

## **TOWARD UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER POWERLESSNESS: ANALYSIS OF AN INTERNET COMPLAINT SITE**

**Matthew P. Bunker, University of Northern Iowa**  
**Matthew S. Bradley, GACO WESTERN**

### **ABSTRACT**

This research investigated and established the emergence of different components of consumer powerlessness using complaints found on an airlines Internet complaint site, [www.Untied.com](http://www.Untied.com). Consumer powerlessness is believed to be more prevalent in ambiguous circumstances, and traveling by air provides ample opportunities for ambiguity.

Consequently the authors expected to find powerlessness themes in an airline complaint site. Formal content analysis was relied upon for the analysis with the specific provisions that customers explain a service failure that they tried to remedy *and*, from the point of view of these customers, their efforts were not properly recognized by personnel working for the airline. To exhibit powerlessness, people simply described a situation that they could not improve through their own efforts or used similes and/or metaphors that indicated positions of subordination to the marketer. Consequences of powerlessness identified in the content analysis were heightened vigilance, grudge-holding, retaliation, and fear. Grudge-holding and fear were most evident when customer service representatives were perceived to be rude to their customers.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this research is to analyze consumer complaints to establish and probe feelings of consumer powerlessness and to delineate antecedents and consequences of

powerlessness using complaint text found on the Internet complaint site, [Untied.com](http://Untied.com), as evidence. Consistent with Seeman (1959), powerlessness is herein defined as the general condition in which individuals believe that their behavior cannot determine desired outcomes.

More specifically, this research identifies two components of powerlessness. The first component follows the general definition of powerlessness and refers to consumers' beliefs that their complaints would lead to no corrective action by the company. For the second component to be discerned, the complaints had to include an element in which consumers express a form of powerlessness during the failure episode by describing a self effacing event. For example, one consumer described her companion's experience as the "most humiliating moment of her life."

The central purpose of using comments in which customers expressed powerlessness, is to help identify complaints that portray powerlessness, and is further explained in the methodology section. Describing feelings of powerlessness in complaint letters adds a new layer of understanding to these complaints. Thus, adding powerlessness to the complaint literature is expected to be helpful to both scholars and practitioners.

### **Complaints**

The formal study of complaint behavior has a long history that begins in the 1970s and has recently included the Internet as a forum for consumer complaints (Nasir

---

2004). Understanding complaint behavior is important because firms that encourage complaints, and act on those complaints, have been seen to obtain an advantage with their customers (Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987). Consequently, these firms place themselves in a position to better serve both dissatisfied as well as satisfied customers. For example, savvy companies can use complaints as a valuable source of customer feedback (Nyer and Gopinath 2005) and engage in service recovery which would reduce negative comments to third parties (East 2000). By recovering well after a complaint, firms also have the potential of increasing satisfaction levels of complainers (Spreng, Harrell, and Mackoy 1995).

Complaining benefits consumers as well as companies. External benefits that customers may receive due to complaint behavior involve seeking and obtaining redress for the company's perceived wrongdoings (Mattila and Wirtz 2004). Other benefits include the reduction of feelings of disappointment regarding a service experience that did not meet the customer's expectations (Zeelenberg and Pieters 2004). Some of the most common ways that consumers complain are face-to-face, making a phone call, writing a letter or writing an email (Matilla and Wirtz, 2004). These complaint methods are directed at the company and consumers usually expect some type of redress for their complaint efforts.

Consumers are also known to complain to the company without seeking personal compensation. For example, customers can write anonymous complaints on comment cards or voluntarily express their dissatisfaction on surveys by writing extra comments in the margins. This type of complaining is referred to as catharsis and provides consumers a release of negative emotions (Kowalski and Erickson 1997). Additionally, writing about a dissatisfactory experience has been shown to help low

propensity complainers to feel better about the situation.

Even though some (perhaps many) customers may not choose to complain to the offending service provider, they still may complain to their acquaintances (Halstead, Morash, and Ozment 1996) or write into a complaint site found on the internet (Harrison-Walker 2001). Up to now, customers engage in electronic word-of-mouth behavior much less than person-to-person word-of-mouth behavior (Carl 2006), although this may change in the years ahead. In any case, complaining on a protest internet site is beneficial to consumers because they see themselves as crusaders for the common people, and also they hope to convey their personal betrayal as a sign of disrespect by the company to all customers (Ward and Ostrom 2006). Consequently Internet complaint sites as third party complaint forums should worry marketers because they act as a higher-order action than complaining to friends, family, or even to the offending service provider (McAlister and Erffmeyer 2003). Third party complaint sites also help dissatisfied consumers because it gives them the opportunity to complain when they were not able to obtain a remedy from the firm (Lapidus and Schibrowsky 1994). Additionally Internet complaint sites allow customers to confidentially complain to a potentially large audience (Lee and Hu 2004).

