



Understanding why anger predicts intention to complain among high but not low power customers: A test of competing models

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ABSTRACT

While anger is a strong predictor of customer complaining, it is possible that some angry customers do not complain, and some customers who are not angry do complain. To better understand anger's role in customer complaining, the current work tests the hypothesis that the relationship between anger and complaining intention is contingent on the customer's power state. Specifically, anger is posited to relate positively to complaining intention among high but not low power consumers. More importantly, two competing models are tested which explain why anger may not predict complaining among low power customers (i.e., low power suppressing vs. low power compensating). Two experiments reveal that a low-power state reduces the relationship between anger and complaining, resulting in a moderate level of complaining intention overall, supporting a hybrid model integrating the low power suppressing and low power compensating models. Theoretical and practical implications and future research directions are discussed.

1. Introduction

In a competitive and uncertain economy, organizations increasingly look to non-traditional sources for novel ideas and strategies to gain a competitive advantage (Grant, 2013; Morrison, 2011). One important voice, of course, is the customer's, especially in terms of performance feedback. Customer complaints, for example, once considered a cost to organizations (Fornell, 1976; Luo, 2007), are now viewed as shedding light on key performance practices and providing useful information for organizations to learn from their mistakes (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1987; Min, Lim & Magnini, 2015; Mittal, Huppertz & Khare, 2008). In addition, customer complaints enable organizations to immediately redress issues and, when properly handled, can maintain customer satisfaction (Min et al., 2015; Spreng, Harrell & Mackoy, 1995).

A critical question then emerges: What drives customer complaining? Cognitive appraisal theory suggests that customers' interpretation of a service failure influences emotional reactions (e.g., anger) which in turn represent a salient predictor of complaining (Joireman, Smith, Liu & Arthurs, 2015; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998; Watson & Spence, 2007). In the service failure literature, the traditional view of customer complaining is that anger shows a strong and positive relationship with the likelihood of complaining. However, according to

theories of power, the powerless are sensitive to social judgement and, thus, alter their behavior when visible by others (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). This suggests that low power customers may not always translate anger into complaining. Nonetheless, the impact of a customer's power state has been overlooked in cognitive appraisal theory in the customer complaining literature. Therefore, we examine power state as one boundary condition for the relationship between anger and complaining intention, suggesting that the impact of anger on complaining intention may not be applicable to low-power individuals in a service context.

A low power state, however, may influence complaining intention in two conflicting ways. On one hand, low-power individuals may use the act of complaining as a tool to compensate for low power by exerting customer power even when they are not angry. Some evidence for this perspective comes from research showing that low power customers utilize visible conspicuous products to restore their low power state (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Rucker, Galinsky & Dubois, 2012). On the other hand, low-power individuals may suppress their complaining intention even when they are angry, as they are more sensitive to how their actions will be perceived in the eyes of others (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). We build on these opposing propositions to advance a contingency perspective of power

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state on the relationship between anger and complaining intention. Specifically, we test two competing theoretical models: low-power compensating (LPC) vs. low-power suppressing (LPS) models. Both models predict a positive relationship between anger and complaining intention among high-power individuals, and no relationship between anger and complaining intention among low power individuals. They differ in the level of complaining intention by low power individuals. The LPC model theorizes that low-power individuals maintain a high level of complaining intention regardless of anger. On the contrary, the LPS model theorizes a consistent, low level of complaining intention of low-power individuals regardless of anger. Through two studies, we find that the positive relationship between anger and complaining does not exist among those low in power and they maintain their complaining intention at a moderate level, suggesting that the appropriate model combines aspects of the LPC and LPS models.

The present research advances existing knowledge by (1) challenging the universally assumed relationship between anger and customer complaints, (2) expanding cognitive appraisal theory by proposing a customer's power state as a significant boundary condition, and (3) providing additional evidence for emerging research suggesting that subtle aspects of the environment can affect an individual's power state.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Customer complaining intention

In the seminal work by Sing (1989), customer complaining behavior is defined as a three-faceted phenomenon consisting of voice (directly complaining to the service provider), third party complaining (word-of-mouth) and private actions (taking legal actions). Sing (1988) also showed consistency between complaining intention and actual complaining behavior. More recent investigations of customer complaints have separated the facets. Numerous studies have regarded customer voice as a proxy for customer complaining (e.g., Fan, Wu & Mattila, 2016; Lacey, 2012). Others further specified that a manifestation of customer complaining is customer negative voice (e.g., Luo, 2007) to distinguish it from customer positive voice such as giving recommendations and sharing successful experience with services/products (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Moreover, the development of technology has broadened the domain of third party complaining from spreading negative word-of-mouth to family and friends to electronic word-of-mouth such as posting negative online reviews (e.g., Min et al., 2015). Although recognizing the benefits of indirect complaining, we focus solely on customer direct complaining in this study due to the unique utility of these complaints to the firm.

