COMPENSATION IN NeWOM: THE INFLUENCE OF COMPENSATION ON PURCHASE INTENTION WHEN RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH

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ABSTRACT

Brand holders have little control over negative reviews, however most review platforms allow them to respond to reviews. The characteristics of review responses that influence brand attitudes and consumer intentions are not well understood. As such, this study seeks to contribute to our understanding of the influence of review responses on consumer outcomes. A model of purchase intention based on a review response factor (congruence between the service failure and the level of compensation identified in the response) is developed and tested using a scenario-based experiment. Fifteen scenarios are developed (3 levels of service failure and 5 responses). Using ANOVA and pairwise comparisons, 5,607 responses are analyzed. Relationships are identified between compensation and purchase intention. Specifically, any level of compensation increases purchase intention more than no compensation. Additionally, purchase intention is higher when compensation matches the level of service failure (higher compensation for more severe service failure results in higher purchase intention). However, we were not able to support a relationship between excessive compensation and purchase intention.

INTRODUCTION

The influence of eWOM (electronic word of mouth, i.e., online product reviews) on consumer attitudes and behavior is well established in the literature (e.g., Bachleda & Berrada-Fathi, 2016; Lis & Fischer, 2020; Naylor, 2016). Both academics and brand holders recognize the effect this form of communication has on consumer attitudes and ultimately product success (Furner et al., 2014). Indeed, research shows that eWOM influences consumer behavior significantly more than information provided from other sources (e.g., marketing by the brand holder) (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014). Although positive eWOM has been extensively studied, negative eWOM (NeWOM) remains understudied (Arora et al., 2021); however, foundational studies suggest that NeWOM may have a stronger impact on consumer behavior than positive eWOM (e.g., Salehi-Esfahani et al., 2016). This is likely because customers use online reviews to reduce uncertainty about potential loss which might occur from the transaction, and thus seek out information related to the losses that others have experienced (Furner & Zinko, 2018). Consumers write NeWOM to vent negative feelings, out of concern for other customers, as well as to exert power over the company (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011). These internal drives to share negative experiences are typically much more powerful than motivations to share positive experiences.

As our understanding of this phenomenon matures, researchers have begun to examine how companies respond to NeWOM. Indeed, a variety of academics have proposed that ignoring negative reviews may lead to a reduction in sales and a damage of brand image. As such, scholars have advised corporations to address negative reviews (Leung et al., 2015). Indeed the percentage of negative reviews that companies respond to has increased substantially (Chang et al., 2012). Nevertheless, replying to negative reviews is a delicate art. As potential consumers are concerned about possible transaction risk, the response should convey a message to customers that the problems addressed in the review won't affect future buyers; but if they do encounter a problem, the company will make it right, thus reducing perceived transaction risk. In light of the importance of responses, there is a developing area of inquiry that explores how reactions to NeWOM affect consumer behavior.

On the whole, existing studies on NeWOM focus on non-monetary aspects of responses: Sparks and Bradley (2017) examined the source of the response, voice of the responder, speed of the response, and action frame. Likewise Zinko, Patrick, et al. (2021) examined which type of response is most effective (e.g., an apology alone, an apology and an explanation, a promise to address the issue, etc.). Although a few foundational studies examining the effects of compensation exist (e.g., Piehler et al., 2019), what has not been fully explored is the relationship between the perceived service failure and the amount of appropriate compensation that should be offered by the company. Should responses to NeWOM include indications of compensation which is consistent with the loss indicated in the review? Is it necessary to overcompensate, or does overcompensating lead to suspicious consumers? By building upon the theory developed in these earlier studies, this study seeks to augment our understanding of NeWOM by examining the following research questions:

> **RQ1:** *Does an offer for compensation in a response to a negative review influence the purchase intention of readers?*
>
> **RQ2:** *What level of compensation is appropriate in relation to the service failure discussed in the negative review?*

In order to answer these questions, a model of purchase intention is developed in which the level of congruence between a service failure and the compensation offered in a response to a negative review is studied. Essentially, participants were asked to assess the response of a company in regard to compensation offered when a customer complained about being dissatisfied with the service (e.g., you reported our mistake to us, via an online post, and we posted a reply with offered compensation).

