

When service failure is not service failure: an exploration of the forms and motives of “illegitimate” customer complaining

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Abstract

Purpose – Proposes responding to earlier calls for further research into “fraudulent” or “feigned” customer complaints, and providing insights which explore and describe the motivations and forms of such deliberate “illegitimate” customer complaints.

Design/methodology/approach – Critical incident technique was utilized in analyzing 104 interviews with customers who had knowingly made an illegitimate complaint within the six months prior to the interview. Data collection stopped at the point of theoretical saturation and was subsequently analyzed according to the coding procedures advocated by Strauss and Corbin (open, axial and selective coding).

Findings – Two key insights emerged from data analysis. First, coding procedures revealed four distinct forms of customer complainants. These are labeled; “one-off complainants”, “opportunistic complainants”, “conditioned complainants”, and “professional complainants”. Second, six main motives for articulating fraudulent complaints were uncovered during data analysis. These are termed; “freeloaders”, “fraudulent returners”, “fault transferors”, “solitary ego gains”, “peer-induced esteem seekers”, and “disruptive gains”.

Research limitations/implications – The study is constrained by its exploratory design and qualitative methods employed. Subsequently, future studies could employ survey methods to improve empirical generalizability. Future studies could adopt a more inclusive approach and incorporate insights from employees, managers, and other relevant actors within service encounters.

Practical implications – Practical implications highlighted by the study include a need for businesses to examine and, in many cases, reevaluate their personnel training, customer complaint and service recovery procedures. Furthermore, managers may wish to enforce mechanisms wherein customer complaints are monitored and tracked in a manner that assists in the identification and challenging of re-offending fraudulent complainers.

Originality/value – The study constitutes the first systematic attempt to explore and describe illegitimate customer complaining behaviors.

Keywords Consumer behaviour, Complaints, Fraud, Service failures, Critical incident technique

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this issue.

Introduction

Customer complaining behaviors (CCB) have been studied from a diverse range of perspectives over the past three decades. In particular, a plethora of contemporary research highlights the value of customer complaints and stress that customer complaints should be welcomed and encouraged by organizations (Bennett, 1997; Prim and Pras, 1999; Dewitt and Brady, 2003; Snellman and Vihtkari, 2003). However, while extant service recovery and customer complaining literature has forwarded useful insights into the antecedents, response forms, processes, methods, and dynamics of CCB (e.g. Jacoby and Jaccard, 1981; Singh, 1988; Kowalski, 1996;

Boote, 1998; East, 1998; Fisher *et al.*, 1999; Harris and Mowen, 2001), much of this research assumes that customers do not knowingly complain without cause (Day, 1980; Harris and Reynolds, forthcoming). Such unjust and on occasions pre-planned complaints have been labeled “faked complaints” by Day *et al.* (1981). Indeed, Jacoby and Jaccard (1981) acknowledge the existence of complaints from “satisfied users” who may “deliberately fabricate” problems. In this regard, empirical research has focused on service failures, service recovery processes, and customer complaints wherein the complainer perceives their motive to complain to be legitimate in nature (Andreasen, 1988). This has been to the detriment of research that explores the behaviors and motivations of consumers who consciously voice illegitimate complaints.

The aim of this study is to explore the motives and forms of deliberately illegitimate complaints, professed whilst reporting insincere service failures. In this regard, the objective of this study is to illuminate service encounters wherein customers knowingly, and incorrectly report service failures. Therefore, this study is designed to both respond to earlier calls for further research into the matter of “fraudulent” or “illegitimate” complaints and reimbursement claims (Kowalski, 1996; Piron and Young, 2000; Harris and Reynolds, forthcoming), and to advance understanding of service and product failures, and CCB through acknowledging and considering the “dishonest” and indeed, “unjustified” side of CCB.

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Literature review

Service failure is commonplace and is frequently considered as an inevitable consequence of service provision (Lewis and Clacher, 2001; Dewitt and Brady, 2003; Hess *et al.*, 2003). Bitner *et al.*'s (1990) classification of service failure categories is widely adopted and extended within the service failure literature. However, divergent classifications of service failure categories can be seen, for example, within the research findings of Meuter *et al.* (2000), Michel (2001) and Holloway and Beatty (2003). Indeed, the importance of addressing the commonality of service failures and thus implementing effective service recovery strategies has been widely acknowledged both within academic and practitioner domains (Hart *et al.*, 1990; Bailey, 1994; Lewis and Clacher, 2001; Mattila, 2001).

Nevertheless, the major thrust of research within the service failure sphere has concentrated on service recovery efforts. For example, Dewitt and Brady (2003) discuss the effect of rapport on customer responses to service failure, while Hess *et al.* (2003) examine the effect of relationship factors on customer satisfaction during recovery proceedings. Conversely, McColl-Kennedy *et al.* (2003) identify the role of gender as a central construct in developing service recovery strategies, while Lidén and Skälén (2003) consider the effect of service guarantees on service recovery efforts. However, the concentration within the service failure literature on service recovery is based predominantly on the assumption that service has genuinely failed, and that the motivations driving customer complaints are essentially legitimate. In this sense, much of the service failure research presumes that dissatisfaction is the foremost consequence of service failure, and therefore the primary motivation driving subsequent customer complaining behaviors.

Several definitions of CCB have been proposed, the majority of which view dissatisfaction as the source of complaints. For example, Singh and Howell (1984, p. 42) define CCB as:

[...] a set of all behavioral and non-behavioral responses which involves communicating something negative regarding a purchase episode and is triggered by perceived dissatisfaction with that episode.

In a similar vein, Alicke *et al.* (1992) adopt the dictionary definition supplied by Webster's *Third International Dictionary* which defines complaining as "expressing discontent, dissatisfaction, protest, resentment or regret". Conversely, Kowalski (1996, p. 180) notes that complaints do not stem solely from feelings of dissatisfaction, and accordingly defines complaining as "an expression of dissatisfaction, whether subjectively experienced or not, for the purpose of venting emotions or achieving intra psychic goals, or both". Indeed, support for Kowalski's (1996) suggestion that not all complaints originate from experienced dissatisfaction can be found within research which postulates that dissatisfaction can only account for a small percentage of customer complaints (East, 1996; Day *et al.*, 1981).

The drivers of CCB

Despite a disparity within the literature with regard to whether dissatisfaction is a sole driver of CCB (see Bearden and Teel, 1983; Day *et al.*, 1981) a large number of studies forward a variety of potential contingent factors, one of which concerns personal factors. Within this widely researched

sphere, Andreassen (1988) forwards the "personality model" which contends that in addition to feelings of dissatisfaction, individuals are either driven or restrained to complain on the basis of their personality. In particular, specific personality, and indeed, psychological variables are identified as potential drivers of customer complaints, these include, among others: assertiveness (Richins, 1983; Bolting, 1989); attitude towards complaining (Bearden and Teel, 1983; Kim *et al.*, 2003); the perceived cost or benefit of complaining (Day *et al.*, 1981; Andreassen, 1988); locus of control (Bearden and Mason, 1984; Foxman *et al.*, 1990); attribution of blame (Krishnan and Valle, 1979; Richins, 1983); personal values (Prakash, 1984; Rogers and Williams, 1990); and alienation (Bearden and Mason, 1984; Kim *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, Bennett (1997) suggests that via positive reinforcement induced by psychological rewards obtained through the complaining process of venting, customers may affectively "learn" to complain. Support for this proposition can be found within the research of Andreassen (1988), who in a similar vein, states that customers learn to become complainers over a period of time due to accrued complaint successes.

