demographic and control variables. They predicted 8.0% of the variance in acknowledgment of responsibility ($F_{(10, 332)} = 2.88$, $p < .01$) and 3.2% of the variance in willingness to respond ($F_{(10, 332)} = 1.11$, $p = .351$). The second steps were performed using the same variables but with ABM added. ABM was a significant predictor of both variables, with an additional 4.0% of variance in acknowledgment of responsibility ($F_{\text{Change } (1, 331)} = 14.94$, $p < .001$) and an additional 3.7% of variance in willingness to respond ($F_{\text{Change } (1, 331)} = 13.23$, $p < .01$) explained; with empathically biased participants acknowledging more responsibility than participants in the control (mean difference = 14.49, SE = 3.10, $p < .001$) or self-sufficiency attentional bias condition (mean difference = 15.20, SE = 3.09, $p < .001$). They were also more willing to respond than participants in the control (mean difference = .44, SE = .16, $p < .01$) or self-sufficiency attentional bias condition (mean difference = .70, SE = .16, $p < .001$). Transportation was added to the hierarchical multiple regressions in the third steps (see Table 4). Transportation was a significant predictor of acknowledgment of responsibility ($F_{\text{Change } (1, 330)} = 11.95$, $p < .01$) and willingness to respond ($F_{\text{Change } (1, 330)} = 6.31$, $p < .05$). Transportation explained an additional 3.1% of variance in acknowledgment of responsibility and an additional 1.7% of variance in willingness to respond; ABM results were in line with the group differences described previously. These results support Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

We bootstrapped the indirect effects of ABM on acknowledgment of responsibility and willingness to respond, using the approach of Preacher and Hayes (2004; Preacher and Hayes 2008). The bootstrap estimates presented here are based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. In agreement with Hypotheses 3a and 3b, transportation mediated the relationship between ABM and acknowledgment of responsibility (point estimate = 1.89, bias corrected and accelerated 95% CI = .72 ± 3.41) as well as willingness to respond (point estimate = .07, bias corrected and accelerated 95% CI = .01 ± .15).

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Discussion

We show in Study 1 that empathy ABM is a powerful instrument to evoke transportation and has desirable effects on acknowledgement of responsibility and willingness to respond. These results are exacerbated in the case of severe customer vulnerability. However, it is unclear whether to come to a fair solution, it is always required that the employee completely rejects the firm's perspective and fully adopts the customer perspective.[4] The myth that the customer is always right is instilled in many company policies and employees are often urged to use it as a guideline in customer contact. At the same time, many instances exist where the customer is not right or expresses him or herself in the "wrong" way (Bitner, Booms and Mohr 1994). For example, marketing research points to increasing cases of customer misbehavior (Berry and Seiders 2008; Fisk et al. 2010). Typically, the tone of voice in social media, in general, and blogs, in particular, is authentic, but also raw, oversimplified, and perhaps abusive. This may lead to work stress for boundary-spanning employees (Hochschild 1983). Therefore, there may be circumstances in which firms would rather have their employees adopt a self-sufficiency bias. This is the focus of Study 2.

[4] We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing our attention to this important and relevant aspect.

Research on emotional labor shows that when affective states clash, a feeling of emotional dissonance is evoked (Hochschild 1983). We contend that in such circumstances, an empathy bias, which is at odds with an abusive customer reaction, will be less likely to result in transportation. In contrast, we expect that a self-sufficiency bias equips employees to deal more effectively with abusive language from customers. As emotional dissonance is less prevalent, a self-sufficiency bias should remain unaffected. In case of verbally abusive blog posts, we thus put forward a fifth hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: As a blog post content is more verbally abusive, the effect of empathy ABM on transportation decreases; the effect of self-sufficiency ABM is not affected however.

Study 2 Method

Study 2 tested the effect of ABM on actual responding behavior in a field sample. To prime one group to adopt an empathy bias and the second group to adopt a self-sufficiency bias, we used four sessions consisting each of 15 word search puzzles similar to those in the pretest and Study 1. To establish whether the impact of ABM would last beyond the immediate experimental situation, employees' responding behavior was assessed with a customer blog post a week after the ABM. We manipulated the content of the blog post. The customer either politely complained or verbally abused the employee. The participants were randomly assigned to the priming and blog post content conditions. The study thus used a 2 (attentional bias: empathy, self-sufficiency) × 2 (blog post content: polite, verbal abuse) factorial design.

