

A Model of Consumer Anger

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Abstract

This research focuses on consumer anger and its ability to drive consumers to suspend or alter their purchase patterns as well as engage in negative behaviors. Attribution theory provides the framework for the study. An online survey of consumers was conducted. The results of the structural equation model revealed that both the psychological contract and the attribution dimensions were significant in the development of consumer anger. In addition, consumer anger and the psychological contract were directly related to consumer decisions regarding future usage. Consumer anger was also directly related to consumer decisions to participate in negative behaviors. Based on the study findings, implications and future research directions are discussed

Key Words: Consumer anger, Attribution, Psychological contract, Negative behaviors, Consumer repatronage

Introduction

The cost of angering customers is higher than at any other time in history. Angry consumers may now give vent to their unhappiness through a variety of outlets most notably complaint websites (Harrison-Walker, 2001). Consumer complaints deter others from patronizing firms (Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger, 1997) and can harm stock returns both now and in the future (Luo, 2007). Previous research widely acknowledges that service failures are costly to firms and may cause consumers to exit and possibly retaliate (Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Funches, Markley, & Davis, 2009). However, there is still a gap in our knowledge of which incidents lead to which consequences. This knowledge is important. The more we understand about detrimental consumer behavior the better equipped managers' will be at preventing it from occurring. The purpose of this research is to examine the role of specific cognitive and affective factors on consumer behavioral decisions to continue patronizing a firm or engaging in negative behavior.

Although previous research has shown that negative emotions affect subsequent consumer behavior, little research has been done on discrete emotions and their effects on behavioral responses (Mattila & Ro, 2008). Furthermore, specific emotions have specific effects on consumer behavior (Bonifield & Cole, 2007; Lerner & Keltner, 2001). This research attempts to fill the gap pointed out by Romani, Grappi, & Bagozzi (2013) concerning the limited amount of knowledge about the conditions which lead to different consumer responses and the role that emotions play in creating those responses.

This research focuses on consumer anger and its ability to drive consumers to suspend or alter their purchase patterns as well as engage in negative behaviors. Specifically, the research focuses on the role of the psychological contract and the attribution theory in the consumer anger experience. This research is one of the first to apply the concept of the psychological contract from the management literature to the consumer context.

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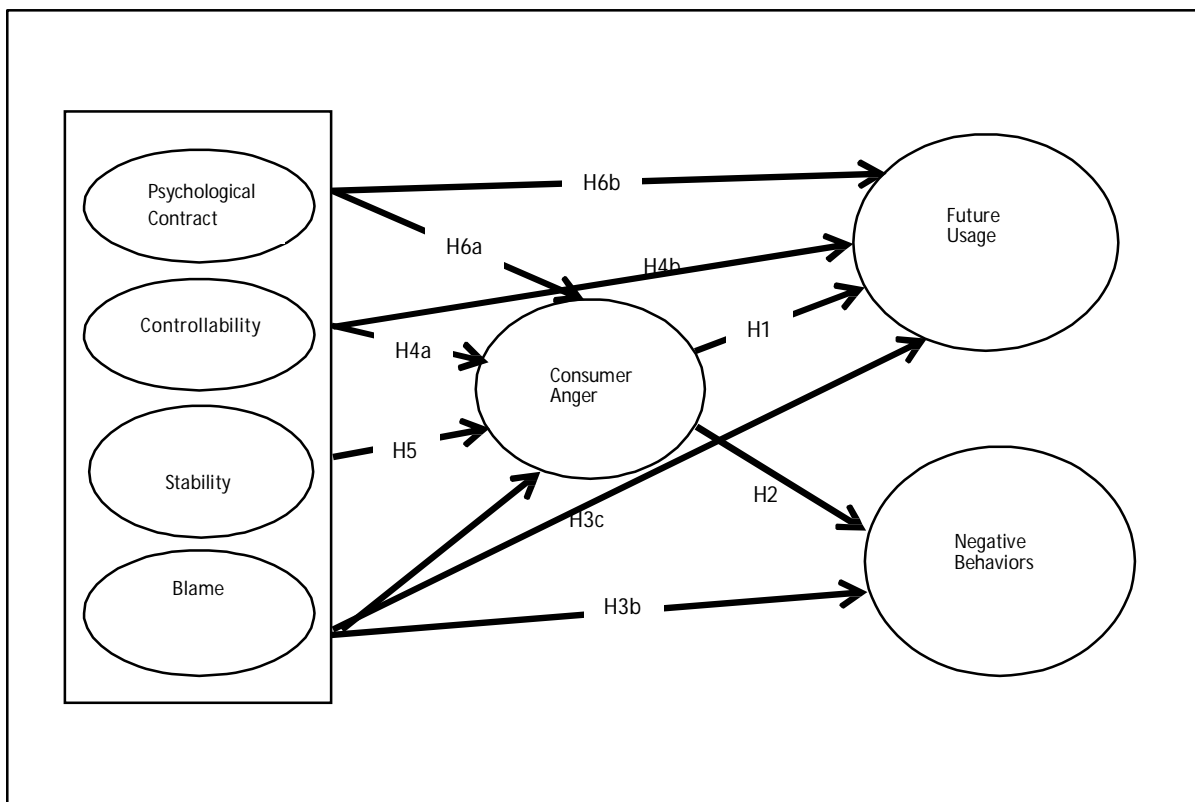
Furthermore, prior research confirms that the attribution of service failure plays a key role in determining how specific emotions will affect behavior (Sanchez-Garcia & Curras-Perez, 2011). This research will provide a deeper understanding of the role attribution plays in anger evoking experiences.

