

UNFOUNDED VERSUS DISHONEST COMPLAINTS: AN OBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT BY A TEAM OF EXPERTS

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ABSTRACT

Service researchers and employees often equate unfounded (unsubstantiated) complaints with dishonest (intentionally misleading) complaints. The difference, however, is conceptually, morally, legally, and strategically relevant. A team of experienced and independent industry, legal, and academic experts found, in multiple case studies using a unique dataset of 226 complaint files from an independent third-party arbitrator, that the majority of customer complaints are unfounded but not dishonest. Unfortunately, many customers perceive typical product characteristics as faults after purchase. Firms should clearly communicate product characteristics (often unknown to customers) and not treat unfounded complaints as dishonesty, to prevent escalation.

INTRODUCTION

“The customer is always right” proclaimed Harry Gordon Selfridge of the famous London department store. He advocated, around 1909, that complaints be treated seriously so that customers would not feel deceived. With the rise of customer- and relationship-oriented marketing, the motto became immensely popular. The mainstream of service recovery researchers has held the same assumption: that customer complaints are motivated by real dissatisfaction resulting from genuine service failures (e.g., Reynolds and Harris 2005). The common starting point was that customers would not deliberately complain without a cause and that organizations should therefore always encourage complaints (e.g., Bennet 1997; Prim & Pras, 1999).

However, as early as 1914, some voices proclaimed that the customer is not always right. Salesman Frank Farrington warned (in his 1914 book “Successful Salesmanship: Is the Customer Always Right?”) that customer complaints may be opportunistic or fraudulent, and that if companies were always to settle them at face value, they would be subjected to inevitable losses. In recent years, there is growing concern among both practitioners and academics that Farrington has a point, and that indeed a growing portion of customer complaints is perhaps dishonest. The popular press regularly provides examples of far-fetched claims of dishonest customers. On Reddit, for instance, is the story about the “Fried Hard Drive Guy”, who wiped his hard drive with a large magnet and claimed that it had mysteriously died, a week before the warranty ended. The loss of revenue because of this kind of warranty abuse is estimated by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC, 2010) at 3 to 5% (and billions of dollars) in the US alone. To avoid being scammed, firms like Apple consider implementing a “consumer abuse detection system” consisting of liquid, thermal and shock sensors in their electronic devices. This system would enable service personnel to determine whether a failure is due to customer abuse or damage.

Based on these developments, the service recovery literature recognized that consumers sometimes voice complaints in situations of satisfaction (Halstead, 2002; Dahl & Peltier, 2015)

and developed a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate complaints (see Arora and Chakraborty, 2020, for an overview). Complaints are considered legitimate if they result from genuine dissatisfaction after a product or service failure (Arora & Chakraborty, 2020; McQuilken *et al.*, 2013; Susskind, 2015) and as illegitimate when customers deliberately create inauthentic complaints without having experienced actual service failure and dissatisfaction (Baker *et al.*, 2012; Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Khantimirov & Karande, 2018). Service recovery literature has discussed examples of illegitimate complaints (Wirtz & Kum 2004), their prevalence (e.g., Kang and Gong 2019; Yagil & Luria, 2016), the types (Huang & Miao, 2016; Reynolds & Harris, 2005) and the drivers of such complaints (Alicke *et al.*, 1992; Harris & Reynolds, 2005; Kowalski, 1996; Marquis & Filiatrault, 2002).

Most of these studies have made use of subjective, self-reported, retrospective assessments of consumers (e.g., Daunt and Harris 2012; Reynolds & Harris, 2009; Harris, 2008) or frontline employees (e.g. Miloslavac 2019; Huang & Miao, 2016; Khantimirov, 2015; Ro & Wong, 2012) to investigate illegitimate complaining. Investigating the customer's and the firm's perspectives is a valid and valuable approach, but it may also suffer from certain disadvantages specific to the context of illegitimate complaining. Because illegitimate complaining is a sensitive issue considered unethical and illegal in most countries, assessments of both customers and frontline employees may be affected by self-serving and attributional bias. Both may have (monetary, psychological, legal) reasons to blame the other party and consider the other party dishonest. Customers are unlikely to admit in a survey or experiment that they themselves are dishonest. Frontline employees might be motivated to maintain that the customer complaint is fraudulent, since admitting that it is not might suggest to others (like their employer) that they themselves are somehow to blame for the product or service failure (and therefore should accept legal responsibility and compensate the customer).