Relevant literature related to Word of Mouth, eWOM, NeWOM, and compensation is reviewed. A model and hypotheses are developed and tested using a simulation-based experiment. Results are discussed in terms of the NeWOM paradigm along with directions for future exploration, and implications are discussed. Summarizing remarks conclude the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND MODEL DEVELOPMENT

eWOM

The rapid proliferation of the internet and the development of online communities has had a substantial effect on message control and brand image management (Hong et al., 2018). By using online review platforms, consumers are empowered to share their experiences with not only their immediate circle of friends (i.e., usually a limited number of potential consumers) but with the public at large, thus amplifying the influence of word of mouth (WOM) on consumer behavior (Srivastava & Kalro, 2018).

These platforms facilitate a deeper and richer conveyance of WOM, as product reviewers can include images, multimedia, and related links to information that can support the position of the reviewer (Zinko, Furner, et al., 2021). In addition, research suggests that the motivations that drive social media participation also drive individuals to write reviews about products. The intensity of the tie, confidence, normative, and informative power of eWOM are all positively correlated with users' overall eWOM behavior; but there is a negative association with homophily (Chu & Kim, 2011).

In contrast to traditional WOM from interpersonal outlets, advice in eWOM is usually from anonymous persons and in a text-based style. Consequently, consumers often look for a variety of clues when assessing the uncertainty reduction value and quality of eWOM (Greer, 2003). Previous literature on traditional WOM indicates that antecedents of the WOM effect include root legitimacy (Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977) and WOM directions (positive or negative) (Arndt, 1967). Thus, online users struggle to determine the authenticity of statements based on sources with which they are less familiar (Chatterjee, 2001). Determining the veracity of content contained online posts has become even more problematic as advertisers have tried to manipulate eWOM by paying users to rate products, and even gone so far as to write their own feedback about their products (Werde, 2003). Because eWOM is anonymous, at times, customers can find it difficult to assess the accuracy of the eWOM (Zinko, de Burgh-Woodman, et al., 2021).

NeWOM

Purchase decisions are optimization problems under uncertainty, and negative eWOM (NeWOM) reduces uncertainty and serves as a screening tool, assisting customers in determining the downsides of a good or service and providing consumers with risk cues (Lee & Youn, 2009). Research has shown that NeWOM has a negative impact on brand image (Lee & Cranage, 2014). According to the value rankings of eWOM outlets, reviews on these platforms have more impact than either Facebook or corporate website testimonials (Bachleda & Berrada-Fathi, 2016). As the number of negative online reviews increases, consumers' attitudes about products become less favorable (Lee et al., 2008).

The credibility of the reviewer and the review platform affect consumer trust and the influence of the reviews on consumer attitudes and behavior. Experience-based disappointment drives the writing of critical feedback specifically, but only implicitly influences website mistrust (Nam et al., 2020). Readers tend to consider the information provided by reviewers that have more favorable characteristics, such as reputation, appearance, personal presence, familiarity, and strength (Man Yee et al., 2009). Regardless of the validity of the information shared, negative reviews have no effect if the reader does not find the information credible and trustworthy.

Brand holders have little control over the reviews that consumers share on online review platforms. Indeed, some negative online reviews are left by competitors, with the goal of sabotaging sales and steering consumers to competing products/services (Furner et al., 2014). By offering high-quality products and services, companies may be able to mitigate the effects of negative reviews by developing a strong brand image; however, negative reviews may be unavoidable. With this in mind, most online review platforms provide companies with the ability to respond to negative reviews. Research related to responding to NeWOM is reviewed in the next subsection.