An example of an Internet complaint site is Untied.com which is the complaint site for customers dissatisfied with United Airlines (Tyrrell and Woods 2004). This site is useful for analyzing complaints because of the richness of the data that it holds. Untied.com boasts more than 9,500 complaints from October 1998 to the present (see [www.United.com/ual](http://www.United.com/ual)), thus allowing multiple themes and analyses to emerge from the database provided by this website. One of the reasons that Untied.com is a popular site for consumers to upload complaints about

service failures with United Airlines is that customers know that the complaints are forwarded to the company, United Airlines (Harrison-Walker 2001). Whether United Airlines acts on these complaints is not documented, however. Previous research utilizing the Untied.com database investigated the types of complaints that occur on this site (Harrison-Walker 2001). Harrison-Walker created thirteen categories for the complaints on Untied.com, thus illuminating the nature of complaints in airline service failure contexts. It is not necessary to completely replicate their work; indeed, this article focuses on research that investigates only those complaints that exhibit evidence of consumer powerlessness.

### **Powerlessness**

Researchers have looked at powerlessness in several different contexts such as romantic relationships (Rotenberg, Sheewchuk, and Kimberley 2001), stereotyping (Reynolds et al. 2000), the workplace (Ashforth 1989), social control (Fiske, Morling, and Stevens 1996), and neighborhood disorder (Geis and Ross 1998). Powerlessness is usually discussed as a one dimensional construct conceptualized as a generalized expectation that outcomes of situations are determined by forces external to oneself (Geis and Ross 1998). But there is some evidence that powerless people may feel vulnerable in different ways (Fiske et al. 1996). For example, people may feel powerless when another party can control outcomes they value; and people may feel powerless about self-evaluation due to negative feedback from others who are more powerful (Fiske, et al 1996). So when consumers' receive little or no compensation or empathy from a company after a service failure, they might complain. If that complaint is ignored or the service provider belittles the consumer during the complaint process, the consumer may feel powerless,

during that episode, due to the negative feedback received from the service provider.

Powerlessness is believed to be a powerful factor in human relationships for a number of reasons: it may hinder a person's ability to learn from previous mistakes (Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale 1978); it may enhance a powerless person's vigilance for future wrongdoings, whether perceived or real (Rotenberg et al. 2001); and it may also lead to retaliatory behavior (Petrik, Olson, and Subotnik 1994). Enhanced vigilance for future wrongdoings can be dangerous for a company because consumers may take offense from the company's service personnel even when offense is not at all intended.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Since the goal of this research project is to analyze complaints posted on a website, the qualitative analytical method of choice, content analysis, is perfectly suited for the task (Harrison-Walker 2001). "Content analysis is a research method used to quantify and analyze the words, concepts, and relationships within text" (McAlister and Erffmeyer 2003, 345). Since the nature of this research is exploratory, the goal is to categorize how people felt powerless as well as to find some antecedents and consequences of consumer powerlessness as revealed in the complaint letters.

### **Sample**

Permission was granted by the webmaster of Untied.com to analyze the site and publish any findings resulting from the analysis. Six months of complaints (March 2006 through August 2006) were *independently* analyzed by each of the authors. The authors compared their results to ensure that the examples of powerlessness were consistent in the analyses. If a complaint on the website did not fit *both* of the two general powerlessness criteria-- the

non-ability to control one's outcome and the description of a self effacing experience, then that complaint was not recorded.

### Content Analysis Criteria

To guide the content analysis process, it was necessary to create guidelines to maintain consistency regarding the interpretation of the complaints. As the purpose of this research is to explore the nature of powerlessness, and to identify some antecedents and consequences, criteria were created to systematize the analytical process as suggested by Krippendorff (2004). Indeed, it is important that criteria be specific enough that other reviewers can look at the same data and come up with the same or least very, very similar results (Kassarjian 1977).

