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Factors Contributing To Positive Effect of Negative Publicity on Consumer Demand of The Product

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ABSTRACT

The rare phenomenon of negative publicity is intriguing and this research establishes to find the factors associated with it that lead to positive outcome. Negative publicity can either be intended or a response to an unfavourable incident. Organizations have had mixed responses to such incidents from the customers and that has affected the demand and reputation of their products or services. This qualitative research paper is based on literature review mostly from journals ranked by Financial Times or listed in ISI Thomson. The paper serves to establish the factors playing role in bringing about the positive effect of negative publicity on consumer demand of the product. The knowledge of these factors will be useful for the marketing managers to understand the impact of negative publicity and to leverage the situation to increase the demand of the products and preserve the company reputation.

Key words: Negative publicity, positive effects, media, packaging. brand positioning.

INTRODUCTION

With news disseminating among a group of people, a company obtains publicity. Previous researches show that the publicity has a strong effect on company's products and its image (Zhu & Chang, 2013). The negative publicity can damage the corporate image (Dean, 2004). A bad publicity undesirably affects the brand when the source of negative information is highly credible or the customer's confidence is high. It was established that the amount of negative publicity relating to business founders' unethical behaviour is on the rise in the age of online social media (Zhu & Chang, 2013).

Negative publicity can either be intended or a response to an unfavourable incident (Biswas,, Pullig, & Netemeyer, 2006). Organizations have had mixed responses to such incidents from the customers and that has affected the demand and reputation of their products or services (Dean, 2004). Negative Publicity hurts the company but it has also been successful for various organizations (Berger, Sorensen & Rasmussen, 2010).

Singapore has been a platform to one of the most popular cases of negative publicity, the "Hello Kitty McDonald's Riot" case that took place about fourteen years ago. McDonald's introduced _Hello Kitty_ toys as part of the _Happy Meal_. The Singaporeans stood in a long queue to ensure they do not miss out their favourite toy. At one such instance, to get their hands on these toys, the crowd jostled in one of the McDonald's store and seven people were injured. This brought more attention to the "limited edition" toys, creating mayhem in Singapore but McDonald's took advantage of the situation. McDonald's Corporation Annual Report (2000) states that their sale exceeded $40 billion and they served nearly $1 million more customers than the previous year.

With the release of the movie _The Da Vinci_ Code, the world witnessed yet another example of unusual approach adopted to reach the masses in negative way and generate profits**.** During the promotion, the movie was criticised worldwide by the Catholic sect and the court case was brought against the team behind the movie. This in fact helped gain popularity and created a wave of curiosity among audiences. During the foremost week of the release, the movie had a huge collection of $224 million, worldwide (Boxofficemojo.com, 2015).

According to the old adage, "Any publicity is a good publicity". Thus, a bad publicity need not always give poor result to a company. Negative publicity increases sales by increasing the product awareness (Berger, Sorensen & Rasmussen, 2010). Sometimes people do get tempted and eager to know about certain negative news about famous celebrity or firm. Consumers place more weightage to negative news than positive news in

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forming opinions (Eagley & Chaiken, 1993). Sometimes, other person's negative news will be a boost for certain firms to market their products. For ex, McDonald's, Uruguay tweeted 'Hi @ luis16suarez, if you feel hungry, come take a bite at a BigMac) 'after Suarez was banned for four months for biting Giorgio Chiellini in the 2014 football World Cup (Kunju, 2014). Moreover, the powerful individuals (people who have high mind set and have freedom because of influence of external force) are less likely to be affected by these type of information compared to low power individuals (David, Alokparna & William, 2011). This clearly indicates that the negative publicity will not always create an unpleasant situation to a company.

Thus, such issues bring out attention of consumers and can have unpredictable effect on the organization's reputation and business (Zhu & Chang, 2013). There are various factors affecting the outcome of negative publicity. These factors, independently or collectively contribute in making the difference that some organizations are positively or negatively affected (David M., 2006).

The objectives of this research paper are:
- To study the factors affecting negative publicity.
- To help marketing managers understand the impact of negative publicity; analyse the response of the consumers; and leverage the situation to increase the product demand and preserve the company reputation.

FACTORS AFFECTING NEGATIVE PUBLICITY

The literature review indicates the following factors that determine the impact of negative publicity on customer's demand.