Demographic variables are also frequently linked to the propensity of CCB during service or product failure. In summarizing this body of literature, researchers widely maintain that consumers who complain: are typically younger (Warland *et al.*, 1975; Bearden and Mason, 1984); are highly educated (Jacoby and Jaccard, 1981; Heung and Lam, 2003); earn above average incomes (Day and Landon, 1977; Morganosky and Buckley, 1987); hold professional jobs (Moyer, 1984); are female (Kau *et al.*, 1995; Heung and Lam, 2003); and have children (Moyer, 1984; Kolodinsky, 1993).

With reference to the impact of situational variables on complaint intentions and actions during service failure, a number of factors are forwarded. These include: the intensity of dissatisfaction experienced (Prakash, 1991); the product/service type (Singh, 1990); the perceived organizational reputation (Landon, 1977); the level of purchase involvement (Godwin *et al.*, 1995); the severity of the problem (Richins, 1983); the prior relationship between the organization and customer (Blodgett and Granbois, 1992); and the expected response of the organization (Bearden and Mason, 1984).

In summarizing the effect of the antecedents or "triggers" of consumer dissatisfaction responses, the "theory of complaining" as forwarded by Kowalski (1996) may be drawn on. Within this theoretical model, Kowalski (1996) forwards the notion that complaining behaviors involve two distinct processes. These processes consist of first, an individual's "dissatisfaction threshold", and second, a "complaining threshold". Kowalski (1996) suggests that underlying these processes is a state of self-focus. Here, individuals compare the perceived present situation with their personal standards, in order to evaluate the level of dissatisfaction. In addition to this comparison, and in also determining the threshold of complaining, a number of "trigger" factors such as personal, demographic factors, and situational factors as discussed above, are also either consciously or unconsciously considered (Boote, 1998). Ultimately, the occurrence of these two processes will lead to either action or inaction with regards to voicing a complaint.

Classifications of CCB response styles

However, to consider customer complaining responses to service and product failures to consist solely of action or inaction would be rather simplistic. Indeed, considerable attention within the CCB field has been devoted to developing and consequently extending typologies and taxonomies of CCB response styles and processes. Yet, Maute and Forrester (1993) note that the majority of such classifications are incompatible. The earliest study, yet widely considered as the founder and “basic” model of consumer dissatisfaction response styles, is that of Hirschman’s (1970) exit, voice, loyalty model (Huefner and Hunt, 1994). However, while this model has been empirically supported (see Maute and Forrester, 1993), it is generally regarded as rather simplistic. Hence, calls for the model to be extended have been forwarded (see Singh, 1990). Accordingly, for example, Rusbult *et al.* (1988) added “neglect” to the model. Alternatively, in addition to voice and loyalty, Huefner and Hunt (1994, p. 268) found “retaliation” which symbolizes the “deliberate (and) intentional efforts (by customers) to in some way get even with the seller for what went wrong”, to be a supplementary response to dissatisfaction. Subsequently, the authors also queried the use of the label “exit”, in its place adding the concepts of “exit” and “grudgeholding”, denoting long-term disaffections. Day and Landon (1977) by contrast propose a conceptual two-level hierarchical classification of response options which Day (1980) later refines into three broad categories of behaviors.

In 1992, Blodgett and Granbois attempted to integrate existing research in presenting an “integrated” conceptual model of CCB. In contrast to existing classifications, Blodgett and Granbois (1992) treat complaining behavior as a “dynamic” and sequential process, adding the concept of perceived justice to complaint decisions, and also indicating that customers may engage in multiple responses to dissatisfactory experiences. Building on this model, Boote (1998) offers a “comprehensive” model of CCB in arguing that complaint types should be classified according to whether they are primary or secondary responses and subsequently identifies eight core triggers which lead to dissatisfaction responses.

“Unjustified” CCB literature

However, in contrast to the above central body of CCB literature which espouses that genuine customer complaints are essentially derived from dissatisfaction, exists a small faction of literature which espouses that in reality, complaint episodes may occur wherein customers complain without experiencing service failure or dissatisfaction. This is to suggest that such complaints are essentially “illegitimate” and “fraudulent” in nature (Jacoby and Jaccard, 1981; Prim and Pras, 1999; Harris and Reynolds, forthcoming). Indeed, in 1977 Landon proposed that such deviant complaining behaviors should be incorporated within the development of mainstream customer complaining theories and classifications, a proposition which has been largely ignored (e.g. Hirschman, 1970; Singh, 1988; Blodgett and Anderson, 2000). Yet, in conducting a psychological analysis of CCBs, Jacoby and Jaccard (1981) identify four potential sources of customer complaints. Three of these sources may be defined as legitimate (dissatisfied users and non-users who are purchasers or consumers). However, Jacoby and Jaccard (1981) label the fourth group of complainers as “satisfied

users”. Within this category the authors note that customers may deliberately fabricate problems and fraudulently complain due to a number of motives. Such motives include; harboring an anti-business attitude, and the perceived possibility of gain from making an illegitimate complaint. The motive of unjustly complaining for gain is also recognized by Russo (1979), Kowalski (1996), and Boote (1998). Additionally, financial gain may also be acquired via fraudulent complaints (Landon, 1977; Harris and Reynolds, forthcoming).

Several social impression management motives have been identified as rationales for inauthentic complaints. These include complaining as a means of; impressing and gaining approval of observing customers (Kowalski, 1996; Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002), evoking sympathy from onlookers (Alicke *et al.* 1992), and attempting to be viewed favorably by others, in implying that experienced standards are below those expected (Alicke *et al.* 1992). Furthermore, Goodwin and Spiggle (1989) suggest that such customers may enjoy creating negative reactions from bystanders, through in effect, embracing the “role” of a complainer. Finally, Kowalski (1996) notes that customers may attempt to “compete” with each other in fabricating fraudulent complaints. Additionally, Kowalski (1996) stresses that illegitimate complaints may diffuse across a setting in a “domino” effect (a proposition empirically supported by Harris and Reynolds (2003)). A faction of research within this sphere also highlights that such deviant behaviors are not only carried out on an opportunist basis, but rather a distinct group of consumers exist which have been widely labeled as “professional” and “chronic” complainers (Landon, 1977; Day *et al.*, 1981; Harris and Reynolds, forthcoming). Such customers unjustly complain regularly, both for their own consumption and personal benefit (Harris and Reynolds, forthcoming). However, evidence can also be found documenting the existence of “professional complainers” who may be hired, at a fee, to complain on the behalf of consumers (see www.halfbakery.com and www.boston.com/globe/offbeat/daily/27/complainer.htm). Furthermore, Harris and Reynolds (Forthcoming) indicate that illegitimate complaints do not occur solely through “vocalized” behaviors. Rather, in addition to oral complaints, the authors identify the existence of the “compensation letter writer”, referring to customers who intentionally pen letters of complaint without genuine reason.

However, with reference to official statistics, drawing on research by Day and Bodhur (1979), Day *et al.* (1981) conclude that in practice, the number of customers who complain without genuine justification, is insignificant to the extent that they fail to skew official complaining statistics. Yet, this statement may be queried when considering findings from contemporary studies that demonstrate a noteworthy number of customers confess to making inauthentic complaints on either a one-off, occasional or regular basis. As illustrated within, for example, Harris and Reynolds’s (forthcoming) account of illegitimate compensation letter writers, and Schmidt *et al.*’s (1999) study of deshopping.

