

The Influence of Online Complaints on Third-Party Consumers

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Abstract

Consumers often voice negative opinions about products and services publicly to increase pressure on firms and to warn other consumers. As a result, third-party consumers (TPCs) who search for brands online frequently read complaints about brands. The previous research focuses on the complainant and appropriate recovery efforts of firms but neglects the influence of complaints on TPCs. By adapting the theory of counterfactual thinking, this study develops a conceptual framework that illustrates how TPCs process and respond to complaints. The analysis of observational data from a complaint website and two experiments illustrates how complaints influence TPCs and how counterfactual thinking mediates TPCs' response to complaints. The findings suggest asymmetric counterfactual thinking involving the firm and the complainant that depend on the type of firm failure and the complainant's involvement in the failure. Our research extends the existing literature on customer complaints and provides evidence of how complaints affect TPCs.

Keywords: *online complaints; counterfactual thinking; third-party consumers*

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