Customer dissatisfaction: Not always a necessity or curse for online complaining

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Abstract:

This study investigates how cognitions and negative emotions are involved when different types of customers (brand-attached vs. unattached) develop complaint desires (revenge vs. reparation) before voicing their discontent about a service failure online. More specifically, it shows that while attributions trigger the desire for revenge through an indirect, emotional route for both complainant types, the role of post-failure dissatisfaction differs dramatically: For brand-attached complainants, dissatisfaction affects the revenge desire negatively due the elicitation of inward-directed negative emotions (e.g., guilt). These customers also 'coldly' decide on their reparation desire – beyond any biasing emotions. Hence, this research shed light on the complex role of customer dissatisfaction as a trigger of online complaining.

Keywords: Service failure, online complaining, brand attachment

Track: Relationship Marketing

1. Introduction and theoretical background

Following service failures, affected customers increasingly go online to voice online complaints on the involved brand's social media channels. Extant literature (e.g.,, Weitzl, 2019) demonstrates that the motives underlying this pattern range from vindictive desires (i.e., a desire for revenge: inclination to harm the company) to more constructive one, including the desire for reparation (i.e., a positive coping strategy by which complainants demand a compensation from the brand). While literature on the existence of the two desires is both well-established and on the rise (e.g., Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2019), surprisingly little is known about how complainants develop these two seemingly controversial but often co-existing desires. This research investigates the role of thoughts and feelings for explaining why online complainants voice a complaint on marketer-initiated social media sites and why they strive for specific goals.

Earlier research demonstrates that inferred failure attributions (i.e., inferred causes of the failure's circumstances) as cognitions are essential in affecting consumer reactions to service incidents (see Van Vaerenberg et al [2014] for a review). This research implies that attributions can predict complaining desires via two routes: a direct cognitive route and an indirect emotional route (Joireman et al., 2013). The former suggests that complainants' cognitions of blame predict desires directly – regardless of any (negative) emotion. In other words, complainants 'coldly' decide how to cope with the failure. In contrast, the indirect emotional route suggests that discrete emotions are involved. Based on this rationale, this study assumes that complainants' blame attributions affect the level of dissatisfaction (i.e., a state of mental discomfort caused by an insufficient return relative to the resources spent), which in turn affects anger (i.e., an outward-directed aggressive negative emotion that involves an impulse to respond towards the source of anger). To put it differently, the indirect route assumes that – building on appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991) – the two emotions can – in principle – mediate sequentially between failure-related cognitions and complaint desires. Having this said, this research argues that whether the direct or indirect route becomes effective depends both on the kind of desire sought (revenge vs. reparation) and the complainant's pre-failure level of brand attachment (i.e., mental bond connecting the consumer with the brand). We show that brand-attached complainants make their affect-based choice for revenge drastically different than their unattached counterparts. For these committed customers, their dissatisfaction extenuates their desire for revenge instead of cultivating it (i.e., dissatisfaction's duality).

1.1 Determinants of complainants' desire for revenge

This research postulates that for unattached complainants, failure attributions have an indirect effect on the desire for revenge via the emotional route. Appraisal theory suggests that individuals are inclined to develop emotions following cognitive appraisals for something of importance. Instead of arguing for a failure attribution $\rightarrow$ anger effect, this research argues that it is the customer dissatisfaction caused by the service failure that mediates between the initial causal appraisal and anger. Dissatisfaction is