Fraudulent customer retail returns literature

Parallel to the above literature that identifies the existence of illegitimate customer complaining, is a stream of research which details the fraudulent customer activity labeled “abnormal buy-returns” (Siegel, 1993), “retail borrowing” (Piron and Young, 2000), or otherwise termed “deshopping”

(Schmidt *et al.* 1999). Such labels depict the actions of customers who intentionally, preplan the purchase of goods in the knowledge that they will use the products and fraudulently complain and return them at a later date, often taking advantage of a stores' "legitimate" return policy (Schmidt *et al.*, 1999; Piron and Young, 2000; Harris and Reynolds, forthcoming). Accordingly, Schmidt *et al.* (1999 p. 292) defines deshopping as "the deliberate – and arguably inappropriate – return of goods for reasons other than actual faults in the product, in its pure form premeditated prior to and during the consumption experience as at least a potential outcome of the event". Owing to the nature of the merchandise, such behaviors commonly occur in clothing and personal item product categories (Siegel, 1993). Furthermore, Zabriskie (1972) concludes that such deviant behaviors are performed by a "significant group" of consumers within society.

Moreover, a number of rationales are forwarded which attempt to explain the motives driving fraudulent return activities. For example, Schmidt *et al.* (1999) suggest that deshopping is often employed as a "social" and "risk" reducing strategy. In this sense, customers can be observed by peers as wearing a vast array of garments which they could not otherwise afford. Social needs are also identified by Piron and Young (2000) in what is perhaps the most comprehensive insight into the motivations of retail borrowers. In addition to social needs, five further categories are forwarded. These consist of economic needs, personal satisfaction needs, professional needs, altruistic needs, and finally miscellaneous needs. Moreover, in profiling and typifying customers who fraudulently return goods, Jolson (1974) found that younger, male customers, with an average income of under \$10,000, were more likely to return damaged or used goods than the rest of the population. However, contradictory findings have been forwarded by both Schmidt *et al.* (1999), and Piron and Young (2000) who independently found no difference between the sexes and deshopping activities.

Overall, a broad review of extant literature reveals the focal attention of CCB conceptualizations and empirical research has centered on complaining behaviors that essentially are sourced within feelings of dissatisfaction. This has been to the detriment of research which focuses on the motivations and forms of illegitimate CCBs from the perspective of the perpetrator of fraudulent complaints – the customer.

Research design and methodology

A review of the literature reveals that extant research has primarily focused on examining the antecedents, forms, and motives of complaints which stem from failure episodes wherein genuine feelings of dissatisfaction have been experienced by the perpetrators of complaints (e.g. Hirschman, 1970; Singh, 1990; Prim and Pras, 1999). This focus has been to the detriment of comprehension regarding the motives and forms of illegitimate complaint behaviors, wherein perpetrators effectively feign incidences of service or product failure. Therefore, given the poorly understood nature of this concept, in order to supply insights into this neglected issue, a qualitative research approach is considered to be suitable.

In particular, critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) was deemed appropriate. This is on account of critical incident technique being regarded as especially useful during

exploratory research wherein concepts, as is the case with illegitimate complaints, are not wholly clear and comprehended. Advocates of qualitative research methods employed critical incident technique widely in the research of customers, since the method allows the elicitation of in-depth descriptions of critical incidents from the viewpoint of the customer (Bitner *et al.*, 1990). Furthermore, since its conception, critical incident technique has been extensively adopted across a number of contexts including consumer retail shopping (e.g. Hare *et al.*, 2001) and entrepreneurial learning (e.g. Cope and Watts, 2000). In particular, studies that utilize critical incident technique while examining services are particularly common. For example, empirical investigations have focused on an array of subject matters including; general favorable and unfavorable service encounter incidents (Bitner *et al.*, 1990), and the causes of customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction within services (Johnston, 1995; Edvardsson, 1998). Moreover, critical incident technique has also been embraced within the examination of service failure and recovery (Kelley *et al.*, 1993; Mueller *et al.*, 2003; Lidén and Skälén, 2003), and CCBs (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2003; Snellman and Vihtkari, 2003). Furthermore, specifically, with relation to the study deviant behaviors by customers, both Bitner *et al.* (1994) (as part of a wider study) and Harris and Reynolds (forthcoming) adopt critical incident technique in exploratory analyses of undesirable and dysfunctional customer behaviors. During the data collection stage, critical incidences may be collected in a variety of ways. For example, Bitner *et al.* (1990) used hypothetical situations, to gauge the reactions of respondents. However, the current study utilized an open-ended questionnaire structure, allowing the respondents to express themselves and describe their experiences in their own words, thus arguably generating rich and real data and capturing "true" depictions of incidences from the respondents' perspective (Stauss and Weinlich, 1997).

The sample for the current study was recruited by two researchers from shopping malls in nine different cities. To generate an informed sample, respondents were selected on account of having knowingly made an insincere complaint, within the last six months. Explicitly, critical incidences of first-hand experiences were only collected from those who had perpetrated unjust complaining behaviors themselves. This is to suggest that informants had first-hand experience of making an illegitimate complaint, as opposed to witnessing the actions of others or hearing second hand stories. Potential informants were selected using a quota sample, designed to include informants of different ages, genders, and ethnic minorities. In total, 155 customers were asked to recall incidences wherein they had expressed what could be described as a (retrospectively) "unjustifiable" complaint. A total of 104 respondents were able to recall incidences of such behaviors. In many regards, the sampling procedures adopted for this study conform to Gummesson's (1991) suggestion that qualitative research should be driven by the imperative of data quality and not (necessarily) by the need for representativeness of a particular population (as in quantitative sampling). Thus, while a quota sampling procedure was employed, this does not denote representativeness of any particular population but rather indicates a desire to collect data regarding a broad range of consumers.

Data were collected during 104 interviews with customers, of which 43 were males and 61 were females. The average age of respondents interviewed was 31. However, the age scope of respondents ranged from 17 to 74 years of age. Furthermore, 80 percent of informants were classified as being in current employment. The remaining 20 percent of respondents fell into the categories of either being in full-time education, a home maker or unemployed. The financial income of the employed informants ranged from part time workers who earned \$6,000 per annum and above, to persons within full-time employment who earned a salary of up to \$200,000 per year. In addition, the interviewed informants represented a diverse array of ethnicities and religious orientations. Finally, 47 percent of the sample was married.

All interviews were conducted individually and typically lasted for 45 minutes (although some lasted as long as two hours). Data collection stopped at the point which Strauss and Corbin (1998) label "theoretical saturation". This refers to the stage in data collection at which no new categories of incidences are disclosed. Each interview began with the collection of socio-demographic information, and a discussion regarding the meaning of illegitimate complaints. That is to say that the respondent and perpetrator of the complaint acknowledged that the complaint and claim of service or product failure was to some degree intentional, and did not stem from a genuine source of dissatisfaction. Furthermore, in order to aid an open discussion on the part of the informant, confidentiality assurances were given[1]. In order to increase the accuracy and precision of data recorded, as advised by Patton (1990), approval to audio record all of the interviews was gained. Each interview was transcribed by the researcher. Customers were probed through a set of open-ended questions to provide a verbal account of the sequence of events involving them making an illegitimate complaint. In particular, respondents were probed for information regarding their motives for making such injustice claims and their means of voicing this complaint.

