



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## International Journal of Hospitality Management

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijhosman](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijhosman)

## Who gets to decide your complaint intentions? The influence of other companions on reaction to service failures



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Service failure  
Complaint intention  
The presence of others companion  
Customer susceptibility to interpersonal influence

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the impact of others companion on complaint intentions when encountering service failure to fill in the gap of insufficient research on the effect of the presence of others companion on consumer complaint behavior (CCB) in the literature of service failure through four scenario experiments. The results of study 1, 2 and 4 support our basic hypothesis that customers who encounter service failures will have higher complaint intentions when they are with others than when alone. The findings study 2, 3 and 4 suggest that the level of intimacy between two individuals acts as a partial mediator of their complaint intentions. People with closer relationships, such as in-group members or of the same sex, have higher complaint intentions than those who are less close. Furthermore, study 4 showed that consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence represents the normative influence that companions provide, which leads to higher complaint intentions when eating with friends than with family.

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Imaging that, you invite your past colleague of seminary school to have dinner with you in a restaurant. Your dishes come very slowly and the soup is cold, the salad is old and both of them come together with your steak. This poor service leads you an unpleased dining experience. Both you are angry because you have not seen each other for long and were expecting a happy dinner time. You feel sorry to your friend for choosing this low quality restaurant. You do not want your dinner party to be ruined so you would like to express your discontent to the manager. But he seems too busy to take care of your appeal. You get mad and lose your marbles. You tell yourself that you will not come back to this restaurant and will also warn your friends not to come. This is a common service failure might occur sometimes in our restaurant experience. How does dining with others influence your complain intention then?

Service failures occurring in a restaurant may cause complaint. How customers respond to service failures is crucial to daily operations in hospitality industry since it usually leaves customers with negative feelings and results in dissatisfaction (Bitner, 1990; Hoffman et al., 1995; Smith et al., 1999). On the other hand, complaint is one of the most important responses and has got much

attention from academic and practical fields for years since it has usually been viewed as suggestion toward service quality improvement (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987). Not only generate valuable information for the service providers, complaints are also useful for monitoring the effectiveness of customer service programs, moreover, the satisfactory handling of complaints can actually create loyalty to a firm (Bennett, 1997). Thus, the issue regarding consumer complaint behavior (CCB) resulting from service failure therefore becomes vital.

Numerous studies have attempted to elucidate the connection between customer responses to service failure and employee reactions (Hoffman et al., 1995; Smith et al., 1999) as well as the relationship between service failure and customer satisfaction. For example, the expectancy disconfirmation theory proposed that, when service performance fails to meet customer expectation, negative disconfirmation occurs and is followed by dissatisfaction (Cadotte et al., 1987; Chih et al., 2011). Some studies have suggested that outbursts of anger during complaints can lead to feelings of relief and psychological well-being. These positive feelings then induce the formerly dissatisfied customers to continue buying the item or using the supplier to whom they had angrily complained (Bennett, 1997).

However, the effect that a companion has on a dissatisfied customer's complaint behavior has not been adequately researched. Numerous studies have shown that the presence of others can affect people's attitudes, intentions, and behavior. Unless they are buying from a vending machine, consumers are not usually alone during service encounters. Even if they are not with a companion, there

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is a strong chance that someone else will be present, such as other customers or staff. When other people are present, consumers may try to meet others' expectations (Trafimow et al., 2010), choose products or brands that their friends recommend (Childers and Rao, 1992), eat more (McFerran et al., 2010), or donate more (Hoffman et al., 1996).

Currently, it is unclear how the presence of co-consumption others affects consumers' behavioral intentions. Few studies of service failure have discussed the influence of companions. Do consumers have higher complaint intentions when with companions than when alone? If so, who gets to decide their complaint intention then? Does the type of companion – family, friend, in the same or different sex – alter people's complaint intentions? This paper aims to differentiate the degree of intention to complain when encountering service failure alone vs. with companions. Four scenario experiments depicting events in a restaurant were conducted to test the effect of the presence of others. The relationship between two customers dining together was also tested as a mediator of complaint intentions.

## 1. Theoretical background

### 1.1. Complaint intention

Negative events, such as cold food or slow service, lead to low satisfaction (Bitner, 1990; Hoffman et al., 1995; Smith et al., 1999). When customer encounters unsatisfied purchasing experience, complaint behaviors may be taken from doing nothing, boycotting, complaining privately and seeking redress, to complaining publicly in response to the unpleasant failed service (Landon, 1980; Day et al., 1981). A two-level hierarchical classification schema was proposed to classify consumer complaint behaviors (CCB) into behavioral and non-behavioral action (Day and Landon, 1977). The first level separates behavioral (action) and non-behavioral responses (no action). The second level then distinguishes between private actions (e.g. WOM) and public actions (e.g. complaining to a consumer advocate group).