1. Media

Media has made communications easier and quicker thus any negative news about the firm or person gets circulated quickly. There are wide varieties of media and out of those social media are becoming increasingly important for the consumer decisions. Online blogs are attracting consumer's interest. People refer online blogs mostly for the purchase of expensive products (Bronner & Hoog, 2014). The credibility of the bloggers plays a vital role in product sales.

Newspapers and television channels cover wide range of people from far and near geographical locations. Any negative information about a product through media channel is set to create an adverse effect over the sales of that product. Brand celebrity also influences the perception of the consumer. The consumer's reaction is based on the morality and conduct of celebrity in advertisements in magazines and television (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997).

The factors which influence people's reaction to negative publicity through media are explained as follows:

1.1 Consumer Perception

Consumers have definite ideas about the media and their advertising content. They believe the best source of information for shopping or entertainment comes from media such as television or newspaper (Larkin, 1979). Thus any negative news through a media channel will have an effect on the customers.

1.2 Advertising

Advertisement is a paid message from a specific sponsor in order to persuade the customer. A consumer's judgement is based solely on a single specific target object: advertisement (Jin & Lutz, 2013). Advertising and publicity work together in a two-step model. First, an exposure to advertising induces the customer to form a hypothesis to that product. Second, he/she will try to test that advertisement in order to increase confidence. Though publicity is more credible compared to advertising, the synergy of advertisement and publicity has a greater effect on consumer's perception about a product (Kim, Yoon & Lee, 2010).

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1.3 Brand Endorser

Celebrity endorsements are a popular are the popular marketing medium. Consumers tend to get carried away by their favourite celebrity compared to any expert or CEO. Any negative news about the celebrity in turn has an impact over the brand. In order to get rid of negative news, certain animated characters can also be made as the product endorser, since they are immune to any negative news (Till & Shimp, 1998).

2. Product Quality

In spite of all the publicity and advertising, the product quality should match consumer's expectations. The perception a consumer has about the quality of a product is of utmost importance as it creates the foremost impression. Poor quality eventually leads to poor sales, despite heavy publicity (Noel, 2009). Moreover, it has been found that the quality certificate label plays a vital role in sales of store brands (Ku, Kuo & Wang, 2012). Consumers are even prepared to pay more for high quality products (Bertini, Iyengar & Wathieu, 2012). It is clearly evident that there should not be any sacrifice in the quality of a product. Consumer's perception about the product has positive effects when it satisfies their expectations. A negative effect about the brand is created when the product or service quality is poor that eventually leads to customer dissatisfaction.

2.1 Innovativeness

Product innovation is one important way that the organisation can adapt to changes in markets, technology and competition. Some organisation suffers in the market due to lack of sustained product innovativeness or managing a product innovation over a period of time. These are the organisations with stable or no innovative practices that are trying to be innovative (Dougherty & Hardy, 1996). Product innovation is the key for many organisations to survive in the market, if their new approach fails and gets negative remarks, it leads to customer dissatisfaction.

2.2 Packaging

Many of the purchases of the customer are unplanned and therefore packaging is most significant in store communication. New and attractive product packaging may influence customer's perception to but the product However poor quality will disappoint the customers and will lead to failure of the product. Even if the packaging is not good and the quality is better, this won't affect the customer's frequency of buying that product (Couste, Martos & Martinez, 2012).

2.3 Service Quality

Service quality is very important for any firm. No matter how good their products are, poor service will eventually lead to poor sales. Customer loyalty depends on the evaluation of the quality of the service they receive (Bogomolova, 2011).

3. Brand Positioning

Brand positioning is how a brand is perceived in the mind of the customer with respect to other competitive alternatives. Brands generally segment the market uniquely so that they have an edge over the other players. Hard-selling (which is a direct and data-based approach) vs Soft-selling (which is an indirect and image-based approach) also has an impact on the positioning of the product (Okazaki, Mueller & Diehl, 2013). In products like mobile phones or laptops, the attribute of the product positions itself in the mind of the consumer and the consumer makes decisions purely based on the features. In the case of a perfectly-competitive environment,

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the price helps the consumer make his choice. Abad news or experience will create a bad perception to the customer, so it is important to have a positive brand positioning.

