

## GETTING GOOD COMPLAINING WITHOUT BAD COMPLAINING

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the similarities and differences between public and private complaining drivers. The purpose of this analysis is to provide organizations with a set of characteristics that drive value-added public complaining behaviors, while simultaneously avoiding detrimental private complaining behaviors. A sample of 235 consumers who experienced actual service failures in a variety of industries is used to assess these differences. The results suggest that age, attitude toward complaining, and perceived consumer effectiveness are all positively related to public complaining behaviors, but not private complaining behaviors. Income is also negatively related to private complaining behaviors, but not public complaining behaviors. Failure severity is positively related to both forms of complaining behavior. Implications for practitioners are discussed.

### INTRODUCTION

Consumer complaining behavior is a phenomenon of great interest and practical importance in services. Its advancement is contingent upon the application of different samples, data collection procedures, and analytical methods. The practical importance of addressing service failures is well established in the literature (e.g., Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998). For example, service failures and failed responses to customer complaints are costly mistakes for firms to make, as new customers are more costly to acquire than retaining current customers (Hart, Heskett, and Sasser 1990).

In an effort to help organizations learn and improve from service failures, researchers

suggest that organizations promote complaining behaviors from consumers (e.g., Fornell and Westbrook 1984). Public complaining behavior (i.e., complaints made directly to an organization or indirectly through a third party) affords an offending firm the opportunity to make amends for a service failure and potentially retain the affected consumer (Gilly and Gelb 1982; Hogarth, English, and Sharma 2001; Mattila and Wirtz 2004). A downside of promoting public complaining behaviors is that potentially detrimental private complaining behaviors (e.g., negative word-of-mouth and relationship termination) often accompany the public complaining behaviors (Singh 1988). It is therefore of potential benefit to emphasize characteristics that prompt public complaining behaviors without also prompting private complaining behaviors.

Despite the development of Day and Landon's (1977) classification of complaint behaviors and subsequent taxonomy by Singh (1988), few researchers attempt to differentiate between the various types of consumer complaint responses to service failures and simply report general complaint intentions. The results cannot necessarily then be segmented into actionable strategies that benefit firms. For example, employing a call center to handle complaints adds little value if the majority of consumer complaints are lodged in person. Similarly, there is little value in heightening failure severity to induce public complaining if it also decreases satisfaction and leads to negative private actions by the consumer, such as negative word-of-mouth (Weun, Beatty, and Jones 2004). This gap needs to be addressed if firms are to benefit from promoting consumer complaining behaviors. The objective of this research is therefore to compare characteristics that drive public complaining

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behavior to those that drive private complaining behavior.

### **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

Providing superior complaint handling and service recovery have been highlighted in literature as a source of competitive advantage (Richins 1981; Stevens and Gwinner 1998; Tax, Brown and Chandrashekar 1998). This system requires policies and procedures that make complaining easier for customers. Despite the suggested benefits of such a system, a considerable disconnect exists between theory and practice, as service organizations tend to shy away from complaint management (Fornell and Westbrook 1984). Barnes and Kelloway (1980) suggest that the source of this gap stems from the universally negative connotation that complaints carry.

A more specific explanation is perhaps the inability to separate value-adding complaining (e.g., complaints that help the firm improve service offerings or assist in retaining customers who experience service failures) from value-subtracting complaining (e.g., complaining that reduces the customer base or share-of-wallet). Service organizations are typically reluctant to promote general complaining because complaining is often viewed as a negative outcome (Fornell and Westbrook 1984). However, public complaining (i.e., complaining to the firm) often allows firms to adjust faulty service offerings and make amends in order to retain customers (Ndubisi and Ling 2006; Oh 2006). Private complaining (i.e., complaining to other consumers or ending service with a firm), on the other hand, does not typically offer a firm the chance to repair failures and tends to reduce the customer base (Bearden and Oliver 1985). Firms thereby need to be able to not only to differentiate between public and private complaining behavior, but also to understand what drives each type of

complaining behavior. To address this gap, characteristics expected to generate value-adding complaining (public) are differentiated from characteristics expected to generate value-subtracting complaining (private). Service organizations can then potentially focus on value-adding complaining when building complaint management and failure response systems and limit value-subtracting complaining.

A host of prior literature has provided a strong base of variables from which to compare public and private complaining behavior. Day and Landon (1977) initiated the discussion by classifying complaint actions. Singh (1988) and Blodgett and Granbois (1992) followed with additional classifications and hypothetical models that suggested the importance of variables such as attitude toward complaining, likelihood of success, locus of control. Initially, demographic variables, such as age, gender and income (Kolodinsky and Aleong 1990; Kolodinsky 1992; Otto, Parry, Payne, Huefner, and Hunt 2004), were heavily studied due to their objectivity and because they were relatively easy to determine. Other research began to examine personality and consumerism characteristics, such as assertiveness (Gilly and Gelb 1982), consumer collectivist tendencies (Price, Feick, and Higie 1987), and attitude toward complaining (Richins 1981; Singh and Pandya 1991). Still another stream investigated situational characteristics, such as failure severity (Weun, Beatty, and Jones 2004) and attribution of fault (locus) (Otto, Parry, Payne, Huefner, and Hunt 2004).