Later, Singh (1988, 1990) conducted two studies in the field of consumer behaviors that made a great contribution to differentiating the taxonomy and typology of customer responses. Singh (1988) identified three types of consumer complaint behavior: voice responses, which are complaints that are external to the customer's social circle and are directly involved in the dissatisfying exchange (e.g., the retailer); private responses, which are word-of-mouth (WOM) complaints to individuals or groups who are not external to the customer's social network and are also not directly involved in the dissatisfying experience (e.g., friends/family); and third party responses, which are complaints to a public agency that is external to the consumer but is not directly involved in the dissatisfying exchange. In the typology study, Singh (1990) classified customers into four main types according to their responses, ranging from no action at all (Passive), complaint only for redress (Voicers), complaint for redress and involving word-of-mouth (Irates), to all of the reactions mentioned above and also complaint to a third party (Activists). These two studies provide a clear exploration of customer complaint behavior.

Numerous studies have attempted to explain the motivations behind customers' responses to service failures. Some such motivations include personality traits (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987), attitudes toward complaining (Zaltman et al., 1978), personal values (Rogers and Williams, 1990), etc. Hui et al. (2011) discovered that trust influenced customers' complaint and switching intentions, especially for people with interdependent self-construal. Bennett (1997) and Huang and Chang (2008) found the link between personality and the probability of complaint intentions

and service recovery expectations. People who tend to be more aggressive, rushed, and competitive (i.e., type A personalities) have higher complaint intentions than those who are more relaxed, somewhat unassertive, and conciliatory toward the outside world (i.e., type B personalities). Guilt-prone people and individuals with low self-esteem complain less frequently, but may also experience repressed resentment that can lead to hostility toward the source of frustration. Consequently, they are more likely to stop buying the brand or using the supplier after complaining (Bennett, 1997). Bougie et al. (2003) study found that transaction-specific dissatisfaction is not directly related to complaint behavior, but the emotion of anger mediates the relationship between service encounter dissatisfaction and customers' behavioral responses.

Culture influences consumer complaint behavior. Collectivists (individualists) are more sensitive to the loss of social (economic) resources caused by process (outcome) failure and are thus likely to perceive it as more severe and to experience stronger dissatisfaction than individualists (collectivists). Consequently, collectivists seem to be more dissatisfied with service failures due to the interpersonal nature of service consumption. However, the intangible nature of service leads consumer evaluations of service to be weighted toward the intangible process elements, rather than toward the tangible service outcomes (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Notably, consumers in individualist cultures are typically characterized as less tolerant of service failures than those in collectivist cultures (Hofstede's, 1980; Hui and Triandis, 1986). The two groups also tend to express their dissatisfaction in different ways. Americans, who are generally categorized as individualists, prefer voice responses, whereas Chinese, who are generally categorized as collectivists, prefer private responses (Chan and Wan, 2008). Liu and McClure (2001) also used Hofstede's (1980) individualism versus collectivism and in-group versus out-group categorizations as justification and found that when dissatisfied, consumers in a collectivist culture (Koreans) were less likely to engage in voice behavior (complaint) and more likely to engage in private behavior (word of mouth or exit) than consumers in an individualist culture (Americans).

How about the presence of others when encountering service failure? The mere presence of others can influence behavior in some instances (Zajonc, 1965). Only few researches get into the issue to explore the effect of others on consumer behavior in the present (Huang, 2008; Luo, 2005; Wei et al., 2012a,b). However, behavior will be influenced by the presence of other since individuals anticipate others will form impressions of them based on what they respond (Asch, 1956; Deutsch and Gerard, 1955; Diener et al., 1976).

### 1.2. The presence of others and impression management

In most service-providing contexts, consumers are usually accompanied by family, friends, or coworkers. Research regarding decision making in others presence versus private contexts is largely associated with personality traits, such as self-consciousness, to examine the differences in consumers' expectations and behavior between the two contexts (Fenigstein et al., 1975; Ratner and Kahn, 2002). Numerous studies (Asch, 1956; Chang et al., 2012; Diener et al., 1976) have shown that people adhere more to social norms about what constitutes appropriate behavior when their behavior is identifiable than when it is innominate.

Previous research has also discussed how the presence of others influences consumption choices, such as by promoting impulsive buying (Luo, 2005), generating moment-to-moment emotion contagion (Ramanathan and McGill, 2007), and affecting people's food choices (McFerran et al., 2010). Zajonc (1965) suggested that the

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