Responding to NeWOM

The influence of apologies on 3rd-party observer consumers' patronage intention and word of mouth intention has been explored in a traditional context (McClure et al., 2019). In an online context, managers must carefully consider approaches to responding to NeWOM by selecting an optimal strategy to recognize the voice of the consumer while avoiding unintended consequences. Consumers want NeWOM to be recognized, their voices to be heard, and for the service provider to respond appropriately (Karande et al., 2007). Online review responses are commonly viewed as instruments that aid brand retention by strengthening or restoring a reputation (Zhang et al., 2020). ReviewPro (2015) reports a correlation between management response rates and a brands' online credibility. If the response is satisfactory, the benefit of responding will be amplified when the response is seen by potential consumers (Sparks et al., 2016). Reacting to customer feedback helps brand holders manage ever-important customer relationships in the digital age (Chen & Xie, 2008).

The literature identifies an array of strategies for responding to NeWOM that range from "no response" to "an excessive display of generosity." For example, using the Facebook and Twitter pages of 34 major US brands, Einwiller and Steilen (2015) performed a large-scale content review of brands' reaction strategies to NeWOM tweets. Compared to presenting facts (60%) and showing thanks (28%), apologizing was a response tactic that was seldom used (5%). Since apologizing can infer the service provider is to blame for the negative incident, brands are stingy with their apologies in webcare responses (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). To stop a "double deviation" (i.e. an inadequate or inappropriate response to a service failure) brands pair apologies with disciplinary acts Bitner et al. (1990). Due to the increased importance of consumers' material-oriented demands, compensation has a better effect on restoring less serious service deficiencies (Sharp, 2007).

Compensation

Compensation can be an effective means of equitably addressing concerns about a service failure. Customers who have experienced a service failure often generate negative word of mouth with the goal of receiving compensation (Soderlund, 1998). This reflects the suggestion by researchers that firms use compensation as a recovery strategy in the form of complementary services, discounts, upgrades, and refunds (e.g., McCollough, 2000). Beneke et al. (2015) also found that managers' efforts to decrease the inclination to engage in NeWOM after a service failure using compensation in the form of discounts or complementary services or products is effective. Of the many service recovery options, compensation has been proven to be effective.

As consumers become more aware of compensation as a service recovery option, some become more aggressive in seeking compensation. Gössling and Lane (2015) found an increased frequency of complaints with associated demands for compensation as guests realize the importance of positive reviews on business outcomes. Brand holders often receive requests from customers asking for compensation in return for writing a positive review, and managers also report having been threatened by guests with negative reviews if demands for compensation were not met (Gössling et al., 2019). This rise in these types of requests serves as an expression of growing consumer awareness of the importance of reviews to the success of a business. Consumers' awareness of compensation as an option and the leverage they hold places brand holders in a weaker position and makes providing reasonable compensation an essential strategy.

Compensation remains an effective approach to developing consumers' sense of reparation when affected by a sub-optimal service experience. Studies on the effects of compensation related to restoring equity after the resulting unfairness caused by a service failure find that compensation restores perceived distributive fairness and equalizes the customer-firm equity levels (Adams, 1965). Such findings link compensation to consumers' perceived distributive and interactional fairness, as well as to procedural fairness (Mattila, 2001).

In addition to the consumers’ sense of reparative justice, compensation serves to mitigate future transaction risk, by signaling that if a service failure occurs in the future, the provider is willing to make reasonable amends, thus reducing transaction risk. Following this reasoning, we expect that when consumers see that a firm has replied to a negative review and offered the reviewer compensation, we expect that purchase intention will increase.

> **H1:** *When the response to a negative review offers compensation, purchase intention will be higher than if no compensation was offered*.

Levels of Compensation

When consumers have a bad experience with a brand, they may feel a sense of loss and injustice, offsetting their perception of equity (Lin et al., 2011). Identifying three separate dimensions: distributive, procedural, and interactional justice; justice theory provides a theoretical framework that can be used to analyse perceived fairness relating to service recovery attempts (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003). The perceived fairness of policies, procedures, and criteria utilized by a firm to arrive at a recovery effort is referred to as procedural justice (i.e., waiting time, responsiveness, and flexibility of procedure) (Blodgett et al., 1997). Consumers will determine if the company has made a proper effort in correcting the issue. Procedural fairness is less concerned with the outcomes (i.e., unlike distributive justice) than with the process that the company followed. Indeed, if some customer complaints are instantly dismissed, while others are seen as being given an internal review (i.e., and then also dismissed), the company may be seen as being unfair to the person who didn’t get the review (i.e., regardless of the similar outcomes for both parties). When considering eWOM, a company has an opportunity to tell their side of the story in both how the incident occurred, and what steps were taken to alleviate the issue, establishing the perception of an equitable solution to the problem.