described as a relatively undifferentiated emotion or as a general, unspecific emotional reaction to a negative incidence (Bougie et al., 2003). Nevertheless, dissatisfaction is regarded as a prerequisite for both specific emotions and emotion-related coping behaviors following consumption problems (see Figure 1a). Therefore:
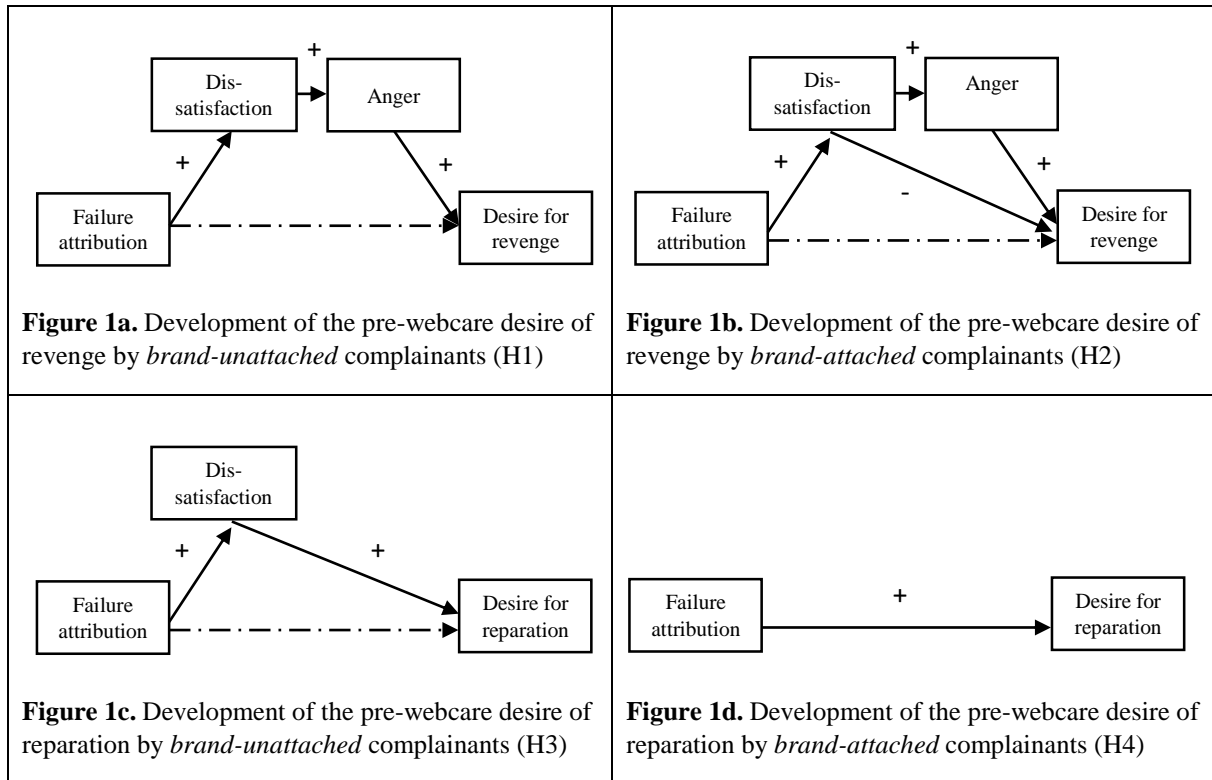
H1. For *brand-unattached* complainants, the effect of failure attribution on the pre-webcare desire for revenge is (fully) mediated by customer dissatisfaction and anger. That is (a) failure attribution has a positive impact on dissatisfaction, (b) dissatisfaction has a positive impact on anger, and (c) anger has a positive impact on complainants' desire for revenge.

For brand-attached individuals, this research assumes a similar indirect emotional route (failure attribution → customer dissatisfaction → anger → pre-webcare desire for revenge) as for unattached persons. However, it is further argued that customers' dissatisfaction not only has a positive impact on anger (indirectly increases the desire for revenge), but also a negative direct impact on complainants' desire (see Fig. 1a). This ultimately implies a 'compensation effect', meaning that one can expect a smaller (unfavourable) net effect due to the opposing impacts of the two negative emotions on the revenge desire. That is, having anger *increasing* revenge desires while dissatisfaction *decreasing* revenge intentions when complaining online.

The unspecific emotion of dissatisfaction has been shown to trigger various specific negative emotions (Haj-Salem & Chebat, 2014). Basically, two types of emotions are elicited, namely *outward negative emotions* (e.g., anger) and *inward negative emotions* (e.g., guilt) (Smith et al., 1993). We argue that following a failure with a beloved brand, attached customers develop self-directed negative emotions – not because they attribute the cause of the failure to themselves – but they regard themselves responsible for trusting a faulty brand, being vulnerable to relational and transactional risks as well as being exploited because of this self-inflicted vulnerability by a close relationship partner (i.e., the 'friendly' brand). Extant literature demonstrates that dissatisfied customers can develop various inward or self-directed negative emotions because of self-blame such as guilt (Dahl et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2011; Kayal et al., 2017), shame (Yi & Baumgartner, 2011), and embarrassment (Lunardo & Mourangue, 2019). Reactions to guilt, for example, appear to be relatively constructive in that individuals seek control over the consequences of their self-inflicted actions through rationalization or confession (Tracy et al., 2007), or engaging in some corrective action. Guilty individuals tend to take responsibility for their own wrongdoings and make amends accordingly. For the complaining context, this implies that attached consumers are likely to apply one of these amends and refrain from seeking revenge. Nevertheless, at the same time, individuals experiencing a personal harmful event involving an external source (e.g., a brand) are generally inclined to feel strong outward negative emotions in parallel to self-directed emotions. Dissatisfied customers blame the brand for causing the problem, which translates into outward-directed anger and revenge seeking. It follows:

H2. For *brand-attached* complainants, the effect of failure attribution on the pre-webcare desire for revenge is (fully) mediated by customer dissatisfaction and anger. That is (a) failure attribution has a positive impact on dissatisfaction, (b) dissatisfaction has a positive impact on anger, (c) dissatisfaction has a negative impact on pre-webcare desire for revenge and (d) anger has a positive impact on complainants' desire for revenge.