Therefore, the main contribution of this work is to examine how anger influences consumer behavior. In particular, this research examines how specific situational assessments contribute to the experience of anger and its outcomes. Furthermore, this research builds on the present knowledge as to the role of attribution in consumer future usage decisions as well as participation in negative behaviors. The paper is structured as follows. First, the conceptual model of consumer anger is introduced. Second, the supporting literature is reviewed and hypotheses presented. Third, the study design and methods are discussed. Fourth, the results are presented. Finally, the study concludes with implications, study limitations, and future research directions.

Literature review

The proposed model of consumer anger pulls from prior research concerning consumer dissatisfaction and service failure to examine how the assessments of psychological contract and attribution impact the experience of consumer anger and how that experience influences repatronage and participation in negative behaviors. The first step in the consumer anger process occurs when a consumer perceives a firm's action as inappropriate (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001). Then attribution assessments begin. Consumers make judgments about the controllability and stability of the situation. Is it likely to happen again? Could it have been prevented? Next, blame is assigned and the resulting response target and action is chosen (Aquino et al., 2001; Beugre, 2005). This information is then used to alter or discontinue purchase behaviors in the future and perhaps participate in negative behaviors. Negative behaviors occur when consumers deliberately violate the accepted norms of conduct in a consumption setting (Reynolds & Harris, 2009). See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual model of Consumer Anger



Consumer anger

Despite the importance of anger and its clear recognizability, it has been very difficult to define (Robbins, 2000). The experience of anger is complex and manifests itself physically and emotionally. The experience of anger for the consumer differs from other interpersonal experiences of anger in both its causes and consequences.

Consumer anger is defined as an emotional state which stems from a consumer's perceived loss of entitlement due to an unfair, threatening, or harmful consumption experience. These consumption experiences involve interactions with the firm, its products or services, and or its employees (Funches, 2007). Given that anger is a key and fundamental emotion, the concept is a central element in social behavior (Diaz & Ruiz, 2002). It is one of the most frequently experienced of all emotions. "In fact, researchers have reported that most people become angry anywhere from several times a day to several times a week" (Robbins, 2000, p.12). Anger is caused when an individual appraises an event as harmful and frustrating. It can be aimed at another person, an institution, the situation, or the self. Wiener (2000) suggests that anger is a result of social transgressions. Anger is typically driven by a need to restore equity and justice (Averill, 1982). Averill's (1982) seminal study of anger uncovered that it typically begins with a perceived misdeed, involves a belief that one is responding to an occurrence that was unprovoked and unjustified, and involves interpersonal difficulties.