Four criteria were utilized to identify complaints exhibiting evidence of powerlessness. These criteria are:

- (1) *a specific service failure was identified in the letter;*
- (2) *the author of the complaint wrote that an attempt was made by her or him to remedy or improve the situation involving the service failure;*
- (3) *The customer's attempt to remedy or improve the situation was rejected or actively ignored by the service provider; and*
- (4) *The customer indicated future action regarding the company, such as switching, writing negatives letters to newspapers, or spreading negative word-of-mouth.*

For example, many complaints would describe a service failure, and the complainant

would describe her/his displeasure towards the airline, but one or more of the four criteria were missing. In other words, the complainant did not explain any attempt to remedy the situation, or did not specifically describe a situation in which the airline refused or actively ignored their request, or did not describe future intentions. It was necessary to diligently use these criteria throughout the analysis process so the authors could maintain consistency in the data collection process. As a result of establishing and using these criteria, *6.4% (108) of the total (1,685) complaints from the six month period analyzed on the website were chosen for analysis.* Both authors agreed with 98% of the fruit from this labor. Further discussion ensued between the authors for the few instances of disagreement, and these instances were eventually dropped.

Descriptions of subordination and complaints that explain how customers attempted to correct the situation and were rejected in their efforts were used to quantify powerlessness occurrences. 47% of the sample reported feelings of subordination, whereas 53% reported that after complaining, nothing was done by the service representatives to correct the situation, but feelings of subordination were not reported.

### EXPRESSIONS OF POWERLESSNESS

As we've stated, powerlessness is an individual's belief that he or she cannot bring about desirable consequences through his or her own actions (Rotenberg, et al. 2001). Powerless people are described as living at the whim of the more powerful, unable to influence the more powerful in order to obtain their desired goal (Overbeck, Tiedens, and Brion 2006).

It may seem extreme to describe customers as powerless when they are not able to obtain desired recovery from a firm, but the mere fact that their obtaining a desired goal is contingent on the mercies of the

company, describes the essence of powerlessness. For this reason, it was deemed important to only include complaints describing consumers' attempts at obtaining their goal, only to be refused by representatives working for the airline. For example, one customer wrote the following:

*"My luggage went to Denver and I was without it for two days after my arrival. I had to go out to buy some clothes until my luggage arrived."*

A person could feel powerless because they are missing their clothes, thus causing them to buy new clothes. But there is no stated indication of the steps the customer took in trying to find the lost luggage. Additionally, there is no stated complaint of the airline not helping him at his desired level, so this quote would not be included in the analysis as an example of a customer in a powerless situation.

### Feelings of Subordination

Some customers' complaints went beyond simple description of the situation, as they described themselves feeling as subordinates to the service representatives working for the airline. Research in the powerlessness domain associates powerless people with occupying subordinate positions (Bandura, Ross, and Ross 1963; Depret and Fiske 1999). For example, some powerless populations are referred to as "childlike," in the sense that they are inferior and incompetent and need the protection and care of the analogous parents, or the more powerful parties (Kallen 2004). Furthermore, powerless people describe themselves and their situations using negative metaphors and similes that revolve around animals, natural processes, and confinement (McCorkle and Gayle 2003). By using metaphors and similes, powerless people create tangible and

unambiguous images for ambiguous and intangible situations.

### Similes of Complete Subordination

People use similes to suggest comparisons between two objects that are usually dissimilar to each other (Boozer, Wyld, and Grant 1990). Similes are culturally based and for a simile to be effective, both the communicator and 'listener' must be familiar with the comparison involved with the simile (Stern 2000). For example, saying "Juliet is like the sun" requires enough knowledge about cultural meanings surrounding the word "sun," to understand that this is a complement to Juliet. Additionally, for a simile to be effective, the listener must be able to pick out the proper components of the object used in a simile comparison (the sun), successfully compare those components to the original object of the simile (Juliet), and then make a proper conclusion (Guttenplan 2005). By doing so the 'listener' would conclude that Juliet is a welcome sight who reduces the darkness of the soul.

Similes are similar to metaphors in the sense that one object is used as a base for comparison for another, dissimilar object (Stern 2000). The authors of this article assume that the effect of similes is similar to the effect of metaphors. This is important because the marketing literature explores the usefulness of metaphors (Zaltman 2003), but there is nothing in the marketing literature that explores the usefulness of similes. People tend to use metaphors as a bridge from the unfamiliar to the familiar, thus helping people gain a fuller understanding of the speaker's experience (Goodwin 1996). An example of how metaphors are used in marketing is given in the short paragraph on the next page:

*“The factory metaphor focuses attention on operations that can be performed by interchangeable employees; customers are viewed as inputs, potential employees as obstacles to smooth production; and solutions are presented in terms of design change.” (Goodwin 1996, pg. 13)*

In a similar vein, similes are used to help the listeners gain a better understanding of the speaker’s experience. For example, one consumer used the simile, “I got the dinner being thrown to my Table like I was a dog,” to describe a bad experience in which he felt that the flight attendant was purposely treating him poorly throughout the flight. Readers of the complaint may not fully

understand the feelings that this particular consumer was experiencing at the time of this incident. But readers who own dogs understand that the dog dish is usually placed somewhere in the corner of a kitchen and food is “thrown into the dish.” The dog receives a different treatment than guests, who are allowed to sit at the Table, and enjoy the company of the host. So a reader may conclude that not only did the consumer not feel welcomed by the host service provider, but the consumer also felt like he or she should eat his or her dinner in the corner and be careful to not disturb the host service provider. Table 1 shows examples of similes that emerged from the data analyses, each of which provide a picture of how the consumer felt during each service failure.