Figure 1. Illustration of research hypotheses

Figure 1a. Development of the pre-webcare desire of revenge by *brand-unattached* complainants (H1)

Figure 1b. Development of the pre-webcare desire of revenge by *brand-attached* complainants (H2)

Figure 1c. Development of the pre-webcare desire of reparation by *brand-unattached* complainants (H3)

Figure 1d. Development of the pre-webcare desire of reparation by *brand-attached* complainants (H4)

1.2 Determinants of complainants' desire for reparation

As mentioned, the desire for reparation is a complainant's constructive means to cope with a poor service delivery and to restore justice in a transactional relationship. 'Constructive' does not mean forgiving, but to demand adequate redress. Given that unattached complainants are more inclined to take affect-based negative measures against the involved brand than attached ones (Matilla, 2004; Gregoire & Fisher, 2006), it is assumed that these individuals take an indirect emotional route (failure attribution → customer dissatisfaction → desire for revenge) to determine their personal level of redress seeking (Joireman et al., 2013). This means that their desire for reparation is particularly based on the negative emotion of dissatisfaction for brand-unattached complainants. However, the aggressive outward-directed emotion of anger – given the constructive nature of reparation – is not assumed to be involved (see Fig. 1c). Therefore, it follows:

H3. For *brand-unattached* complainants, the effect of failure attribution on the pre-webcare desire for reparation is (fully) mediated by customer dissatisfaction. That is (a) failure attribution has a positive impact on dissatisfaction and (b) dissatisfaction has a positive impact on the desire for reparation.

This research assumes that brand-attached individuals draw on the inferred failure attribution to 'coldly' decide, regardless of any emotions, to which extent the brand should provide reparatory measures (Joireman et al., 2013; Grégoire et al., 2010) to restore the relational relationship (see Fig. 1d). This assumption is based on extant research demonstrating that post-failure desires can be triggered by cognitions alone, without any emotional involvement (Bechwati & Morrin, 2007). Attached complainants may take the cognitive route for reasons such as restoring the social order. This means that they focus on constructive, calculative ways to re-establish justice in their damaged but valued brand relationship. Knowing that the brand is responsible is enough and no further dissatisfaction is needed to educate the brand with a complaint. In this research, it is assumed that brand attachment immunizes consumers against considering negative emotions when seeking redress.

H4. For *brand-attached* complainants, failure attribution has a direct positive impact on the desire for reparation.

2. Empirical study

2.1 Method and procedure

For hypotheses testing, an online survey was conducted to investigate the population of interest – i.e., adult consumers who have personally experienced a service failure (e.g., unfriendly staff) in the recent past (< 6 months) and who have chosen to complain online directly to the involved brand via either *Facebook* or *Twitter*. Extant literature shows that both social media channels are the prime communication outlets for brand-directed online complaints. Although an experiment would allow a cause-and-effect test of the evolving complaining desires and their consequences, it is not clear how to produce realistic service incidences and real consumer tensions (e.g., authentic emotions) in a laboratory setting that is also ethically justifiable. Therefore, conducting a survey that investigates retrospective negative brand experiences of real online complainants was deemed appropriate for this research. This approach is consistent with similar, well-published research on complaint handling (e.g., Grégoire & Fisher, 2006; Schoefer & Diamantopoulos, 2009). An online access panel was used to invite respondents from both the US and Germany. 660 questionnaires were finally returned. After data screening and cleaning, the final sample included usable answers from 556 online complainants. Measures for the standardized questionnaire were taken from established academic literature. Their assessment by means of CFA yielded satisfactory psychometric properties (e.g., discriminant validity). Data was pooled after ensuring participants' homogeneity across countries (e.g., failure type) and complaint channels. 53.5% of respondents were male. The average age was 36.0 years (SD = 10.20). Together with their profession

