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Title

The impact of customer compassion on face-to-face and online complaints

Abstract

Customer complaints play an important role in firm performance as complaints enable service recovery and provide feedback for new product development. This study is among the first to investigate the impact of compassion on customers' face-to-face complaints and online review posting behaviors following a service failure. Using an experimental design, either compassion or neutral emotion was primed. In an ostensibly unrelated task, individuals read a service failure scenario in the restaurant (Study 1) and hotel setting (Study 2). In Study 1, results show that individuals primed with compassion (vs. neutral emotion) were less likely to lodge a direct complaint. In Study 2, results show that participants were equally likely to post a negative online review regardless of the emotion prime. Practitioners might want to consider diversifying their complaining channels to include anonymous survey links to deter compassionate customers from turning to social media to voice their dissatisfaction.

Keywords

Customer complaint; complaint channel; compassion; prosocial emotion; online review

Introduction

"Most unhappy customers are the greatest source of learning" – Bill Gates

"Imagine your customer is your best friend — listen to their concerns, be a shoulder to lean on, and then shift the focus from what went wrong to how you can help make it right." - Rachel Hogue

As noted in the above quotes, marketing practitioners agree that customer complaints play a pivotal role in firm performance. Customer complaints enable service recovery and provide valuable feedback for new product development (Sparks & Browning, 2010; Umashankar, Ward, & Dahl, 2017). Most customers experiencing service failures, however, do not complain directly to the service provider. A recent study shows that only one out of 26 unhappy customers bothered to lodge a complaint (Markidan, 2017). Consequently, many businesses are not aware of dissatisfied customers (Kim, Wang, & Mattila, 2010). This is unfortunate news for hospitality managers as they may miss the chance to regain customer trust through service recovery. Therefore, it is important to understand what inhibits complaining behaviors.

Although not many customers engage in a face-to-face complaint, they may turn to social media to write an online review and share their negative experiences with other consumers (Tripp & Gregoire, 2011). Consumer-generated online reviews are prevalent in the hospitality and tourism industry (Sparks & Bradley, 2017). Approximately 77 percent of travelers stated that they frequently read online reviews before booking a hotel room (TripAdvisor, 2013). Thus, it is important to understand how consumer emotions influence both face-to-face complaints and online complaints. Prior research posits that emotions are an important driver of encounter

satisfaction in the service failure/recovery context (Antonetti, Crisafulli, & Maklan, 2018; Folkes, Koletsky, & Graham, 1987; Min & Kim, 2019; Song & Qu, 2017). Accordingly, anger (Chebat, Davidow, & Codjovi, 2005; Min & Kim, 2019) and positive and negative affect (Westbrook, 1987) are considered as antecedents of complaining behaviors.

However, there is scant research examining how consumers' prosocial emotions discourage complaining behaviors. With a growing interest in corporate social responsibility initiatives, hospitality and tourism firms aim to encourage consumers' prosocial behaviors (Gao & Mattila, 2019). Hence, prosocial emotions are an important and timely topic. This research focuses on compassion, defined as an other-oriented emotion arising from observing others suffering or in distress (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010; Lazarus, 1991). Both compassion and empathy are prosocial emotions. Empathy is a multi-faceted construct encompassing (1) empathic accuracy, (2) emotional contagion, and (3) compassion (Decety & Cowell, 2014). Empathic accuracy is related to *knowing* what others feel via perspective-taking (Zaki, 2014). Emotional contagion is related to *feeling* what others feel via face mimicry (Hess & Fischer, 2013; Wondra & Ellsworth, 2015). Compassion is a motivational state of reducing others' pain and suffering, thereby increasing prosocial behaviors (Goetz et al., 2010).

This study investigates compassion (vs. empathy) with a methodological and theoretical rationale. Although previous research has manipulated empathy via perspective-taking (Davis et al., 2017), the multidimensional nature of empathy makes it harder to manipulate than compassion. Furthermore, previous research shows that empathy can sometimes lead to negative consequences such as emotional burnout and fatigue among clinical professionals (Gleichgerrcht & Decety, 2011). On the contrary, as noted earlier, compassion induces a motivation to engage

in helping behaviors after observing others in need. This key distinction between empathy and compassion is central to this study's theorizing.

This research posits that compassion toward a frontline employee is likely to reduce face-to-face complaints and that this effect arises due to a threat to social harmony (Study 1). This research further demonstrates that compassion does not influence customer complaints in the digital world (Study 2). Specifically, results show that compassion does not reduce consumers' propensity to post negative reviews on social media, as such posts do not directly confront the frontline employee (Tripp & Gregoire, 2011; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). In both studies, an experimental design is used with a well-established compassion prime task to establish causal inferences (Oveis, Horberg, & Keltner, 2010). Moreover, a different industry setting (a casual restaurant in Study 1 and a mid-scale hotel in Study 2) is adopted to show the robustness of our findings.