Equity refers to fairness, rightness, or deservingness in comparison to other entities, whether real or imaginary, individual or collective, person or non-person (Oliver, 1997). Equity theory encompasses the concept of the perceived balance between a wrong and the correction of the grievance, thereby explaining how consumers respond to recovery efforts (e.g., Sabharwal et al., 2010). For example, Grewal et al. (2008) argued that the necessity to restore equity depends on the customer relationship and the degree to which the compensation effectively improves the relationship. Stemming from social exchange theory, equity theory extends the concept under the dynamic of accumulating interpersonal interactions (i.e., consumers and brands). Equity theory asserts that relationships range from transaction-specific (the start of a relationship) to relationships solidified over a long series of accumulated exchanges. Researchers have empirically examined the unique nature of equity by testing its role as an antecedent or consequence of satisfaction to explain consumers’ behavioral loyalty and determined that equity concerns the overall value of the history of the relationship, regardless of duration, which leads to customer loyalty (e.g., Chen & Myagmarsuren, 2011).

Service recovery, which refers to actions to restore customer satisfaction levels after a service failure, provides the firm an additional opportunity to meet customers’ expectations and encourage loyalty (DeWitt, Nguyen & Marshall, 2008). Effective recovery methods avoid undesirable outcomes (provider switching and negative word-of-mouth) and may increase customer satisfaction and loyalty (Priluck & Lala, 2009). A service failure establishes an inequitable situation where customer expectations are not met and remediation is expected to establish a sense of justice.

Justice theory predicts that consumers who have had a bad experience with a brand will perceive a sense of loss and inequity and will seek to restore equity by complaining or demanding remediation from the provider. For many consumers, compensation can provide remediation and a sense of justice. Compensation can restore a consumer's sense of equity, and firms can benefit from not only the restored loyalty of the consumer receiving the compensation but also potential consumers who read the reviews and management response. However, the mere presence of a compensation offer in a response to a negative review may not be sufficient to create a sense of justice in the mind of potential consumers. The compensation should be at a level that adequately matches the service failure and repairs the harm done by that service failure. As such, we propose the following:

> **H2a.** *There is a direct relationship to purchase intention and the congruence between compensation and service failure such that as compensation gets closer to the consumer perceived equitable level, purchase intention increases.*

Adams (1963) established a distinction between negative inequity (under-benefitting), equity, and positive inequity (over-benefitting) with the most desirable situation being one where both parties benefit equitably. In contrast, both negative and positive inequity result in a form of distress. A good deal of research demonstrates that under-benefitting tends to motivate consumers to produce NeWOM and become disloyal. However, how consumers deal with a positive inequity or over-benefitting is less studied, although Anderson et al. (1969) found over-benefitting creates tension, potentially related to guilt and embarrassment which consumers will also try to reduce or eliminate. The mechanisms of this relationship remain largely unstudied.

The beneficiaries of over-benefitting vary in their perceptions of the exchange. There are three groups of recipients of overcompensation: benevolents or givers, who dislike being on the receiving end of exchanges; entitleds or getters, who want to be overcompensated and receive more than they contribute; and equity sensitives, who want what they received to be in line with what they contribute (Huseman et al., 1987).

