The influence of self-construal and co-consumption others on consumer complaining behavior

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ABSTRACT

Consumers show great individual variability in complaining behavior even after experiencing similar service failures. The present study examined the effect of self-construal and co-consumption others on consumer complaining behavior following a service failure. Based on an experimental study with a sample of 202 in a restaurant context, MANCOVA results revealed significant effects of self-construal on voice response and switching behavior. The results also showed a significant interaction effect of self-construal and the presence of co-consumption others on switching behavior. The findings shed light into the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics at work when consumers react to service failures. Theoretical and managerial implications of the findings are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Due to the high level of human involvement in the hospitality business, service failure cannot be completely eliminated and may result in consumer dissatisfaction (Anderson et al., 2008; Hess et al., 2007). To express dissatisfaction, consumers may react in a variety of ways, such as voicing their anger, telling friends about their experience, ending patronage or just keeping silent. Considerable research attention has been devoted to identifying antecedents to complaining behaviors. An important body of literature examined the effect of individual differences on complaining behavior, such as personality traits (Huang and Chang, 2008), personal attitudes toward a situation (Diamond et al., 1976), propensity of seeking redress and demographic differences (Gronhaug and Zaltman, 1981; Yuksel et al., 2006). Other than relatively stable individual differences, individual complaining behavior is also subject to situational factors such as the social impact of other consumers. Other consumers who are present at a service failure and their reactions to the service failure are likely to influence a focal consumer's complaining behavior. However, the extant literature on the social aspect of complaining behavior is rather limited. As service encounters often represent a high level of social interaction (Chan and Wan, 2008), it is important to examine complaining behavior from both intrapersonal and interpersonal perspectives. To integrate the individual differences and the situational factors to better predict individual complaining behavior across contexts, the present study used the notion of self-construal to account for the individual variability in complaining behavior in different contexts.

To explore the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of complaining behavior, the main objectives of this study were to examine: (1) the effect of dominant self-construal (independent vs. interdependent) on consumer complaining behavior after service failures and (2) the potential moderating effect of co-consumption others on the relationship between self-construal and consumer complaining behavior. Self-construal describes how individuals perceive themselves in a relationship with others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Self-construal is responsible for a variety of psychological processes. A significant body of literature has explored how self-construal directs an individual's thoughts, feelings and actions with a concern for one's connection to or separation from others (Kirsh and Kuiper, 2002; Neumann et al., 2009; Nezlek et al., 2008; Singelis, 1994; Suh et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2006). The term "co-consumption others" refers to the companions whom consumers share the consumption experience with. As many hospitality services involve high level of human interactions, it is important to explore whether the social impact of other consumers affects the relationship between self-construal and complaining behavior.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: The review of literature presents the theoretical development of the proposed model and related research hypotheses. Then the design and results of an experimental study testing the hypotheses are reported. Based on the findings, theoretical and practical contributions of the present study are also discussed.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Consumer complaining behavior

Consumer complaining behavior refers to responses to purchase dissatisfaction (Singh, 1988). Diverse taxonomies of consumer complaining behavior have been developed in previous literature. The early classification by Hirschman (1970) included voicing, exiting, and remaining consumption with the company. Subsequently, Day and Landon (1977) divided behavioral actions into the public category and the private category. Voicing was classified more specifically into voicing to the service provider, turning to a third party, and spreading negative word-of-mouth to friends, families, or other consumers. Similarly, Singh (1988) proposed a classification of voice response, private response (negative word-of-mouth and exit action), and third-party response. The present study used Singh's taxonomy (1988) because it has been widely used in the previous complaining studies and is relevant to the context of this study. The three types of complaining behavior examined in the present study were voice response, negative word-of-mouth and switching (exit) behavior. The third-party response was not considered in the present study as the nature of the particular service failure examined in this study was not likely to call for such a cause of action.