This research contributes to the hospitality literature in the following ways. Consumers' prosocial emotions are sparsely examined in the hospitality literature, and this study advances our understanding of downstream consequences of compassion in terms of customer complaining behaviors in offline and online environments. As compared to the abundant literature examining *drivers* of customer complaints (e.g., Chebat et al., 2005; Choi & Mattila, 2008; Dunn & Dahl, 2012; Fan, Mattila, & Zhao, 2015; Folkes et al., 1987; Richins, 1983; Singh & Wilkes, 1996), there is scant research investigating *inhibitors* of complaining behaviors (see also Ro, 2015). Understanding a hidrance to customer complaining has been exploratory (e.g., Voorhees, Brady, & Horowitz, 2006). Thus, this study adds to this stream of literature by demonstrating that consumers' compassion toward frontline employees can reduce face-to-face

complaints. This study further examines the differential effect of compassion on complaining behaviors across online and offline channels. Prior research indicates that consumers' choice of complaint channels may involve different motivations and personalities (Berry et al., 2018; Lee & Cude, 2012; Mattila & Wirtz, 2004; Min & Kim, 2019; Robertson, 2012). This study demonstrates that compassion toward frontline employees may reduce face-to-face complaints, while such an effect is not observed in an online setting.

Lastly, findings of this study advance hospitality managers' understanding of customer complaining behaviors. The high touch nature of the hospitality industry is prone to induce compassion toward frontline employees. Compassionate customers may not complain directly to frontline employees, especially when the employee seems overwhelmed during peak hours or has to deal with overly demanding customers. Hospitality managers might want to provide alternative channels for customer complaints such as follow-up survey links. As anonymous surveys do not involve a threat to social harmony with frontline employees, customers compassionate toward the frontline employee may be more prone to express their dissatisfaction than face-to-face complaints.

Literature review

What is compassion?

Compassion can be defined as an other-focused emotion that arises when an individual observes others in need or undeserved suffering (Lupoli, Jampol, & Oveis, 2017). This suffering includes emotional pain as well as physical pain. Compassion motivates an individual to alleviate others' suffering, thereby taking an action to help them (Lupoli et al., 2017). For instance, Lupoli et al. (2017) show that individuals with higher levels of compassion are more likely to tell a prosocial lie because they want to prevent harming others' feelings. Lies involving the intention of benefiting others in any form are regarded as prosocial lies (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015). As such, compassionate individuals are likely to inflate their evaluations of the other person's poorly written essay (Lupoli et al., 2017). In a similar vein, when hearing news about children being abused in coffee plantations in some developing countries, compassionate individuals may feel bad for such children and find ways of helping them in the form of donations or volunteering.

Prior research documents that the downstream consequences of compassion can be costly (DeSteno, 2015). For example, when participants primed with compassion see a confederate receiving electric shocks, they tend to help the person even when escaping from the situation is a viable option (Bierhoff & Rohmann, 2004). In the context of service encounters, customers may feel compassionate toward frontline employees under stress during peak hours. Interactions between frontline employees and the focal customer frequently occur in high-touch industries such as hospitality and tourism (Koc, 2019). As frontline employees are readily visible to the focal customer, the focal customer may feel bad when they look busy or stressed out. In short, compassionate customers are other-focused, and this focus can be directed toward frontline

employees. With such altruistic and prosocial characteristics, compassionate individuals are portrayed as warm, caring, and supportive (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005).

The influence of compassion on face-to-face and online complaints

This research suggests that the prosocial and altruistic nature of compassion is likely to reduce face-to-face complaints following a service failure. Fornell and Westbrook (1979, p. 105) define complaining as "a means of making one's feelings known when disappointment with a product/service arises." In a similar vein, Kowalski (1996, p. 180) define complaining as "an expression of dissatisfaction to vent emotions or achieve intrapsychic goals, interpersonal goals, or both." Drawing from the social exchange/equity theory, a service encounter can be viewed as an exchange between a customer and a service provider. From the customer's perspective, a service failure can be seen as disadvantageous inequity, thereby increasing his/her anger (McCollough, Berry, & Yadav, 2000; Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999). To regain equity, customers may directly complain to the service provider with high expectations for problem resolution (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekaran, 1998). When individuals are motivated by their self-interests, they tend to evaluate perceived fairness of the exchange based on the maximization of their own needs (Skitka & Wisneski, 2012). That is, customers expect the service provider to correct the failure and provide some form of compensation.

Lerner (1975) posits that when individuals are motivated to maintain social harmony, they tend to downplay their self-interests. Prior research demonstrates that compassion directs people's focus away from their own needs and goals (Oveis et al., 2010). Thus, compassion may lead customers to focus less on their own needs (i.e., regaining equity and expressing anger) and turn their attention to the frontline employee's well-being. Prior research indicates that customer

complaints typically have an adverse impact on the frontline employee in the form of heightened negative emotions (Mittal, Huppertz, & Khare, 2008). For example, when the frontline employee is overwhelmed by the customer flow during peak hours, lodging a face-to-face complaint about a dissatisfying experience may induce emotional distress from the employee. In a similar vein, customers' expressions of negative emotions and verbal aggressions tend to decrease frontline employees' working memory and job-related performances such as a recall of customer requests (Rafaeli et al., 2012). To avoid such negative consequences, customers with high levels of compassion might be cautious about engaging in face-to-face complaints following a service failure.

Conversely, this study proposes that compassion toward frontline employees is not likely to influence customers' online complaining behaviors. This proposition relies on the distinction between online and offline environments in terms of the salience of frontline employees. The role of frontline employees is crucial in service encounters, while the presence of frontline employees is less salient in online platforms. Following a service failure, customers express their disappointment and anger through face-to-face complaints (Fornell & Westbrook, 1979; Kowalski, 1996; Singh, 1988). When such negative emotions are directed toward frontline employees, the employees' emotional distress may be heightened and their job performance may be negatively affected (Mittal et al., 2008; Rafaeli et al., 2012).