To overcome these biases, Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy (2010) used two independent judges to investigate consumer claims. Their assessment of customer claims is likely to be more independent and objective. The judges, however, were graduate students, and their assessment might be biased by their lack of (expert) knowledge of the products, services and markets involved. An independent, but inexperienced judge might be unfamiliar with the professional, legal and industry standards in the delivery of specific products and services. Assessing, for instance, whether a complaint about the reupholstering of antique furniture is unfounded is difficult without expert knowledge of that service.

A bias that is particularly prevalent in the context of illegitimate complaints is to infer dishonesty from behavior. How easy it is for researchers to erroneously infer dishonesty from observing behaviour alone was demonstrated by Rabinowitz *et al.* in 1993. Previous research had conducted an experiment in which customers purposely overpaid for an item at the checkout. Many cashiers kept the overpayment, and researchers concluded that they were dishonest. Rabinowitz *et al.* repeated the experiment, adding a situation in which customers paid not too much but too little. Many cashiers did not notice. Rabinowitz *et al.* concluded that at least some of the over-payments kept by cashiers can be explained by carelessness or inattention, not dishonesty.

In the context of complaints, this bias might lead customers, employees, and researchers to conflate two key aspects of complaints: whether they are unfounded (i.e., unsubstantiated, baseless) and whether they are dishonest (i.e., consciously and deliberately misleading). Service recovery literature uses many labels that imply that these two key aspects go hand in hand, i.e., that an unfounded complaint is *ipso facto* dishonest. Illegitimate complaints are called faked (Day *et al.*, 1981), fraudulent (Wirtz & McColl-Kennedy, 2010; Kowalski, 1996; Piron & Young, 2000),

feigned (Reynolds & Harris, 2005), fictitious (Baker *et al.*, 2012), dishonest (Reynolds & Harris, 2005), opportunistic (Ro & Wong, 2012; Ping, 1993; Van Kenhove *et al.*, 2003; Reynolds & Harris, 2005), inauthentic (Kang & Gong, 2019), unfair (Berry & Seiders, 2008), cheating (Witz & Kuhm, 2004), bad (Yi & Gong, 2006), unethical (Telli *et al.*, 2018), deviant (Moschis & Cox, 1989) and aberrant (Fullerton & Punj, 1993).

Not all unfounded complaints, however, may necessarily be dishonest. An unfounded claim may come from an honest person, i.e., someone who is convinced that her claim has merit and therefore (subjectively speaking) experiences sincere service failure and dissatisfaction, but who's claim is nevertheless (objectively speaking) baseless. This distinction between unfounded and dishonest is relevant for conceptual, moral, legal, and strategic reasons. The distinction is conceptually important because it distinguishes between behavior (an unfounded complaint) and motivation (dishonesty). The distinction is also important because of the difference in moral and legal assessments of a customer who makes an honest mistake in his assessment of a product or service (for instance, because of a lack of expertise), and a customer who deliberately tries to scam a retailer or manufacturer. For firms, the difference is strategically important because presumably they would like to address cheating customers differently from mistaken or uninformed customers during service recovery.

The current study aims to complement and extend existing approaches and contribute to the existing knowledge about complaining by introducing the important distinction between unfounded and dishonest complaints and exploring it with a unique dataset and approach. The dataset consists of 226 complaint cases of the Dutch Foundation for Disputes Committees (SGC), which contain real-life (not experimental), contemporary (not retrospective), two-sided (not one-sided) correspondence and documents from both buyer and seller. These rich complaint cases will be assessed by a team of independent and impartial technical, legal and academic experts. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in which the prevalence and types of unfounded / dishonest complaints are investigated by a team of experts, using such a unique and rich dataset.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Dishonest versus Unfounded Complaints

Illegitimate complainers are dishonest customers who exploit opportunities for personal gain with little consideration for principles or consequences (Wirtz & McColl-Kennedy, 2010). In the literature, these illegitimate complaints are also known as fake, fraudulent, feigned, fictitious, dishonest, opportunistic, inauthentic, unfair, cheating, immoral, or unethical complaints (e.g., Telli *et al.* 2018). Both the definitions and synonyms of illegitimate complaints highlight that existing research considers them not only unfounded (i.e., unsubstantiated, baseless) but also dishonest (i.e., consciously and deliberately misleading).