Anger is a particularly special emotion because it carries with it action tendencies. Anger evoking experiences lead to action tendencies with strong urges to respond, (Harmon-Jones, Singelman, Bohlig & Harmon-Jones, 2003), desires to injure (Kuppens, van Mechelen, Smits & de Boeck, 2003), and punishment of wrongdoers (Fischer & Roseman 2007; Romani, Grappi, & Bagozzi, 2013). These action tendencies represent costly consequences for firms. Diaz and Ruiz(2002) found a relationship between anger and repatronage intentions. This study focused on consumers who experienced airline delays. The results indicated that anger did play a major role in consumer decisions to repatronize firms. Unfortunately, due to the setting of the study generalizability was limited. This study attempts to broaden our knowledge base concerning anger by examining the anger evoking experiences of a wide range of consumer settings.

Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg (2003) found that anger tended to involve confronting or hurting the firm in hopes that such aggressive behavior would dissuade future occurrences of the problem. In other words, consumers were less likely to continue their relationships with firms that made them angry and more likely to engage in negative behaviors. Furthermore, research conducted by Funches et al. (2009) suggests that anger is a trigger for retaliatory consumer behaviors. Retaliatory or negative behaviors by consumers are a common occurrence. In fact, consumers are increasingly behaving in problematic and inappropriate ways that inhibit the smooth functioning of services (Hibbert, Piacentini, & Hogg, 2012; Harris & Reynolds, 2004). Therefore, the author proposes that:

H1: Consumer anger will be negatively related to future usage.

H2: Consumer anger will be positively related to the likelihood of negative behaviors.

Attribution

Attribution theory provides a rich framework for examining experiences leading to consumer anger. This theory focuses upon the universal concern with why and event occurred (Weiner, 2000). Attribution is composed of three dimensions: control, stability, and blame. This concept is important because consumer perceptions of causality play a major role in the anger experience. Anger typically results when consumers perceive a problem to be stable or permanent. Likewise, consumers are driven to reduce the likelihood of negative occurrences and therefore situations deemed stable or reoccurring would be damaging to future usage intentions (Funches, 2007). Previously conducted research suggests that emotional responses vary depending on how consumers attribute blame in situations (Ruth, Brunel, & Otnes, 2002; Machleit & Mantel, 2001; Nyer, 1997). Blame involves who or what caused the problem and can be placed internally or externally (Weiner, 2000). Consumer anger generally accompanies external blame of the firm or its employees. Chebat and Slusarczyk (2005) supported the idea that different attributions of blame to the firm or individual impacted consumers' behavioral responses.

Diaz and Ruiz (2002) examined the relationships between attributions, anger, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions in the airline setting. They found that the more controllable consumers deemed the experience, the angrier they became and the less likely they were to repatronize the firm. Hence, consumer assessments about who is blame, how preventable the situation was and its likelihood of reoccurring are key determinants in the consumer anger experience. Moreover, this assessment also impacts consumer repatronage decisions and participation in negative behaviors (Blodgett & Anderson, 2000; Maxham III, 2001). Therefore, the author proposes:

H3a: Firm control will be positively related to consumer anger.

H3b: Firm control will be positively related to the likelihood of negative behaviors.

H3c: Firm control will be negatively related to future usage.

H4a: Stability will be positively related to consumer anger.

H4b: Stability will be negatively related to future usage.

H5a: Firm blame will be positively related to consumer anger.

Psychological contract fulfillment

The psychological contract is prevalent in the management literature and involves agreements, promises, or obligations between the firm and the employee and is defined by the individual. In addition, these contracts are informal, subject to interpretation, and evolve over the course of the relationship between employee and the firm (Lemire & Rouillard, 2005). However, this concept could also apply to the consumer-to-firm relationship. In the consumer context, psychological contracts are developed through repeated interactions with products, brands, or employees of the firm. As consumers invest more time, effort, and other, irrecoverable resources into a relationship, psychological ties and expectations of reciprocation are formed (Blau, 1964).

Understanding psychological contracts in the consumer context could enhance our knowledge of complaint behavior and consumer anger because consumer beliefs about the extent to which the firm has fulfilled its obligation to them will affect their behavior toward the firm. This research seeks to test the appropriateness of this concept in the consumer context and deepen our understanding of this cognitive process. Hence, the following hypotheses were developed:

H6a: Psychological contract fulfillment will be negatively related to consumer anger.