Contrary to face-to-face complaints in offline environments, consumers tend to perceive that online complaints are relatively easy and convenient to make (Dunn & Dahl, 2012). Online complaints can be made on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) and online review websites (e.g., Yelp). Such media can provide an open forum where opinions can be anonymously shared,

thus enabling customers to voice their opinions readily or to vent their emotions (Berry et al., 2002; Sparks & Browning, 2010; Suler, 2004; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Prior research shows that one of the most salient motives for online complaints is to vent negative emotions (Hu & Kim, 2018; Loo, Boo, & Khoo-Lattimore, 2013; Mattila & Wirtz, 2004). That it, complaints are not as private and directed toward a specific frontline employee, thereby decreasing embarrassment or social confrontation (Dunn & Dahl, 2012; Min & Kim, 2019).

Compassionate customers may perceive that venting negative emotions directly toward frontline employees may cause emotional distress, and therefore, they are reluctant to lodge a face-to-face complaint. Such perceptions stem from the nature of face-to-face complaints, which is private and geared towards a particular employee. On the contrary, online reviews are public with no mention about a particular employee (Tripp & Gregoire, 2011; Sparks & Browning, 2010; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Sparks and Browning (2010) posit that customers who are often reluctant to complain directly to the firm might be prone to express their opinions in cyberspace. In the online environment, a threat to social harmony with the frontline employee is rare, and thus, online reviews are not likely to result in emotional distress among frontline employees. Therefore, this research suggests that compassion toward the frontline employee is not likely to influence customers' online complaining behaviors and their online ratings following a dissatisfying service experience. Taken together, this research proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Customers' likelihood of lodging *face-to-face complaints* following a service failure will be lower in the compassion (vs. neutral emotion) condition.

Hypothesis 2. Customers' propensity to post *online reviews and online ratings* on social media following a service failure will not be different across the compassion and the neutral emotion condition.

Hypothesis 1 is tested in Study 1, and Hypothesis 2 is tested in Study 2.

Alternative accounts

It is reasonable to argue that compassion might arise along with feelings of shame, fear, and guilt (Lupoli et al., 2017). Feelings of shame and fear tend to induce an avoidance (vs. approach) motivation (Schmader & Lickel, 2006), thereby decreasing face-to-face complaint intention. To rule out this alternative account, negative affect was captured in Study 1. Positive affect was also measured in Study 1. Otherwise, participants in the neutral emotion condition might suspect the purpose of the study (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000). Severity of a service failure was measured in both Study 1 and Study 2 to isolate its effect on complaint intention. Previous research shows that failure severity is positively related to complaining behaviors (McQuilken & Robertson, 2011). The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of compassion (vs. neutral emotion) on complaint intention, holding failure severity constant, thereby contributing to the customer complaining literature.

Study 1. The impact of compassion on face-to-face complaints

Method

Design and sampling

This study adopted a single-factor, between-subjects design (emotion prime: compassion vs. neutral emotion). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions. With convenience sampling, participants (n = 112) were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is a crowd-sourced online participant pool, and previous research shows that data from MTurk tend to exhibit demographic diversity (Buhrmester, Talaifar, & Gosling, 2018; Mason & Suri, 2012). MTurk is widely used to conduct consumer surveys and experiments, as the data tend to meet or exceed the psychometric standards set by the data from other sources (e.g., undergraduate samples) (Buhrmester et al., 2018; Paolacci et al., 2010). To ensure data quality, we prescreened participants with the following criteria: (1) an approval rate equal to or higher than 98% and (2) 500 or more previous attempts in completing tasks on MTurk (e.g., Peer, Vosgerau, and Acquisti 2014). On average, participants spent 10.87 minutes on the survey.

Procedures and materials

Manipulating compassion within a service failure context may bring about reactive responses from participants and/or hypotheses guessing, which could threaten the validity of findings (e.g., Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). As such, participants were instructed to complete two ostensibly unrelated tasks pooled out of convenience: "A Study on Visual Perception and Memory" (Appendix A) and "A Restaurant Study" (Appendix B). First, in the "Visual Perception and Memory Study," participants completed either a neutral emotion or compassion

prime task. This emotion prime task was adapted from Lupoli et al. (2017). In the compassion condition, participants viewed five photographs depicting people with helplessness and vulnerability (Oveis et al., 2010), followed by a validated short film induction of compassion about child malnutrition and starvation (Côté et al., 2011). Such photographs and the video are designed to elicit an other-focused mindset that subsequently influences complaining behaviors in a hypothetical restaurant scenario. Meanwhile, participants in the neutral emotion condition viewed five photographs eliciting neutral emotions from the International Affective Picture System (IAPS; Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 1999), followed by a short clip depicting two men talking in a courtroom in 'All the President's Men.' Prior research shows that such a clip elicits a neutral emotional state (Hewig et al., 2005). This manipulation was pretested (n = 61). As a result, the emotion induction was successful: participants in the compassion condition exhibited higher levels of compassion (M = 3.82) than their counterparts in the neutral emotion condition (M = 1.61 on a 5-point scale) (t (59) = 7.74, p < .01).

