

DIGITAL DYSFUNCTION: CONSUMER GRUDGEHOLDING AND RETALIATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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ABSTRACT

Consumers respond to suboptimal outcomes in a variety of ways, including dysfunctional approaches that may range from passive grudgeholding to aggressive retaliation directed against an offending firm. This paper examines the causes and outcomes of dysfunctional consumer responses through a review of relevant literature, with a focus on the changes that have occurred in what is known as the modern digital era. The impact of the digital era on consumers and on marketers is considered in the context of a shift in power from the marketer to the consumer. Implications and recommendations for future research are included.

Keywords: *digital era, dissatisfaction, complaining, retaliation, grudgeholding, dysfunction, anger, loyalty*

INTRODUCTION

THEN (circa 2000): At a rest stop off the Ohio Turnpike, a middle-aged man was frustrated by his long wait and the poor service he received at a Burger King restaurant. While the only cashier present dealt with another customer at the front of the line, and while several idle employees watched from the food preparation area, the man quietly began to push display items off the counter and onto the floor. Napkins, table tents, straws, condiment packets, all fell down. This retaliatory response was likely noticed by as many as ten people, including customers and employees.

MORE RECENTLY (circa 2009): A folk singer named Dave Carroll saw United Airlines baggage handlers recklessly throwing and damaging his guitar while he sat helplessly on board the plane. Carroll released a video of his band singing “United Breaks Guitars,” based on this experience and his lack of satisfaction from United. That was seven years ago. The original “United Breaks Guitars” video has been viewed 16,097,516 times on YouTube as of December 21st, 2016.

That’s not all: A Google search of the phrase “United Breaks Guitars” yields 125,000 results. This might seem small in comparison to the over 16 million times the original video has been viewed, but keep in mind that each of those 125,000 Google results has its own number of views. Carroll’s retaliation against United Airlines has spawned a cottage industry, including multiple music videos, a website, concert tours, speaking engagements, interviews, television appearances, and even his logo (<http://www.davecarrollmusic.com>). This doesn’t even include the retaliatory website Untied.com, created in 1996 during the early days of the Internet but still in existence today. These examples illustrate the phenomenal rise in social media that has shifted power to the consumer.

Within the realm of consumer research, consumer satisfaction is an important niche (Dahl and Peltier 2015), and consumer dissatisfaction and complaining behavior represent an even narrower categorization. Within this particular area there is an even more refined avenue of research that focuses on consumer responses to negative outcomes and is of growing

importance in a practical sense. Specifically, the areas of consumer grudgeholding and consumer retaliation are highly relevant to marketers, in general and more than ever given the ubiquity of social media in what has been called the Digital Era (Lau 2003).

Consumer responses to dissatisfying outcomes is not a new topic but the increase in what might be labeled dysfunctional responses, including grudgeholding and retaliation, has led to this current paper. The purpose of this paper is to examine research on dysfunctional consumer response and how this area of consumer dissatisfaction has evolved in this, the digital era. Some possible causes of dysfunctional responses will be examined as they relate to changes that have occurred in the digital era. Managerial and marketing implications will also be considered.

CONSUMER RESPONSE TO SUBOPTIMAL OUTCOMES

The study of complaining behavior dates back to well before the dawn of the digital era. The seminal framework for the exploration of consumer dissatisfaction and complaining behavior was developed by Hirschman (1970), who provided the structure for the study of consumers' reactions to dissatisfaction. Hirschman developed three types of responses: exit, voice, and loyalty. The voice response was described as the consumer informing employees, managers, or anyone else about the unsatisfactory situation (Hirschman 1970). Sargeant and West (2001) added three more specific avenues for complaining behavior. *Vocal* describes the situation when consumers express their displeasure directly to the company. *Private* describes negative word-of-mouth behavior and *third party*, also studied by Singh and Wilkes (1996), describes occasions when the consumer seeks help from an outside entity, such as a lawyer, regulatory agency, or the Better

Business Bureau. Third party voice directed toward other potential and current customers, known as word-of-mouth, has also been widely studied (e.g., Richins 1983).