Despite the value inherent in testing an isolated set of variables, the majority of prior research does not compare value-added complaining (public) to non-value-added complaining (private). Respondents are typically either placed in contrived situations, as in the case of DeWitt and Brady (2003), asked about general complaining behavior, as in the case of Voorhees and Brady (2005), asked

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only about either public or private complaining behaviors, as in the case of Richins (1983), or examined as only complainers or non-complainers, as in the case of Bennett (1997). Kolodinsky and Aleong (1990) provide an assessment of complaining behavior that compares actual complainers to non-complainers across both private and public responses. The variables in the study, however, are limited primarily to demographics and attitude toward complaining. This research extends Kolodinsky and Aleong's work by collectively assessing additional public and private complaint predictors resulting from real service failures.

A host of different variables have been used to examine the nature of complaining behavior. These can be broken down into demographic, psychological, situational, and consumerism categories. Demographic variables constitute objective characteristics of consumers, such as age, gender, and income. Psychological variables are aspects of personality, attitudes, or traits that might increase or decrease a consumer's propensity to complain. Situational variables are aspects derived from a specific service failure event. These often relate to the type and extent of service failure. Consumerism variables refer to beliefs about the market and may indicate goals surrounding complaining rather than underlying personality traits. This research takes a broad focus and examines all of these categories in a combined analysis. **Figure 1** summarizes the conceptual framework and the hypothesized relationships described in the subsequent sections.

### Demographic Variables

Demographics are among the oldest and most common predictors used in complaining behavior. The advantage of demographic measures is that they provide an objective means of comparing complainers to non-complainers (Keng, Richmond, and Han 1995). For example, it is relatively easy in most cases to visually or verbally distinguish between males and females. The

demographic characteristics investigated in this research are age, gender, and income, as these are some of the most prevalent demographic variables discussed in complaint research.

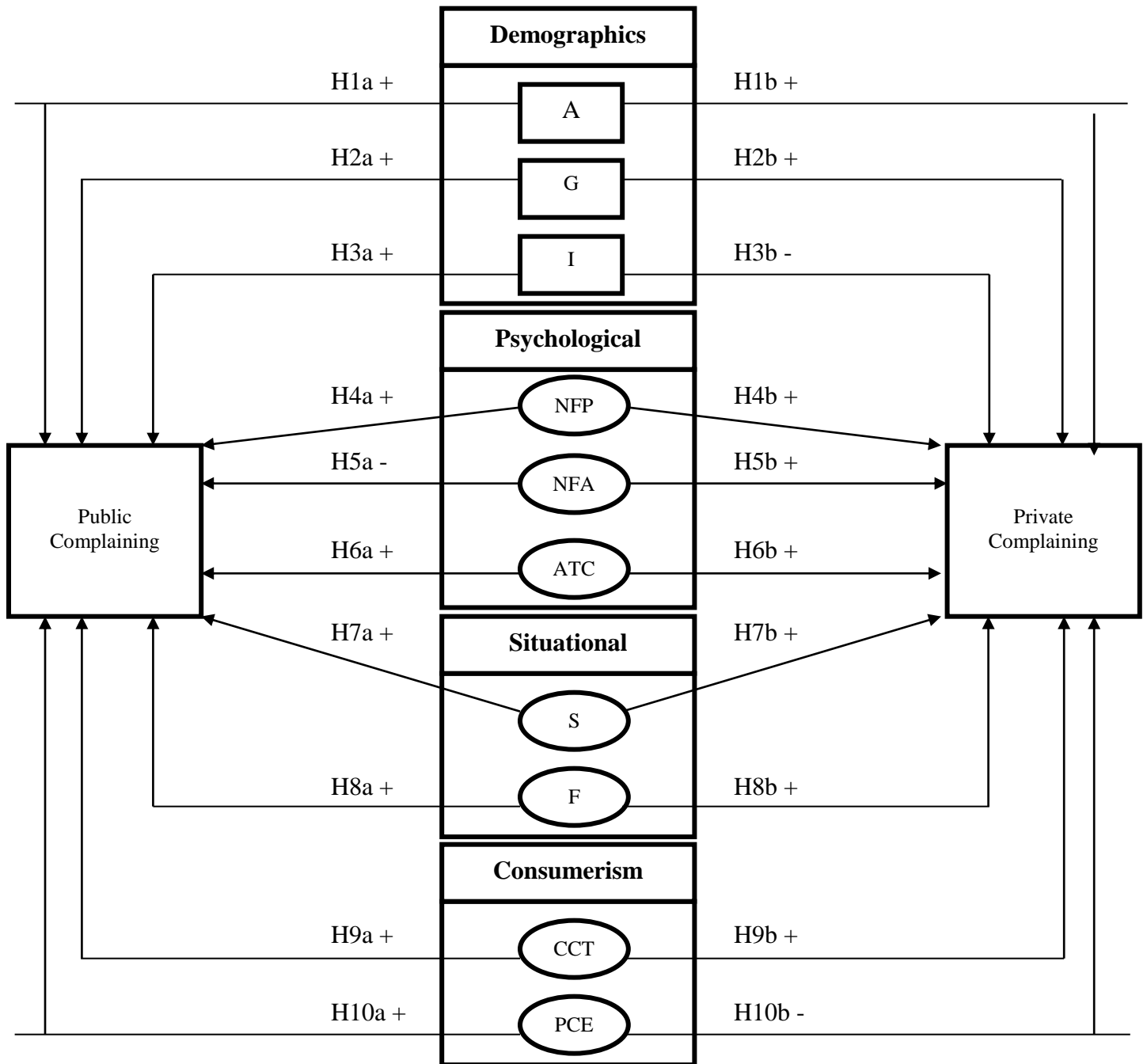
Age is frequently used to predict complaining behavior, though its impact is often indiscernible (Bolfing 1989; Kolodinsky 1992; Palmer, Beggs, and Keown-McMullan 2000). For instance, Bearden (1983) found that age negatively relates to complaining behaviors in the auto mechanic industry, while Bolfing (1989) found no relationship in the hospitality industry. In a more general context, age has been shown to positively correlate to public complaining behaviors (Kolodinsky 1992; Keng, Richmond, and Han 1995). Older consumers are expected to publicly complain more than younger consumers due to accumulated knowledge and experience in dealing with service failures (Kim, Kim, Im, and Shin 2003; Kolodinsky 1993). Knowledge and experience are shown to bolster self-efficacy (i.e., a belief in one's abilities to accomplish tasks), which in turn facilitates complaint efforts (Keng, Richmond, and Han 1995).