H6b: Psychological contract fulfillment will be positively related to future usage.

Methodology

Measures

To measure the constructs in the model, validated measurement items were adopted from the extant literature (Oliver & Swan, 1989; Forgyas, Forgyas & Spielberger, 1997; Huefner & Hunt, 2000; Robinson & Morrison, 2000; Bunker & Ball, 2003) and modified to fit the consumer context.

Consumer anger was measured using the Spielberger's State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory scale (Forgays et al., 1997) was used to measure the intensity of angry feelings at a particular point in time. For purposes of this research, anger was defined as an emotional state which stems from a consumer's perceived loss of entitlement due to an unfair, threatening, or harmful consumption experience. The final scale was composed of six items measured on a strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) scale. The coefficient alpha for the sample was .82. The concept of psychological contract fulfillment was measured using two scales. A five-item measure developed by Robinson and Morrison (2000) was adapted to assess perceived contract violation. The respondents' perception of fairness was measured with an adapted version of the three-item scale reported in Oliver and Swan (1989). The final scale was composed of four- items measured on a strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) scale.

The coefficient alpha for the sample was .88. Attribution is composed of three dimensions: stability, control, and blame. Portions of the Causal Dimension scale developed by Russell (1982) were adapted to measure how causal attributions are perceived. Three items were used to measure stability and were taken from Russell (1982) and Blodgett, Granbois, and Walter (1993). The coefficient alpha for the sample was .92. The control measure contained three items on a strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) scale. The coefficient alpha was .80. Wade's (1989) victimization sub scale was used to create a three-item measure for firm blame. The coefficient alpha for the sample was .88. The dependent variables included negative behaviors, grudge holding, and complaint behavior. The negative behaviors scale was taken from Huefner and Hunt's (2000) classification of retaliatory behaviors. The final scale was composed of three items. The grudge holding scale contained a three-item measure with a response scale of 1(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree) developed by Bunker and Ball (2003). The coefficient alpha was well above the acceptable level for the sample at (.95).

The complaint behavior scale contained four items taken from Blodgett, Hill, and Tax (1997) measured on a strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) scale. The coefficient alpha for the sample was .83. The final future usage scale was composed of two-items adapted from Blodgett et al., (1993). The purpose was to capture the complexity of future usage. It is more than just purchasing or not. The first question asked "Since this incident occurred, I will no longer do business with this firm," in true/false format. A false answer leads to the second question, "I will continue to do business with this firm but: not as much, not at the same location, not for certain types of product/services, I avoid certain employees, I will make no changes. All multi-item scales were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis using the principal component analysis and a varimax rotation to test for unidimensionality. Factor Loadings of less than .5 were omitted. Overall, the constructs performed well. The final measurement items for each construct in this study are presented in Table 4.

Data collection and sample profile

A convenience sample was used to examine consumer anger. The study used a student recruited sample. In order to obtain the first sample, forty-eight student recruiters enrolled in various marketing courses at a southern university were used. The use of students as data collectors has been successfully utilized in numerous marketing studies (Martin & Bateman, 2014). The student participants were asked to recruit at least four non-student respondents to go to the website and complete the questionnaire as part of an extra credit assignment. In order to increase the validity of this sample, validation of respondent participation was conducted. A question on the survey asked participants to voluntarily supply their e-mail addresses.

Respondents who provided their e-mail address were entered into a random drawing for \$200 worth of gift cards as an incentive. Each respondent was then contacted and asked to confirm his or her participation in the study. Thirty-four percent confirmed their participation in this study with an email response. Surveys with missing, incomplete, or inappropriate information were deleted. As a result, 279 surveys were retained in the sample.

The survey instrument asked respondents to describe a situation in a service setting that left them angry or dissatisfied which had occurred in the last two years. Next, respondents were asked survey questions focusing on specific details about the incident they chose to share. This study focuses on the answers to those survey questions. Descriptive information shows the sample was 65.6% female, 91% white, and fairly well-educated with a majority of the sample reporting at least some college education. Please see Table 1 for complete demographic information.

Results

Measurement validation

Based on Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) research, a measurement model using CFA was estimated before running the structural model. Results of the CFA indicated that the measurement model for the independent variables adequately fit the data (See Table 2).