3.1 Product Attributes

The attributes of a product contribute to how a product is positioned in the minds of the consumer. Based on the attributes, the buying pattern of a consumer is either a feature-rich product or its no-frill counterpart. A measure of the utility received by a consumer decides his preference (Markopoulos & Clemens, 2011). There is conflict between the purchase and usage behaviour based on the product features. Based on a survey by Nielsen Holdings N.V, the mobile phone sales in 2012 grew by 38% over the previous year (Goodman & Irmak, 2013). Given the fact that consumers are willing to pay more for feature-rich products, every aspect of a product's attribute is examined and any shortcoming or negative news about a particular product can have an effect on its consumer demand.

3.2 Product Price

The pricing strategy adopted by a company in positioning a product goes a long way in determining the success of the product in the market. Apart from testing the paying-capacity of the consumer, the pricing also has a psychological effect on the customer. For a product, every individual has a reference-price or adaptation level (Petroshius & Monroe, 1987) Extreme values on the price scale are generally not tolerated by buyers except for a product that has no substitutes. For a product that has a perfectly-competitive demand, a slightly lower price than the reference-price can result in the consumer perceiving the brand to be inferior to another.

3.3 Consumer Expectation

In a market where each and every product has a viable substitute, it is important for a brand to come up with a product that caters to each customer segment. When a large set of options are available, it has an adverse effect on the consumer's buying pattern and the buyer does not feel confident about his decision.(Diehl & Poynor, 2010) Now that there is a thin line of difference between any two products in a particular segment, customer expectations are very precise. When the particular requirement of a consumer is not met, this might have a negative effect on the consumer demand due to a highly competitive environment.

4. Consumer Psychology

A lot can be understood about the thought process of a customer based on the buying pattern. When a consumer makes his purchases regularly from a particular store, it is unlikely that he will consider trying out another store even if he receives negative reviews about the outlet because he is satisfied with the service that he receives (Sivakumar, Mei & Beibei, 2014). The same will not be true for e-commerce shopping. When it comes to shopping online, negative publicity has an impact on the mind of the consumer. The loyalty of a customer is short-lived when he receives negative reviews about an e-commerce portal. The uniqueness of a retail store in terms of service, convenience, pricing influences the customer's decision making (Wan, Xu & Ding, 2014). This is applicable to stores that deal with fast-moving-consumer goods because the products cannot be differentiated based on use and attributes (Palic, Maricic & Kovac, 2011).

4.1 Frequency of Buying

An important aspect of consumer psychology is the frequency at which they buy a product. This frequency influences the perception about the product. (Sivakumar, Li, & Dong, 2014). The frequency of coming across a news with respect to the brand also determines the reaction and effect on consumers regarding it. Marketers consider this as a tool in promotion of products. (Constantinides, E., 2004).

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4.2 Promotions

"Add-ons" are sometimes more attractive than the main product. These value added goods or services are useful not only in winning but also in retaining loyalty of a consumer. For example, various stores may be selling the same good, but other amenities such as entertainment, parking lots etc. aid in providing satisfaction to the customers. (Palić, Maričić, & Kovač, 2011). Many times the consumers may not be very much impressed with the product but the promotional giveaways helps turning the table in favouring the organization.

5. Word of Mouth

Word of mouth is a means of disseminating data. It is prevalent in situations where there is high consumer interest in a newly launched or upcoming venture. The source of information also influences the extent to which 'word-of-mouth' happens (Keller & Fay, 2012). When the source happens to be a trustworthy or well-known identity, then the publicity which follows is intense and if it is negative it can have an impact on the sales. However studies have differing conclusions on whether consumers prefer to engage in negative or positive word-of-mouth (Angelis, Bonezzi, Peluso, Rucker, & Costabile, 2012). The need to self-enhance for an individual makes them talk about their own personal experiences rather than about others' experiences. A greater tendency to involve in positive word-of-mouth was noticed when a need to self-enhance was noticed.

5.1 Social Influence

Many times a consumer doesn't intend to purchase a product but his social circle influences him in the act. (Cheema, A., & Kaikati, A. M., 2010). This is prevalent at the times of negative publicity as well, as was well depicted in the "McDonald's Hello Kitty Riot Case" at Singapore. Thus, social influence is an important aspect of word-of-mouth communication.