Following the procedures advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1998), three types of coding were utilized to analyze the transcribed data. First, "open coding" was used to identify and distinguish between the properties and dimensions of concepts within the data. "Axial coding" was used second, as a process of linking core categories together with subcategories at the level of properties and dimensions. Third, "selective coding" was employed as a procedure to integrate and refine category labels and theory. These coding procedures were performed according to, in part, the iterative process originally outlined by Flanagan (1954) and popularized by Bitner *et al.* (1990). Specifically, six stages of analysis comprising of repetitive and persistent examination of the analysis occurring at the end of each phase were carried out by the researcher (this often led to re-evaluation and further reiterations). The stages are:

- 1 category configuration according to parallels within the narratives;
- 2 saturating categories;
- 3 developing abstract descriptions and definitions for each category of incidences;
- 4 clarifying categories;
- 5 combing and linking categories; and
- 6 assessing links.

Initial coding identified incidents wherein customers had knowingly complained without justification. Subsequent coding, sorted incidents according to frequency and perceived normality into four main forms of complaining, while parallel analysis sorted incidents by the various financial and non-financial motives of the complainer into six categories of illegitimate complaining motivations.

Findings

Data analysis procedures led to the emergence of a range of declared service failures and subsequent complaint behaviors by customers that could be deemed as "unjustified" and in this sense "illegitimate". That is, complaint behaviors were described by informants in which they admitted to having intentionally and knowingly made complaints without having prior experienced genuine service failure and feelings of dissatisfaction. Therefore, respondents acknowledged incidences wherein they had fabricated incidences of service or product failure. Such unwarranted complaints appeared to be rather common, with the large majority of customers questioned being able to recall at least two incidences in which they personally had made an illegitimate complaint within the last six months. In this sense, these findings contrast with those of Day *et al.* (1981) who suggest that the number of fraudulent complaints articulated by customers are so few that they do not bias customer complaint statistics. However, these insights support the theory of Fullerton and Punj (1993), and findings of Harris and Reynolds (2003), both of which argue that dysfunctional or deviant customer behaviors are in reality commonplace in today's society.

Two key insights emerged from data analysis. First, coding procedures revealed distinct forms of customer complainants. Second, a diverse range of motives was uncovered. In total four forms of unjust complainants were consistently revealed. These are labeled; "one-off complainants", "opportunistic complainants", "conditioned complainants", and "professional complainants". In addition, six main motives for articulating fraudulent complaints were uncovered during data analysis. These are termed; "freeloaders", "fraudulent returners", "fault transferors", "solitary ego gains", "peer-induced esteem seekers", and "disruptive gains". In order to steer the subsequent discussion, these factors are presented in Figure 1. This figure is supplied merely as an aid to guide the reader and is not intended to suggest definitive causal links.

During data analysis it emerged that particular motives for deliberate unjustified complaints were primarily (but not exclusively) discussed in relation to either one or two forms of

Figure 1 The forms and motives of illegitimate customer complaining



illegitimate complaining. This is not to suggest that individual motives were exclusively associated with single forms but rather that this was the main emphasis stressed by informants. As we shall discuss later, further research will be required before definitive relationships can be reliably established. Beginning with the forms, the remainder of the paper will discuss in turn, each of the above listed classifications.

The forms of illegitimate customer complaints

Coding procedures revealed that the forms of illegitimate customer complaints may be plotted on a continuum of frequency, ranging from infrequent or “one off” acts of unjustified complaints, to those who fabricate complaints in a “professional” manner, voicing complaints on a regular, and sometimes daily basis. The most frequently cited form was that of opportunistic complainers, closely followed by the occurrence of incidences of one-off complainants. However, as will be discussed in due course, occurrences of informant self-censorship may have inflated the number of incidences classified within this category.

One-off complainants

The first form of illegitimate complainant to emerge is labeled “one-off complainants”. This category refers to customers who declare that they have articulated, on one distinct occasion, what they consider to be a solitary unjustified complaint. Interestingly, all informants within this category specified that such incidences had been a “one-off” event (or were only prepared to admit that they had illegitimately complained once), claiming that such conduct is not typical of their conventional complaining, and indeed, consumption behaviors. The main rationale for this attitude towards additional unjustified complaints was due to respondents reporting experiencing feelings of anxiety during the complaint episode. Furthermore, such emotions were often followed by prolonged feelings of guilt. For example:

I bought a sweater, and I wore it a lot, so much so that I became bored of it, so I unpicked the sleeve and took it back, they gave me a refund . . . However it's not the sort of thing I would do again, I feel really guilty about it actually (Male, age 29).

I have made an unfounded complaint once, however I felt really uncomfortable doing it at the time, I was convinced that the sales assistant knew what I was up to, I wouldn't ever do it again (Male, age 44).

Of the reported incidences classified within this category, the majority of the perpetrators were male. In addition, offenders of this nature tended to be in current employment. Moreover, a possible explanation for one-off complainants experiencing feelings of guilt and anxiety during and after illegitimate complaint episodes may in part be explained by the individual's level of cognitive moral development (Kohlberg, 1969). Cognitive moral development theory implies that customers with low levels of moral development, may not perceive such behaviors as immoral, therefore they are able to cognitively rationalize deviant complaints. However, individuals with higher levels of moral development, by contrast, may identify such behaviors as morally wrong, and thus may experience negative emotions if performed. Furthermore, this theory has been widely linked to unethical and dysfunctional behaviors by consumers (e.g. Fullerton and Punj, 1993; Babin and Babin, 1996; Mitchell and Chan, 2002).

However, these findings should be treated with caution in that it is possible that informants, wishing to appear as “socially

functional” censored their depiction of incidences of fraudulent complaining. That is, due to illegitimate complaining behavior being largely considered by societal norms as an undesirable behavior, respondents may therefore conceal the full extent of their unjustified complaining activities in order to reduce the likelihood of being perceived in a negative fashion by the researcher (see Young, 1988; Mick, 1996).

Opportunistic complainants

The label “opportunistic complainants” refers to customers who complain in an unjustified manner when, and only when, a potentially lucrative opportune occasion arises. Therefore, this type of complainant will not purposely preplan an illegitimate complaint, but instead, on a frequent basis, will take advantage of any opportune encounter to do so. Incidences which were grouped within this category were predominantly perpetrated by females. However, incidences of this nature appeared to be performed equally by those who earn superior levels of income and persons who are paid more modest salary levels. The concept of opportunity has been widely drawn upon within both criminology and customer deviance literatures. For example, the perception of an “opportunity” to commit a crime or deviant act has been linked to a number of dysfunctional behaviors including; bar related deviance (Fox and Sobol, 2000), ethically questionable behavior (Fukukawa, 2002), shoplifting (Bernstein, 1985), and general criminal (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) and aberrant customer (Fullerton and Punj, forthcoming) behaviors.

Furthermore, Clark (1995) notes that the concept of opportunity is multifaceted. Two aspects of opportunity which are particularly relevant to this study include first, opportunities which are based on the deliberation of the comparison between the costs and benefits of engaging in the dysfunctional, in this case illegitimate complaining, behavior (see Becker, 1968; Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985). One customer explains:

It's not a type of activity that I make a habit of, but if the opportunity is there to make a sincere complaint, and nobody is going to get hurt in the process, then I would be a fool not to take the chance and gain from it wouldn't I? (Female, age 30).