Private complaining is also expected to exhibit a positive relationship to age, but for different reasons. Specifically, older consumers are more likely than younger consumers to stop patronizing (private complaining) firms that fail them (Kolodinsky 1992; Otto, Parry, Payne, Huefner, and Hunt 2004; Ndubisi and Ling 2006). Further, elderly consumers often seek information from interpersonal sources (i.e., word-of-mouth) when deciding what stores to patronize or what products to purchase (Lumpkin and Greenberg 1982). Taken together, these suggest that older consumers are more likely to commit private complaining behaviors than younger consumers. The above discussion suggests the following set of hypotheses:

**H1a:** The probability of public complaining increases with age.

**H1b:** The probability of private complaining increases with age.

**FIGURE 1**  
Conceptual Framework and Summary of Hypotheses



Note: A = Age, G = Gender, I = Income, NFP = Need for Power, NFA = Need for Affiliation, ATC = Attitude toward Complaining, S = Severity, F = Fault, CCT = Consumer Collectivist Tendencies, PCE = Perceived Consumer Effectiveness



## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Though females are shown to communicate complaints in the same manner as males overall (Garrett, Meyers, and West 1997), there is strong evidence to suggest that females voice complaints to firms and friends more frequently than males (e.g., McColl-Kennedy, Daus, and Sparks 2003). The advantage of understanding gender differences is that gender is relatively easy to discern in person and over the phone (public complaining) (McColl-Kennedy, Daus, and Sparks 2003). The stereotypic tendency of females to desire and focus on communicative behaviors more than males (Fischer and Arnold 1994) suggests that females are more likely than males to commit word-of-mouth behaviors (private), whether positive or negative.

Public complaints are also more likely the domain of females than males. This is because females expect greater relational continuity, have higher expectations of recovery, and view failures as less stable than do males (Hess, Ganesan, and Klein 2003). In essence, females are more likely to complain to a service provider than males because they expect more from an organization, believe more strongly that the service failure experience is aberrant, and are not as willing to sever ties with organizations. The above discussion suggests that females are more likely to publicly and privately complain than are males. This leads to the following hypotheses:

**H2a:** Females are more likely to complain publicly than are males.

**H2b:** Females are more likely to complain privately than are males.

Income level is another useful predictor of complaining behavior, as it is strongly related to education level (Day and

Landon 1977). Those with greater income tend to be more educated and hence savvy about how to complain to organizations (Ngai, Heung, Wong, and Chan 2007). The complaint process is thus less cumbersome and tends to be a more critical element of the service encounter for consumers with higher levels of income. In addition, higher income consumers often believe that they should receive superior treatment in exchange for their financial remuneration (Ngai, Heung, Wong, and Chan 2007). Specifically, higher income consumers tend to pay more for services and hence expect higher service levels, which include response to complaints. This suggests that consumers with greater income will be more likely to commit public complaining behaviors.

Income is also related to social status and normative behaviors. Specifically, work on status and social movements (e.g., labor strikes and boycotting) suggests that lower income consumers are more likely than higher income consumers to stop purchasing or commit negative word-of-mouth (cf. Dixon and Roscigno 2003). Lower income heightens concerns about material losses and tends to drive lower income consumers to communicate with each other in order to mobilize against a failing firm (Dixon and Roscigno 2003). Income level is thus expected to positively relate to public complaining, but negatively relate to private complaining (Bearden 1983; Kolodinsky and Aleong 1990). This suggests the following pair of hypotheses:

**H3a:** The probability of public complaining increases with income.

**H3b:** The probability of private complaining decreases with income.

### Psychological Variables

Common psychological variables associated with the study of complaining behavior are assertiveness (Fornell and Westbrook 1979), aggressiveness (Day 1980),

and attitude toward complaining (Richins 1981; Singh and Pandya 1991). An additional psychological variable considered here is need for affiliation (McClelland 1961). Bolting (1989) indicates that research on personality variables is inconclusive. A range of findings among psychological variables suggests that research is still needed to shore up the key psychological antecedents to complaining behavior. Further, psychological variables are suggested to be among the most likely to help distinguish between public and private complaining behaviors (Kolodinsky and Aleong 1990).