5.2 Loyalty

Generally, marketing strategies of an organization focuses on both finding new customers and maintaining the old ones. This happens because a loyal customer is considered an indirect brand promoter. Moreover, loyal customers will have a holistic approach towards the negative news and will not be easily influenced (Kawakami, Kishiya, & Parry, 2012)

5.3 Self-Motivation

Customers have a preconceived notion about popular brands. Many times for personal taste or for social status factor they are self-motivated to purchase a specific brand's product. (Berger & Schwartz, 2011). For example, an iPhone might have lesser feature than a less expensive Samsung-android phone yet the consumer may have a preference for iPhone. Such consumers are not very easily influenced by negative news associated with their preferred product.

Thus, with the help of literature review, it has been established that the primary factors that affect negative publicity are as follows–

1. Media
2. Product quality
3. Brand positioning
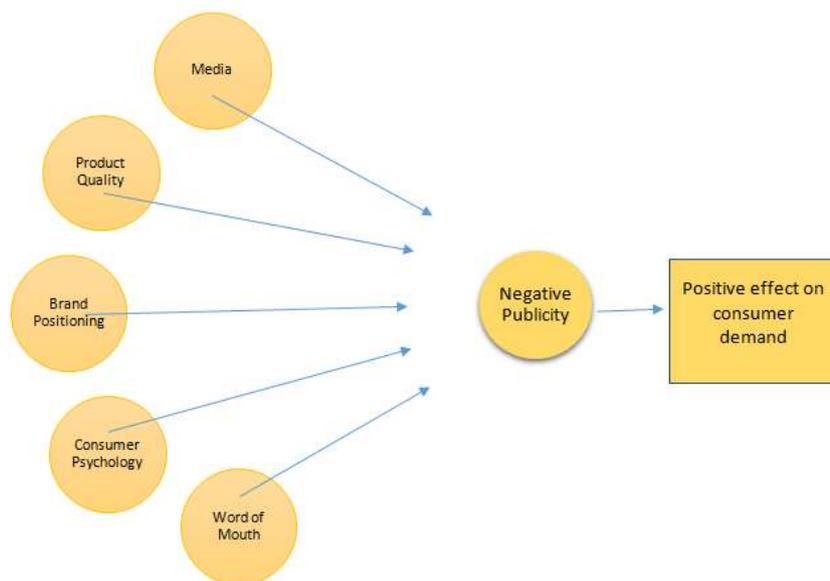4. Consumer psychology
5. Word of mouth.

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Figure 1: Factors taken into consideration for Negative Publicity

LEVERAGING THE NEGATIVE PUBLICITY

As mentioned in the case of McDonald's at Singapore, the consumer demand for McDonald's grew drastically after the introduction of their Hello Kitty range of products. Based on this incident, it was established that there were positive effects of negative publicity. It came down to how companies made the most out of unexpected circumstances. In addition to that, companies tend to leverage on certain events that garner attention. During the recently concluded FIFA World Cup, McDonald's pounced on the incident where Luiz Suarez bit Giorgio Chiellini. The McDonald's Uruguay twitter account came up with an interesting tweet which read "Hi @ luis16suarez, if you feel hungry, come take a bite at a BigMac)". The tweet from 24th June 2014 had an instant impact as it doubled the company's profile on social network. The fast food chain had approximately 700,000 mentions on the social network during the world cup while the other brands averaged 100,000.

The study implies that the position of a brand is a critical factor in influencing the effect of negative news. The premium brands are largely affected but the uncommon ones are not much influenced. So, brand reputation may be hampered but the consumer demand is not decreased, although it may be increased in some cases as McDonald's 2000 riot case (Wong, 2014). The context of negative news is of prominence in affecting the psychology of a consumer. For example, the negative publicity of the movie 'Da Vinci Code', affected people of Catholic sect and other communities were indifferent to it (Goodstein, 2006). So, any company involved in a negative news should recognize the target audience and hence its impact. In the changing marketing trend, the negative publicity could be used as distinguishing factor and it helps in bringing quick attention. For example, Haagen Dazs' ice cream when launched in India, it invited the 'scoop of controversy' with its tagline "Entry restricted only to holders of international passports" (The Economic Times, 2012). Reports suggested that this helped the company draw initial attention in the competitive market. The negative publicity can be applicable in yet another bit of the changing trend in marketing, i.e., "one's bad is another one's good". This can be understood through the example when McDonalds tweeted 'Hi @ luis16suarez, if you feel hungry, come take a bite at a BigMac'. The tweet reported to have boosted the sales on that day. (Kunju, 2014). Some