2.2. Self-construal and consumer complaining behavior

Self-construal is concerned with how individuals perceive themselves in a relationship with others and how individuals form a set of thoughts, feelings, and actions with a concern for their connection to or separation from others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). The self-construal construct has been used to distinguish self-perception as either independent or interdependent by the extent to which individuals link or disconnect themselves with others. Generally speaking, independent self-construal drives people to be separated from others and display behaviors on the basis of their own thoughts. In contrast, interdependent self-construal drives people to be more connected with the social context and take actions in reference to others. Previous research found that while both types of self-construal can resonate with an individual concurrently, in a specific situation, either an independent or an interdependent self-construal will take on a dominant position (Kolstad and Horpestad, 2009; Zhang and Shrum, 2009). Self-construal examined by the present study refers to an individual's dominant self-construal at a given point in time.

Previous research in self-construal alluded to the potential influence of self-construal on complaining behavior. Independent self-construal stresses an "autonomous" aspect that is separate from social contexts. This type of self-construal causes people to place primary interest on inner attributes, such as personal feeling and interest, and motivates individuals to express and validate their inner attributes in a more direct way. In a service failure context, when individuals' independent self-construal is dominant, they tend to choose actions that can vent their dissatisfaction more directly. In contrast, concern for external aspect is at core of interdependent self-construal. Taking into consideration others' minds, feelings and actions, interdependent self-construal stimulates individuals to suppress their personal interest and set the maintenance of an appropriate relationship as their primary task. In the context of service failures, individuals with an interdependent self-construal are likely to be reluctant to respond in a way that may disrupt harmony with others. In the following section, the effect of self-construal on three types of consumer complaining behavior is explored more thoroughly.

Voice response denotes direct complaints toward the party that consumers perceive actively involved in and responsible for the unpleasant consumption experience (Singh, 1988). Voice response is a straightforward, effective, and confrontational approach to vent dissatisfaction (Kowalski, 1996; Nyer and Gopinath, 2005). With the goal of expressing personal emotions and feelings, individuals with the dominant independent self-construal are more likely to engage in voice response after a service failure. On the contrary, oriented toward goals of conforming to the social harmony, individuals with a dominant interdependent self-construal tend to avoid direct conflict (Liu and McClure, 2001). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. After a service failure, consumers with a dominant independent self-construal (versus interdependent self-construal) are more likely to engage in voice response.

Negative word-of-mouth indicates consumers' private communication with acquaintances about their unpleasant consumption experience (Son and Kim, 2008). Different from voice response, negative word-of-mouth is indirect due to its avoidance of confrontational dispute (Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002). Individuals with a dominant interdependent self-construal are more conscious about others' wellbeing and feelings, and focus on fostering their connectedness with others. In a service failure context, by informing others of an unpleasant experience and stopping them from enduring the same encounter, such individuals will feel a social connectedness and further validate their self-identities. On the other hand, for individuals with a dominant independent self-construal, whether they can vent discontent and receive relevant remedy is of primary concern. Therefore, such individuals will be less inclined to share with others their own experience or to engage in negative word-of-mouth. The present research proposes the following hypothesis:

H2. After a service failure, consumers with a dominant independent self-construal (versus interdependent self-construal) are less likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth.

Hirschman (1970) described switching behavior as ending a current relationship with a firm. Such behavior is perceived to be less confrontational and less functional (Chan and Wan, 2008). Individuals with a dominant interdependent self-construal tend to keep a harmonious relationship with their social environment. With a focus on continuity of relationships, such individuals are likely to maintain a long-term relationship with a service firm. Since switching behavior implies a termination of the relationship between a consumer and the firm, the present study predicts that individuals with a dominant interdependent self-construal are less likely to switch than others with a dominant independent self-construal. The hypothesis is presented as follows:

H3. After a service failure, consumers with a dominant independent self-construal (versus interdependent self-construal) are more likely to engage in switching behavior.

2.3. Joint effect of self-construal and co-consumption others

In addition to individual differences, previous literature found considerable variability of complaining behavior across situations (Cheng and Lam, 2008). Social psychology literature suggested that individual behavior can be influenced by the presence of other people during social interactions (Gump and Kulik, 1997; Hatfield et al., 1992; Howard and Gengler, 2001). In service encounters where a high level of interpersonal interaction exists, consumers' behaviors tend to be influenced by others in a shared consumption experience (Ramanathan and McGill, 2007). Co-consumption others are, therefore, incorporated into the present study to account for the social effect on complaining behavior. The term "co-consumption others" refers to companions with whom consumers share their