Specifically, the RMSEA indicated acceptable model fit with the results falling below the recommended level of .08 for the sample. In addition, the CFI and IFI indexes were above the recommended level of .90.

Results of the CFA for the dependent variables showed the measurement model adequately fit the data (See Table 3). The standardized RMR results fall below the recommended level of .08 and the other fit indices were above the recommended level of .90 for each sample. According to the recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1998), this model achieves acceptable fit for both samples.

Table 1: Respondent demographic information

Characteristics	Categories	%
Age	19-24	21.1
	25-34	21.1
	35-44	10.8
	45-54	34.1
	55-64	8.6
	65-74	.7
	75 and older	0
Gender	Male	30.8
	Female	65.6
Race	White	91.0
	African-American	3.2
	Asian	2.1
	Other	0
Education	Some High School	.7
	High School Graduate	7.5
	Some College	25.8
	College Graduate	48.0
	Graduate Level or above	14.3

Table 2: Independent variable fit indices

Goodness of Fit	1
Degrees of Freedom	254
Min Fit Function Chi-square	605.38 (p=0.0)
RMSEA	.076
Standardized RMR	.077
GFI	.84
CFI	.94
IFI	.94
RFI	.88

Table 3: Dependent variables fit indices

Goodness of Fit	1
Degrees of Freedom	24
Min Fit Function Chi-square	26.16 (p=0.35)
RMSEA	.018
Standardized RMR	.033
GFI	.98
CFI	1.00
IFI	1.00
RFI	.98

Next, reliability and construct validity were examined for the independent variables in the sample. Tables 4 show composite reliabilities and average variance measures were above the desired levels at .60 and .50. The composite reliabilities and average variances extracted were acceptable for all three dependent variable constructs.

Testing for the proposed structural model

The results of the structural model with a maximum likelihood estimation method are presented in Table 6 and Figure 2. The overall fit was adequate. The results indicate that the chi-square is significant. However, the sample size makes this finding questionable. The fit indices fall inside the limits suggested by Hu and Bentler (1998) except for GFI. The relationship between consumer anger and future usage was significant. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported.

The relationship between consumer anger and negative behaviors was tested. The relationship was significant. Hypothesis 2 was supported. Next, the relationship between firm control and consumer anger was tested. Hypothesis 3a was supported. The relationship between firm control and negative behavior was negative and significant. As a result, hypothesis 3b was supported. The relationship between firm control and future usage proved not to be significant. Hypothesis 3c was not supported. Stability and consumer anger were significant. The stability and future usage relationship was negative but not significant. Firm blame and consumer anger exhibited a positive relationship. Hypothesis 5a was supported. The relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and consumer anger was negative and significant for the sample. Hypothesis 6a was supported. Finally, the relationship between psychological contract fulfillment and future usage was significant and positive. Hypothesis 6b was supported.

Table 4: Confirmatory factor analysis of independent variables

Scale Name	Item	Std Loadings	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Psychological Contract Fulfillment	I felt that I received everything I was entitled to in this situation.	.79	.88	.65
	I felt that this firm came through in fulfilling its promises to me.	.88		
	I was treated fairly in this situation.	.62		
	In the end, I felt like I got a fair deal.	.73		
Anger	I felt angry.	.69	.82	.5
	I felt like yelling at someone.	.79		
	I felt like swearing.	.65		
	I felt outrage.	.87		
	I felt frustrated.	.55		
	I felt inconvenienced by this incident.	.34		
Firm Control	The incident you described was controllable by the firm.	.78	.82	.60
	The incident you described was intentional.	.71		
	The firm or employee who handled the situation was responsible.	.84		
Stability	I believe that situations like what I experienced are probably quite common at this firm.	.95	.93	.81
	The situation I	.86		

	experienced with this firm is likely to happen to other customers.			
	Situations like what I described probably happen all the time at this firm.	.89		
Firm Blame	I believe that situations like what I experienced are probably quite common at this firm.	.87	.88	.71
	The situation I experienced with this firm is likely to happen to other customers.	.78		
	Situations like what I described probably happen all the time at this firm.	.87		