In an ostensibly unrelated study ("Restaurant Study"), participants were asked to imagine themselves in a service failure scenario in a casual, sit-down restaurant. Participants encountered a long wait and an over-cooked steak. The scenario method was employed for several reasons. First, this method can minimize memory bias and rationalization tendencies that otherwise would occur in recall-based survey designs (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Smith et al., 1999). Intentionally imposing service failures in a field setting would also be problematic (e.g., Kim & Jang, 2015). Furthermore, the scenario method can reduce problems associated with individual differences in response bias (Wirtz & Mattila, 2004). More importantly, with high ratings of realism (reported in the results section), the scenario method ensures ecological validity in the context of service encounters (Bateson & Hui, 1992). In the scenario, servers and bussers were rushing through the

dining tables during peak hours. Such a description was designed to direct participants' focus to frontline employees. With an other-focused mindset, this study predicts that participants in the compassion (vs. neutral emotion) condition are motivated to reduce the service employees' distress by refraining from lodging face-to-face complaints. After reading the scenario, participants were asked a battery of questions and probed for suspicion (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000). Nobody raised any suspicion or was able to guess our hypotheses.

Measures

After viewing the slides and the video clip, participants were exposed to a five-point emotions scale (1 = not at all, 5 = extremely). Three items captured compassion (α = .91; compassionate, sympathetic, and moved; Oveis et al., 2010) while ten items measured positive and negative affect (i.e., interested, excited, irritated, distressed, upset, guilty, ashamed, scared, alert, and afraid from PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)[1]. The order of these emotion items was counterbalanced. Negative affect was measured to rule out an alternative account that the compassion prime task could also induce negative affect (e.g., fear), thereby reducing face-to-face complaints. Lastly, to bolster the cover story, participants were asked to indicate the most memorable picture or scene and why they picked that particular one.

After their exposure to the service failure scenario, participants were asked to indicate their complaint intention using three items (α = .96; "If I were in this scenario, I would be likely to/ be inclined to/ definitely complain about the service failure"; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; Singh, 1988). Furthermore, severity of the service failure (1 item; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much;

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[1] The original PANAS includes 20 emotion measures; however, it would be taxing for participants to answer all 20 emotions so ten emotions relevant to our priming task were selected.

Smith et al., 1999), scenario realism ($r = .78$, $p < .01$; e.g., "The scenario was realistic"; 2 items; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; Wu, Hanks, & Mattila, 2015), and demographic questions such as gender, age, household income, education, and dining frequency were measured. Lastly, participants' general propensity to complain ($\alpha = .82$; e.g., "In general, I am more likely to complain about poor service than most people I know"; 3 items; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; Blodgett, Hill, & Tax, 1997) was measured.

Results

Demographics

Participants' age ranged from 21 to 70 (Mean = 36.22 SD = 11.73). Fifty-five percent were male, 46 percent had a college degree, and 48 percent had an annual household income of $20,000 to $59,999. Forty-five percent of the participants dine out approximately once or a few times a week. The demographic profile of participants is presented in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 around here]

Manipulation checks

Participants in the compassion condition (M = 3.70) exhibited higher levels of compassion than their counterparts in the neutral emotion condition (M = 1.56, t (110) = 12.44, p < .01). Therefore, our emotion prime was successful.

Alternative accounts

Ten affect measures followed the two prime tasks and found that there was no difference in the following three emotions: interested ($M_{compassion}$ = 2.88, $M_{neutral}$ = 3.31; p > .05), scared ($M_{compassion}$ = 1.70, $M_{neutral}$ = 1.41; p > .1), irritated ($M_{compassion}$ = 1.84, $M_{neutral}$ = 1.52; p > .1), afraid ($M_{compassion}$ = 1.67, $M_{neutral}$ = 1.33; p > .05), and alert ($M_{compassion}$ = 3.54, $M_{neutral}$ = 3.48; p > .1). The means of the following four negative affect items were higher in the compassion (vs. neutral) condition: distressed ($M_{compassion}$ = 3.00, $M_{neutral}$ = 1.31; p < .01), upset ($M_{compassion}$ = 3.25, $M_{neutral}$ = 1.31; p < .01), guilty ($M_{compassion}$ = 2.26, $M_{neutral}$ = 1.35; p < .01), and ashamed ($M_{compassion}$ = 2.11, $M_{neutral}$ = 1.30; p < .01). However, the means of such negative affect in the compassion condition were either at a mid-point or lower, indicating that negative affect was not

activated in the compassion condition. Furthermore, none of these negative affect items were correlated with complaining intention (correlation coefficients ranged from -0.08 to .01, p-values ranged from .38 to .95).

As for the service failure scenario, participants perceived the scenario as highly realistic (M = 6.19, SD = .87). Severity of the service failure did not differ across the compassion (M = 3.98) and the neutral emotion condition (M = 4.46; t (109) = 1.63, p > .1).

Hypotheses testing

To test Hypothesis 1, an independent samples t-test was run on complaint intention. Participants in the compassion condition exhibited lower levels of complaint intention (M = 4.03) than their counterparts in the neutral emotion condition (M = 5.01, t (109) = 2.92, p < .01). The authors also ran a one-way ANCOVA on face-to-face complaining intention with participants' general tendency to complain as a covariate. The overall model was significant (F (2, 108) = 16.45, p < .01), and participants' general tendency to complain was a significant covariate (F (1, 108) = 22.36, p < .01). More importantly, the effect of emotion prime (compassion vs. neutral emotion) on complaint intention remained significant (F (1, 108) = 8.05, p < .01).