This study argues that – while dishonest complaints are automatically (at least to some degree) unfounded - not all unfounded complaints need to be dishonest. An unfounded claim may come from an honest person, i.e., someone who is convinced his claim has merit and therefore (subjectively speaking) experiences sincere service failure and dissatisfaction, but who's claim is nevertheless (objectively speaking) baseless. This may be the case -for instance- when consumers misunderstand product or service attributes and honestly think that the product or service is defective. For instance, a customer may have ordered a kitchen in a specific colour from the firm's showroom. When the kitchen is installed in his home, however, the customer is convinced it is the wrong colour. The customer is sincerely dissatisfied and complains. He does not realize that the

color difference is caused by the difference in lighting conditions between the showroom and his house. His complaint is unfounded, but not dishonest. Had this customer participated in a survey about his complaint, he would have been unable to report that it was an honest mistake caused by his own lack of expertise in correctly judging the product or service failure. Self-reported measurements cannot reveal what respondents themselves are not aware of.

The present study will focus on these two different aspects of illegitimate complaints (unfounded and/or dishonest), explore their prevalence and types, and compare and confront the findings with findings from previous research. An unfounded complaint is a complaint for which there is no factual basis in the quality of the product or service when compared to professional, legal and industry standards by independent experts. A dishonest complaint is a complaint which is consciously and deliberately misleading the firm for personal gain.

Prevalence

There is consensus in the literature that although dishonest complaints are relatively rare and exceptional (e.g., Kang & Gong 2019; Prim & Pras, 1999), their numbers are increasing (e.g., Khantimirov & Karande 2018; Baker *et al.*, 2012; Reynolds & Harris, 2005), while maintaining that the majority of complaints are honest (e.g., Kang & Gong 2019; Yagil & Luria, 2016). Clear objective evidence about the proportion of complaints that is unfounded and/or dishonest, however, is missing, because subjective and inexperienced perceptions of customers and employees have been used, as outlined above. Some authors (Baker *et al.*, 2012, p. 301) even suggest that “it is not possible to accurately gauge the extent of dishonest customer complaining” due to the issue's sensitivity and the potential for bias. This study is the first to use the objective and impartial assessment of technical, legal, and academic experts to assess unfounded complaints. Comparing our results with the results of previous research should provide a clearer picture of the prevalence of unfounded and dishonest complaints. In this, we start from the realization that while all dishonest complaints are (to some degree) unfounded, not all unfounded complaints are necessarily dishonest.

Types

There is no typology of dishonest *complaints* in literature, but several typologies of dishonest *complainants* do exist. In these typologies, the perceived motives (like dishonesty or financial greed or opportunism) and behaviour (like filing unfounded complaints) are mixed in with the frequency of complaining (like repetitive or occasional), the viciousness of complaining (like grumblers or tyrants) or the origins of the behavior (like conditioned or professional). These typologies are based on the assessment of either consumers or employees. Huang and Miao (2016), for instance, identify opportunistic plotters, repetitive grumblers, and occasional tyrants. Reynolds and Harris (2005) identify on-off complainers, opportunistic complainers, conditioned complainers and professional complainers. While it may be theoretically and managerially important to distinguish these differences at the complainant's level, it is important to acknowledge that the same person (complainant) may complain in different (unfounded) ways in different situations.

This study aims to develop a typology of unfounded complaints based on the objective characteristics of the complaint. For instance, a complaint may be unfounded because a product fault is reported, even though, according to the experts, it does not exist. Alternatively, it may be unfounded because a cause for that product fault has been reported, which, according to the experts, is impossible. Alternatively, it may be unfounded because the retailer or manufacturer is

blamed for the product failure, although it cannot be (according to the experts) her fault. By focusing on the complaint alone (rather than the complainant), this conceptualization avoids conflating (and thereby obscuring) characteristics of the complaint with those of the complainant. After objectively assessing whether a complaint is unfounded or not, and which types of unfounded complaints exist, we also try to assess whether certain types of unfounded complaints might or might not be dishonest.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Background of our Data

To investigate the prevalence and types of unfounded complaints, we conducted a multiple-case study in cooperation with the Dutch Foundation for Disputes Committees (SGC). The SGC is an independent third-party arbitrator, supported by the Dutch Department of Justice, several industries, and consumer organizations. The SGC has specialized dispute committees for several industries, such as travel, child care, banking, and public transport. It provides a relatively cheap and easy way for consumers to resolve conflicts with firms. When the SGC receives a complaint from a customer, it first asks both the complainant and the firm for all documents and correspondence. It then requests an independent industry expert to inspect the product and assess the technical validity of the complaint. The expert has extensive experience in that specific industry and is familiar with the professional and formal standards. His or her technical report is sent to the complainant and the firm, who may respond to it in writing. All documents are then sent to the corresponding disputes committee. The committee consists of three independent members: one appointed by the Dutch Consumer Association, one by the appropriate industry, and a chairman, usually an experienced judge or a lawyer. They study the files, hear both parties in a trial and formulate a binding decision, which is delivered to both parties within six weeks.