A second dimension of the opportunity construct refers to opportunities that are perceived to derive from environmental or situational factors (Sheth, 1979; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). Specifically, the vast majority of incidences classified within this category highlighted one situational factor in particular, as generating, what was perceived to be an opportunity to voice an illegitimate complaint. This is, that lenient return and satisfaction guaranteed policies were seen as “encouraging” and “inviting” illegitimate customer complaints. For example:

On checking in to a hotel I noticed that they had a 100 percent satisfaction or your money back guarantee, I just couldn't resist the opportunity to take advantage of it, so on checking out I told the receptionist that I wanted a refund as the sound of traffic had kept me awake all night. They gave me a refund, no questions asked. These companies can be so stupid they need to be more alert (Male, age 26).

This finding is concurrent with the research of Harris and Reynolds (2003, forthcoming) who suggests that liberal organizational return policies may be inadvertently encouraging and creating opportunities for customers to engage in dysfunctional behaviors. Furthermore, these

findings are complementary to Piron and Young (2000), who note that generous store return policies might be a contributory factor in the ability of customers to be able to fraudulently return store items.

Conditioned complainants

The label “conditioned complainants” represents customers who through observing the illegitimate complaining behaviors of others, have learnt, how to voice unjustified complaints in an effective manner, and currently do so on a regular basis. Conditioned complainers were found to be predominantly females of an employed status. Often respondents reported learning “techniques” of how to convey a fabricated complaint from their peers. In addition, several cases were uncovered wherein female respondents reported having observed and subsequently adopted the illegitimate complaining behaviors that they had witnessed their mothers performing during childhood. One customer describes:

I have been taught well, when I was a child I used to go shopping with my mum and she was always complaining about things which weren't really a problem, I used to get really embarrassed over it, but as I have gotten older I find myself doing it more and more, it's a good way to get things (Female, age 24).

This form of complaining is consistent with the dysfunctional complaining behaviors described by Kowalski (1996), and Harris and Reynolds (2003), in uncovering evidence of a “domino effect” of unwarranted complaints amongst customers in a close proximity to one another. This effect represents incidences wherein customers observe and recognize the benefits that fellow patrons receive from making unjustified complaints, therefore causing them to indulge in fraudulent complaining behaviors themselves in order to obtain the same gains. For example:

I was in a restaurant and I saw that my neighboring diners had complained about the speed of service and had been given free meals, even though the service had been satisfactory, I thought “well if they can do it why can't I?”, so I also complained and got free meals (Female, age 37).

Due to the nature of the service, incidences of this description most commonly occurred within the hospitality industry. In this regard, these findings offer support for social learning theory (Bandura, 1971), which stipulates that rewards and punishments for engaging in particular behaviors are learned and reinforced through observing the actions of others (Jones, 2001). Social learning theory has been applied widely in the field of criminology, and consumer and employee deviance (see Terry and Steffensmeier, 1988; Fullerton and Punj, 1993; Babin and Griffin, 1995; O'Leary-Kelly *et al.*, 1996). Further, learning theories have also been employed in the study of CCB. For example, in examining conventional complaints, Andreassen (1988) suggests that complaining behaviors are a learned response to dissatisfaction. In addition, Fornell and Westbrook (1979) suggest that assertive complaint styles are learned behaviors. Therefore, implying that illegitimate complaint styles may also be conditioned behaviors.

Professional complainers

The fourth and final form of illegitimate complainants that emerged, was that of the “professional complainer”. This category refers to customers who purposely, on a regular basis, seek out opportunities in which they can voice feigned service failures, and thus fabricate complaints. Such complaints are generally articulated for both the

perpetrator's own consumption and personal benefit. Informants who reported to complaining in a professional manner tended to be female and below the average age of that of the sample. Thus, they were predominantly under 31 years old. This group of illegitimate complainers differs from opportunists in that professional complainers proactively search for opportunities to complain, while opportunist complainers react to opportunities that they are confronted with. Furthermore, professional complainers frequently preplan their complaints in advance, often judging such behaviors as acceptable and as part of their regular consumption activities. For example:

I illegitimately complain all of the time, I look out for vulnerable firms, it's a good way to stop the bank manager getting heavy with me, it keeps my expenditure down (Female, age 32).

Making complaints is kind of a hobby to me, I have done allsorts over the years, I think that people don't complain enough, these big companies make so much money from customers, a few lies here and there aren't going to make a difference to their profits are they? (Female, age 29).

A small number of studies identify the existence of illegitimate complainers in a professional capacity. For example, Harris and Reynolds (forthcoming) note the actuality of professional complainers within their study of jaycustomer behaviors. In addition, Landon (1977) stresses that professional complainers may profit from such actions. Unsurprisingly, very few of the respondents admitted to conducting themselves in the manner of a professional complainer. Yet, it is imperative to note that self censorship incentives may be a primary motivation for withholding of such details and reporting socially desirable responses (for further studies which identify this bias see Young, 1988; Paulhus and Reid, 1991; Mick, 1996).

The motives of illegitimate customer complaints

In addition to the above forms of illegitimate customer complainants, analysis of the data also consistently revealed six main motives for engaging in such behaviors. Customers' motivations for articulating an illegitimate complaint may be plotted on a continuum ranging from financial, to ego, to disruptive motives. The majority respondents reported having experienced a variety of different motives for distinct events wherein they had voiced an illegitimate complaint. This is, that different complaint events may have been driven by differing motives. Subsequently, the most widely experienced motive was that of customers wanting to return a used good (fraudulent returner). In contrast, the least frequently cited motive referred to disruptive gains. Each of the six will motives will now be discussed in turn.

Freeloaders

The first driver compelling fraudulent customer complaints alludes to customers who, motivated solely by monetary gain, attempt to obtain free goods and services without experiencing any genuine dissatisfactory incidences. Such financial rewards may be sought in the form of discounts, or in attempting to acquire products and services in their entirety, without payment. Indeed, female informants in particular admitted to partaking in freeloading activities. Perhaps, somewhat surprising, however, was the finding that the majority of perpetrators citing this motivation were not financially challenged. While, all incidences within this category are motivated by financial gain, behaviors differed in two main ways. First, depicts incidences which are

motivated by monetary “need” (i.e. the customer did not have enough money with them to make a purchase). Second, such unjust complaints may be motivated by financial “greed”. Here, perpetrators had been carrying sufficient funds with them at the time of the complaint, to pay for the goods or services. Two separate customers describe:

I went out for a meal with a friend knowing that I had no money to pay for the food, so I complained that the order was wrong (which it wasn't) and that I had had to wait too long for my food (we hadn't), so I refused to pay for the food, I didn't pay a penny! (Female, age 23).

I enjoy complaining to get goods for free, even though I can more than afford them, it means that I can spend my cash on other things, I get discounted holidays, clothes and cosmetics by making up problems and complaining (Female, age 30).

In this regard, these findings are consistent with existing research within the customer theft literature. In particular, Bernstein (1985) forwards “need and greed” as one class of motivations which drive shoplifting behaviors. Moreover, Bernstein (2000) stresses that customer theft is typically motivated by greed as opposed to need. Furthermore, the findings provide support for those of Fullerton *et al.* (1996) who emphasize that high income attainment is negatively correlated to the level of one's ethical righteousness. In addition, with specific reference to illegitimate complaining, in their study of customer complaints from managers' perspectives, Rensik and Harmon (1983) found the most common motivation of illegitimate customer complaints was the desire by the customer to get something for nothing.

