



Reciprocity anxiety: Individual differences in feeling discomfort in reciprocity situations

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ABSTRACT

Providing gifts, assistance, or favors to benefit consumers may pressure the recipients to adhere to the norm of reciprocity, which has the potential to increase customer patronage and satisfaction. However, these practices can fail to yield desired results if customers feel uncomfortable about receiving things that need to be reciprocated. People differ in the degree to which they feel anxious in a situation that requires them to reciprocate or when they anticipate such a situation. This research introduces the construct of reciprocity anxiety to capture this individual difference and distinguish it from other variables. We develop an 11-item scale to measure two components of reciprocity anxiety and find that reciprocity anxiety can predict (1) consumers' avoidance behavior toward businesses that may obligate them to reciprocate; (2) consumers' eagerness to repay a benefit provided by businesses; as well as (3) consumers' intentions to make future visits to businesses that employ reciprocity relationship-building tactics.

1. Introduction

Understanding reciprocity is indispensable for understanding all social orders (Kolm, 2008), including economic relationships. The importance of reciprocity has long been noted by observers of human interaction. In the fourth century BC, Democritus already offered this advice: “Accept favors in the foreknowledge that you will have to give a greater return for them” (Greenberg, 1980). Howard Becker was so certain of the central importance of reciprocity that he titled one of his books *Man in Reciprocity* and referred to man as “Homo reciprocus” (Becker, 1956). Both economists and psychologists have found evidence of a universal reciprocity norm obligating people to repay the favors others do for them (Falk & Fischbacher, 2006; Fehr & Gächter, 2000; Jung et al., 2014; Ma, Tunney, & Ferguson, 2017).

Reciprocity plays an important role based on the expectation that future benefits will be delivered directly by beneficiaries or indirectly by beneficiaries' friends (Greiner & Levati, 2005; Stanca, 2009). In addition, the empirical studies of psychology have found that individuals are more likely to comply with a request from a favor-doer, even when individuals dislike this people and the favor is unrequested (Gialdini et al., 1975; Regan, 1971), which indicated the relationship between favors and compliance are mediated by normative pressure to reciprocate. Therefore, companies routinely employ reciprocity-based tactics. Companies reciprocate customers' patronage with initiatives such as frequent-flyer programs, customer loyalty bonuses, free gifts, and personalized cents-off coupons (Argo & Main, 2008; Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001). Consumers duly reciprocate by making purchases or

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becoming loyal to the sellers from whom they have received extra benefits (such as tangible rewards, preferential treatments, and personalized communication). Reciprocity is also manifested in a number of burgeoning economic phenomena such as share economy (Hummel & Lechner, 2002; Shiao & Luo, 2012) and participative pricing (Kim, Natter, & Spann, 2009). Although many reciprocity-based tactics are regularly used to increase consumer satisfaction, commitment, and loyalty (Wulf et al., 2001), they can lead to distinct outcomes that are not always beneficial to consumers or to firms (Mitchell, 2002; Noble & Phillips, 2004).

The success of reciprocity tactics depends not only on its strategic planning or implementation, but also on the individual propensities of the customers (Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998). Some feel grateful and satisfied with favors, assistance, and gifts provided by a company, but the same benefits may produce discomfort and anxiety for other customers (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcheralagna, 1982). The discomfort may stem from the burden of obligation, an anticipated negative evaluation from others when failing to repay, damaged self-esteem (Fisher et al., 1982), or anticipated costs of repayment (Greenberg, 1980). Both Greenberg's indebtedness theory (Greenberg, 1980) and Walster and colleagues' restatement of equity theory (Walster, Walster, & Traupmann, 1978) attempted to explain the discomfort associated with receiving favors. Past research emphasized situational factors and suggested that the recipient's discomfort was especially pronounced when the perceived magnitude of the benefit was large (Greenberg, 1980) and when the favor was received in front of others (Jiang, Hoegg, & Dahl, 2013). While acknowledging the importance of these situational factors, we believe that considerable individual differences exist in feeling discomfort in situations that involve reciprocity. The present research treats reciprocity anxiety as an individual difference variable and aims to show that reciprocity predicts important economic behaviors.