Sample

Our sample consists of 226 case files, including all the information involved in the procedure of the committee on “home furnishing”. Specifically, the case files contain (1) the completed SGC form, with all relevant details about the complaint, the complainant and the firm, (2) basic documents, like proof of purchase and warranties, (3) all correspondence between customer and firm, like e-mails, letters, affidavits and reports of oral communications, (4) a technical report by an independent industry expert on the technical validity of the complaints, (5) the written responses of both parties to the technical report, and (6) the final decision of the committee on the legal validity of the complaints.

The “home furnishing” committee handles complaints about kitchens, bathrooms, floors, curtains, wallpaper, upholstery, and furniture. Our sample of 226 case files (approximately 18,000 pages) contains 601 complaints (one file typically contains more than one complaint) about the quality of the product or service. Table I shows the distribution of cases across home-furnishing categories and their average case values.

The total value of all cases is approximately €1.5 million. In 145 case files (64%), the complainant is male, in 79 case files (35%), the complainant is female, and in 2 case files (1%), the complaint is filed by a couple. On average, the correspondence between the customer and the firm in the service recovery phase covers about one year. The third-party arbitration phase takes about 9 months.

Table 1
Distribution of Cases Over Home Furnishing
Categories and Average Case Value

	Number of case files	Average case value
Furniture	95 (42%)	€2978
Floors	59 (26%)	€5550
Kitchens	54 (24%)	€13374
Bathrooms	11 (5%)	€14105
Other	7 (3%)	€2268
Total	226 (100%)	€6600

Procedure and Research Design

Prevalence and types in the case files were investigated using the following procedure.

Prevalence. To be able to assess the proportion of unfounded complaints objectively, two academic researchers (one with 25 years of experience as a judge in the SGC) read the 226 case files. They noted in a large spreadsheet (1) the content of all 601 separate complaints, (2) the assessment of the industry expert, (3) the assessment of the committee, and (4) the assessment of the academic researchers. Following our definition of unfounded complaints as “having no factual basis for the complaint in the quality of the product or service when compared to professional, legal, and industry standards by independent experts”, we considered a complaint unfounded if all experts agreed the complaint was unfounded. If experts disagreed, the academic researchers made the final call. This happened in just a few cases, for instance, when the industry expert judged the complaint to be technically valid. However, the committee rejected the claim (only) because, for instance, the complaint did not meet a formal requirement, such as a deadline.

Types. To be able to develop an objective typology of unfounded complaints, research started with open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Both researchers read all complaints and tried to describe what *exactly* made them unfounded (like “customer states that the chair makes a deafening noise when sitting down in it, while in reality, according to the technical expert, it is just a hardly audible squeak ”. In the next phase, axial coding yielded categories of unfounded complaints (e.g., qualitatively or *quantitatively exaggerated*). In the final phase, selective coding led to types of unfounded complaints, like *exaggerated problems*. To enhance inter-rater reliability, both researchers coded all complaints, and differences in coding were discussed and decided upon during several meetings. In only a few instances, researchers apparently disagreed. However, these disagreements could be resolved by splitting a single complaint into multiple complaints, e.g., “all the tiles were broken by an incompetent tiler” was split into “all the tiles were broken” (an exaggerated complaint) and “the tiler is to blame for the broken tiles” (an incorrect blame).

RESULTS ON THE PREVALENCE AND TYPES OF UNFOUNDED COMPLAINTS

In this section, we present the main results concisely. We will engage in a more elaborate discussion of the many qualitative insights and provide reflections on these results in the conclusion and discussion sections.

Prevalence of unfounded complaints

Our results indicate (see Table 2) that the majority of case files (51%) contain one or more unfounded complaints.

Table 2
The Number of (Un)founded Case Files

Case files	Prevalence
Unfounded case files	116 (51%)
Founded case files	110 (49%)
Total number of case files	226 (100%)

Types of unfounded complaints

Since our next step is to investigate the key types of *unfounded complaints*, our analysis pertains only to the 116 unfounded case files of Table II. Because case files often contain multiple complaints, these 116 case files contain a total of 217 unfounded complaints. Because each unfounded complaint is considered separately, all unfounded complaints fall into one of the three key categories (see Table 3), which we discuss in detail in order of prevalence.