The findings also reveal evidence which suggests that new mediums of complaining channels, such as those offered by the internet and e-mailing technologies, may be inadvertently creating new avenues for dysfunctional customer complaints to occur. For example:

I write fake complaints to companies by e-mail, it's so easy, you just claim that you have bought one of their products or services and that you have a problem with it, they rarely ever ask for proof of purchase over the net, I have gotten loads of vouchers doing this, there is no face-to-face contact so you don't feel guilty ... it definitely gives me more nerve (Male, age 27).

Support for this finding may be drawn from the parallel literature which details “authentic” e-complaining activities by customers. For example, Harrison-Walker (2001) notes that customers are increasingly using the internet as a channel to register complaints against businesses.

Fraudulent returners

The term “fraudulent returners” applies to customers who conventionally purchase and use goods, and subsequently attempt to return them, fraudulently, for reimbursement at a later date. Therefore, intentionally creating product failures. Such behaviors may be pre-planned in advance of making a purchase (wherein the customer will purchase an item, knowing that they are going to use the merchandise and return it at a later date). Alternatively, the decision to return a product deceitfully may be determined after the product has been conventionally acquired. Typically, behaviors classified within this category commonly involved customers making faultless products defective in order to be able to return them according to consumer statutory rights. For example:

I bought a new pair of shoes, I wore them for a few days but I had bought the wrong size, they were far too small, so I knocked the heel off with a hammer and took them back to the shop to complain. I got a full refund and an apology! (Female, age 31).

Moreover, many examples were alarmingly inventive, depicting accounts of customers going to extraordinary

lengths in order to return goods fraudulently. One customer describes:

I bought a pair of trousers, after wearing them for a few days I decided that they didn't fit nicely, I have a friend who works in retail so I used her store's machine to refasten the label to the trousers so that it looked as though they hadn't ever been worn. I told the assistant that I didn't like the color and returned them without any problem. As far as the sales assistant was concerned they hadn't even been taken out of the bag whereas I had actually worn them constantly for two days! (Female, age 23).

However, an additional variety of fraudulent returner entails the behaviors of customers' who purchase items from discounted, low priced stores, and subsequently return the same purchases to premium priced establishments in order to obtain a refund at the higher price. Therefore, such activities are profitable to the consumer. One customer details:

I purposely bought a jumper in a discount clothes store knowing that I was going to try to return it to the original store for a full refund, I made \$20, they didn't even question me (Male, age 36).

Customer complaints entailing a fraudulent return were the most common illegitimate customer complaining behavior uncovered within the present study, with the majority of respondents declaring that they had partaken in such activities. Furthermore, the most common justification for undertaking such behaviors was the presence of lenient return policies.

These findings are consistent with a number of earlier studies which have examined the phenomenon of abnormal buy-returns (e.g. Siegel, 1993; Schmidt *et al.*, 1999). Furthermore, as discussed within the account of “opportunistic” complainers (see above), the present findings complement those of Piron and Young (2000) and Harris and Reynolds (forthcoming), in identifying that relaxed store return policies may be unintentionally encouraging customers to fabricate unfounded complaints. Yet, in contrast to extant research which finds either no differences between the sexes (Piron and Young, 2000) or that males (Jolson, 1974) are more likely to engage in deshopping behaviors, the present study finds that females are more likely to engage in such activities. However, the present study found incidences of fraudulent returner motivated activities to be spread equally across age and income groups.

Fault transferors

Despite being the second most commonly cited motivation for fraudulent customer complaints, the category of “fault transferors” represents a previously unidentified refer of illegitimate complaining behaviors. Fault transferors refers to customers who by means of voicing illegitimate complaints, attempt to evade responsibility for their own errors, through dishonestly claiming that it is the firm who is at fault. Reported incidences of this nature were uncovered to be predominantly perpetrated by informants below the age of 31. However, no differences between the sexes were evident within this category. Comparable to the above discussed categories of “freeloaders” and “fraudulent returners” incidences, fault transferor activities frequently depict episodes in which customers fabricate complaints as a means of obligating firms to take financial responsibility for mistakes which the customer has personally made. However, while many fault transferor anecdotes may be similar to those classified within previously described categories, the motive of complaints voiced by fault transferors is distinct in that they refuse to publicly accept liability for their own actions. One customer describes:

I bought a trouser suit, I got the trousers dirty and then realized that the suit was dry clean only, I couldn't "honestly" take them back as I had worn it, but I didn't want a hefty dry cleaning bill, so I unpicked the hem and took them back, complaining that they were faulty, they gave me a refund for the whole suit (Female, age 30).

However, in contrast to freeloaders and fraudulent returners, in which customers articulate fabricated complaints for various monetary gains, fault transfer activities also encompasses behaviors wherein customers wish for firms to take responsibility for their errors by means of replacing the often "damaged" product. For example:

I bought a bonsai tree from a garden centre and gave it too much fertilizer so it died. I took it back to the shop and complained that they had sold me a diseased plant and so they gave me a new one (Female, age 29).

In this regard, fraudulent returners may be likened to a vindictive form of deviant customer behavior labeled "blame shifters" (Harris and Reynolds, forthcoming). "Blame shifters" depict the actions of customers who attempt to avoid accountability for their own misdeeds by means of blaming members of organizational personnel. Furthermore, such behaviors may be contrasted with research within the service recovery and customer dis/satisfaction and complaining field, which stipulates that if customers' attribute blame for product or service failures to external forces, such as the organization (as opposed to personal attributions), they are more likely to become dissatisfied and complain (Krishnan and Valle, 1979; Day, 1980; Richins, 1983). In particular, Hocutt *et al.* (1997) suggest that if the service failure is recognized by the customer as their own fault, then they will not complain. However, by contrast the present study uncovers evidence of customers voicing complaints, knowing that they themselves are the cause of a service or product failure.

Solitary ego gains

Distinct from the above three drivers of unjustified customer complaints which focus in some way on financial gain, "solitary ego gains" refers to customers who voice illegitimate complaints, whilst alone, in order to enhance their own feelings of self-worth and indeed, ego. All complaints voiced within this category are done so in a solitary capacity, that is no peers, family members, or persons with who they are familiar with are present at the time of the complaint. Typically, such dysfunctional complaints were voiced in order to give the perpetrator of the complaint an increased feeling of self-worth. For example:

I think that some of these shop assistants need to be put in their place, they think they are something really special, well, I as the customer am above them on the hierarchy of things, I often make complaints just to let them know that, it sure makes me feel a lot better about myself in doing so (Male, age 33).

This finding is complementary to a number of existing studies which identify egocentric behaviors driven as forms of what have been labeled dysfunctional or deviant customer behaviors (e.g. Withiam, 1998; Harris and Reynolds, forthcoming).

Furthermore, data analysis revealed a number of incidences wherein customers had articulated an illegitimate complaint as a method of "mood repair". This refers to episodes in which customers fraudulently complained solely to improve their present mood state. One customer describes:

Some days if I'm feeling really grumpy or down on the world then I will go out and make up a problem, and complain, in order to make myself feel better in the process, it feels nice to have their full attention on you for those few minutes (Female, age 34).

This finding is generally consistent with those of a number of studies which examine the behaviors of compulsive and addictive consumption by consumers. For example, Faber and Christenson (1996) suggest that compulsive consumers may use the act of consumption as a means to regulate negative mood states. Further support for this relationship may be found within the studies of O'Guinn and Faber (1989) and Elliott (1994). In addition, persons of an unmarried status and those earning lower levels of income were noted to more commonly report having committed an act of illegitimate complaining behavior motivated by solitary ego gains.