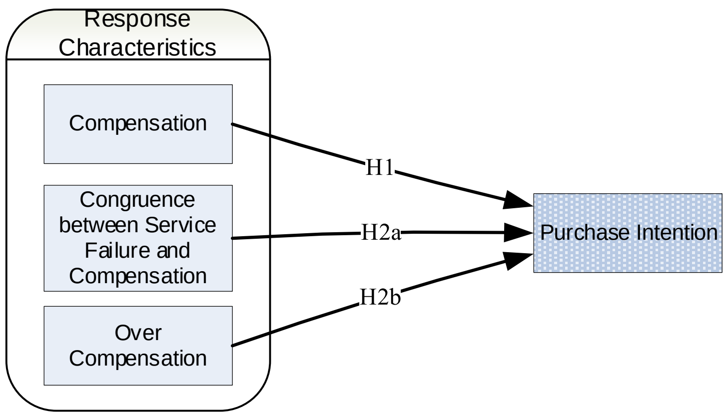
Although Garrett (1999) found that in certain situations (i.e., coupons) aggrieved customers who are provided greater amounts of compensation in response to a service failure are not always motivated by the gesture, existing research has indicated that exceeding aggrieved customers' expectations results in potential benefits for the brand holder. It has been shown that after a service failure, offering an unhappy consumer more than what one would normally expect has been described as both 'service provider generosity' (Estelami & De Maeyer, 2002) and 'over-benefitting' (Gilly & Hansen, 1985). Indeed, Boshoff (2012, p. 2) stated that overcompensation for service failures "can be described as giving aggrieved customers value beyond their expectations."

As stated above, both justice and equity theories suggest that an aggrieved party responds well to compensation. By overcompensating, companies are given the opportunity to signal to not only the aggrieved party but also other potential consumers who read about the compensation that the company. They can signal that they not only accept responsibility for their errors (i.e., by providing compensation); but also 2) acknowledge that the consumer has suffered as a result, and attempt to mitigate that suffering by way of compensation. Based on this, we predict that consumers who read a response that contains an excessive level of compensation will perceive less transaction risk and experience enough uncertainty reduction to facilitate transaction-based trust. Therefore, we propose the following:

> **H2b.** *When compensation surpasses the level that would be congruent with the service failure, purchase intention will increase*.

The research model is presented in Figure 1. The following section explains the methodology for testing this model.

Figure 1: Research Model



METHODS

Scenario-based experiments were used to evaluate the hypothesis. This approach is widely used in a variety of fields, including psychology, management, accounting, and finance (e.g., Bent & Van Hentenryck, 2004; Johansson et al., 1999; King et al., 2003). Scenario-based studies control for variations in the environment through the creation of standard manipulations across the study groups. Scenario-based simulation experiments were conducted using the protocol developed by Potts (1995) and required participants to interact with a mock-up of a review platform that presented the user with reviews and brand holder responses.

The study included fifteen scenarios where negative reviews and the company's response to those reviews were presented to subjects. Reviews varied in terms of service failure (three levels of severity: A minor, moderate, and severe mistake). These negative reviews were paired with five different responses, which provided a narrative where the manager replied to the negative review addressed the issue. The responses varied as follows: In one manipulation, no response was provided, in one response, only an apology was offered, and 3 responses corresponded with three levels of compensation (low, medium, and high).

The negative reviews detailed a service failure associated with replacing kitchen countertops. This context was selected because subjects are expected to be familiar with countertops, and the manipulations for the level of severity and compensation could be implemented relatively clearly. For example, the purchase of countertops missing some hardware is perceived as less severe than the purchase where the countertops are the wrong size. Moreover, the compensation level of more than double the purchase value can easily be seen as excessive compensation, whereas a meager $15 store credit could readily be evaluated as a low level of compensation.

Each participant was asked to read a single review and its paired response and then asked a series of questions, including demographics, purchase intention, and the perceived severity. The questions included manipulation checks for service failure severity and for the response and compensation level.

Instrument Development

A panel of three academic experts with experience conducting e-commerce research and three marketing professionals was presented with the scenarios and assessed the reviews and responses to ensure the levels were distinct and identifiable. They were provided with the low, medium, and high severity reviews and asked to sort the scenarios into the three categories. All experts were able to do this with 100% success. Panel members were then asked to sort the responses into 5 categories, and were able to do so with 100% accuracy. The panel members concurred that the items consistently and comprehensively reflected the theoretical underpinnings of the constructs, thus establishing the face validity of the measurement tools (e.g., Liu et al., 2007).