Table 3
Types of (Un)founded Complaints and their Prevalence

Type of unfounded complaint	Prevalence	Dishonesty
1. Misunderstood characteristics	111 (51%)	Typically not dishonest
2. Exaggerated problems	76 (35%)	Unclear
3. Incorrect blame	30 (14%)	Typically dishonest
Total number of unfounded complaints	217 (100%)	

Misunderstood Characteristics: Unfounded, but Honest Complaints. These are complaints in which product or service characteristics are incorrectly perceived as faults or failures, and are therefore unfounded. More than half (51%) of all unfounded complaints are in this category. Customers complain about an unexpected and unwelcome aspect of the product, which in reality is a regular feature or property of the product or the materials used. In case 224, for instance, a customer complains about the presence of *shading* in a carpet. Shading occurs when darker and lighter areas appear on the carpet due to traffic in the living room, which flattens the carpet pile slightly in some areas, resulting in a different reflection of light. The expert, however, judged this to be a typical and well-known property of the material used, which occurs in some good-quality carpets. It helps break up the plainness of a solid-color carpet and is a characteristic to be enjoyed. Another example would be case 64, in which a customer orders a couch online without visiting a showroom. After delivery, he is dissatisfied with the seating's firmness and considers it a lack of quality. The soft seating (often called “Italian”), however, is by design, and by no means a product fault. Experts agree that there is no objective quality issue in these complaints, and therefore, they are entirely unfounded.

Academic experts agree that these complaints are most likely genuine: complainants have experienced real dissatisfaction because the product unexpectedly had an unknown characteristic they evaluated negatively. This unknown characteristic, however, is not a product fault. The complainants could reasonably be accused of ignorance or of not having done enough to inform themselves of the product's relevant characteristics, but not of deliberate dishonesty. They do not misrepresent the situation, but have failed in their due diligence before buying the product.

2. *Exaggerated problems: unfounded and honest or dishonest complaints.* Approximately a third of complaints (35%) exaggerate the problem at hand. In these cases, typically, there is some ground for the complaint, but customers inflate the problem so that they do not fully reflect reality. In a sense, these are (partly) unfounded complaints.

Some customers exaggerate the problem *qualitatively*; they inflate their assessment of the state of affairs by using (inflated) words and adjectives in their complaints and communications. In case 184, for example, the customer complains about the quality of a custom-made armchair: the inner wooden frame is “seriously damaged”, the construction is “poor,” and the wood is of “inferior quality”. The expert judges, however, believe that there are only a few loose screws, nothing else.

Other unfounded complaints are exaggerated *quantitatively*. In such cases, customers state that the service provider's or retailer's (recovery) performance is worse than it actually is and do so in terms of the numbers and quantities they communicate. In case 138 about a tiled floor, the customer claims that “a very large number of the tiles sound hollow” and says “the entire floor has to be replaced”. The expert, however, finds only one hollow-sounding tile. In this type of case, the perceived lack of quality (by the customer) exceeds the objective lack of quality (as assessed by the experts).

Experts agree that it is hard to assess whether this type of complaint is dishonest. The customer in the example above may honestly feel that many tiles sound hollow, despite the experts' disagreement.

Incorrect Blame: Unfounded, and Most Likely Dishonest Complaints. In 14% of the complaints, customers claim that the problem did not arise from their own negligence or carelessness, but from mistakes in the product's manufacture or the service's delivery, while our independent judges think otherwise. In case 062, for example, the customer complains about “spontaneous” cracks in a glass coffee table after 6 years of continuous use. The experts agree, however, that even if there was a fault in the manufacturing of the glass (of which they found no evidence), this would have manifested itself as cracks in the glass much earlier, in the first days or perhaps weeks of use. At the same time, they found evidence that the cracks resulted from “external pressure” on the glass (such as sitting or standing on the table). In such cases, the customer attributes the problem to the product or the firm, while the experts agree that neither is to blame. In that sense, the complaint is unfounded.

Experts agree that these cases are most likely dishonest, in the sense that the attribution of the cause of the problem to the product or the manufacturer is deliberately wrong, because complainants must know what the real cause is, which is something they themselves have done (like standing on a kitchen top or putting a hot kettle on it, causing cracks), or failed to do (like cleaning the couch or turning the mattresses). The advantage of denying guilt and blaming the firm is, of course, that the firm would have to pay for compensation or repair. Experts, however, cannot be sure that this type of unfounded complaint is dishonest. It could be -for instance, in case 062- that the cleaning staff caused the cracks in the glass coffee table but failed to report this to the owner. The owner then erroneously (but honestly) thinks the cracks appeared spontaneously.