There is a level of assertiveness in voice behavior, even when directed toward a third party. The other category of responses to a deteriorating relationship or unacceptable encounter is called "exit," a consumer removing herself from the relationship or situation (Hirschman 1970). Exit behavior means that the consumer leaves the store or terminates the relationship with the offending business, possibly providing no further information to the firm (Goodman and Ward 1993). In fact, in unhappy buying situations, it is not unusual for customers to avoid a company for years (Otto, Parry, Payne, Huefner, and Hunt 2004; Thota and Wright 2006; Aron, Judson, Aurand, and Gordon 2006). Such exit behavior can also be even less overt, such as a reduction in the number of exchanges or money spent in transactions, or a more gradual exit from the relationship (Aquino, Tripp, and Bies 2006). This response might occur if the consumer is constrained by a monopoly or quasi-monopolistic company (such as a local utility provider) or contractual obligations (such as with a cellular phone service provider). Another constraint might be the depth of involvement or the cost of exiting (monetary and otherwise) the relationship. Examples of this can include a customer's online banking and bill payment or cloud-based digital storage.

Consumer grudgeholding, introduced by Hunt (Hunt, Hunt, and Hunt 1988), represents another multifaceted version of exit behavior. A customer is demonstrating consumer grudgeholding through his negative attitude toward a firm, a planned and persistent avoidance of an offending business, along with possible other actions

that can include complaining and negative word-of-mouth behavior. This sort of response can be seen as a way to cope with a customer's real or perceived grievance against the firm (Aron 2001), to the point that consumers forsake rational behaviors and purchases in order to make a point. While grudgeholding behavior certainly can be seen as a more passive response of avoiding a situation rather than confronting it, recent research has presented a more aggressive if not necessarily more direct category of consumer responses centered around another dysfunctional consumer behavior: retaliation. (See Fullerton and Punj 1993; Harris and Reynolds 2004). Dysfunctional customer behavior includes more aggressive and disruptive responses (Fullerton and Punj 1997, Harris and Reynolds 2004, Reynolds and Harris 2006).

A review of existing literature referring to dysfunctional behavior by customers that might be considered retaliatory reveals no single widely recognized label or definition of the phenomenon but instead a wide range of terms .

For all of these different names, dysfunctional customer behavior is defined as "actions by customers who intentionally or unintentionally, overtly or covertly, act in a manner that, in some way, disrupts otherwise functional service encounters" (Harris and Reynolds 2003 p.145). Huefner and Hunt (2000) defined retaliation in this context specifically as the "type of aggressive behavior done with the intention to get even" (Huefner and Hunt 2000 p. 62). The authors classified 185 respondent stories into six categories or themes, listed in Table 2. Subsequent research on consumer retaliation (e.g., Babin and Babin 1996; Fullerton and Punj 1997; Gabriel and Lang 1997; Nelms 1998; Rose and Niedermeyer 1999; Reynolds and Harris 2006; Gettman and Gelfand 2007; Koprowski and Aron 2013; Traut-Mattausch, E., Wagner, S., Pollatos, O., and Jonas, E. 2015; Kahr, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, and Hoyer 2016) support the categories of Huefner and Hunt and the fact that consumer retaliation is a widespread phenomenon.