Peer-induced esteem seekers

The penultimate driver of illegitimate complaining behaviors uncovered within the present study is labeled "peer-induced esteem seekers". This category contrasts to the above group of complainants who are motivated by solitary ego gains. Rather, peer-induced ego seekers are driven by the anticipated positive perceptions that observing customers (typically peers or family members) will offer in the event of the customer making a dishonest complaint. That is, the perpetrators of such acts will only perceive there to be benefits of voicing fraudulent complaints, if they have an audience. Incidences within this category were predominantly performed by males and those below the age of 42. Furthermore, alcohol was reported to have been consumed within a large quantity of recorded episodes. Moreover, incidences categorized within this group can commonly be divided into two main classifications. The first group consists of incidences that occurred in the presence of peers (typically males) of the same sex. For example:

I went to a pub with my mates, we were taking it in turns to try it on with the barmaid, claiming that our beers were flat and that our peanuts were too salty, really silly things, we were just having a laugh really, trying to get one over on each other, I'm not sure she saw it that way though (Male, age 29).

It's a laugh to wind up waiters and waitresses by making a few unreal complaints when you are on a night out with the boys, it gets the night going (Male, age 26).

The second main category of peer-induced esteem seekers comprised of males attempting to boost their self-worth in the eyes of their observers, who were typically female. One male described:

I took this girl out for dinner, she was bitching about what a menial job waitressing was, so as an attempt to impress her I told her to watch me as I forged a complaint about food being cold, I told her that I was going to try and annoy the staff. However I think I read her completely wrong, she seemed quite disgusted and we never saw each other again! (Male, age 30).

These findings are complementary to a plethora of earlier research detailing the influence of peers on customer misbehaviors within a wide range of contexts. These include, amongst others; shoplifting (Klemke, 1982; Cox *et al.*, 1993), vandalism (Fisher and Baron, 1982; Coffield, 1991), illicit consumption (Bearden *et al.*, 1994; Rose *et al.*, 2001), and violence (Farrugia, 2002). Moreover, the influence of peers has also been linked to a number of deviant behaviors perpetrated by employees (e.g. Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly, 1998; Andersson and Pearson, 1999). Furthermore, Leary *et al.* (1997) note that individuals may behave in an egotistical manner when they perceive that doing so will result in interpersonal benefits. This finding also complements studies that examine customer-to-customer relationships, forwarding that customers' intentional and

unintentional behaviors impact on the level of satisfaction experienced and subsequent behaviors of fellow customers within the exchange setting (Martin, 1996; Nicholls, 2003; Harris and Baron, 2004).

Disruptive gains

The final driver of illegitimate customer complaints which consistently emerged during data analysis is termed “disruptive gains”. Incidences classified within this category depict events wherein customers “have expressed an insincere complaint, solely in order to cause some form of disruption, and ultimately service failure. Furthermore, the perpetrators of such incidences were found to typically be female. Despite disruptive gains accounting for a very small amount of total illegitimate complaint incidences classified within the present study, depictions of such events appeared to be alarmingly largely unreasonable and nonsensical in nature. For example:

I like going into shops and just complaining for the sake of it when there is no real problem, I like to cause a bit of disruption, keep the lazy ones on their toes, its amazing how much havoc one person can cause (Female, age 48).

Furthermore, a subcategory of complainants who complain for the sake of disruption was uncovered within this class during coding procedures. This group represents customers who rationalize fabricated complaints on the basis that they are vengeful towards either an individual or organizational entity in nature. While, the “primary” motive for such vindictive behaviors might be generally regarded as “legitimate” (since the customer perceived a genuine fault to the service or product received). The driving purpose ultimately instigating the illegitimate complaint, may fundamentally be regarded as illegitimate, in that the “secondary” motive is solely cause some degree of disruption to the “victim”. Two separate customers describe:

I worked in a store and I hated my boss, I mean I really despised the guy, so to get him back, I persuaded one of my friends to come in a kick up a really big fuss with the manager. He did, and it was fantastic, he was shouting and screaming about something false, the manager couldn't control him at all, he looked really embarrassed and had to call security, ha, that taught him! (Female, age 22).

I took a real dislike to a restaurant manager, I found him really cocky, so I wrote a letter to the restaurant's head office saying that the place had been really filthy and unhygienic and that I had seen the manager picking his nose and I was going I report them to the health authorities, hopefully he would have been taught a lesson by head office (Male, age 30).

Insights may be drawn to elucidate the above findings from a number of diverse literatures. First, with regards to illegitimate complaints which appear to be predominantly illogical in nature a number of researchers recognize that mental illness and personality disorders may be a contributory factor to a variety of deviant behaviors (e.g. Farrugia, 2002; Foss, 2002). Second, retaliatory and revengeful motives have also been identified as drivers of dysfunctional behaviors by customers (e.g. Bernstein, 1985; Aron, 2001; Harris and Reynolds, 2003).

Implications and conclusions

This study aims to provide insights that explore and describe the motivations, activities, and forms of “illegitimate” complaints. Analysis of interviews with 104 customers revealed four main forms of illegitimate complaining and six

main motivations for such behavior. The remainder of this paper is dedicated to the implications of these findings for theory, practice, and public policy.

While a range of studies have acknowledged the existence of illegitimate complaining behavior (for example, Day *et al.*, 1981; Goodwin and Spiggle, 1989; Boote, 1998; Prim and Pras, 1999), empirical research into such activities have been extremely limited (see Harris and Reynolds, forthcoming; Kowalski, 1996). In this regard, a key contribution of this study is that it constitutes the first systematic attempt to explore and describe illegitimate customer complaining behavior, therefore highlighting the commonality of incidences wherein perceived service failure is in reality, not genuine service failure. The findings suggest that a raft of illegitimate CCBs exist on a continuum of frequency that range from “one-off” episodes to repeated occurrences. Similarly, motives for such behavior include financial, ego, and disruptive motivations. Although each form of and motive for illegitimate complaining generate individual connotations, broad implications are also derived from these findings. That is, consistent with Fullerton and Punj (1993), these findings suggest that illegitimate complaining is not “irrational”, “abnormal”, or even “unusual”. While such activities may be dysfunctional from an organizational perspective or morally questionable from a societal perspective, for many consumers such, often illegal, activities are perfectly rational and normalized to the extent that such acts occur without significant dissonance. In this regard, the current study suggests that just as theorists have acknowledged that some employees (as constituent parts of society) act in an aberrant fashion (see Crino, 1994; Harris and Ogbonna, 2002), a greater recognition is needed that customers also reflect society and sometimes act in deviant ways (see Harris and Reynolds, 2003).

Second, the findings of the current study highlight a need to reevaluate existing insights and theories into complaining behaviors in the light of findings regarding illegitimate motives for customer complaining. For example, an abundance of theories and empirical studies has suggested that complaints ultimately stem from dissatisfaction (Bearden and Teel, 1983; Woodruff *et al.*, 1983; Alickie *et al.*, 1992; Prim and Pras, 1999). However, the current study suggests that a faction of declared service failures and illegitimate complaints are not necessarily linked to dissatisfaction regarding either products or services. This implies that for a more complete understanding of service dynamics, failures and recovery efforts, investigators should incorporate the study of motives and intentions of complainers. In addition, considerable evidence has been forwarded from the service recovery literature which suggests that the encouragement of customer complaining is beneficial and desirable (Bennett, 1997; Heung and Lam, 2003). However, while the benefit of proactively controlling and handling complaints is undeniable, such approaches may well have the unintended consequence of encouraging illegitimate as well as legitimate complaints. Similarly, driven by increased consumerism, organizational responses in the form of increasingly lenient returns policies may also be inadvertently encouraging such behaviors, or at least creating the opportunity for unwarranted complaints.

