



## Consumer advocacy: Examining the feeling and doing following a failed service encounter



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### A B S T R A C T

Dissatisfactory service experiences and consumer complaints following such experiences are everyday occurrences. Prior research has not only examined the emotions experienced because of failed service encounters but also has explored the resultant behaviours towards the service provider and the service. However, prior research does not distinguish between negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) motivated by marketplace-helping behaviour such as consumer advocacy and NWOM as venting triggered by emotions such as anger and frustration. The current study examines the direct relationship between regret and disappointment and consumer advocacy. Unlike past studies, the current study explores two types of customer dissatisfaction: agent based and outcome based. Study 1 uses a vignette methodology, and Study 2 uses experience sampling in which respondents provide personal episodes of failed service encounters. In contrast with a previous proposition, we find that regret has a significant negative relationship with consumer advocacy. Disappointment based on external events demonstrates a significant positive relationship, whereas disappointment caused by another person has a weaker relationship with consumer advocacy.

### 1. Introduction

Dissatisfactory service experiences and consumer complaining following such dissatisfactory service experiences are an everyday phenomenon. The unfavourable consumption experience can be due to one-off or large-scale product quality or service practices affecting many different consumers simultaneously (Richins, 1984). After enduring such unfavourable experiences, consumers tend to share them with others for reasons varying from obtaining a solution to the problem by drawing the attention to the cause (Thøgersen et al., 2009) to venting negative feelings to reduce anxiety (Nyer, 1997). Alternatively, consumers could also share negative marketplace experiences to prevent others from having similar dissatisfactory experiences. Chelminski and Coulter (2011) refer to such sharing as consumer advocacy. The multiplier effect of sharing dissatisfactory service experiences could not only ensure that more people become aware but could also result in the problem being structurally solved (Zaugg and Jäggi, 2006).

The speed and large-scale adoption of the internet and newer technologies have significantly enhanced customer power (Urban and Hauser, 2004). New consumer-empowering technologies such as social media and mobile devices ensure speedy sharing of dissatisfactory experiences to large networks (Van Noort and Willemssen, 2012).

Because the internet and consumer-empowering technologies provide easy access to the sharing and assessing consumption experiences of others (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) can hamper the purchase behaviour of recipients and adversely hurt service firms' revenues (Reichheld, Markey and Hopton, 2000). Given the potential damage caused by behavioural outcomes such as NWOM, past research has attempted to understand cause and effect in service failure (Jean Harrison-Walker, 2012). Behavioural outcomes such as NWOM following a dissatisfactory service experience are known to depend upon the specific emotions experienced by the consumer (Wetzer et al., 2007).

Prior research not only has examined the emotions experienced because of failed service encounters (Zeelenberg et al., 2002) but also has explored the resultant behaviours in relation to the service provider and the service. Specific behavioural outcomes that have been studied include the likelihood of complaining, intention to switch, word-of-mouth (WOM) and inertia (Richins, 1987; Oliver, 1997; Zeithaml et al., 1996).

Research on service encounters has progressed 'beyond valance' (negative or positive WOM) in customer dissatisfaction (Zeelenberg et al., 2002). The 'feeling is for doing' line of argument emphasizes not only the importance of emotions for decision making but also posits the more radical view that 'decision making itself is often an emotional

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process'. A core premise of the feeling-is-for-doing approach is that emotions can act as a motivational process (Zeelenberg et al., 2007). This view conflicts with the classical view that postulates rational calculation based on the cost-benefit or comparison of advantages and disadvantages of alternatives in everyday decisions and choices.

'Feeling is for doing', whose core premise is that emotions act as a motivational process, is rooted in the philosophy of pragmatism (James, 1907), which holds that 'thinking is always for the sake of doing'. The key proposition of the feeling-is-for-doing view is that "emotions primarily motivate goal-directed behaviour". For example, consumers who experience anger are known to express feelings such as 'exploding' and 'being treated unfairly'. Some even behave aggressively or violently. In essence, these consumers are motivated to retaliate (Bougie et al., 2003).

Jean Harrison-Walker (2012) extended the work of Wetzer et al. (2007) and showed that anger, frustration, irritation, disappointment and regret often resulted in wallet share, NWOM, reconciliation and repatronage intentions. However, these studies do not distinguish between NWOM motivated by marketplace-helping behaviour (e.g., consumer advocacy) and NWOM triggered by emotions such as anger and frustration.