Subjects

Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) was used to collect responses. Samples derived from MTurk have been shown to be indistinguishable from the various other survey collection forms (Casler et al., 2013; Hauser & Schwarz, 2016; Paolacci et al., 2010). Additionally, the platform has been demonstrated to be more representative of the U.S. population than typical samples of convenience (Berinsky et al., 2012). Studies using MTurk data have been published in top marketing journals such as the *Journal of Brand and Product Management (Ahuvia et al., 2020), Journal of Brand Management* (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019), *Journal of Marketing* (e.g., Luo & Toubia, 2015; Roggeveen et al., 2015), and the *Journal of Marketing Research* (e.g., Laran et al., 2016; Yoon & Kim, 2016), among others.

Due to the large number of scenarios, data were collected from 5607 subjects. The average age of the participant was 39.4, and 50.54% of the participants were female.

Results

Table1 shows the results of the ANOVA. Although we collected data for three different levels of service failure, there was no statistically significant difference between the three. As such, data were combined, to get a more robust sample.

Figure 2 shows the mean differences between manipulations. Although we did not hypothesize a difference, we did include both ‘no response’ to the negative review (i.e., as a control), and also an apology response (i.e., with no compensation). A post hoc analysis (i.e., Tukey post-hoc, pairwise comparison) of the data showed no statistically significant difference between no response and sorry, nor a difference between congruent compensation and excessive compensation.

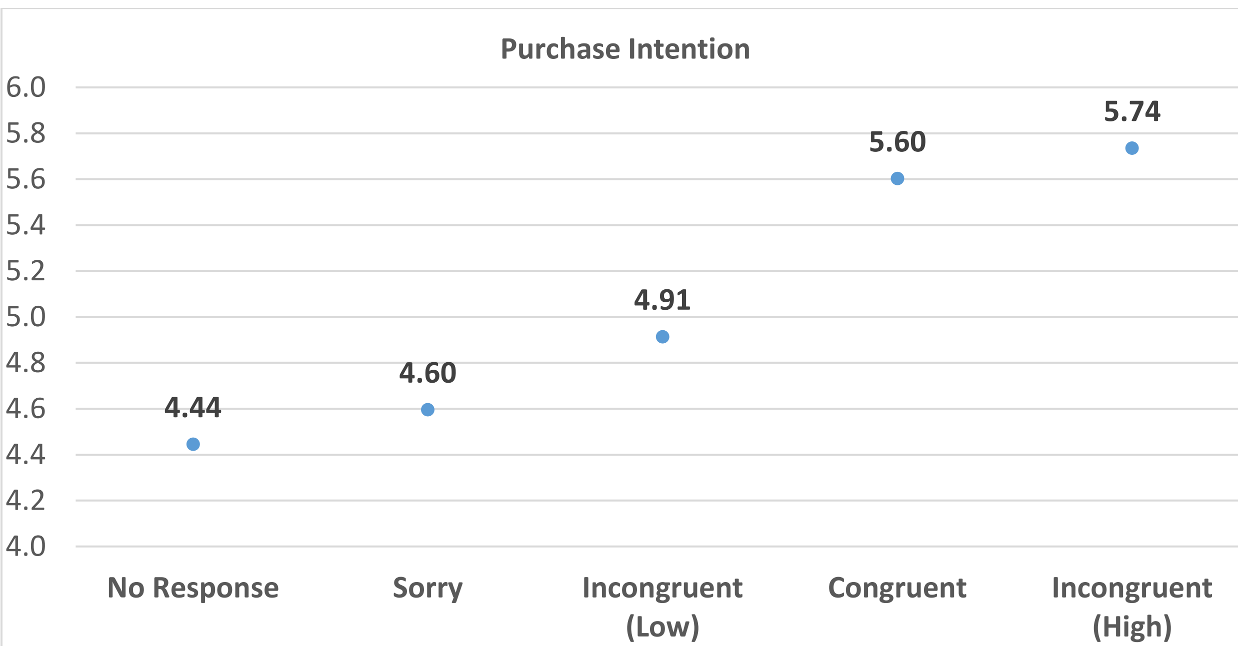
Table 1:
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	1535.675[a]	4	383.919	104.427	0.000
Intercept	143470.552	1	143470.552	39024.224	0.000
Compensation	1535.675	4	383.919	104.427	0.000
Error	20595.465	5602	3.676		
Total	165747.000	5607			
Corrected Total	22131.140	5606			