A third implication of the study is the suggestion that broader societal and environmental changes may have contributed to the extent of illegitimate complaining

behavior uncovered. As suggested at a number of earlier points, organizational responses to increased consumer sovereignty (and arguably militancy) have typically included an array of systems, procedures, and structures that while increasing customer orientation have also increased the opportunity for “unscrupulous” consumers to take advantage. In this regard, it is arguable that society and contemporary culture has changed to the extent that the era of *caveat emptor* (buyer beware) is increasingly becoming one of *caveat venditor* (seller beware). Such cultural changes may be linked to factors of the technological environment that the current study indicates contribute to the frequency of illegitimate complaining. That is, the findings suggest that certain customers are more likely to complain illegitimately via impersonal, non-oral, and non-face-to-face means of complaining (largely e-mail). In this sense, although further research is needed, some evidence is found in support of the view that environmental changes are a key factor in illegitimate complaining behavior.

While the current study uncovered limited evidence of illegitimate complainants complaining in a semi-professional manner as a hobby or past-time, no evidence was uncovered of professional complainers who fabricate complaints as a full-time career. Yet, the above findings suggest that a small faction of customers may perform illegitimate complaining behaviors, in its extremity, as a full-time professional activity. This is to suggest that such customers may construct a full-time career from unjustly complaining to organizations, therefore intentionally creating service or product failures, often selling obtained products for monetary gain. Although some informants described their illegitimate complaining almost as a hobby and others described serial complaining, the failure to uncover evidence of more “professional” illegitimate complaining may attributable to social (or legal) desirability biases. However, theoretical support for the existence of consumers who professionally complain as a means of creating an income, may be drawn from the existing shoplifting literature, which details the behaviors of “professional” shoplifters. For example, as far back as Cameron (1964), customers are described who professionally shoplift as a means of obtaining goods to sell as “boosters” while Bernstein (1985) recognizes “professional shoplifters” who steal for a livelihood.

The uncovering of diverse forms and motives of illegitimate customer complaining behavior revealed within the present study, generates a number of concerns for the creators and implementers of public policies. For example, a number of the incidences disclosed by informants implied that many customers hold, often unreasonably high, expectations of what they anticipate the organization to deliver in terms of protocol customer service and complaint handling standards. This finding echoes those of Denny (1998) and Schmidt *et al.* (1999) in suggesting that the development of a “watchdog” culture in today’s society, brought on by consumerism interest programs, has resulted in increased consumer awareness. Furthermore, this trend has led to a situation wherein many customers hold inflated expectations of organizational standards, and an increased awareness of trade policies, such as return policy conditions and procedures. Therefore, customers are more likely to perceive a service failure to have occurred during an otherwise “functional” service encounter, due to the customer holding exaggerated expectations of service quality. In this regard, public policy

makers might consider implementing customer education programs. In accordance with the findings on “conditioned complainers”, which illustrates that methods of fraudulent complaining are often learned during childhood, it may be beneficial to apply such programs to both adults and children. Furthermore, the commonness of illegitimate complaints highlights that there is a need to amend legislation as a deterrent to such behaviors.

Moreover, a notable issue arising from the findings within the study concerns the implications of illegitimate customer behaviors on practitioners. First, the prevalence and pervasiveness of fraudulent complaint behaviors reported suggests that organizations may be enduring vast financial costs by way of compensating customers for problems and faults for which they are not legally liable. This suggestion is consistent with the findings of Harris and Reynolds (2003), who forward evidence of dysfunctional behavior by customers to be linked to increased direct and indirect organizational costs. The present study also highlights the need for many businesses to reevaluate their complaint and service recovery procedures both in terms of product return policies and staff training schemes. That is, as suggested above, lenient return policies may be inadvertently encouraging customers to fabricate incidences of service or product failure, and thus complain. Therefore, managers may wish to examine such recovery procedures, in order to ensure that they are fair to genuinely dissatisfied consumers, but also attempt to identify those who complain illegitimately. One possible mechanism for achieving this aim would be to record, in detail, all customer complaints. However, this log should be frequently monitored in an attempt to identify and challenge re-offending fraudulent complainers. In addition, the record may be utilized to identify reoccurring problems that potentially may be vulnerable areas or opportunities for fabricated complaints. Moreover, organizations should also be proactive in distinguishing potential failure points with reference to illegitimate complaints.

Second, managers may also wish to impose more responsibility on front-line personnel in the identification and prevention of unjustified customer complaints. Presently, many firms do not hold their employees accountable for the authentication of customer complaints. Rather, concurrent with a plethora of research which suggests that employees should be empowered and given authority to deal with customers’ complaints (see Lewis and Clacher, 2001; Mueller *et al.*, 2003), employees frequently manage customer complaints in an autonomous fashion. This suggests that many employees may knowingly compensate a fraudulent complaint, in order to avoid confrontation with a customer, and in the knowledge they will not suffer any personal repercussions. Therefore, managers may wish to train their front-line personnel in techniques of how to identify and manage suspected illegitimate complainants, making them more accountable for their actions. While the present study has generated a series of implications for theory and practice, the insights gained are tempered by the research design and methods employed. Such limitations provide useful indications of potentially interesting avenues for further study. In particular, five issues appear especially worthy of consideration. First, the current study is constrained by its exploratory design and qualitative methods employed. While theoretical generalizeability is claimed, subsequent research could employ survey methods to improve empirical

generalizeability. Second, although efforts were employed to reduce social desirability bias[1], subsequent studies could adopt different methodologies to explore the extent to which such bias is present (or indeed absent). Third, although insights are provided into the motives for illegitimate complaining, additional research into the drivers, causes, and antecedents of such activity would also be useful. In this regard, researchers could employ an ethnographic approach, particularly in the study of social factors. Fourth, the current study focuses on customers' interpretations of their behavior. Future studies could adopt a more inclusive approach and incorporate insights from employees, managers, and other relevant actors within service encounters. Finally, the focus of the current study is (largely but not exclusively) on face-to-face complaining behavior. Future studies could benefit from exploring the nature and dynamics of such complaining behavior in the diverse mediums of complaints that have been established via new technology (such as e-mail complaints and complaints via company chat-rooms). In these regards, it is hoped that the current study forms the basis for additional research into this understudied topic.

Note

- 1 The emphasis on stressing confidentiality issues stemmed from a concern that the answers of respondents may suffer from social desirability bias. That is, a concern that respondents' answer inaccurately due to conscious or unconscious desires to gain social prestige or appear in a more socially favorable position. Hence, in order to reduce the potential source of bias, extensive confidentiality assurances were offered as a means of building trust and openness between the researcher and informant. Indeed, where possible, the research team adopted the procedures advocated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to develop trustworthiness. Thus, for example, respondents were offered assurances that incidences and examples would remain strictly private, respondents were informed that if they so wished the audio recording of certain parts of the interview could be stopped (although nobody took advantage of this offer), and respondents were encouraged to employ pseudonyms to protect and conceal their identities and locations.

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