Two attention check questions (e.g., "choose disagree for quality purposes") were embedded in the survey. All participants answered the attention check questions correctly except for one participant. However, removing his/her response did not significantly change our findings (t (108) = 2.98, p < .05). In sum, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Discussion

From Study 1, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Specifically, participants primed with compassion (vs. neutral emotion) were less likely to complain about a service failure. This finding is congruent with prior research demonstrating that prosocial emotions, including compassion, shift people's focus away from their own needs and emotions (Oveis et al., 2010). Customers' expressions of anger and dissatisfaction may lead to employee distress (Mittal et al., 2008), and as such, compassion is likely to decrease face-to-face complaints. As alternative accounts, negative affect (e.g., distressed, upset, ashamed) and severity of the service failure were captured. Severity of the service failure was not different across the compassion and the neutral emotion condition ($p > .1$) and none of the negative affect measures was significantly related to complaint intention ($ps > .1$). The next study is conducted to test Hypothesis 2. Specifically, Hypothesis 2 proposes that the impact of compassion on complaining intention is minimal in the digital world since customers do not directly confront frontline employees in an online setting (e.g., Tripp & Gregoire, 2011; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Understanding consumers' online complaining behaviors is imperative, as negative online reviews can go viral quickly and have a detrimental impact on the company's image and financial performance (Tripp & Gregoire, 2011).

Study 2. The impact of compassion on online review posting

Method

Design and sampling

As in Study 1, a between-subjects design (emotion prime: compassion vs. neutral emotion) was adopted, and participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions. With convenience sampling, participants (n = 134) were recruited via MTurk. They were screened out based on their frequency of hotel stays in the past 12 months. On average, participants spent 10.30 minutes on the survey.

Procedures and materials

Participants were instructed to complete two ostensibly unrelated tasks pooled out of convenience: "A Study on Visual Perception and Memory" and "A Hotel Study." The "Visual Perception and Memory Study" was the same as in Study 1. In the "Hotel Study," participants were asked to imagine themselves in a service failure scenario in a mid-scale hotel (see Appendix C). The hotel description was adapted from Bolton and Mattila (2015), and the service failure scenario was adapted from Smith et al. (1999). In the scenario, participants encountered a long wait and were assigned to an uncleaned room. After reading the scenario, participants were asked a battery of questions and probed for suspicion. Nobody raised any suspicion or was able to guess our hypotheses correctly.

Measures

The procedures and measures for the "Visual Perception and Memory Study" were identical to Study 1. After reading the service failure scenario, participants were asked to indicate

how interested they were in writing a review about their hotel stay on TripAdvisor ($r = .94$, p < .01; 2 items; 1 = not at all interested, 7 = extremely interested; Wu et al., 2016). They were explained that TripAdvisor uses a 5-point scale to capture the overall evaluation of the hotel experience (1 = Terrible, 5 = Excellent). Then, they were asked to rate their stay at the hotel on this particular occasion. As in Study 1, scenario realism ($r = .72$, $p < .01$; 2 items; Wu et al., 2015), demographic information such as gender, age, household income, education, and hotel stay frequency were measured.

COMPASSION AND COMPLAINTS

Results

Demographics

Participants' age ranged from 22 to 77 (Mean =3 7.04, SD = 12.29). Fifty-one percent were male, 51 percent had a college degree, and 53 percent had an annual household income of $20,000 to $59,999. Forty percent of participants indicated that they stay at a hotel 1-2 times per year. Their demographic profile is presented in Table 1.

Manipulation checks

Participants in the compassion condition exhibited higher levels of compassion ($\alpha = .94$; M = 3.89) than their counterparts in the neutral emotion condition (M = 1.73, t (132) = 12.41, *p* < .01), indicating that our emotion prime was successful.

As for the service failure scenario, participants perceived the scenario as highly realistic (M = 6.01, SD = 1.00). Severity of the service failure did not differ across the compassion (M = 4.58) and the neutral emotion condition (M = 4.79; *t* (132) = .85, *p* > .1).

Hypotheses testing

To test Hypothesis 2, an independent samples t-test was run separately on the likelihood of posting a review and on the overall rating. The likelihood of posting a review was not different across the compassion (M = 3.90) and the neutral emotion condition (M = 4.24, *F* (1, 132) = 1.02, *p* > .1). Furthermore, the overall rating did not differ across the compassion (M = 2.78) and the neutral emotion condition (M = 2.64, *F* (1, 132) = .66, *p* > .1).

Two attention check questions (e.g., "choose disagree for quality purposes") were embedded in the survey. Four participants failed to answer the attention check questions

correctly. However, removing their responses did not significantly change our findings (review posting intention: $M_{neutral} = 4.19$, $M_{compassion} = 3.83$, $t\,(128) = 1.04$, $p > .1$; review rating: $M_{neutral} = 2.59$, $M_{compassion} = 2.71$, $t\,(128) = -.74$, $p > .1$). In sum, Hypothesis 2 is supported. A summary of study design and findings from Study 1 and Study 2 is presented in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 around here]

Discussion

From Study 2, Hypothesis 2 is supported. Compassion (vs. neutral emotion) failed to influence participants' online complaining behaviors. Specifically, the likelihood of posting an online review and the review rating did not differ across the two emotion conditions. These findings are based on the premise that, unlike face-to-face complaints, online complaints do not involve a social confrontation with a frontline employee (Tripp & Gregoire, 2011; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). As a result, consumers are prone to engage in online complaining behaviors, regardless of their compassion levels.