Table 5: Confirmatory factor analysis of dependent variables

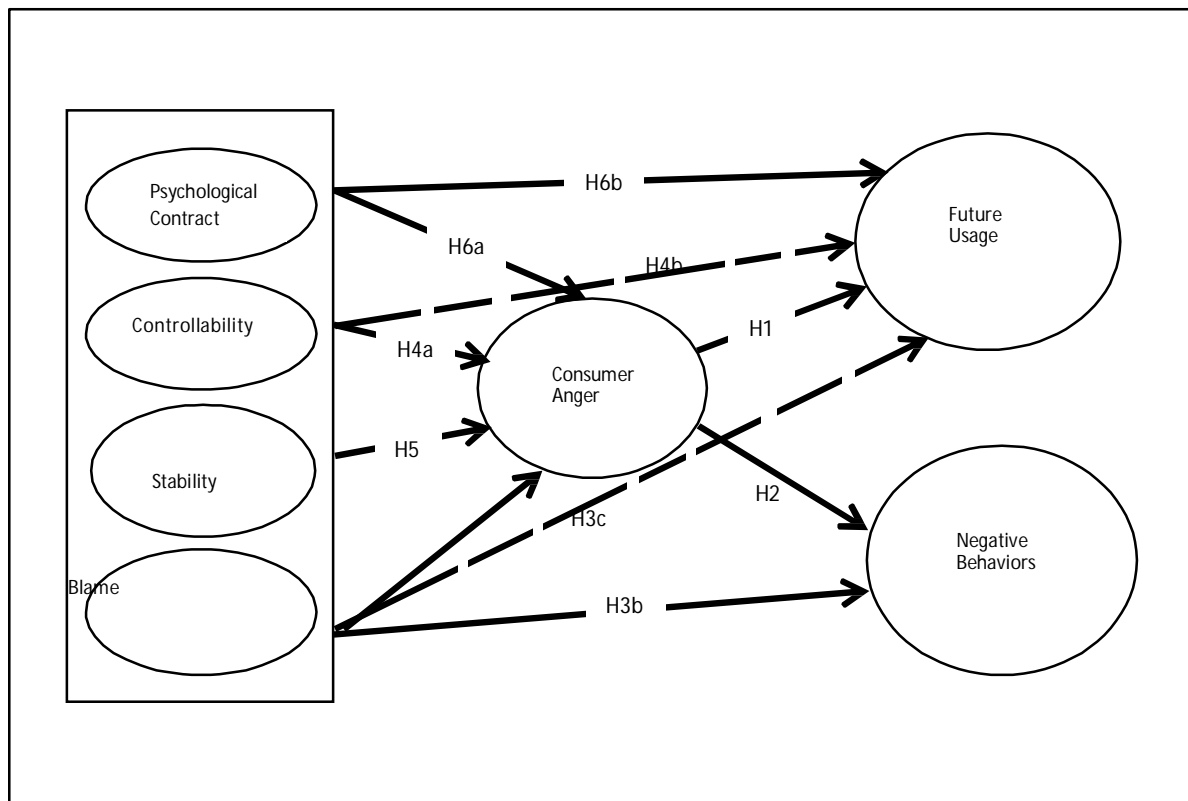
Scale Name	Item	Std Loadings	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Likelihood of Negative Behavior	I wanted to place a fake order in order to hurt the firm.	.65	.77	.53
	I wanted to use name calling or obscenities to vent my frustration.	.78		
	I wanted to intentionally damage the firm's property.	.76		
Complaint Behavior	I wanted to complain to a third party.	.61	.83	.62
	I wanted to complain to my friends and relatives about this firm.	.78		
	I wanted to warn my friends and relatives not to do business with this firm.	.94		
Grudgeholding	I refuse to forgive this company.	.90	.95	.86
	I harbor a grudge against this firm.	.96		
	I have found it difficult to forgive this firm for treating me that way.	.93		

Table 6: Hypotheses results

	Relationship	SRS Estimate	t-value
1	Consumer Anger->Future Usage	-.15	-2.15*
2	Consumer Anger->Negative Behavior	.20	2.52*
3a	Firm Control-> Consumer Anger	.20	2.81**
3b	Firm Control-> Negative Behavior	-.39	-4.59**
3c	Firm Control-> Future Usage	.01	.16
4a	Stability-> Consumer Anger	-.16	-2.24*
4b	Stability-> Future Usage	-.10	-1.57
5	Firm Blame-> Consumer Anger	.33	3.98**
6a	Psychological Contract Fulfillment-> Consumer Anger	-.19	-2.39*
6b	Psychological Contract Fulfillment-> Future Usage	.43	5.55**