Participants. Two hundred fifty-six service employees were recruited from a different global *Fortune* 100 financial services firm. The participants were on average 45 years (from 25–65 years), were again mostly men (78.5%), of Dutch nationality (99.2%), and had on average 22 years of working experience. Education level ranged from only primary school

(20.7%), finished secondary (28.5%), to finished tertiary education (50.8%). The sample represented 12 branch offices.

Attentional Bias Modification (ABM), material, manipulation, and measures. Participants performed four ABM sessions on four consecutive days. Each session consisted of 15 word search puzzles. The empathy and self-sufficiency words were similar to the pretest and Study 1. The set of 6 neutral words was different in each puzzle.

One week later, participants either read the blog post of the pretest and Study 1 (see Appendix) or a verbally abusive version of the same blog post. In that version, customer Paul made angry remarks, saying at one point for example: "Either this banker thought I am stupid or the banker is stupid. The bank is trying to rip me off." The participants were asked to imagine they were the banker Paul was blogging about.

After reading the blog post, the participants were asked whether they cared to respond to Paul and if so, what their response would be. The other measures used were transportation, love of money, moral attentiveness, and Saxe and Weitz's (1982) selling orientation–customer orientation scale (as shortened by Periatt, LeMay and Chakrabarty 2004).

Study 2 Results

Manipulation, priming, and discriminant validity checks. For our confirmation of the blog post content manipulation (polite or verbally abusive), we asked participants how the way in which the accusation was delivered was perceived: "primarily in a fair manner," "primarily in an abusive manner," or "neither of the above." All participants answered the blog post content question correctly.

To assess the degree of empathy that the responses expressed, we asked two independent coders to answer "yes" or "no" to the pretest adaptation of Davis's (1983) empathic ability items. These coders achieved acceptable agreement levels (Cohen's $\kappa = .74$, $p < .001$). Disagreements were resolved through discussion. There was a significant

difference between the empathy (79.7% “yes”) and self-sufficiency (13.3% “yes”) attentional bias conditions on empathy expressed in the responses ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 113.45$, $p < .001$, $\varphi = .67$).

A funneled debriefing procedure was used similar to Study 1. During the funneled debriefing, no participant indicated awareness of the influence of the ABM on their decision to respond to the blog post.

Improving on our procedure in Study 1, we also assess discriminant validity to demonstrate that empathy and self-sufficiency bias, transportation, and willingness to respond are distinct variables. Discriminant validity is established when relations between different variables are weaker than those within each variable (Hair, Black and Babin 2010). In other words, when examining a correlation matrix, the square root of average variance extracted (√AVE) should be greater than all correlation coefficients involving the variable. Table 5 contains the average scores, reliabilities, intercorrelations, and square root of average variance extracted of expressed empathy, transportation, willingness to respond, and the control measures. The only significant correlations involve willingness to respond. Its average variance extracted (√AVE = .37) is greater than the correlation with transportation ($\rho = .29$, $p < .01$) and customer orientation ($\rho = .14$, p .05). Thus, discriminant validity was evidenced.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

Hypotheses tests. Transportation was analyzed with a 2 (attentional bias: empathy, self-sufficiency) × 2 (blog post content: polite, verbal abuse) ANCOVA. The covariates included all demographic and control variables. There was a significant main effect for ABM ($F_{(1, 242)} = 8.32$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .033$) and blog post content ($F_{(1, 242)} = 8.38$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .033$). The corresponding interaction between ABM and blog post content was not significant ($F_{(1, 242)} = .78$, $p = .379$). Follow-up analyses indicated that transportation was higher in the empathy attentional bias and polite blog post content than in the other conditions (mean

differences > .47, SE = .18, *p*s < .01). All other conditions were not significantly different (mean differences < .24, SE = .18, *p*s > .19). These results support Hypotheses 1 and 5.

Willingness to respond was analyzed with hierarchical logistic regression analysis. In the first step, demographic and control variables were entered, and they predicted 8.7% of the variance in willingness to respond ($\chi^2_{\text{Step 1 (10)}} = 14.19$, $p = .165$). In the second step ABM was entered, which explained an additional 5.0% of variance in willingness to respond ($\chi^2_{\text{Step 2 (1)}} = 8.55$, $p < .01$). Transportation was entered in step 3. The results are summarized in Table 6. Transportation was related positively to willingness to respond and explained an additional 11.4% ($\chi^2_{\text{Step 3 (1)}} = 20.49$, $p < .001$). These results provide additional support for Hypothesis 2b.