General discussion

Theoretical implications

This research adds to the customer complaining literature in several ways. Previous research has examined company-level variables such as the company's attitude toward customer complaints (Homburg & Furst, 2005; Umashankar et al., 2017) and price level (Kim, Lee, & Mattila, 2014) and situational variables such as service failure attributions (Folkes, 1984; Dunn & Dahl, 2012) and tie strength (Mittal et al., 2008; Umashankar et al., 2017). Prior research has also investigated individual-level factors such as consumers' attitude toward complaining (Kim & Boo, 2011), redress-seeking tendency (Chebat et al., 2005), cultural background (e.g., individualism-collectivism and concern for face; Fan et al., 2015, power distance belief; Kim et al., 2014), need for cognition (Mittal et al., 2008), gender (Zhang, Feick, & Mittal, 2014), and impression management (Zhang et al., 2014). In particular, previous research posits that understanding consumer emotions is imperative in the service failure context (Antonetti et al., 2018; Folkes et al., 1987; Min & Kim, 2019; Song & Qu, 2017). Although anger (Chebat et al., 2005; Min & Kim, 2019) and positive-negative affect (Westbrook, 1987) were examined in the customer complaint context, no research has investigated the impact of consumers' prosocial emotions on complaining behaviors. As such, this research fills this important void and advances our understanding of how prosocial emotions – particularly, compassion - influence customers' propensity to lodge complaints across offline and online environments.

To be specific, Westbrook (1987) shows that positive affect, captured with interest and joy, is not related to complaining behaviors and that negative affect, captured with anger, disgust, and contempt, is positively associated with customer complaints. Chebat et al. (2005) and Min

and Kim (2019) build on Westbrook's (1987) work by focusing on anger and establish some boundary conditions (i.e., redress-seeking tendency and consumer power) for the effect of anger on complaining behaviors. Specifically, Min and Kim (2019) posit that power moderates the impact of consumers' anger on intention to engage in face-to-face complaints following a service failure. Individuals low (vs. high) in power are more other-focused, resulting in a motivation to reduce social confrontations with a frontline employee. Hence, low power individuals are not likely to complain to a frontline employee, despite their anger in the presence of a service failure (Min & Kim, 2019). In a similar vein, this research relies on the premise that compassion shifts one's focus toward others (Oveis et al., 2010). Results of this study show that individuals with compassion (vs. neutral emotions) are less likely to engage in face-to-face complaints.

Based on the Rusbult, Zembradt, and Gunn's (1982) framework, Ro (2015) examines two types of noncomplainers – 'loyalty' group and 'neglect' group. The loyalty group is not likely to complain because they would give another chance to the service provider who delivered a failed service (DeWitt & Brady, 2003). The neglect group may not complain because they do not care about the service provider (Oliver, 1997). Ro (2015) shows that compassionate trust is higher for the loyalty (vs. neglect) group. Compassion trust is captured with three items ("I am a loyal patron of this restaurant", "I felt bad for the service provider", and "They have a good reputation and my problem was probably due to bad luck or an accident of some sort"; Ro, 2015; Voorhees et al., 2006). However, only one item is directly related to feelings of compassion and the other two items are related to customer loyalty and company reputation. This research is different from Ro (2015) by experimentally manipulating consumer compassion and investigating its impact on likelihood of direct complaints and online complaints.

Furthermore, this study documents the differential effects of prosocial emotions across online and offline channels. Prior research indicates that the customer's choice of complaint channels involves different motivations and personalities (Berry et al., 2018; Lee & Cude, 2012; Mattila & Wirtz, 2004; Robertson, 2012). Specifically, Mattila and Wirtz (2004) demonstrate that customers with redress-seeking motivations tend to choose interactive voicing channels such as face-to-face or phone call, while those motivated to vent their negative emotions are likely to choose remote channels such as an e-mail. Lee and Cude (2012) show that dissatisfaction levels and purchase channels jointly influence the customer's choice of complaint channels. More recently, Berry et al. (2018) demonstrate that personality traits influence consumers' choice of complaint channels such that sociability predicts more active complaining (i.e., alert frontline employees or managers immediately) than delayed complaining (i.e., post an online review). This study contributes to this stream of literature by showing that consumers' prosocial emotions may influence their intention to lodge a face-to-face complaint while such emotions have a minimal impact on their intention to post an online review.

Moreover, previous research on customers' online complaining behaviors documents distinct motivations for driving consumer preferences to share negative service experiences online (vs. offline). Tripp and Gregoire (2011) show that consumers turn to social media to complain because they (1) feel betrayed by the company or (2) encountered a double deviation. A double deviation refers to a situation where companies are responsible for a service failure but fail to resolve the failure (Zeithaml et al., 2017). Specifically, Tripp and Gregoire (2011) content analyzed over 400 complaints in two major web platforms and found that 96 percent of the complaints involved a double deviation. The present study does not address the notion of double deviation in service failures. However, the findings indicate that consumers may be willing to

engage in online complaining behaviors following a single deviation, regardless of their compassion levels. Therefore, this study advances our understanding of circumstances where consumers may or may not complain online.