TABLE 1
DYSFUNCTIONAL CONSUMER BEHAVIORS

Deviant Consumer Behavior	(Moschis and Cox 1989)
Aberrant Consumer Behavior	(Fullerton and Punj 1993)
Jay customer Behavior	(Lovelock 1994; Harris and Reynolds 2004)
Consumer Misbehavior	(Tonglet 2001)
Desire For Consumer Vengeance	(Bechwati and Morrin 2003).
Consumer Vigilantism	(Mcgregor 2008)
Guerrilla Consumer Behavior	(Koprowski and Aron 2013)
Consumer Brand Sabotage	(Kahr, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, and Hoyer 2016)
Pinocchio Customers	(Harris, Fisk, and Sysalova 2016)

TABLE 2
TYPES OF RETALIATORY BEHAVIORS

Create Cost/Loss	The attempt to cost the offending store money by “creating extra work, spoiling products, placing false orders, etc. (Huefner and Hunt 2000, p. 65)
Vandalism	Causing damage to hurt the business.
Trashing	Making a mess in the place of business. Prior burger king example.
Stealing	With the motivation of attacking the business, not simply obtaining a product without paying.
Negative Word of Mouth	Intending to hurt the business and not simply to warn others.
Personal Attack	“Abusive language, negative feedback to supervisors, or physical aggression” (Huefner and Hunt 2000 p. 67) against a manager or sales representative.

Even with these different terms for what really boils down to retaliatory behavior and dysfunctional behavior in general, the causes of such behavior are fundamentally similar. What might lead a consumer to express responses such as grudgeholding or retaliation? It comes down to the experience of an unfair, unjust, inequitable outcome (Huefner and Hunt 2000; Harris and Reynolds 2004). This might be objective, as in a poorly delivered service with no easily identified recourse for the customer, or perceived such as an unacceptably long wait time. It is no surprise that a customer who has experience a suboptimal outcome, that they did not get the marketing experience they deserve, they feel cheated and taken advantage of (Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998). This deficit in delivery might even occur during the process of secondary service, trying to repair damage already done in rectifying a product or service failure.

This is not simply an economic issue. Huefner and Hunt noted that the customer seeks psychological equity (Huefner and Hunt 2000). After all, consumers who experience injustice

experience emotions such as anger (Kim 1996; Bennett 1997) and anger can lead to an aggressive response (Bougie, Pieters, and Zeelenberg 2003).

Central to the injustice is the attribution of blame: a “grievance felt toward the marketer” (Aron 2001 p. 111). In this sense, the customer identifies the firm or its representative as the cause of the unjust outcome. There are different elements to blame, including locus of responsibility, controllability, and stability (Bougie, *et al.* 2003; Phau and Sari 2004).

DYSFUNCTION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Recall the example at the beginning of this paper. Or remember the Faberge shampoo commercial from decades ago, one that perfectly illustrated the concept of word-of-mouth: “I told two friends, and they told two friends, and so on, and so on...”. For a firm, coping with grudgeholding, with negative word of mouth and the other, more severe and destructive forms of retaliation and dysfunctional behaviors is enough of a challenge. Now scale these impacts exponentially. This is now the digital era.

The “Digital Era” refers to a time in information in its many forms is ready, available, accessible, and immediately sharable as digital media (Lau 2003).

The fundamental drivers of consumer dissatisfaction and complaining behavior have not changed. The digital environment, however, in which suboptimal outcomes occur, has led to profound changes in consumer behavior and the consumer-firm relationship.

From the marketer’s perspective, the digital era has brought tremendous opportunity but also substantial challenges. With the increased collection and stronger analysis of data, merchants have greater access to information about the consumer and information related to their buying behavior. This knowledge allows the marketer do several things, including segment and target their market more precisely, and customize their offering, from how that offering is advertised to how it is made. Phenomena such as retargeting and mass customization are byproducts of the digital era: if a customer virtually walks into a merchant’s digital store, or shares any kind of information, the marketer has little reason not to place their message directly on the customer’s screen and create the kind of options the shopper prefers.