DISCUSSION ON THE PREVALENCE AND TYPES OF UNFOUNDED COMPLAINTS

We rely on the general assessment that unfounded complaints with misunderstood characteristics are likely to be honest, but those with incorrect blame are likely to be dishonest. In contrast, complaints with exaggerated problems are hard to judge for their (dis)honesty. We estimate that, of all unfounded complaints, approximately 30-49% are also dishonest. This directly implies that the majority of unfounded complaints (51%) are due to unintentional mistakes and thus do not result from dishonesty. This contradicts the results from previous research, which suggested that only a minority of complaints are unfounded and all unfounded complaints are dishonest (e.g., Kang & Gong, 2019; Yagil & Luria, 2016).

We found three types of unfounded complaints: misunderstood characteristics, exaggerated problems, and incorrect blame. Most of the unfounded complaints (51%) are misunderstood characteristics. In these cases, all experts agree that there is no evidence that the customer is knowingly and intentionally trying to mislead the firm. There is no indication that they made up or exaggerated “something”. In these cases, the experts agree with the customer that there is “something”. That “something”, however, is not a defect or service failure, but rather an aspect or characteristic that customers did not expect, were not aware of or not well informed about, and evaluated negatively when noticing it. So, although these complaints are *unfounded*, they are *not dishonest*. Most likely, customers have made an unintended mistake due to naivety, ignorance, or lack of understanding of the properties of the product or service.

To further substantiate the conclusion that most unfounded complaints are not dishonest, we conducted an additional analysis to determine whether customer demands for financial compensation are more prevalent in unfounded case files (as one would expect if dishonest motives drive unfounded complainers). The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Types and Prevalence of Secondary Complaints

Demands for Compensation	In unfounded case files (116)	In founded case files (110)	Total	χ^2
for additional costs	8 (6.8%)	13 (11.8%)	21	1.622 (ns ¹)
for foregone earnings	3 (2.5%)	6 (5.4%)	9	1.214 (ns)
for emotional damages	0 (0%)	2 (1.8%)	2	.023 (ns)
for incidental damages	11 (9.4%)	10 (9%)	21	.010 (ns)
total demands	22 (18.7%)	31 (28%)	53	2.671 (ns)

The result of the Chi-square analysis shows that demands for monetary compensation (for additional costs, foregone earnings, emotional damages, and incidental damages) are *not* more present in unfounded case files, supporting the conclusion that although a majority of case files may be unfounded, they are not filed by dishonest, greedy customers.

Finally, one could argue that the fact that these types of complainants have filed their complaints with the SGC is itself a sign that they are not deliberately dishonest, because they know the claim will be thoroughly investigated by a technical expert who would most likely reveal any deliberately misleading claims.

CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

There is growing interest (and worry) among practitioners, the press, policymakers, police, and the public about the public and private costs of customer misbehavior, such as dishonest complaining. However, many researchers agree that it is difficult to gather reliable evidence on the extent and causes, as such behavior is considered unethical and illegal. Previous research relied heavily on the accounts of customers or employees, but these are subjective and biased. Consequently, research failed to recognize that not all *unfounded* (baseless) complaints are necessarily *dishonest* (intentionally misleading). That difference, however, is conceptually, morally, legally, and strategically relevant, because the evaluation and response of practitioners, press, policy-makers, police, and public to customers making an honest mistake is -and should be quite different from the evaluation and response to customers deliberately misleading a firm.

This study argues that an unfounded claim may come from an honest person, i.e., someone who is convinced his claim has merit and therefore (subjectively speaking) experiences sincere dissatisfaction, but whose claim is nevertheless (objectively speaking) baseless. As a matter of fact, our results indicate that while most (a little more than half) customer complaints are unfounded, they are not, in most cases, consciously and intentionally dishonest. Many customers complain about a particular aspect of the product or service that they were unaware of when making the buying decision, but which is evaluated negatively when discovered after delivery. They lament that they never would have bought the item had they known this aspect in advance. Alternatively, they complain that the information was provided in general or euphemistic terms (“all natural materials have slight differences in texture and color”). Many firms, on the other hand, state in their correspondence that the specific aspect need not be explained by the salesperson because it is considered common knowledge, or that they have already explained it (albeit in the small print on the back of a product label).

Our study adds a more objective typology of illegitimate *complaints* to the already existing, more subjective typologies of *complainers* by Huang and Miao (2016) and Reynolds and Harris (2005), acknowledging that customers may file different types of (il)legitimate and/or (dis)honest complaints, sometimes even at the same time.