We bootstrapped the indirect effects of ABM on willingness to respond, using the approach of Preacher and Hayes (2004; Preacher and Hayes 2008). The bootstrap estimates presented here are based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. In agreement with Hypothesis 3b, transportation mediated the relationship between ABM and willingness to respond (point estimate = .31, bias corrected and accelerated 95% CI = .08 ± .63).

[Insert Table 6 about here]

General discussion

Focusing on the role of narratives in social media, this paper aims to contribute to the extant literature in two important ways. We demonstrate that ABM can be employed as a means to prime employees with an empathy bias in order for them to take a discontented customer's perspective and subsequently acknowledge responsibility and display a willingness to respond. Relative to a self-sufficiency bias, employees with an empathy bias experience more transportation and feel greater moral obligation to respond to blog posts or engage in online conversations about the company. We complement previous findings focusing on customer transportation into a conversation between employees and a fellow

customer, embedded in a narrative blog post (van Laer and de Ruyter 2010). In the current paper, we show that employees can be primed empathically to put themselves in the situation of their customers. Hence, we demonstrate that an empathy bias can ultimately serve to improve an employee's response to an integrity violation. We conceptually as well as empirically distinguish this empathy bias from a self-sufficiency bias to ignore integrity violations. We also add to the literature on ABM by demonstrating beyond the realm of clinical psychology that this method can be successfully applied with respect to beliefs, intentions, and behavior of service personnel in social media. Interestingly, we also find that employees who are primed with empathy report higher transportation in and are willing to respond to blog posts read one week after the successful ABM. Thus, our work expands Bargh, Chen, and Burrows's (1996) insights, because it shows that priming is not only relevant to current, but also later situations.

As a second contribution, we nuance aforementioned relationships by focusing on two theoretically and managerially relevant boundary conditions related to ABM, namely, customers' financial vulnerability and verbal abuse. Different customer vulnerability and verbal abuse levels significantly affect the impact of empathy ABM on transportation. The knowledge that a customer is highly vulnerable to the consequences of integrity violation positively influences the empathy ABM-transportation relationship. This finding of an association among customer vulnerability, greater empathy, and deeper transportation by employees contributes to Fiske and Taylor's (1991) theory on sensitization of the self to realistic projections of possible situations. In contrast, a narrative with an example of an integrity violation in abusive language becomes much less compelling if the reader adopts an empathy bias. The emotional dissonance process provides a backdrop to this finding (Hochschild 1983). When employees simultaneously are triggered to develop an empathy bias

as well as have to deal with the negative emotions of customer rage, the necessary emotional labor seems to exhaust their ability to transport themselves into the customer's problem.

Limitations and Further Research Suggestions

Any paper's contributions must be evaluated in light of its limitations and this research is no exception. First, the setting investigated in our research may create some confounds. We covered financial services, but obviously there are other markets where research on integrity and restoration efforts is needed (e.g., online retailing, van Dolen, Dabholkar and de Ruyter 2007). Arguably, other contexts may not share the same emphasis on responsibility and accountability as is currently prevalent in financial services. Furthermore, we only consider blog posts, though customers share integrity violations through other social media too (e.g., status updates on Facebook, video logs on YouTube). Green and Brock (2002) argue that when narratives trigger fewer senses, recipients must exert more imaginative effort, which results in more transportation. Reading a blog post thus might provoke greater transportation than watching a video log. Yet Polichak and Gerrig (2002) also suggest that audiovisual stories generate different participatory responses than written stories, because they trigger both sight and hearing. For marketing scholars, the distinctive effects of appeals to either deep or wide senses suggest an area of interesting research possibilities related to the impact of user-generated content.

Second, we include a delayed measure of the effect of ABM on transportation without assessing the underlying longitudinal development of such an effect. Studies on this topic could reveal fruitful insights into the durability of attentional bias modification and its effect on transportation, as well as track their changes over time. This research may shed light on the optimal number of sessions needed to achieve sustainable empathic attention for the customer. Furthermore, it is still to be determined whether there is an optimal degree of affect in responses to customers. There seem limits to the effectiveness of emotional content in

employee-customer interactions, particularly in highly involved service settings characterized by financial vulnerability (Köhler et al. 2011). The search for circumstances under which affect-laden responses may have a negative effect thus seems a fruitful direction for further research.