A study by Fornell and Westbrook (1979) shows that higher amounts of assertiveness and need for control lead to more complaining, while other studies by Landon (1977) and Bearden (1983) fail to find similar results. An alternative tact is available from McClelland (1961) with the examination of the psychological trait "need for power." Need for power contains the elements of assertiveness, aggression, and control (Mason and Blankenship 1987; Zurbruggen and Sturman 2002). Consumers with a strong need for power enjoy influencing others (McClelland 1961) and a service failure is likely to provide them with the means to satisfy this need.

Publicly, these consumers are likely to attempt to force recompense or cause the service firm to react in a specific way. Need for power should thus increase the probability of complaining publicly. It is through any reaction that this need begins to be satisfied (McClelland 1961). Need for power should be a particularly strong predictor in the case of public complaining behavior, as direct goal achievement (e.g., forcing the firm to do something) produces stronger feelings of satisfaction than indirect achievement (e.g., prompting a friend to boycott the firm) (Mason and Blankenship 1987).

Privately, these consumers may communicate failures to friends in order to influence the purchase decisions of others (Bearden and Oliver 1985; Malafi 1991). In

this sense, consumers derive power from guiding the actions of other consumers rather than forcing a direct response from a service organization. Despite the potentially reduced need fulfillment provided by this less direct form of influence, need for power should also increase the likelihood of private complaining. As a result of the above discussion, the following hypotheses are posed:

**H4a:** The probability of public complaining increases with need for power.

**H4b:** The probability of private complaining increases with need for power.

Need for affiliation is another potential differentiator of public and private complaining behaviors. It refers to a consumer's desire to be around others, to communicate with them, and to maintain meaningful bonds with them (McClelland 1961). Consumers with a strong need for affiliation would therefore be more likely to shop in groups and communicate with others about their shopping experiences (Cheung, Anitsal, and Anitsal 2007), thus achieving their desired goal of affiliating with others. This suggests a propensity for these consumers to commit private complaining behaviors, such as negative word-of-mouth. Further, these consumers are likely to boycott firms that wrong them due to a belief that the firm is violating social norms of reciprocity (i.e., money is exchanged for a certain level of service, which the firm fails to provide) or to defend their personal ideals (Otto, Parry, Payne, Huefner, and Hunt 2004).

Consumers with a strong need for affiliation should also be more likely to shy away from direct confrontation or other negative social episodes because these situations detract from the individuals' goals (Schneer and Chanin 1987). These consumers tend to not want to upset the social balance (Barnes and Kelloway 1980). Hence, need for affiliation should decrease public

complaining behavior. The above discussion suggests the following pair of hypotheses:

**H5a:** The probability of public complaining decreases with need for affiliation.

**H5b:** The probability of private complaining increases with need for affiliation.

Complaining has a negative social connotation associated with it for some consumers (Barnes and Kelloway 1980). For example, complaining may be considered whining or signal weakness by some consumers. Those with more positive attitudes toward complaining are more likely to see complaining as a positive as opposed to a negative. Singh and Pandya's (1991) findings suggest that a positive attitude toward complaining increases the probability of general complaint behaviors.

Attitude toward complaining is primarily related to public complaining behaviors, as it involves a tendency to seek recompense from an organization (Kim, Kim, Im, and Shin 2003; Richins 1981). Consumers that view complaining in a more positive light or find it more acceptable than others have fewer internal barriers to complaining. Having a more positive attitude toward complaining is therefore expected to increase public complaining behavior. Further, Oh (2006) suggests that consumers who are more likely to seek recompense are also more likely to commit private complaining behaviors, such as negative word-of-mouth and exit. Hence, a positive attitude toward complaining is also likely to increase the chance of private complaining behaviors. The above discussion implies the following two divergent hypotheses:

**H6a:** The probability of public complaining increases with a more positive attitude toward complaining.

**H6b:** The probability of private complaining increases with a more positive attitude toward complaining.

### Situational Variables

Situational characteristics are also suggested as key drivers of complaining behavior. Service failure severity is among the most commonly cited contributors to complaining from both disconfirmation of expectations (Bolting 1989) and costs incurred (Landon 1977; Bearden 1983). Service failures can constitute something relatively innocuous like a cold meal at a restaurant, or something relatively devastating, like a caterer that fails to show up at a wedding reception. More severe service failures are expected to constitute greater disconfirmation and incite greater dissatisfaction, thus increasing the likelihood of all types of complaining (Bolting 1989).

A positive relationship between failure severity and public and private complaining is noted by a number of prior studies (e.g., Richins 1983; Weun, Beatty, and Jones 2004). Severity should therefore provide no differentiation between public and private complaining. If this is the case, then failure severity should not be the focus of driving value-added public complaining behavior, as it will also ignite detrimental private complaining behavior. Though it is unlikely for firms to deliberately choose to increase failure severity in an effort to prompt public complaining, a reduction in service failure severity would almost certainly obscure public complaining behavior despite the helpful reduction in private complaining behaviors. This suggests the following two hypotheses:

**H7a:** The probability of public complaining increases with service failure severity.

**H7b:** The probability of private complaining increases with service failure severity.



Service failures may also incite situational attribution. Consumers will likely seek both explanation for service failures and assignment of blame (Curren and Folkes 1987). Attribution traditionally involves locus of control, stability, and controllability (Weiner 1980). Locus of control, also known as fault, is perhaps the most important attribution made by consumers (Folkes 1984; Curren and Folkes 1987) and refers to whether consumers perceive themselves or the service provider to be more responsible for the service failure.

