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An asymmetric configural model approach for understanding complainer emotions and loyalty☆

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ABSTRACT

Few works emphasize the emotional nature of customer complaint behavior, and those that do so focus largely on negativity. The idea that specific emotions might lead to idiosyncratic reactions and that in some cases positive emotions may also be aroused during the complaint experience has been largely neglected. The study explores this issue by identifying specific emotions experienced by complainers and then relating them to resulting complainer loyalty levels, separately under conditions where the outcomes of the complaint process is evaluated favorably versus unfavorably. Complaint texts posted on a well-known website are content analyzed and six types of emotions (hopeful, puzzled, recessive, befooled, offended, and hypersensitive), three types of texting styles (general, specific, and threatening), and five types of complainer concerns (financial, technical, psychological, social, and physical) are identified via content analyses. Configural analyses reveal 33 combination paths of these antecedent conditions for complainer loyalty and 65 different combinations for disloyalty. Results suggest that the specific emotions approach potentially explains more about complaining customer behavior compared to the more general valence-based approach, and that post-complaint loyalty depends considerably on complainer emotions, concerns, and texting styles experienced and expressed during the complaint process.

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1. Introduction

Decades of research have established firmly that effective customer complaint management has strong impacts on customer satisfaction (e.g. Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekaran, 1998) and business performance (Yilmaz, Varnali, & Tari Kasnakoglu, 2016). In addition, although generally viewed as negative instances on the part of customers, complaints can also be utilized as markers of areas in need of development and improvement (Larivet & Brouard, 2010).

Resolving complaints favorably may not always suffice for good results, however. It is possible that the disturbance in the firm–customer relationship may extend beyond the firm's well-meant efforts to remedy the complaint-generating situation, and the customer may choose to switch to another brand even when a complaint is resolved favorably. As Andreassen (1999, 2000) states, it is sometimes the initial affective reaction that determines the customer's ultimate level of satisfaction. The reactions of the customer and the form of the complaint might be different, for instance, when the complaint involves the electrical system of an automobile versus the impolite behaviors of an employee. It is therefore reasonable to expect that in the absence of other evidence the nature of the complaint itself could predict the post-complaint process attitudes and behaviors of complainers.

Accordingly, the main focus of the present study is on the intertwined sets of relationships across complainer emotions during the expression of the complaint, major concerns voiced, and the style of expressing the complaint. These initial conditions are used as predictors of post-complaint complainer loyalty, separately under conditions of favorable and unfavorable resolution process. Depending on whether the complaining process is concluded favorably or unfavorably based on complainer perceptions, these three antecedent conditions (i.e. complainer emotions, complainer concerns, and texting styles) are expected to yield different outcomes in terms of the ultimate attitudinal state.

Further, rather than the highly prevalent valence-based approach, which focuses only on negative-versus-positive emotions, the present study adopts the specific emotions approach to make a contribution to the customer complaint behavior (hereafter, CCB) literature. As Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) state firmly, understanding the role of specific emotions experienced by customers during the complaining experience (e.g. anger versus disappointment versus shame) would shed

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further light on the ultimate outcome states of complaining experiences. However, the CCB literature with the specific emotions approach appears to suffer from (1) an over-emphasis on extreme forms of negative emotions and a neglect of possible neutral/positive emotions and (2) an absence of clear linkages between the emotions experienced and the nature of the complaint issue. More important, since most studies rely on scenario-based experiments or surveys involving critical incident techniques whereby customers may not accurately remember past events and feelings, the general CCB research also seems to be confined by unrealistic evaluations or memory-based biases. With its unique data reflecting real-life complaint events (complaint texts posted on the Internet) and multiple methods of analyses, this study largely overcomes the perceptual and memory-based problems associated with the current state of CCB research.

The study explores the emotive nature of complaint-making at two different stages in the present study. In the first stage, typologies of specific emotions, concerns, and texting styles are developed by content analyzing complaint texts posted on a well-known website in Turkey. The purpose of using several criteria to classify the complaints is to see if multiple categories of the same text can better explain customer-related outcomes. In the second stage, the relationships between complaint characteristics and resulting complainer attitudes towards the firm after the complaining experience are explored separately for cases where the complaining experience is evaluated positively versus negatively by the complainers. During these analyses, in addition to traditional symmetric analyses, the relationships of concern are explored via asymmetric configural analyses (fuzzy set qualitative comparative analyses, or fsQCA in short) in order to reveal a richer and a more informative description of CCB. The aim is to integrate tenets of the complexity theory (Anderson, 1999; Urry, 2005; Woodside, 2013, 2014; Wu, Yeh, Huan, & Woodside, 2014) in explanations of CCB and identify possible combinations of independent antecedent expressions that result in loyalty and disloyalty using the categories identified in the first stage.