Lastly, this research contributes to the literature on prosocial emotions. This stream of literature has widely viewed prosocial emotions in a positive light (e.g., Davis et al., 2017; Goetz et al., 2010; Lama & Ekman, 2008). Goetz et al. (2010), for example, posit that compassion evolved to establish cooperation and to protect those who suffer. Davis et al. (2017) show that more empathetic customers are likely to exhibit higher levels of satisfaction during service encounters. However, a growing body of literature highlights the mixed effects of prosocial emotions (Lupoli et al., 2017; Manczak, DeLongis, & Chen, 2016). Lupoli et al. (2017) argue that compassionate individuals may feel bad for giving low ratings to a poorly-written work by a graduate student who is under stress. Thus, they are likely to inflate their ratings. Such inflated ratings may violate the principle of honesty, known as one of the most important moral values (Graham et al., 2015), thereby causing moral dilemmas. Similarly, findings from the present study suggest that prosocial emotions can be viewed both positively and negatively. The finding that compassion reduces face-to-face complaints might be good news for frontline employees having to deal with dissatisfied or problem customers. However, from the management's perspective, prosocial emotions might be problematic, as immediate service recovery is impossible when customers fail to lodge their complaints to the front-line employee. This study thus offers a balanced view of prosocial emotions and advances our understanding of consumers' prosocial emotions in the service failure context.

Practical implications

Service firms are increasingly paying attention to customer complaints as complaints provide an opportunity for a successful service recovery (Umashankar et al., 2017). Yet, not all complaint channels are equally effective in addressing customer problems. Prior research indicates that complaints directed to the firm or the frontline employee are more effective in fixing problems immediately and initiating service recovery (onsite resolution) than online complaints (post-hoc resolution) (Sparks & Browning, 2010; Umashankar et al., 2017). Online complaints appear on public plaforms or social media platforms such as complaints.com and TripAdvisor. There is evidence to suggest that customers think that online (vs. face-to-face) complaining is more convenient, as it does not require much time and effort (Berry, Seiders, & Grewal, 2002; Sparks & Browning, 2010). Negative online reviews can go viral quickly and have a detrimental impact on the company's financial performance (Sparks & Browning, 2010; Tripp & Gregoire, 2011). As such, it is imperative for hospitality firms to try to minimize negative online reviews.

Findings from this research show that, although more compassionate customers tend to exhibit lower levels of likelihood of face-to-face complaints, they might turn to social media to vent their emotions. This is particularly relevant in the context of hospitality, as the high touch nature of the industry is prone to induce feelings of compassion toward frontline employees. Yet, there may be varying levels of high touch even within the hospitality industry. For instance, the high touch nature is prominent when there is a close contact between frontline employees and customers such as in-flight service and table-service restaurants. For fast food restaurants and catering services, the high touch nature might be less salient. In addition, one of the popular

Japanese ramen chains, I-Chi-Ran, designs dining areas as cubicles. This design deters diners from observing frontline employees, thereby diluting the high touch nature. In the case of hospitality firms with high touch, it is important to diversify their complaint channels to prevent compassionate customers from sharing their negative experiences online.

Specifically, hospitality firms might want to send out an anonymous follow-up survey link to customers. Anonymous surveys do not confront frontline employees, so customers compassionate toward the frontline employee may feel free to express their dissatisfaction. Such surveys are not harmful to the firm's reputation, as they are used internally and not shared with other customers. It is reasonable to argue that a tie strength between the service provider and the customer may magnify the impact of compassion on face-to-face complaints. Tie strength is likely to be salient among customers who frequent the service establishment and thus service providers might have an even harder time getting face-to-face feedback from such customers. Therefore, service providers heavily patronized by regulars might need to inform customers of alternative complaint channels. Some restaurants encourage customers to write an online review about their experience with a written message on the bill. However, it is evident that negative reviews may decrease the firm's reputation. It might be better for hospitality firms to encourage customers to share their positive service experiences online while doing their utmost to capture face-to-face complaints onsite.

Limitations and future research

Although both Study 1 and Study 2 exceeded a minimum cell size (Iacobucci, 1994), it may be considered rather small. Also, this research used a restaurant (Study 1) and a hotel (Study 2) as contexts, and as such, future research may be needed to generalize our findings to other

hospitality and tourism contexts, including airlines and cruises. Study 1 involves a casual dining context, and Study 2 involves a mid-scale hotel setting. It may be worthwhile to investigate how findings from this study can be applied to a fine dining context and a luxury hotel setting (e.g., Dincer & Alrawadieh, 2017; Khalilzadeh, Ghahramani, & Tabari, 2017). Compassion arises upon observing others in distress (Lazarus, 1991; Goetz et al., 2010). When customers do not observe distress among frontline employees, compassion is not likely. For instance, one of the popular Japanese ramen chains, I-Chi-Ran, mainly targets solo diners and its restaurants are designed as cubicles. Future research should examine the observability of the employee's distress as a moderator in the relationship between compassion and direct complaints. Service failure attributions might be another boundary condition for the compassion effect. Specifically, when a service failure is caused or controllable by an employee, compassion is not likely to arise.