Externalizing fault (i.e., blaming the service provider) is likely to provide consumers with greater conviction and justification for public complaining. Internalizing the service failure is likely to limit both public and private complaining as consumers protect their images and self-esteem (Sirgy 1982). Placing more blame for a service failure on the firm than on the consumer should therefore increase both public and private complaining behaviors (Curren and Folkes 1987). This suggests the following related pair of hypotheses:

**H8a:** The probability of public complaining increases with greater service provider blame.

**H8b:** The probability of private complaining increases with greater service provider blame.

### **Consumerism Variables**

Consumerism variables refer to attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors that are directly related to the market. Sparse attention is devoted to the study of these variables in complaining behavior. These variables include consumer collectivist tendencies (Price, Feick, and Higie 1987) and perceived consumer effectiveness (Ellen, Weiner, and Cobb-Walgreen 1991).

Consumer collectivism is a tendency to be an activist in the market and to look out for other consumers. In effect, these

consumers help police the market. They are often heavily involved in the marketplace and tend to be information seekers (Price, Feick, and Guskey 1995). Activists have been shown to complain more (Bearden 1983). Their watchdog marketplace behaviors include helping companies improve service offerings and communicating service deficiencies to other consumers (Price, Feick, and Guskey 1995). Service failures should catalyze consumer collectivist tendencies, thus increasing the propensity to complain (Jacoby and Jaccard 1981). This suggests that a consumer collectivist tendency positively influences both public and private complaining behaviors. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H9a:** The probability of public complaining increases with consumer collectivist tendency.

**H9b:** The probability of private complaining increases with consumer collectivist tendency.

Perceived consumer effectiveness, or the perceived likelihood of a successful complaint (Kim, Kim, Im, and Shin 2003), is the extent to which a consumer believes complaining will yield a response from the firm in question (Blodgett and Granbois 1992; Blodgett and Anderson 2000). In essence, it refers to how effective consumers believe they will be at getting a response when registering a complaint. According to Voorhees and Brady (2005), firm responsiveness is a key factor in prompting consumers to complain. Public complaining should therefore increase for consumers who believe that firms will respond.

The advantage of perceived consumer effectiveness is that it is expected to have little to do with private complaining, as it is related primarily to actions by firms rather than actions by other consumers (Blodgett and Granbois 1992; Blodgett and Anderson 2000). Thus, it has the potential to be a powerful driver of good complaining, while

minimizing bad complaining. Further, the extent to which a firm responds to a public complaint should limit the extent to which consumers need to seek alternative complaint channels, such as those offered by private complaining. Hence, perceived consumer effectiveness is expected to negatively relate to private complaining. This discussion suggests the following two hypotheses:

**H10a:** The probability of public complaining increases with perceived effectiveness.

**H10b:** The probability of private complaining decreases with perceived effectiveness.

## METHOD

### Sample and Procedures

The data for this study came from a sample of 308 US consumers. Students participating in a marketing course at a large southeastern university were given extra credit for recruiting up to four respondents for the study. A random sub-sample of the participants (20%) was contacted to ensure valid participation. All of the sub-sample confirmed participation in the study.

Respondents completed a self-administered online survey that included the relevant scales, personal description of a service failure incident (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990; Flanagan 1954; Keaveney 1995), action taken as a result of the service failure, and demographic information. An online questionnaire was used to prevent missing data. All questions had to be answered to successfully submit the survey. The median age is 21 with a range from 18 to 69. The sample is split 57% female and 43% male. Median income category for the sample is \$25,001-\$50,000. The sample is 79% Caucasian, 9% Asian, 9% African-American, and 3% other.

Respondents are excluded from analysis if they do not list a service failure or

if they do not correctly answer the acquiescence bias validity check, "Please check the number 2 if you are male and the number 6 if you are female." The response to that question is compared to the gender listed in the demographics section as a test of data quality. The point of this check is to limit error due to yea-saying or nay-saying. As a result, 11 participants are dropped from the study for failing the gender check and 62 are removed for not listing a service failure. This indicated that 20% of respondents are either unwilling or incapable of providing a service failure memory. The final study includes the remaining 235 participants who provide a service failure episode.

A MANOVA is conducted to check for differences between those reporting a failure and those not reporting a failure. The importance of this test is to minimize the potential of an alternate explanation for the findings, such as those listing service failures being more likely to complain (Armstrong and Overton 1977). The results of the MANOVA indicate no significant difference by failure listing among the key non-situation variables ( $\lambda = .98$ ,  $F = .81$ ,  $p > .59$ ). Situational variables are excluded because they are only provided in conjunction with a specific failure situation listing.

### Measurement

Participants were first asked to describe a service failure experience and check off which, if any, channels they utilized to complain in response to the service failure. The service failure question was deliberately vague to allow respondents to recall the most relevant or memorable service failure to them. Respondents next rated the severity and locus (internal, external) of the service failure on a seven-point scale. Ratings were then obtained for consumer collectivist tendencies (Price, Feick, and Higie 1987), perceived consumer effectiveness (Ellen, Weiner, and Cobb-Walgren 1991), attitude toward complaining (Singh and Pandya 1991), need for power

(McClelland 1961), and need for affiliation (McClelland 1961). Finally, participants then provided demographic information on age, gender, income, and ethnicity.