Our study suggests to service researchers that it is premature to attach labels that suggest dishonesty to illegitimate complaints, like faked (Day *et al.*, 1981), fraudulent (Wirtz & McColl-Kennedy, 2010), feigned (Reynolds & Harris, 2005), fictitious (Baker *et al.*, 2012), dishonest (Reynolds & Harris, 2005), or cheating (Wirtz & Kuhm, 2004). Only when complaining is proven or admitted to be intentionally untruthful, such labels should be used.

While our results of this study suggest a clear distinction between whether a complaint is unfounded and/or dishonest, firm representatives often make the mistake of perceiving an unfounded complaint as also dishonest. This perception may introduce an extra barrier to the relationship and communication between the customer and the firm because it adds the (wrong) perception that the other person is deliberately trying to deceive you to the already existing (and possibly honest) difference of opinion. This may contribute to an escalation of the conflict and may cause the dispute to become personal and harder to solve (Beverland *et al.*, 2010). Firms should avoid escalating the conflict by focusing on the lack of grounds for the complaint, rather than on any supposed improper motivations for the customer's filing. Service personnel can de-escalate the conflict, for instance, by active listening and responding with empathy (Herhausen *et al.*, 2023). This should increase the customer's perception of interactional and procedural fairness,

which, in turn, has a positive effect on satisfaction (Davidow, 2003; 2014) and repatronage intentions, and a negative effect on negative word-of-mouth (Blodgett & Tax, 1993).

Irrespective of how hard it might be for firms in practice to distinguish between dishonest and honest complaints, and between founded and unfounded complaints, we feel it is proper to recommend different approaches in cases where the distinction can be made (Table 5).

Table 5
How to Handle Combinations of
(Un)founded and (Dis)honest Complaints

Complaint	Founded	Unfounded
Honest	1. Firm must honor complaint	3. Firm could honor complaint
Dishonest	2. Firm should try not to honor complaint	4. Firm must not honor complaint

In cases (1) where the complaint is honest and founded, firms have no other (legal or moral) choice than to honor the complaint. Usually, this means compensating the customer, repairing the product, exchanging it for something else, or dissolving the purchase agreement. Such action might also help to retain this honest customer for future business. In cases (4), where the complaint is dishonest and unfounded, firms have no other (moral) choice than not to honor the complaint. This means rejecting the claim and referring the customer to a third-party arbitrator. From a relationship perspective, this is also the wise thing to do, because a firm would not want to spend valuable resources like time, money, and energy in an attempt to encourage dishonest customers who try to scam the firm. In case (3), where the complaint is unfounded but honest, firms could choose to honor the complaint – without agreeing with the complaint or accepting responsibility- to keep the customer satisfied and loyal, and in the hope of future returns. The company may offer something to the customer. Although it is the customer’s mistake and the firm would not legally be obliged to give anything, they also know it is an honest, unintentional mistake and want to help the customer because they feel empathy. Here, the firm could meet the customer halfway by offering to refund half the money, offering a discount on future purchases, or giving a present (depending on brand policy). In cases (2) where the complaint is founded but dishonest, firms should try *not to* honor the complaint, to not encourage dishonesty from this customer (or any other customers). An example of such a complaint would be a customer who complains about an aspect of a product which does not bother him at all (but which is actually a product fault) for opportunistic reasons. If the type B power plug is not included in the packaging of an electrical device, as promised, it is a product fault. However, if the customer lives in Europe, they would never need or use type B power plugs, only type C. If he complains about this only because he saw a better offer for the same electrical device elsewhere, it would be a founded, but also a dishonest complaint. Ultimately, however, the firm may feel legally compelled to honor such complaints. The best thing to do is probably to find a practical solution while avoiding wasting energy, time, and money.

Unfounded complaints can cause several additional problems for organizations. Other than the financial expenses resulting from compensating the complainer, it is often unclear for organizations what actually needs to be improved, since the set of complaints becomes biased due to complaints without any fundamental basis. This can hinder appropriate long-term resolutions of complaints, as changes made to prevent the mistake (that did not take place in the first place) from happening again are solutions to a non-existing problem. This could drive up costs or interfere

with current processes. However, to prevent unfounded complaints, managers need to understand why customers exhibit this behavior. This would help them to prevent it from happening, or at least limit the chances of it happening, and by doing so, improve the service provision processes and complaints handling, and increase the chance of satisfied customers.

Filing unfounded complaints and managing the subsequent process requires considerable time, effort, and money from customers as well. Additionally, as the service recovery process might be complicated and its outcome is uncertain, it might result in anxiety and stress.