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of the learnings that can be drawn to leverage the negative publicity to increase the demand of the product and preserve the company reputation are as follows:

1. Attractive ads based on any negative news will have a positive response from the public.

An ad pointing to a negative event or characteristics makes a longer impression on the minds of consumers. So, many companies try to create the buzz using this technique. For example, Jaguar used the tag line "Good to be bad" to launch the F-type coupe and portrayed its image as the British Villain (Mashable, 2014) during the Super bowl event. The hashtag #GoodToBeBad became the most used hash tag of that event. Attractive ads based on other's negative event or news have also gained popularity to the company using such strategy. For example, after Saurez bit Giorgio Chiellini during the Football World Cup, McDonald's, Uruguay had tweeted during the Football World Cup "Hi @ luis16suarez, if you feel hungry, come take a bite at a BigMac ;)" (News.bbc.co.uk, 2000) and this increased the social presence of McD significantly.

2. Negative reviews of sub optimal product quality are overlooked if there's excellent service associated with the product.

The services are the link between a product and consumers. They impact the first impression of the product before a customer uses the product and also continue to build the positive impression post the consumption. Thus, companies ensure to offer best services to create a positive impression on the minds of a consumer. So, if a product has negative reviews but has satisfied customers with the services, which are the value adding factor for the product, the effect of negative reviews will be faded. For example, Dell computers are considered less advanced when it comes to performance compared to Macbook but Dell offers customizations and excellent service of giving maintenance at door step. Thus, adding value to the product and making attractive proposition for consumers.

3. Negative publicity of premium brands will have positive affect.

Consumers perceive premium brands as high quality. Even though there's negative news associated with it, that generally doesn't affect consumer's perception about using that product instead that increases popularity. For example, when Apple sued Samsung for design copyright issues (Cusumano, 2013), that helped both the brands create higher popularity and worked as a buzz for them. Samsung had a product launch during that time and thus it helped boosting its sales (Info.localytics.com, 2015).

4. Negative news about a consumer's favourite brand will not affect his/her frequency of buying the product.

A consumer's loyalty towards the brand they use does not let them get affected by the negative news about the brand because the consumer associates themselves with that product. So, when a consumer has a brand dearer to him, a negative news doesn't change his loyalty or affect his frequency of buying the product. For example, Zara clothing were ranked as 'most toxic' by Greenpeace. (Chemicals, 2012). Although the competitors tried to take advantage of it, but this didn't affect the consumer's preference for Zara clothing as consumers buying Zara products associate themselves more with the fast-fashion Zara is famous for.

5. Bad Word of Mouth will have positive effect for a product.

Word of mouth (WOM) is one of the most traditional way of promoting a product and presently the WOM is shifted to social media. A negative news about a product becomes viral through social media and consumers tend to rely on the validity of a claim more when heard through WOM, so WOM impacts the buying decision of a consumer. For example, during the McD Hello Kitty riot, McD was criticized for the havoc created because of the toy it had launched and for mismanaging the crowd. But, this in turn spread like a forest fire in the entire Singapore and created a huge promotion for McD Hello Kitty toys resulted in boosting the sales of 'Happy Meals'. (News.bbc.co.uk, 2000).

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DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research proves that while the negative publicity, in some cases, can be responsible in damaging the corporate's image (Dean, 2004), it may enhance the consumer demand for a product and also the reputation of a company (Zhu & Chang, 2013). This study involved establishing the factors that gives positive result when a brand or a product is affected by negative publicity. The literature review helped establish the five factors essential in relating the increase in consumer demand for a product as a result of negative publicity. The factors are – media, product quality, brand positioning, consumer psychology and word of mouth. The paper also emphasises the strategies used by the companies to leverage the negative publicity to increase the demand and preserve the reputation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE

The present study would help a company anticipate the factors contributing to positive effect of negative publicity on consumer demand of the product but may not be able to measure the intensity of each factor contributing to the negative publicity. Hence, even though a company is benefitted through negative publicity, it cannot be established for how long will the consumers perception be acceptable to such publicity. The learnings mentioned to leverage the negative publicity may be further validated with primary research.

Another limitation is that the study is generic with respect to the context in which negative publicity can occur. For example, the effect of negative publicity regarding religion might have a different reaction of consumers than the publicity in regard to gender.

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