### **Analysis**

The dependent variables for public and private complaining are binary due to the retrospective comparison of action (complaining) to non-action (not complaining). As a result, binary logistic regression is used to analyze the drivers of public and private complaining. The outcome of the binary logistic analysis is a set of log likelihood ratios that describe the extent to which each dependent variable increases the chance of the dependent variable occurring. The basic outcome and interpretation of the independent variables is similar to that of the Bayesian network model analysis provided by Blodgett and Anderson (2000), as Bayesian networks provide conditional probabilities of dependent variable occurrence as a function of each independent variable.

Binary measures have several advantages. First, they allow for a direct distinction to be made between actual complainers and non-complainers rather than relying on scenario-driven responses. The importance of this distinction is described by Spangenberg and Sprott (2006) as the disconnection between behavioral intentions (prospective behavior) and actual behaviors (retrospective behavior). Second, they enable both a qualitative and quantitative approach to measuring complaint outcomes. Finally, they alleviate common method bias via methodological separation of dependent and independent variables (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff 2003).

## **RESULTS**

A combined CFA is performed on the six personality scales and the results indicate

acceptable measurement properties for all of the items. Items are tested in a single model and are restricted to load only on their respective factors. The model uses fourteen items to measure five latent constructs and is identified with 67 degrees of freedom. In other words, the model is identified because there are more pieces of information available than there are parameters to estimate (Rigdon 1994). The model fit is evaluated using the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual SRMR. The results indicate that the comprehensive model fits the data well ( $X^2/df = 112.8/67 = 1.68$ , TLI = .99, CFI = .99, and SRMR = .06).

The internal consistency of the scales is assessed through the construct reliability estimates (Fornell and Larcker 1981) reported in Table 1. The reliability estimates range from .70 (Perceived Consumer Effectiveness) to .88 (Consumer Collectivist Tendencies), which exceed Nunnally and Bernstein's (1994) suggested .70 cutoff criterion. Convergent validity is evaluated by an examination of the average variances extracted (AVE) and significance of critical ratios (Fornell and Larcker 1981). All but one of the AVEs is greater than .50 and all critical ratios are significant (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Perceived consumer effectiveness is slightly below the threshold of .50, but is an established scale and as such is retained for use in further analysis. Discriminant validity is tested by means of Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criteria, whereby the AVE for each construct is compared with the shared variance between that construct and each other construct in the model. The results provided in Table 1 indicate discriminant validity has been achieved by all measures. Specifically, all AVEs exceed the shared variance for all constructs.

**TABLE 1**  
**Measurement Statistics**

Construct	Average		NFA	ATC	NFP	PCE	CCT
	Variances Extracted	Parameter Estimates					
NFA	.59	.62-.86	<b>.81</b>	.00	.01	.00	.01
ATC	.60	.68-.86	-.04	<b>.75</b>	.07	.03	.13
NFP	.60	.64-.85	.12	.26	<b>.82</b>	.01	.02
PCE	.45	.53-.89	-.03	.17	-.09	<b>.70</b>	.03
CCT	.71	.77-.88	.11	.36	.13	.16	<b>.88</b>

**Notes:** Intercorrelations are presented in the lower triangle of the matrix. The construct reliability of each scale is depicted in boldface on the diagonal. Shared variances in percentage form are given in the upper triangle of the matrix. NFA = Need for Affiliation, ATC = Attitude Toward Complaining, NFP = Need for Power, PCE = Perceived Consumer Effectiveness, CCT = Consumer Collectivist Tendencies

**TABLE 2**  
**Stepwise Logistic Regression Results**

Hypothesis	Predictor Variable	Public Complaining <sup>a</sup>			Private Complaining <sup>b</sup>			
		Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)	B	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
<i>Demographic</i>								
H1	Age	6.19	< .02	1.05			NS	
H2	Gender		NS				NS	
H3	Income		NS		-.16	3.07	.08	.85
<i>Psychological</i>								
H4	NFP		NS				NS	
H5	NFA		NS				NS	
H6	ATC	4.94	< .03	1.26			NS	
<i>Situational</i>								
H7	Severity	3.60	< .06	1.22	.35	11.76	< .001	1.42
H8	Fault		NS				NS	
<i>Consumerism</i>								
H9	CCT		NS				NS	
H10	PCE	8.49	< .004	1.42			NS	

a: Nagelkerke R-square = .17,  $p < .001$ , 68.1% classified correctly

b: Nagelkerke R-square = .09,  $p < .001$ , 70.2% classified correctly

**Note:** NFP = Need for Power, NFA = Need for Affiliation, ATC = Attitude Toward Complaining, CCT = Consumer Collectivist Tendencies, PCE = Perceived Consumer Effectiveness, NS = Non-significant

A stepwise binary logistic regression is run to assess the drivers of actual public and private complaining behaviors. The significant predictors of complaining versus non-complaining for both public and private complaint channels are listed in Table 2. Log-likelihood values are listed in the fourth column of each table with values above 1 indicating positive relationships and values below 1 indicating negative relationships. Public complaining includes interactive and remote channels, such as complaining in person, over the telephone, in writing, and via e-mail. Private complaining includes exit and negative word-of-mouth, as neither involves communicating directly with a company.

Public complaining exhibits a positive relationship with age ( $\text{LnB} = 1.05, p < .02$ ), which supports H1a. Older consumers are therefore more likely to complain publicly than younger consumers. There is not a significant impact of age on private complaining, which fails to support H1b. Taken together, the findings for H1a and H1b suggest that age is a useful differentiator of public and private complaining behavior. Older consumers may thus be less likely to need prompting in order to complain. Firms may therefore wish to focus on facilitating the complaint behavior of younger consumers by providing access to the firm through tools such as high technology (e.g., websites and blogs).