The objectives of the present research are threefold. First, we introduce reciprocity anxiety as an important individual difference variable and distinguish it from related constructs. Second, we develop and validate a concise scale to measure reciprocity anxiety. Third, we investigate the downstream consequences of reciprocity anxiety in important consumer behaviors.

2. Theory background

2.1. The dark side of reciprocity

In many cases, offering consumers favors, including assistance, preferential treatment, and gifts, etc., makes them feel good and generates positive effects in sales (Jiang, et al., 2013). However, reciprocity-based practices do not necessarily work in all situations for all consumers (Wulf et al., 2001). To some, these practice arouses discomfort and anxiety (Fisher et al., 1982). For example, it has been shown that individuals felt uncomfortable and anxious when they were in situations that demanded reciprocity, and when they knew it would be difficult or costly to reciprocate (Gross & Latane, 1974). Demosthenes probably had in mind the discomfort of receiving benefits when he warned, "To remind a man of the good turns you have done him is very much like a reproach" (Greenberg, 1980).

What are the origins of the anxiety associated with reciprocity? Why do some individuals experience discomfort when receiving favors from others that need to be reciprocated? On the one hand, the discomfort may be caused by the burden of obligation, an anticipated negative evaluation from others when failing to repay, or anticipated costs of repayment. Research has shown that a favor can lead to feelings of obligation on the part of its recipient (Goranson & Berkowitz, 1966; Regan, 1971). The normative pressure to reciprocate a favor imposes a restriction on recipients' freedom not to reciprocate. Individuals may have an aversive feeling that their freedom of behavior has been restricted (Brehm, 1966). When individuals receive more than they deserve, the cost of repayment (Greenberg, 1980) and the fear of negative evaluations from others (Jiang et al., 2013) create anxiety. On the other hand, the discomfort can be caused by threatened self-perception. Receiving favors, especially favors that may be difficult to reciprocate, may damage one's self-esteem, sense of competence, and perception of independence (De Cooke, 1997). For example, if an individual feels unable to return a favor, (s)he tends to attribute this inability to a lack of competence of the self. Prior research suggests that feelings of competence and independence may be threatened by receiving aid, particularly in an area that is important to one's self-concept (De Cooke, 1997). In a study conducted in Sweden, the United States, and Japan, recipients from all three countries found receiving help that cannot be repaid to be self-threatening (Gergen, Ellsworth, Maslach, & Seipel, 1975). Receiving favors constitutes a threat to the recipient's status and power relative to the donor (Blau, 1964), which leads to discomfort for the recipients.

As evidenced above, in some instances excessive assistance and favors can produce all sorts of discomfort for consumers. Here we argue that this may lead to negative consequences such as consumer dissatisfaction or consumer avoidance. According to the cognitive consistency account, humans are motivated by inconsistencies and a desire to change them (Brehm, 1956; Egan, Santos, & Bloom, 2007; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). Thus, consumers may combat the negative feelings associated with the unreturnable favor by engaging in a cognitive distortion. That is, they can cognitively make the favor appear smaller and/or derogate the favor provider (Fisher et al., 1982). The notion of cognitive distortion has received much empirical support (Gergen et al., 1974). Gergen et al. (1975) found that favor recipients in several cultures reliably evaluated the donor more negatively when they received favors that they could not reciprocate. Similarly, another study found that recipients who could not pay back a donation blamed the favor provider for making them feel uncomfortable (Castro, 1974). Such research shows that providing favors to consumers may hurt the customer-firm relationship and potentially lead to customer dissatisfaction or even resentment (Gergen & Gergen, 1971). Indeed, prior research has shown that receiving favors would reduce the perceived attractiveness of the favor provider, and recipients showed reduced liking for the favor provider (Gergen et al., 1975; Gross & Latane, 1974).

To summarize, the emotional discomfort of receiving benefits may cause cautious consumers to avoid dealing with firms that provide excessive assistance and favors to them (Mathews & Shook, 2013; Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, & Kolts, 2006). When customers receive favorable treatments that they may not be able to reciprocate, they experience negative emotions that detract from the

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