Third, we base our manipulation of a self-sufficiency bias on experiments by Vohs and colleagues (2006), who use monetary priming. In line with their interpretation, we find that if people believe they are more self-sufficiency, they will be less engrossed in the blog post and less likely to feel they should help others. However, Aggarwal (2004) conceptualizes a similar attentional bias as "quid pro quo," with a purely rational exchange relationship and zero deviation from contractual agreements, such as warranty schemes, in mind. Additional ABM research should investigate how such an attentional bias differs in impact from a self-sufficiency bias. If tested in combination with a relevant outcome (e.g., conversion rates), this investigation might provide interesting insights for online interactive marketing research as well.

Managerial Implications

Managers must be cognizant of the growing popularity of stories in social media, particularly as avenues for customer complaints. To restore the integrity perceptions of a complaining customer, firms commonly route complaints to public relations or Web care departments. Such tactics exclude employees who are directly involved from acknowledging responsibility or responding to the customer. Moreover, company spokespersons that lack personal involvement are unlikely to experience transportation. Therefore, instead of a scripted response provided by a customer service representative, implicated employees should transport themselves into, take responsibility for, and respond to posts about them or their actions. For example, American Airlines credibly countered a customer's complaint in social

media about baggage-handling fees when a frontline employee acknowledged responsibility and responded promptly (Gaines-Ross 2010).

An important question is how to apply ABM in the practice of the daily business environment. One way to achieve this is to introduce Multi-Touch Collaboration Walls that can be used to feature empathic priming words, for instance during meetings and training sessions (see Figure 3). Furthermore, empathic concern could be embedded in reward and recognition systems, which often drive performance in services industries. These systems should balance economic with empathic criteria as kpi's. Against the backdrop of the current financial crisis, it seems particularly pertinent to counterbalance employees' self-sufficiency bias when dealing with financially vulnerable customers. Within a customer-champion context, sample actions could be judged by a panel of independent experts. Employees, who demonstrate that they have "saved" a customer from defecting, could earn rewards for their responsible, responsive behavior. It is important to note, however, that an empathy bias does not always translate into employee perspective-taking. In evaluating employees' empathic behavior, it is important to take note that the customer may not always use the right words. Customer verbal misbehavior should therefore be taken into account.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Finally, it seems important to review hiring practices and recruit people who are conversant with social media—such as the Comcast employee who started a Twitter account and thus put "in one deft swoop, a human face on a company that had been disparaged for poor customer service" (Gaines-Ross 2010, p. 74). Companies should also consider the use of frontline employee improvisation training as a means of reinforcing shared values of high quality customer service, and empowering employees to respond empathically to customer complaints in social media (John, Grove and Fisk 2006; Daly et al. 2009). More employees might learn to respond in narrative formats and become characters in an unfolding story.

Without such efforts, employees will likely produce clinical, standard responses that serve only to alienate customers and thousands of online readers.

Conclusions

In sum, transportation prepares employees to respond effectively to complaints of integrity violations in blog posts. Although the outcomes are conditional on customer vulnerability and misbehavior, employees with an empathy bias seem to display the highest levels of transportation into the customer experience, which enhances their sense of responsibility and willingness to respond. If employees try on the mental shoes of the customer, they may be able to walk much further into their stories.

Appendix

PaulTalk

I have nothing left.

…Each year, I saved for retirement as much as I could. So I was beside myself with joy when I met this financial magician, who just conjured up an investment portfolio out of his hat with a nice yearly return. Then the poor fellow did a disappearing act, and the high returns he promised turned out to be an illusion too. My investment portfolio has evaporated. The government pension will not be enough to live off. Will I nevertheless have to rely on it?

…They say that timing is everything—and how. My numbers lined up half a year ago, and I decided to wait to convert everything to the safety of bonds. A few months ago, my net worth was half of what it had been. Time was almost up. When I received the bad news, at first I really thought something like, I won't be able to manage all this. But later I thought something more like: Not to worry, I have ridden out dips before. But at that moment, the way things were financially, I didn't really have a choice.

…But not this time. The ride got too rough. The bank was not very considerate … a bank that itself advised a heavy investment portfolio. If I worked at your bank, I would never advise anyone to invest such a large sum of money.

…Only time will tell, but I don't think I have enough time to recover. Scary isn't it. I have nothing now, and will have even less tomorrow. A person has to have faith in the future, but as my investment portfolio went, so did my future. I have no more faith. I am doomed.

POSTED BY PAUL

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