The digital era has also created the need for firms to gather, and the ability to gather, customer satisfaction information at almost any point during a transaction. Furthermore, merchants are able to respond to their information more immediately. This information might arrive in the form of inquiries, orders, feedback during the purchase process, and of course post-purchase commentary. This would include comments directed toward the merchant, both positive and negative, and directed toward the public online. At the same time, the consumer realizes many changes due the new digital environment, including:

- Access to more information and therefore a reduction in the knowledge gap
- Far more choices due to lowered barriers to entry faced by merchants
- The immediate ability to search and price compare, by means of computers and mobile devices
- Greater ease sharing feedback (e.g., van Noort and Willemsen 2012)
- More outlets for response, both positive and negative.

While customer service desks still exist in the brick and mortar environment, complaints can now be shared on merchant’s websites, in the form of product reviews via online retailers like Amazon.com, on websites created specifically to harangue a particular brand (Aron and Muniz, 2002) or share general feedback (e.g., Yelp, Reddit) or directly on a social network site like the Facebook page of the respective company or brand (Einwiller and Steilen 2015; Lee and Song 2010).

These changes are momentous, and have changed the firm-customer relationship in several ways. Consumers are now more involved in coproduction and shared creation of the very content the consume (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). With consumers having a greater role in content creation and customization, along with their increased choices, merchants need to respond immediately to consumer concerns. Customer expectations have risen. Greater competition demands more liberal return policies, even leading firms to snap to attention when a complaint is registered on social media such as Twitter.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

In the digital era, firms must cater to the squeaky wheel. Marketers must manage not only the offering, and the delivery experience they must also manage the consumer response. This has led to firms

directly *bribing* customers to leave positive customer reviews (e.g., Flacy 2012).

While the motivations for dysfunctional consumer behavior might be similar, the environment has changed. The information deficits that made consumers feel helpless against firms have, to a great extent, disappeared. Consumers that seek to make a major purchase such as airline tickets or a car without having availed themselves of the information readily available in the digital marketplace have only themselves to blame. No matter what size or manner of purchase, the digital era has brought about many options where only a few might have existed before.

Marketers too have taken advantage of digital resources with tools such as retargeting and customization of their message and their offering, as well as tracking through digital cookies and maximizing revenue through dynamic pricing. It is through such features and data analysis that marketers can better serve customers by knowing just what they want and when they want it. Marketers can serve themselves in this manner as well, by knowing how much customers are willing to pay and by utilizing pricing approaches that will track a consumer and increase the asking price as their search continues. In this sense, a consumer who thought she could buy an airline ticket or a concert ticket for \$200, only to find the price dynamically rise to \$275 as she prepares to enter her credit card number, might feel the same frustration and helplessness that her parents felt as they walked into a car dealership some thirty years earlier.

While consumers generally had a choice as to whether to purchase from a particular vendor or not, such decisions came with physical, psychological and monetary costs. Now not only is the knowledge gap closed, the cost of switching vendors and stores has precipitously

declined. The phenomenon of showrooming provides an example (<https://www.techopedia.com/definition/28277/showrooming>). When showrooming, a mobile-assisted consumer can visit a brick and mortar retailer to examine and evaluate purchase options, and while in the store, use their mobile device to compare that option to other online options. In this way, a consumer might stand inside of a high-rent retail space, handle and sample a product, and then purchase the product from a rival such as Amazon. The digital era means that customer expectations have risen and unhappy consumers can express their dissatisfaction quickly, on a large scale, and often, in a dysfunctional manner.

What can marketers do? Firms need to control what they *can* control. Marketers need to utilize service-driven strategies and tactics including service scripts (Harris and Daunt 2013). They must be prepared to manage any kind of interaction that might arise. Preparedness represents the firm's best hopes in preventing an escalation of any conflict. Traditional tools still have their place. The demonstration of friendliness and empathy on the part of the frontline employee, the fairness of the outcome, the speed of the response, active feedback and access to organizational contact points (Friman and Edvardsson 2003) can alleviate negative outcomes.