and education, the sample resembled typical social media users (Pew Research, 2016). Concerning failures types, defective products were the prime reason (32.9%) for complaining. This was followed by issues related to poor product/service quality (27.2%). All participants experienced a 'double deviation', which is the experience of a service incident followed by an unsatisfactory recovery attempt in a traditional complaint channel. Potential non-response bias was evaluated by applying an extrapolation method comparing early and late respondents and Harman's single factor test was used to assess the issue of common method variance.
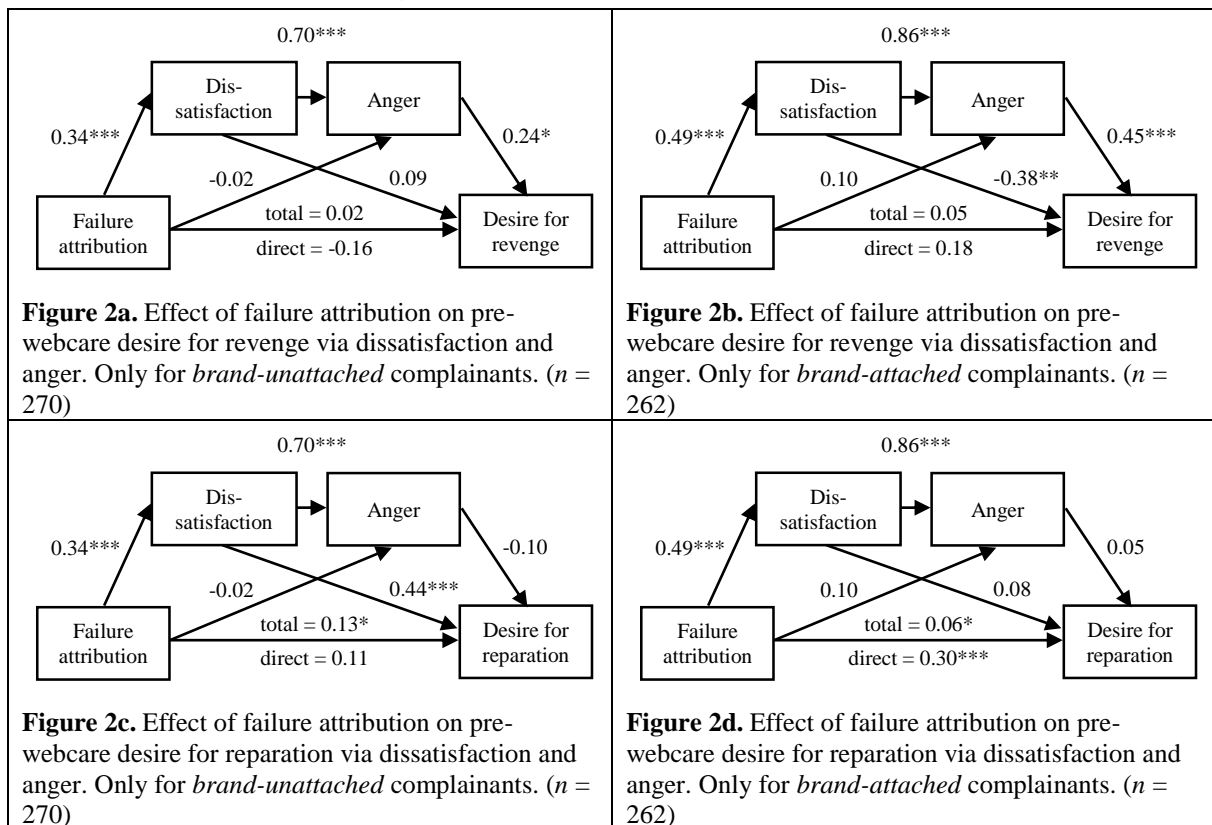
2.2 Results

To test the mediation models proposed in H1-H2, model 6 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) was used. This SPSS macro applies an ordinary least squares regression-based path analytical framework for estimating the direct and indirect effects in mediator models. In this research, 10,000 bootstrap samples were used to estimate the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (BCIs), for making inferences about the indirect effects. In the first model, failure attribution was the independent variable, customer dissatisfaction was the first mediator, anger was the second mediator, and the pre-webcare desire for revenge was the dependent variable. Prior brand experiences, failure severity, as well as age, gender and country were included as covariates. Two serial mediation models were run separately for *brand-unattached* complainants (H1; $n = 270$) and *brand-attached* complainants (H2, $n = 262$).