*p<.05. **p<.01

Figure 2: Model results



Discussions

The model tested two specific situational aspects: psychological contract and attribution. It showed that the development and subsequent violation of the psychological contract played a significant role in both the experience of consumer anger and in decisions regarding future usage. The applicability of the management concept of psychological contracts sheds additional light on consumer responses.

This finding deepens our previous understanding of dissatisfied consumers and moves beyond the expectancy disconfirmation theory. The psychological contract encompasses the importance of consumer expectations but also takes into account the relationship history. From the consumer perspective, violations of the psychological contract are essentially broken promises or betrayals of trust. As a result, managers must be aware that breaches of trust in consumer relationships come with severe consequences. These types of occurrences are accompanied by intense emotional reactions and increased likelihood of participation in negative behaviors. Consumers who believe they have a close relationship with a firm tend to view service failures as betrayals or exploitation of the prior relationship and are more likely to take the seller's actions personally (Xia, Monroe, and Cox, 2004).

The results of this study support the assertions of the attribution theory. This study only adds to already extensive literature regarding the appropriateness of this theory in service failure situations. Moreover, for all three dimensions, the direct relationship to consumer anger was significant. This is important because it reconfirms how critical explanations for failure are in consumer processing of events. In some cases, employees may be able to de-escalate emotionally intense situations by assuring consumers that such occurrences are not common place and are unlikely to occur in the future. Such efforts could reduce the emotional intensity of a consumer anger experience.

Surprisingly, firm blame proved to impact the consumer anger experience more than control or stability. This finding supports prior research which asserts that externally placed blame results in anger. In addition, the results indicate that blame is the most influential dimension of attribution at play in the experience of consumer anger. Stability and control did not have an effect on consumer future usage decisions directly. So these elements alone do not damage consumer-firm relationships but in concert together they do have to ability to intensify consumer anger levels and influence future usage decisions indirectly.

Another contribution of this study is the testing of the psychological contract in the consumer context. The results indicate support for this concept in terms of its effect on both the consumer anger experience and future usage decisions. The more consumers felt their psychological contract had been violated the less likely they were to continue their relationship with the firm. This concept provides some insight into what goes into developing consumer expectations and how violating those expectations lead to consumer anger.

This research builds on existing dissatisfaction literature by examining the role of a specific emotion namely consumer anger. This research adds to the limited knowledge of anger in the consumption setting. An additional contribution of this research was the breaking down a broad range of dissatisfactory experiences and examining specific commonality that existed and contributed to the experience or intensity of anger as well as the behavioral outcomes. Thereby building on the findings of Daunt and Harris (2012) which indicated that certain conditions could be used to predict consumer participation in negative behaviors. Altering future usage patterns and participating in negative behaviors by consumers indicate deterioration in the consumer-firm relationship. Managers must be concerned with the precipitating event that turn once coveted consumers into feared enemies. By understanding what customers feel and how they react to these emotions, managers will be more effective in tailoring their responses in order to prevent, diminish, and control the damage done through by failures.

Limitations & future research

While the model in this study was a good fit, it is entirely possible that other models could also have been appropriate. There may also be additional factors at play in this process that were not examined in this study. It is important to note that this study sample was taken primarily from respondents living in the southern region of the United States. It is possible that the geographic location may have biased responses and therefore is a limitation of generalizability.

Certain individual differences may also influence consumer anger responses. For example, one's trust and commitment levels could influence the consumer anger experience. For example, consumers' high in commitment may be less affected by service failures thereby protecting offending firms. Future research could examine how different levels of trust and commitment alter the experience of anger.

In addition, future research could also examine the role of relationships in either mitigating or intensifying the experience of consumer anger. Does relationship length or quality serve to protect firms from the effects of service failures? What are the boundaries of these factors? More research into the development psychological contracts for consumers is warranted given the findings of this research.

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