Gender is not a significant predictor of either public or private complaining behavior, which fails to support H2a or H2b. This suggests that complaining behavior is not well differentiated on the basis of gender. Income is not a significant predictor of public complaining, which fails to support H3a. Income did, however, exhibit a negative relationship with private complaining behaviors, which supports H3b. This suggests that consumers with more income are less likely to stop buying or commit negative word-of-mouth behaviors than are consumers with lower income levels. These findings suggest that some demographic differences in

clientele will help organizations either derive public complaining behavior or limit private complaining behavior.

Need for power is not significantly related to either public or private complaining behaviors, which fails to support H4a or H4b. Need for affiliation exhibits a similar insignificant result for public and private complaining behaviors, which fails to support H5a or H5b. Together, these results suggest that consumers may not be attempting to use service failure experiences as opportunities to fulfill or limit frustration of psychological needs. It is also possible that the specific items used to measure need for power and need for affiliation in this research are too general to capture the relationship with complaining behavior. For example, affiliation is conceptualized as a general construct of desiring to be around other people. More communicative aspects of affiliation (e.g., desire to talk with other people) may be better indicators of complaining behavior in future research.

In support of H6a, attitude toward complaining increase the probability of public complaining behavior ( $\text{LnB} = 1.26, p < .03$ ). In contrast, attitude toward complaining is not a significant predictor of private complaining behavior. This suggests that attitude toward complaining is primarily related to complaints to a firm. As such, firms might seek to compensate for weak attitudes toward complaining by offering rewards/incentives to consumer that complain. In concert, the above findings suggest that useful psychological variables are more likely related to feelings about firms and complaining about service failures, as opposed to addressing higher level psychological needs via complaining.

As expected in H7a and H7b, service failure severity is positively related to both public ( $\text{LnB} = 1.22, p < .06$ ) and private ( $\text{LnB} = 1.42, p < .001$ ) complaining behaviors. Increasing failure severity is thus likely to enhance public complaining behavior, but at the cost of also creating deleterious private

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complaining behaviors. The reverse also applies. Decreasing service failure severity, which is the focus of most organizations due to its limitation of private complaining behaviors, will also generate less attention to valuable public complaining behaviors.

Fault is not a significant predictor of either public or private complaining behaviors in this research. Hence, H8a and H8b are not supported. This suggests that consumers are equally likely to complain publicly, privately, or not at all regardless of where the blame for the service failure is placed. This is an interesting null finding in that service firms are not necessarily able to disarm negative complaining behaviors that result from customer error. Though this null finding is somewhat at odds with prior research, the importance of the finding to this research is the inability to utilize fault to distinguish between public and private behaviors. Taken together, the findings for severity and fault suggest that service firms should focus on less situational variables in order to differentiate between public and private complaint drivers.

Consumer collectivist tendencies are not significantly related to either public or private complaining behaviors. This fails to support H9a or H9b and suggests that consumers in general do not complain to help organizations or other consumers. Perceived consumer effectiveness is positively related to public complaining ( $\text{LnB} = 1.42, p < .004$ ) and unrelated to private complaining. This supports H10a, but fails to support H10b. Though private complaining is not simultaneously reduced by perceived consumer effectiveness as expected, the null result points to a valuable differentiator of public and private complaining. The difference in the driver is again an opportunity for service firms to promote public complaining without incurring harm from private complaining behaviors. Assessing the right set of consumerism characteristics can thus add value to complaint handling procedures. For example, firms might include customer feedback as a primary component of promotional materials.

Specifically, when considering service recovery systems, firms are advised to emphasize customer influence and accessibility (Johnston 1995; Tax and Brown 1998).

## DISCUSSION

The primary objectives of this research are to compare the drivers of public and private complaining behavior, explore the impacts of two new potential predictors of complaining behavior, and to add to the validity of prior studies by examining actual responses to service failures in a retrospective fashion. Hypotheses are divided into public and private complaining in an effort to assess potential differences in complaint drivers. The results suggest several differences that can be used to create valuable public complaining behaviors without also inciting negative private complaining behaviors.

Public complaining is spurred by the consumer's age, the consumer's attitude toward complaining, the severity of the service failure, and the consumer's belief in the effectiveness of complaining at garnering a response from the firm. Private complaining is also spurred by service failure severity, but is limited by income. These findings suggest that demographic, psychological, situational, and consumerism variables can all provide valuable insights into complaint behavior prediction.

Demographics cannot be controlled directly by a service organization, which calls into question their usefulness as a practical gauge despite their quantitative significance. However, targeting specific demographic groups and understanding the demographic makeup of a service firm's clientele will help that firm understand the likelihood of complaint in the absence of additional operational procedures that aid in complaint management. In essence, service organizations with older, higher income consumers, need fewer supplementary complaint capabilities to promote the same level of

value-added complaining behaviors as organizations with younger, lower income consumers. The findings on age and income warrant additional study, as they agree with some prior findings and disagree with others. Differences in the results may be due to the industries investigated (i.e., open frame of reference versus specific industries) (e.g., Kolodinsky 1993), cultural/nationality differences (e.g., Keng, Richmond, and Han 1995), or even differences across time (e.g., Warland, Herrmann, and Moore 1984).