For the *unattached* condition (see Figure 2), the results showed no significant direct effect ($b = -0.16$, $p = 0.121$), but a significant indirect effect of failure attribution on the desire for revenge (indirect effect = 0.06, boot SE = 0.02, BCI [0.01; 0.12]). This indirect effect was mediated by the effect of the failure attribution on dissatisfaction ($b = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), which consequently increased anger ($b = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$), and ultimately resulted in a higher desire for revenge ($b = 0.24$, $p < 0.05$). This provided support for the process proposed in H1. The same analysis for *brand-attached* individuals, resulted in a significant indirect, negative effect of failure attribution via dissatisfaction (indirect effect = -0.19, boot SE = 0.08, BCI [-0.38; -0.07]), and an indirect, positive effect via dissatisfaction and anger (indirect effect = 0.19, boot SE = 0.06, BCI [0.09; 0.34]) on revenge desire. Specifically, dissatisfaction was predicted by failure attribution ($b = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$), and anger by dissatisfaction ($b = 0.86$, $p < 0.001$). More interestingly and in line with this article's arguments, however, the desire for revenge was negatively affected by dissatisfaction ($b = -0.38$, $p < 0.01$) and positively affected by anger ($b = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$). H2 was thus supported.

H3 proposes – for brand-unattached complainants – failure attribution affects the desire for reparation, mediated by customer dissatisfaction. Again, this mediation was tested by using model 6, but now with the desire for reparation as the dependent variable. The results showed a significant mediated effect (indirect effect = 0.15, boot SE = 0.04, BCI [0.09; 0.24]). More specifically, failure attribution had a significant positive effect on dissatisfaction (b = 0.34, p < 0.001) and the latter construct had a significant

positive effect on the desire for reparation (b = 0.44, p < 0.001). No direct effect of the cognition on the desire was observable (b = 0.11, p = 0.07). This supported H3. Finally, also in line with H4, the results yielded a significant direct effect of failure attribution on the desire for reparation ($R^2 = 0.29$) for brand-attached complainants (b = 0.30, p < 0.01). No indirect effects via any emotion were identifiable.

Figure 2. Tested serial mediation models

Figure 2a. Effect of failure attribution on pre-webcare desire for revenge via dissatisfaction and anger. Only for *brand-unattached* complainants. (*n* = 270)

Figure 2b. Effect of failure attribution on pre-webcare desire for revenge via dissatisfaction and anger. Only for *brand-attached* complainants. (*n* = 262)

Figure 2c. Effect of failure attribution on pre-webcare desire for reparation via dissatisfaction and anger. Only for *brand-unattached* complainants. (*n* = 270)

Figure 2d. Effect of failure attribution on pre-webcare desire for reparation via dissatisfaction and anger. Only for *brand-attached* complainants. (*n* = 262)

Note: * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$

3. Discussion

Nowadays, service failure-affected customers increasingly voice their discontent about service incidents on brands' social media channels (e.g., *Facebook* brand pages). This is particularly true when complainants have experienced 'double deviations', which is a situation when a service failure is followed by unsuccessful recoveries in traditional complaint channels (e.g., hotline, in-store). When complaining online, customers can have multifaceted motives ranging from vindictive to constructive goals. In this research, the emergence and the consequences of two pivotal complaint motives – namely, the *desire for revenge* (i.e., a negative problem coping strategy in which the complainant wants to harm the brand with the online complaint) and the *desire for reparation* (i.e., a positive problem coping strategy in which the complainant demands redress from the involved brand) – are both investigated. While extant literature acknowledges that the two desires can arise due to a direct, cognitive route or indirectly via an emotional route, this research contributes by theoretically deriving and empirically showing that the way how the desires are formed depends on both the desire's type and the complainant's

prior brand-attachment. Findings suggests that unattached complainants form revengeful desires purely affectively and that dissatisfaction is an important mediator between failure attribution and anger, which ultimately triggers the wish to cause inconvenience to the involved brand with the online complaint (see Fig. 2a). Earlier research missed to include dissatisfaction in their conceptual models, which is particularly problematic in case of brand-attached complainants: The more these complainants are dissatisfied the more anger is felt, but also the less a desire for revenge is formed (see Fig. 1b). This research explains this effect by emphasizing the role of inward-directed negative emotions (e.g., guilt), which result from a self-reproach of forming close ties with an unreliable partner brand. This adds to the literature (e.g., Davvetas & Diamantopoulos, 2017) emphasizing the protective properties of close customer-brand relationships – even after a series of incidents. The beneficial consequences of strong bonds become also evident when complainants form their desire for reparation: Here, attached complainants 'coldly' decide by making inferences about the failure's circumstances to which extent compensation is appropriate to restore the relationship (see Fig. 1c), while unattached complainants consider the level of dissatisfaction (see Fig. 1d). Brand-attached complainants take the cognitive, calculative route for reasons such as teaching the brand a lesson, dissuading the brand from causing service failures in future, and restoring the social order. These findings suggest that demands for redress are purely formed by cognitions about the brand's accountability for the failure (i.e., customer's inferences about how much to blame the brand) and are beyond any distracting, negative emotions, which may bias the extent compensation is deemed appropriate.

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