2. Literature review

Several studies attempt to understand the types of behaviors customers engage in when they are dissatisfied (e.g. Folkes, Koletsky, & Graham, 1987; Richins, 1983; Singh, 1990), and complaining is only one of the possible responses (Crié, 2003; Didow & Barksdale, 1982; Hirschman, 1970; Richins, 1983). CCB literature concentrates on issues such as (1) how customers reflect the problem through a complaint, (2) whether the customer is satisfied with the resolution, and (3) whether this satisfaction leads to loyalty (Andreassen, 2000; Blodgett & Anderson, 2000; Blodgett, Wakefield, & Barnes, 1995; Heung & Lam, 2003; Mittal, Huppertz, & Khare, 2008; Orsingher, Valentini, & de Angelis, 2010; Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999; Tax et al., 1998). The major assumption in this line of research is that customer evaluations depend solely on the complaint handling and contact employees (e.g. Hui & Au, 2001; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2003; Roschk & Gelbirch, 2014), and that this resolution process impacts customer reactions (e.g. Andreassen, 2000).

Nevertheless, it is highly likely that certain characteristics of complaints can directly affect evaluations and outcomes. Considering the fact that customers become dissatisfied for different reasons and only some of them voice their complaints, it becomes very important to comprehend the qualitative content of complaints. Extant research, however, treats customer complaints as binary conditions (complaint-made/not-made). The conception regarding *which complainers with particular emotions or which complaint texts with particular characteristics* are likely to result in positive outcomes is an eminent yet lacking piece of knowledge in this regard. At the juncture of customers and the complaints they make, the role of emotions is yet to be fully understood.

Few studies discuss the role of emotions in customer complaints (Andreassen, 1999, 2000; Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999), yet others extensively study complainers' affective states but only as antecedents to service recovery satisfaction (e.g. Bennett, 1997; Bougie, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2003; Schoefer, 2010). Andreassen (1999, 2000) speculates that the initial negative affect is likely to have an effect on satisfaction/dissatisfaction with service recovery. The present study conceptualizes the psychological state of the complaining customer as an emotion and not as a general feeling. This is based on the notion that in the case of complaining customers, it is not clear whether the sensation would continue to exist for a long time.

The valence-based approach differentiates only between positive and negative emotions (Bagozzi et al., 1999; Schoefer & Diamantopolous, 2008) and implicitly assumes that the customer will have only negative feelings because of the displeasing situation (e.g. Tronvoll, 2011). A clear differentiation among emotion *types* is missing in the CCB literature. Another typology based on emotions by Schoefer and Diamantopolous (2008) studies “the negatives, the positives, the concerned, and the unemotional,” again with no differentiation among specific emotions such as fear or frustration.

Concerning the role of specific emotions, Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) investigate the effects of regret and disappointment, and Baker, Meyer, and Chebat (2013) focus on non-verbal signs of complainer emotions. The basic premise in all these studies is that different emotions differentially affect CCB. There is still a need to understand what other types of emotions may be altering customers' perceptions and the firms' attempts to solve the problem. Also, note that the emotions literature in the CCB context seems to be detached from the general emotions literature, and attempts to make links between previously established emotion categories and the emotional experiences in the CCB context appear to be in order. In this context, another purpose of the present study is to delve into the complaint texts, try to understand what they contain in terms of emotional cues, and compare customers in terms of these typologies and the scores they provide for recovery and loyalty.

3. Methodology

The first aim in the present study is to identify useful categories of complaints so that comparisons can be made across different complainers as opposed to the scores they provide. Extant research offers different versions of complaint taxonomies (e.g. Davidow & Dacin, 1997), sometimes categorizing real complaints (e.g. Heung & Lam, 2003; McAlister & Erffmeyer, 2003), which may be more directly related to the organization's complaint handling practices (e.g. Fan, Miao, & Wu, 2013). However, it is very likely that customers do not complain to provide information for the firm. On the contrary, there is ample evidence in the literature that customers complain to sharebrand-related concerns with the public or just to haverelief (Bennett, 1997).

In this study, emotion categories are defined based on data in contrast to previous studies which provide one-dimensional content analyses directed by pre-determined rules (e.g. Harrison-Walker, 2001). For this purpose, actual complaint texts voluntarily made by the members of an online complaint website are content analyzed. This site is called “sikayetvar.com”, where *şikayetvar* means “I have a complaint to make.” The complaint is visible to the general public and to the company in question who may or may not reply. One week after the complaint is posted on the website, each complainer is asked to rate the company's efforts to resolve the complaint (solution score) and provide another score about his or her intention to repurchase the same brand in the future (loyalty score).

The chosen contexts in this study are complaints pertaining to refrigerators (an exemplar product) and banking (an exemplar service). In these contexts, there are hundreds of complaints, illustrating different worries and emotions. Since solution scores (10-point scale) converge on extreme levels of very low and very high scores, an equivalent number of complaints were selected from low-score, medium-score, and high-score groups, following a stratified sampling strategy. As such, a

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