Furthermore, it might be interesting to examine the effectiveness of service recovery strategies depending on compassion levels. After a service failure, less compassionate customers might expect both apology and compensation, whereas more compassionate customers might expect apology only. This speculation is based on prior research showing that customers high (vs. low) in moral identity expect a lower degree of service recovery (Chen et al., 2018). Moral identity and trait compassion might be positively related because both predispose individuals to be other-focused. In sum, the role of prosocial emotions in the service failure/recovery context has been largely ignored, thereby providing ample opportunities for future research.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Compassion and neutral emotion manipulation

Visual perception and memory

For this study, we are investigating how different visual stimuli affect memory. You will view a series of photos and a short movie. You will later be asked to recall aspects of the photos and movie, so please pay close attention.

An example of neutral emotion photos

An example of compassion emotion photos

COMPASSION AND COMPLAINTS

Video clips are in the following link:

http://supp.apa.org/psycarticles/supplemental/xge0000315/xge0000315_supp.html

What was the most memorable picture and/or scene? And why?

Appendix B. Service Failure Scenario Used for Study 1

You and your friends decided to go to a new restaurant in town for dinner on a Friday night. As soon as you enter the restaurant, you notice that about five people are waiting in the lobby area. After 15 minutes of waiting, you and your friends are finally seated at a table. On the way to your table, you notice that the dining area is packed. Bussers are busy cleaning the tables and servers are rushing to keep up with the orders.

The server comes to take your order and you decide to order a steak. "How would you like your steak?" says the server. "Medium rare, please" you reply. After 30 minutes, the server delivers your orders. However, when you cut into your steak, you realize that the meat is overcooked. You ask your friends to go ahead with their dishes while you notify the server of the problem. The server comes back in 20 minutes with the correct order.

Appendix C. Service Failure Scenario Used for Study 2

Hotel XYZ is a mid-scale hotel chain with multiple locations in North America. The hotels are typically located in major cities or suburban areas, often near expressways or business areas, and convenient to shopping and attractions. The hotels feature medium-sized restaurants, fitness centers, and pools.

You are traveling on an important business trip. You arrive at the hotel and go to the front desk to check in. You notice that there is only one front desk agent rushing to check in guests in a timely manner. About ten people are waiting ahead of you and you are in line for about 15 minutes. When you get to the desk, the representative answers a telephone call. You get your room key and take an elevator. Then, you find that the room has not been cleaned. You call the front desk and ask to be reassigned to a clean room. The representative assigns you to another room.
You are finally in the clean room. You notice the following paper slip on the night stand, encouraging to write a review about your stay.

[Front]   [Back]
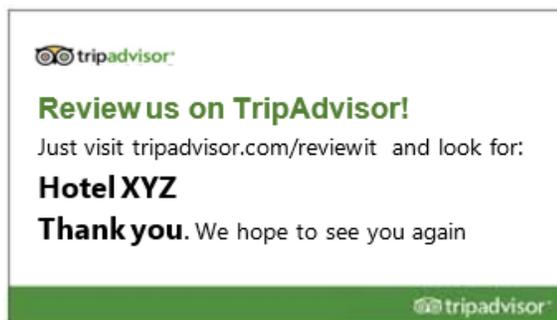
Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants in Study 1 and Study 2

	Categories	Study 1	Study 2
		n (%)	n (%)
Gender	Male	61 (54.5)	69 (51.5)
	Female	51 (45.5)	65 (48.5)
Income	Less than $20,000	11 (9.8)	13 (9.7)
	$20,000-$39,999	28 (25.0)	35 (26.1)
	$40,000-$59,999	26 (23.2)	36 (26.9)
	$60,000-$79,999	19 (17.0)	20 (14.9)
	$80,000-$99,999	15 (13.4)	13 (9.7)
	$100,000-$119,999	8 (7.1)	10 (7.5)
	$120,000-$149,999	3 (2.7)	4 (3.0)
	$150,000 or above	2 (1.8)	3 (2.2)
Education	High school or equivalent	15 (13.4)	14 (10.4)
	Some college education	29 (25.9)	35 (26.1)
	College degree	51 (45.5)	69 (51.5)
	Graduate school/ professional degree	17 (15.2)	16 (11.9)
Hotel stay frequency	1-2 times a year		62 (46.3)
	3-5 times a year		55 (41.0)
	6-9 times a year		10 (7.5)
	10 times or more a year		7 (5.2)

COMPASSION AND COMPLAINTS

Table 1 (Cont'd)

Dining frequency	A few times a week	23 (20.5)	
	About once a week	28 (25.0)	
	A few times a month	29 (25.9)	
	About once a month	15 (13.4)	
	About once every three months	9 (8.0)	
	Rarely	8 (7.1)	
Total		112 (100.0)	134 (100.0)

COMPASSION AND COMPLAINTS

Table 2. Summary of study design and findings

	Dependent variable	Design	Main findings	Alternative accounts
Study 1	Face-to-face word-of-mouth	Single-factor design (compassion vs. neutral emotion)	Participants in compassion (vs. neutral emotion) condition exhibited lower levels of word-of-mouth intention	Negative affect did not influence word-of-mouth intention
Study 2	Digital word-of-mouth	Single-factor design (compassion vs. neutral emotion)	Participants in compassion (vs. neutral emotion) condition exhibited similar levels of word-of-mouth intention	