a. R Squared = .069 (Adjusted R Squared = .069)

b. Computed using alpha = .05

Figure 2:
Results



Hypothesis 1 predicted that responses to negative reviews that contained compensation would better facilitate purchase intention than responses that did not offer compensation. This hypothesis was supported (p<.01 when comparing no response or sorry with any of the compensation scenarios). Hypothesis 2 predicted that as the level of compensation approached the severity of service failure, purchase intention would increase. This hypothesis was supported (p<.01 when comparing low incongruent with congruent). Hypothesis 3 predicted that overcompensation would increase purchase intention. This hypothesis was not supported.

Although purchase intention was slightly higher when overcompensation occurred, the difference was not statistically significant (i.e., p>.05 when comparing congruent with high congruent). These results are discussed in the following section.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the effects of compensation on purchase intention after reading reviews of service failures, and responses to those reviews. Hypotheses 1 predicted that when the response to a negative review offers compensation, purchase intention will be higher than if no compensation was offered. This hypothesis was supported across all levels of compensation. That is to say, any level of compensation (even low compensation) had the effect of reducing transaction risk and increasing purchase intention. This finding is interesting because it suggests that, at times, the jester of offering compensation for the recognized the failure is of great importance. Although compensation that is more in line with the perceived failure results in better outcomes, some level of compensation is better than a simple apology. Also of interest is that this study reflects the findings of Zinko, Patrick, et al. (2021), in that there was no empirical difference between an apology and no response at all. As such, there seems little point in offering an apology, if it is not paired with some level of compensation (i.e., even if the compensation seems less than required to make the consumer whole).

Hypotheses 2a predicted that there is a direct relationship between purchase intention and the congruence between compensation and service failure such that as compensation gets closer to the consumer perceived equitable level, purchase intention increases. This hypothesis was supported. As compensation moved from none to little, up to moderate; purchase intention increased. This is not surprising as research suggests that consumers seek equitable situations. Knowing that another customer was compensated for a service failure (i.e., as the subjects were shown reviews and responses from other customers) suggests that the company would be willing to be fair with all consumers. As such, this reduces uncertainty and transaction risk, thus increasing purchase intention.

H2b predicted that when compensation surpasses the level that would be congruent with the service failure, purchase intention will increase. This hypothesis was not supported. Although purchase intention did not decrease when moving from moderate to excessive compensation, it also did not proportionately increase. There are a variety of explanations for this finding: first, these counter-intuitive results may be explained by justice literature. Studies have shown that over-benefitting negatively impacts some consumers' sense of justice. For some customers, over-benefitting may create feelings of guilt and indebtedness (Zeithaml et al., 2006). Indeed, Huseman et al. (1987) classifies parties in an equity scenario as either benevolents, entitleds, or equity-sensitives. This study did not measure the equity sensitivity of subjects. It could be that entitleds would see over benefiting as a good thing, thus increasing purchase intention, while benevolents and equity-sensitives may see over benefiting as a bad thing, thus reducing purchase intention. Future studies may consider measuring the equity sensitivity of participants, and may hypothesize differing relationships between overcompensation and purchase intention based on the equity sensitivity of the subject.

Another possible explanation is that overcompensation may raise customer suspicion because it is beyond the norm for a profit-driven organization and may trigger customers to question the nature of such transactions and the legitimacy of the response (Estelami & De Maeyer, 2002). Consistent with this point of view, Haesevoets et al. (2014) documents that overcompensation offers no incremental effects on customer satisfaction compared to congruent compensation because it is attributed to a lower level of moral orientation on the part of the seller. Furthermore, overcompensation leads to a less favorable perception and a lower level of trust in the seller. Therefore, this could potentially help explain why H2b was not supported. Yet, the scenario used in the current study is not the same as presented in Haesevoets et al. (2014), in which the overcompensation is ten times the amount of the financial cost of the buyer (i.e., an extreme scenario). In the current study, the amount of overcompensation is two times the amount of the financial cost of the buyer. This level of overcompensation may be more justifiable in our scenario than in Haesevoets et al. (2014). Some customers may presume that the additional compensation might cover the cost to restore the situation that preceded the service failure event (Kenesei & Bali, 2020) or it is a gesture from the company to acknowledge and compensate for customer suffering.