Attitude toward complaining is a psychological characteristic that drives public complaining behavior. Its usefulness as a complaint driver stems from an organization's ability to positively alter the consumer's attitude toward complaining rather than hoping that all consumers possess positive levels of this characteristic. Prior research has shown that experience is a particularly strong enhancer of attitude toward complaining (Kim, Kim, Im, and Shin 2003). This suggests that organizations can increase a consumer's attitude toward complaining by making sure that the consumer is rewarded for appropriately complaining. At the basic level, this means acknowledging and responding to the service failure in some way. To do this, organizations need to ensure that procedures and technology are in place to provide customers with access to complaint outlets. Additionally, organizations should ensure that recovery attempts result in positive customer experiences.

Severity is unfortunately linked to both public and private complaining behaviors, which limits its value as an effective strategic characteristic. The more egregious the service failure, the more likely is an organization to hear about the service failure. Negative word-of-mouth and boy-cotting is unfortunately also more likely to result from this type of service failure. The finding is useful, however, in that it makes intuitive sense and supports a proactive ideal of service failure prevention/minimization and contin-

uous improvement rather than one of reactive service recovery.

The results also suggest that perceived consumer effectiveness is another variable that can be used to generate public complaining behaviors without incurring private complaining behaviors. The idea that organizations need to find ways to encourage complaining following a service failure and help the consumer feel as though their efforts will not be in vain is not new. This research goes beyond this idea by providing evidence that perceived consumer effectiveness does not significantly spur private complaining behavior along with the public complaining behavior. This suggests that service organizations are free to encourage complaining without fear that it will result in a negative backlash.

This research assesses multiple public and private complaint predictors in a single analysis with real world complaint data. Consistent with prior research, age (Kolodinsky 1992), attitude toward complaining (Richins 1981; Singh and Pandya 1991), failure severity (Richins 1983; Singh and Pandya 1991; Weun, Beatty, and Jones 2004), and perceived effectiveness (Blodgett and Granbois 1992; Blodgett and Anderson 2000) positively impacted complaint behavior. More specifically, these variables predict public complaining behavior in this analysis. Further, failure severity (Richins 1983; Singh and Pandya 1991; Weun, Beatty, and Jones 2004) is also positively related to private complaining behavior, while income (Kolodinsky and Aleong 1990; Stephens and Gwinner 1998) is negatively related to private complaining behavior.

In contrast to prior research, gender (Hess, Ganesan, and Klein 2003; McColl-Kennedy, Daus, and Sparks 2003), and fault (Folkes 1984; Curren and Folkes 1987) are found not to have an impact on either public or private complaining. Further, income (Kolodinsky and Aleong 1990; Ngai, Heung, Wong, and Chan 2007) is unrelated to public complaining, while attitude toward com-

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plaining (Bearden and Oliver 1985) and perceived effectiveness (Blodgett and Granbois 1992; Blodgett and Anderson 2000) are unrelated to private complaining. The impact of need for power (McClelland 1961), need for affiliation (McClelland 1961), and consumer collectivist tendencies (Price, Feick, and Guskey 1995) on complaining behavior is assessed for the first time in this analysis. All three constructs fail to predict either public or private complaining behavior.

### LIMITATIONS and FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of this study is its use of an open frame of reference design. Specifically, industry variance likely generates error variance. The sample size, though large in absolute terms ( $n = 235$ ), is relatively small within each industry, which potentially adds undesirable error. Further, the type of failure is not controlled in this study. Leaving the failure memory open to the consumer adds another potential source for error. Future studies should perhaps specify several key industries from which to draw service failure memories and possibly home in on one or two key service failure types within the industries.

Several of the variables studied here are valuable in understanding complaining overall, but basic regression methods are somewhat limited in their ability to extract group differences. For example, consumers have different goals in complaining. It is possible that affiliation and consumer collectivist tendencies wash out of the analysis because venting, recompense seeking, or aiding others only leads to complaining for some of the consumers in some industries. An ideal future study would involve clusterwise logistic regression. This procedure might allow consumers with different complaint goals (e.g., venting or recompense) to be analyzed with separate prediction functions that, when considered together, generate a much higher overall explanation.

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## APPENDIX

### Scales

#### Consumer Collectivist Tendencies

1. Consumers need to join together to protect themselves against business.
2. As a group, consumers need to work together in the marketplace.
3. If consumers work together to fight bad business, everyone is better off.

#### Perceived Consumer Effectiveness

1. It is futile for an individual consumer to do anything about poor service. (R)
2. I personally feel helpless to have much of an impact on the service provided by a company. (R)
3. There's no use in me worrying about the poor service I receive, because I can't do anything about it anyway. (R)

#### Explicit Need for Power Scale

1. I like to persuade people who have different opinions from mine of doing what I like them to do.
2. I enjoy influencing other people to understand my way of thinking.
3. I often work to gain more control over the events around me.

#### Explicit Need for Affiliation Scale

1. I think it would be satisfying if I could have very close friendships with quite a few people.
2. I prefer to hang out where there are a lot of other people around.
3. I prefer to be alone most of the time.

#### Attitude Toward Complaining

1. It bothers me if I do not complain about an unsatisfactory experience.
2. It feels good to get my dissatisfaction and frustration off of my chest by complaining.
3. I like to complain. \*

\*Removed

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