Many unfounded (but not dishonest) complaints arise from the customer's pure ignorance, stemming from a lack of proper information and knowledge. There are many ways to overcome this knowledge gap and reduce such complaints, saving time, effort, and money for companies and customers. Companies could provide clear information about important aspects of products and services that are well-known to (sales)people in the industry but less well-known to the general public. Such aspects could include the shading in carpets, the difference in texture and color between leather upholstery, the greater visibility of fingerprints on high-gloss kitchen surfaces, the unexpected fragility of marble kitchen worktops, or the fact that most mattresses and couches settle and become less firm. These are not malfunctions of the product, but properties of the materials used, unknown to a large part of the general public. Firms should not inform their customers about these properties in the small print on the back of the purchase agreement, but more clearly and visibly. Furthermore, in addition to displaying representative samples of products, firms could offer customers the opportunity to test the product at home, thereby providing direct experience with (even the possibly unexpected aspects of) the product or service.

Other strategies to prevent customer dishonesty might include revising service guarantees, which are perhaps too liberal and generous (Khantimirov & Karande, 2020), and increasing opportunistic complaining. When return and exchange policies are consumer-friendly, dissatisfied customers are more likely to seek redress (Blodgett et al, 2015). Large firms should recognize that customers are more likely to be dishonest and have robust fraud detection systems in place (Wirtz, Paluch, & Kunz 2021). Another strategy may be to offer elaborate guarantees only to regular customers or customers in a membership program, since repeat customers are less likely to be dishonest (Wirtz, Paluch, & Kunz, 2021). To limit the negative effects of dishonesty, firms could also assess more thoroughly the actual losses and inequities suffered by dishonest complainants. Such an assessment may suggest a far lower compensation than the dishonest customer demands. The company could also offer a fixed (and limited) compensation amount for complaints, with only a small room for negotiation for the service agent. With this policy, increasing compensation would either be impossible or require the customer to explain his demands to a higher manager (which some dishonest customers are unlikely to want to do). Employees may also lower expectations on the expected gains of dishonesty and the customer's ability to influence the service employee by providing examples from the past, or by providing industry standards related to service recovery and customer compensation (Khamitov et al., 2020). The firm could also (threaten to) blacklist dishonest customers (Khamitov et al., 2020). Companies would need a central database of all compensation payments, accessible for all service recovery personnel to be able to check customers (Wirtz, Paluch and Kunz 2021). Previous research suggests that it is more important to increase the probability of being exposed as a liar than to increase the magnitude of the punishment (Mazar & Ariely, 2006). This suggests that firms should better advise customers that complaints are investigated by experienced, trained investigators, rather than warn them that fraud is subject to a \$100 fine. On the other hand, Deterrence Theory (Dootson et al., 2018) suggests that it is (fear of) punishment that deters (potential) offenders. Seeing others get punished

deters potential future offenders, and being punished oneself deters repeat offenses. Finally, a study by Tran (2021) suggests that identifying the customer as “guest” or “partner” may reduce dishonest behavior. Financial damages to the firm could perhaps be limited by offering a voucher to tempt the customer to accept it, which is often put in a drawer and forgotten about (Jones, 2009).

To prevent unfounded complaints, customers could conduct more research, consult more sources, visit more stores, be aware of their own biases, focus on essential aspects of the purchase, and make an effort to see and experience a product before buying it. They are likely to put in more effort in cases of high-involvement purchases (Elaboration Likelihood Model: Petty and Cacioppo 1984). Indeed, in most cases in our case study, customers were willing to spend considerable time and effort deciding on a new couch or kitchen. They feel all the worse that, despite this effort, they missed one important piece of information - and blame the firm.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in which a team of experts investigated customer complaints objectively and impartially. Our study, however, focused on only one of the committees of the *Geschillencommissie*, the committee on home furnishings. To assess external validity, future research should also investigate complaints from other committees to see whether the results confirm that a majority of complaints are unfounded but not dishonest. Future research should also compare complaints made to the SGC with those made only to affiliated firms. The proportion of both unfounded and dishonest complaints in the last sample may be higher because customers with egregiously unfounded or dishonest complaints are likely to avoid the SGC (and its objective assessment of their complaint).

This study has investigated customer complaints in the context of an arbitral procedure in which the *Geschillencommissie* issues a binding decision. Whether the adversarial nature of arbitration has an effect on the perceptions, orientation, communications and commitment of parties has not been investigated. Future research should investigate whether the planned juridical procedure (settlement through adversarial means in arbitration versus settlement through amicable means in mediation) has an effect on the way involved parties perceive and communicate their grievances about each other to the third party before the trial, and feel committed to the settlement after the trial (e.g., Ross & Conlon, 2000).

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Submitted: 5 August 2024

Revised: 10 February 2025

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