The digital era allows marketers to monitor satisfaction throughout the consumer's purchase. This is a dual-edged sword. With greater attention to customer expectations and level of satisfaction, the constant asking and response could lead to a sort of survey fatigue. It might also lead to even more empowered customers who feel entitled to complain or retaliate if they are not fully satisfied.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In the earliest stages of the digital era, Huefner and Hunt declared that “retaliation is the worst dissatisfaction outcome of all.” (2000, p. 79). More accurately, retaliation, in the digital era of changing roles, heightened expectations, and instantaneous, expanded and easily shared response, is the worst dissatisfaction outcome in ways that marketers and marketing researchers might never have imagined but must now anticipate and overcome.

The above examination of how consumer grudgeholding and retaliation have been affected in the digital era raises many new questions while leaving many long-standing questions in need of continued study. The familiar ideas still seem to apply: when customers are upset, when they feel abused by the system and without solutions to their dissatisfying outcomes, and when they blame the firm, they might be expected to utilize whatever resources they have at their command to gain equity or revenge.

Consumer and marketer roles have changed. Role theory has been used to explain consumer actions with focus on role expectations (Sheth 1967) and how different social positions and roles are associated with certain behaviors and expectations (Goffman 1959; 1967; Biddle 1979; Broderick 1998). This includes the digital market place. Previously realized roles that might have positioned the customer as beholden to the firm, due to their information disparity as well as the effort involved in making a physical purchase, have been disrupted.

The tools of the digital era, available to marketers and to customers, seem to favor transaction-based encounters more than relationship building. As has always been the case, marketers can strive to build trust, equity, even a degree of affection with their customers, the kind that can withstand the occasional suboptimal experience or price

increase. In this sense, it might be expected that such a relationship would help avoid dysfunctional consumer behavior, but this is not necessarily the case. Gregorie and Fisher (2005) found that even the existence of a prior relationship between marketers and customers might be fraught with peril. The authors found that customers with a strong prior relationship would be more likely to forgive a transgression. Yet they also discovered that other customers might feel a greater sense of betrayal, that their relationship has been violated, leading to a retaliatory response.

What outcome, then, does a customer really want, beyond a particular transaction? This is among the several avenues for future research on dysfunctional consumer behavior, including grudgeholding and retaliation. A customer that engages in dysfunctional behavior is not acting in an economically rational way and in fact might be hurting himself in terms of monetary and physical expenditure. The payoff is psychological, and the question remains: does a grudgeholding or retaliating consumer want to teach the firm a lesson in the remedial sense or in the vindictive sense? That is, does the customer want to punish the firm so it can learn from its mistakes and become a better partner? Or does the customer want to hurt the company and gain some measure of revenge?

Another direction for research is the question of image management. To what extent does a disgruntled consumer hope to save face or even establish superiority in light of their outcome, and above all seem like (and feel like) a smart shopper? A consumer who feels that her options have been limited might react in a manner akin to reactance (e.g., Clee and Wicklund, 1980; Lessne and Venkatesan, 1989)

The growing interest in the research on the consumer journey seems well-suited for the pursuit of consumer motivations in

the realm of dysfunctional consumer behavior (e.g., Edelman and Singer, 2015). Such a qualitative approach might allow an understanding of grudgeholding and retaliation in a deeper, more nuanced manner. This includes an exploration of at which point in the purchase process, secondary service response, or overall relationship between the customer and the merchant does the decision to exit, complain, or retaliate actually occur.

CONCLUSION

It was only a few years ago that a disruptive, dysfunctional consumer response was labeled as guerrilla consumer behavior (Koprowski and Aron 2013), among the latest in a long list of names for retaliatory consumer behavior. That term and its definition seem almost quaint now, particularly since the phrase was coined after the events of United Breaks Guitars, and Dave Carroll's retaliatory guerrilla response launched Carroll's internet-fueled (and airplane-fueled) career sky high.

In the digital era, then, dysfunctional consumer behavior to dissatisfying outcomes still exists. It just exists faster, louder, and on a greater scale than ever before.

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