The primary purpose of this paper is to extend the work of Jean Harrison-Walker (2012) by investigating the specific emotion(s) that cause idiosyncratic consumer advocacy. In other words, if warning other consumers is an associated goal of becoming a consumer advocate, then what specific emotions bring forward said goal? The present study examines the direct relationship between regret and consumer advocacy, a particular form of NWOM. Unlike past studies, the current study operationalizes dissatisfaction at two levels: agent and outcome. Thus, the current study aims to contribute to the literature as follows:

- a. The first aim is to build on the existing consumer advocacy literature by providing a greater understanding of the cause (specific emotions) and effect (NWOM) in particular and of customer complaints in general.
- b. The second aim is to contribute to the feeling-is-for-doing literature by identifying the emotion-goal link for consumer advocacy, a unique form of NWOM.
- c. Finally, there is growing evidence that knowing that a customer is dissatisfied is not adequate. Therefore, from a practical standpoint, knowing specific behavioural responses associated with different emotions will enable a service organization to address a response effectively, particularly if service organisations can encourage consumer advocates to voice (complain directly to the business) instead of complaining to friends and acquaintances'.

### 1.1. Emotion research

Research pertaining to consumers' behaviour can be found in emotion and marketing research (Storm and Storm, 1987). Studies on the importance of emotions in decision making criticize the theories of rational decision making and argue that (a) rationality is limited by one's cognitive capabilities (Simon, 1956); (b) heuristics – simply, rules of thumb – can be better than extensive processing within a time constraint (Payne et al., 1993); (c) emotions can help overcome one's cognitive limitations within the decision environment (Zeelenberg et al., 2008); and (d) outcomes of emotions are stable and predictable (Frijda, 1988).

Recent studies have primarily focused on the effect of specific emotions on satisfaction and resultant behaviour. A welcome addition to the emotion and consumer behaviour literature (see Bagozzi et al., 2000) is the distinction between the valance-based approach and specific emotions. The valance-based approach considers the effect of the sum of the customer's positive or negative emotions in forming a judgement about a service and its provider. The valance-based

approach is criticized, however, for ignoring the wide range of different emotions.

The specific emotions approach, proposed as an alternative to the valance-based approach, relies on the appraisal theory of emotions (see Scherer et al., 2001) and captures the idiosyncrasies of emotions based on antecedents, phenomenology and consequences. The basic premise of this approach is that different negative emotions might affect dissatisfaction differently.

The role of attributions following a service failure is well known. Customer interpretations of the reasons (or the cause) for a service failure are known as attributions (Priluck and Wisenblit, 2009). Knowing the reason for the service failure is argued to be a 'general tendency' of customers (Folkes et al., 1987). Jean Harrison-Walker (2012) argued, "Multiple reasons could cause a service failure, and each of these attributions may elicit different emotions."

### 1.2. Service failure-related emotions

Because it is difficult to evaluate a service in advance, the actual service could be a cause of negative emotion when the service falls short of expectations or when expectations are met. The former is a result of disappointment of expectations (Lin, 2006), and the latter is due to *counterfactual thinking*, a comparison process in which an actual outcome is compared with what *could, would or might* have occurred (Van Dijk and Zeelenberg, 2005). Service failures arising out of not meeting customer expectations can be either outcome-oriented failures or process-oriented failures (Bitner et al., 1990; Mohr and Bitner, 1995). The emotional responses following a service failure reflect how individuals evaluate it (del Rio-Lanza et al., 2009).

Although research in emotion theory identified 32 specific emotions (Roseman, Wiest and Swartz, 1994), two emotions are recognized as more important in the field of marketing, namely, regret and disappointment (Inman, Dyer and Jia, 1997). Both are known to play a key role in a consumer's decision-making process (McConnell et al., 2000). Zeelenberg et al. (2000) argue that regret and disappointment are consequences of poor decisions and dis-confirmed expectations; both originate in counterfactual thinking. However, the experiential qualities of regret and disappointment are different (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 1999). Therefore it is necessary for service organisations' to understand the behavioural outcomes of regret and disappointment following a failed service encounter.

### 1.3. Regret

Because people tend to focus on the expected rather than the actual, regret is widely experienced (Carmon and Ariely, 2000). Just the act of choosing is known to produce post-decisional regret (Carmon et al., 2003). Therefore, regret has its basis in counterfactual emotion (Roese, 1997). Past studies have found that regretful consumers experience the following emotions: (a) having known better, (b) lost opportunity, (c) desire to correct one's mistake (d) and ways of preventing the mistake in the future (Roseman et al., 1994; Zeelenberg et al., 1998).

Typically, the attribution in regret is internal, for example, when an individual holds herself responsible for the bad experience. Past research has found a direct relationship between regret and switching behaviour. When an alternative is considered and a conscious trade-off is made, consumers can switch quickly following the hindsight wisdom. Given the 'how stupid I was to let go of a better alternative' feeling, regret is unlikely to trigger complaining. Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) found that customers were more inclined to indulge in WOM when they experienced less regret. We concur with Jean Harrison Walker's (2012, Pg.119) finding that customers experience regret due to their own poor decision. Therefore, 'they may be reluctant to tell others'. Thus, customers who experience regret are less likely to share it with their social network. Hence, we posit that.

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