Unlike spreading word-of-mouth and taking private action, customer complaining provides a unique opportunity for the firm to redress service failures on site. Marketing research consistently demonstrates that an appropriate response to customer complaints (complaint management) can affect customer satisfaction and loyalty as well as firm performance (Hess, Ganesan & Klein, 2003; Joosten, Bloemer & Hillebrand, 2017; Umashankar, Ward & Dahl, 2017; Yilmaz, Varnali & Kasnakoglu, 2016). Historically, customer complaints have been considered as burdens to the organization with research focused on identifying how to handle customer complaints across various contexts (e.g., service context) (Fornell, 1976; Min et al., 2015; Spreng et al., 1995). More recently, customer complaints have been interpreted in a more positive light. For example, research has found that firms benefit from the organizational learning derived from customer complaints, suggesting customer complaint management should move beyond the simple handling of complaints (Yilmaz et al., 2016). In addition, some label the customer-centric service recovery process as value co-creation, recognizing the benefits of learning from the complaints and the complaint handling process (e.g., Hazée, Van Vaerenbergh & Armiroto, 2017; Roggeveen, Tsiros & Grewal, 2012). Therefore, customer complaints have evolved from a cost or burden to firms to a valuable

learning opportunity, and it is recommended that customer voice be encouraged.

Given this, it is important to understand what leads customers to complain. Cognitive appraisal theory suggests that the evaluation of an event (e.g., is it beneficial or harmful/stressful?) leads to a certain emotional state (e.g., happy or angry), and the emotional state, in turn, results in certain behaviors (e.g., patronizing or complaining) (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Watson & Spence, 2007). Accordingly, marketing researchers have shown that while negative events lead customers to respond negatively, the negative emotions such as anger and dissatisfaction are a more proximal predictor of reactions to service failures (Bougie, Pieters & Zeelenberg, 2003; Kowalski, 1996). In other words, only those who are angry about a failed product or service are likely to complain.¹

Cognitive appraisal theory in complaining research, however, overlooks the important fact that complaining in a public place is visible behavior. This is important, because as social entities, humans tend to avoid conveying negative information and being perceived as negative (Milliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003). “Complaining” itself has negative connotations; complaining can be viewed as an attempt to create conflict and complainers may be viewed as troublemakers (Kowalski, 1996; Morrison, 2011). Most studies utilizing cognitive appraisal theory in customer complaining disregard the impact of this social influence. However, research outside of the realm of complaining revealed that, based on a sense of power, the existence of others affects human behavior. Low-power individuals tend to be concerned with others' perceptions, and, therefore, alter their behaviors accordingly (Berdahl & Martorana, 2006; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). As a result, it is possible that the power state of customers may moderate the impact of anger on complaining intention. To understand how anger and power might interact, we turn to a consideration of work on power.

2.2. The role of power

Power has received much attention across various disciplines such as psychology (e.g., Fast et al., 2009; Folkman et al., 1986), management (e.g., Magee & Galinsky, 2008) and marketing (Dubois, Rucker & Galinsky, 2011; Rucker et al., 2012). Power refers to “asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations” (Magee & Galinsky, 2008, p. 16) and has been found to shape human actions and perceptions (Fast et al., 2009; Galinsky et al., 2006; Rucker et al., 2012). Unlike trait power (a sense of power that people dispositionally possess), state power is the felt power that can be influenced by social relations (e.g., position), cognitive factors (e.g., an episodic recall), physical factors (e.g., expansive body positions), and one's surroundings (e.g., messages in a print advertisement) (Dubois et al., 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Rucker, Dubois & Galinsky, 2010).

The bedrock of the effect of power can be understood by its connection with agentic/communal orientations (Rucker et al., 2012). Agency and communion have been suggested as two fundamental modalities of human thinking and behavior (Bakan, 1966). Agentic individuals tend to manifest themselves in “self-protection, self-assertion and self-expansion” (Bakan, 1966, pp. 14–15) while communal individuals tend to consider others in thinking and decision-making (Rucker et al., 2012). Rucker et al. (2012) argue that the two modalities are associated with power. Because the concept of power originates from the existence of social hierarchy and asymmetry of resources, the higher status within this hierarchy indicates less reliance on others.

¹ While numerous negative emotions may be elicited from a failed service/product (e.g., sadness, disappointment), it is anger that has been considered as a key antecedent emotion to customer complaining behavior (e.g., Watson and Spence, 2007; Funches, 2011; Bougie et al., 2003). Thus, in this study, we focus on the effect of anger to narrow our scope. However, we do not dismiss the possibility that other emotions can be antecedents of customer complaints.

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