Lastly, results may also be partially explained by the prospect theory (see Kahneman & Tversky, 2013 for an overview of prospect theory). Prior research suggests customers are loss averse, which means that people experience losses asymmetrically more severely than equivalent gains. The loss aversion drives the potential buyers to focus on reducing losses. A congruent compensation would mitigate such concern. Compared to the motives to mitigate losses, consumers are less motivated by receiving gains through overcompensation (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). Therefore, overcompensation may not have a strong effect. Yet, this theory does not necessarily predict that high incongruent compensation produces no incremental effect compared to congruent compensation. Regardless, further research is needed to clarify the mechanism behind this non-finding.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

These results are an example of a “vicarious recovery paradox.” The “recovery paradox” refers to the state in which service failures offer an opportunity to turn dissatisfied customers into even more satisfied and loyal customers. If effective recovery efforts are provided, customers can be more satisfied than if the failure had never happened in the first place (Hart et al., 1990). Researchers should examine of the extent to which a company’s efforts at recovery from past service failures effect potential customers via online review platforms.

Further, we were not able to support a relationship between extensive compensation and purchase intention. We speculate that this may be explainable by equity theory, suggesting that benevolents and equity sensitive individuals may not prefer excessive compensation. Future studies might classify participants based on this topology, and look for differences between benevolents, entitleds and equity-sensitives in scenarios in which excessive compensation is offered. If a relationship can be supported for entitleds but not the other two groups, this would carry further implications for companies as they consider responses to service failures, as it might suggest individual level compensation strategies.

Our study was limited to three service failure scenarios (i.e., low, medium, and high service failures) and five levels of compensation (no response, apology, and low, equitable and excessive compensation). Future research should consider more levels of compensation to better define the apex of adequate and too much compensation. Our study was also limited by industry context, future studies may explore these phenomena in different contexts than the home renovation industry. Future research may consider a variety of purchase decisions and include a range of cost levels from low cost to very expensive merchandise and tangible to very intangible purchases including cellular phone services to international travel arrangements. This varied array of purchasing decisions would increase the generalizability of the findings and augment our understanding of consumer behaviour relating to service failures and guide service recovery efforts allowing organizations to optimize service recovery investment, systems and procedures.

Typical to experimental studies, external validity is a potential limitation. Despite efforts to offer realistic manipulations and ensure they are interpreted as intended, the reported results are based on fictious service failures and respondents were asked to role play and pretend that they were the customer seeking to make a purchase in a hypothetical scenario and report their purchase intention. This does not allow for the potential influence of important factors such as emotions (urgency, for example). Additionally, the sample was limited to those living in the United States and may not be generalizable to other cultures with differing values. Future research should include a more robust (i.e., international) sample.

Finally, this study did not examine repeat customers. Would long-term customers be more sympathetic to a service failure (i.e., as anchoring adjustment theory may come into play in that the customer already has a positive image of the company, so a service failure may not change their opinion as drastically as it might for a new customer)?

CONCLUSION

While the eWOM paradigm is extensive and growing at a fast pace, the influence of responses to NeWOM is still a relatively recent domain for study. The findings of this paper represent one step in a large effort toward understanding the influence of responses to reviews on consumer behavior outcomes. This emerging domain of research promises to identify implications for brand managers as well as review platform developers. For brand managers, results suggest that offering compensation to aggrieved consumers has potential to mitigate the deleterious effects of negative reviews, however there is no significant benefit to offering extensive compensation. Review platform developers are motivated to maintain customer satisfaction, thus increasing sales and reducing returns (Furner et al., 2021). The findings of this study suggest that review platform developers can achieve this by prioritizing reviews which have responses which mention compensation. This is an emerging area of research within the eWOM paradigm, and further investigation promises to provide more insight for brand holders and review platform developers.

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