**TABLE 1**

**Similes of Complete Subordination**

“We were yelled at on a microphone at a podium <i>like misbehaving children.</i> ”
“I’m tired of being treated <i>like a stupid animal</i> by a dumb telephone answer machine.”
“We were treated <i>like 3rd class citizens</i> because we were traveling with small children.”
“I had to vent as it was killing me to let someone get away with treating me <i>like I was just one of a herd of cows.</i> ”
“I got the dinner being thrown to my Table <i>like I was a dog.</i> ”

**ANTECEDENTS TO POWERLESSNESS**

A recurring theme through all of the complaints was the inability to obtain service recovery *even after multiple tries*. In some cases, these multiple attempts at obtaining recovery resulted in threats by the service

personnel. Due to the heterogeneous nature of services, failures will occur, and most customers seem to acknowledge this point. But if a service representative’s recovery efforts fail to meet the customer’s

expectations, feelings of dissatisfaction may become worse (Maxham and Netemeyer 2002). Unsatisfactory employee responses to service failures are noted by customers and can lead to switching behavior (Keaveney 1995).

Harrison-Walker (2001) previously analyzed Untied.com to determine the types

of complaints people write after having a negative experience with United Airlines. The purpose of that research was to uncover the nature and variety of complaints on Untied.com. As noted earlier, however, the purpose of the current research is to explore the nature of powerlessness, including discovering any antecedents that would precede powerlessness.

**TABLE 2**

**Antecedents to Powerlessness**

Antecedent	Total Times Mentioned
Rude service representative	37
Flight delays	14
Policy misunderstandings	11
Lost luggage	8
Flight cancelled	6
Other passengers	5
Separated from traveling party	5
Missed flight	5
Lost seat on airplane	5
Mechanical problems	4
Multiple small problems add up	3
Ordered off plane	2
In-flight amenities	1
Flew to wrong destination	1
Unaccompanied minor	1
Total # of Complaints Analyzed	108

The complaint types that emerged from Harrison-Walker's research and this research are very similar, with employee rudeness found to be the largest complaint (Harrison-Walker) and the largest antecedent to powerlessness. The antecedents to powerlessness are displayed in Table 2.

**CONSEQUENCES OF POWERLESSNESS**

Customer consequences of powerlessness seem to be extreme once they are out of the situation. Dissatisfied customers not only switch, but these dissatisfied customers

switch *and swear to never return as long as they live*. In other words, grudge holding is strongly evidenced in such customers. People who feel powerless also tend to pay more attention to negative information and interpret that information as intentional behavior by the more powerful party (Depret and Fiske 1999). This phenomenon is known as heightened vigilance. Another consequence of powerlessness is fear. When people appraise negative events that are beyond their own control, the experienced emotion is generally sadness or fear (Timmers, Fischer, and Manstead 1998). Although sadness was not apparent in the descriptions of these complaints, fear as a consequence of feeling

powerless was strongly addressed in some of them. Once a person leaves a powerless situation and returns to a more comfortable environment, they might take steps to retaliate against the company by engaging in activities such as complaining on Internet sites, writing negative letters to the editor, spreading negative word-of-mouth, or even initiating a lawsuit. Some customers will entertain thoughts of retaliation, but may never actually carry out their wishes. Table 3 illustrates the relationship between the consequences of powerlessness and the type of powerlessness expressed by each complainant in the Untied.com database.

TABLE 3

**Consequences of Powerlessness by Descriptions of Powerlessness:  
Number of Times Mentioned**

Powerlessness Descriptors	Consequences of Powerlessness				
	Vigilance	Grudge-holding	Retaliation	Fear	Total
Subordination	6	19	12	14	51
Situation not Corrected	14	24	7	12	57
Total	20	43	19	26	108

### Heightened Vigilance

Vigilance is defined as “the increased intake and exhaustive processing of threatening information” (Hock, Krohne, and Kaiser 1996, 1052). People tend to rely on vigilance as a coping behavior when events have more negative than positive implications for them (Pratto and John 1991). In a marketing context, consumers would become more vigilant towards negatively perceived stimuli, such as rude service personnel and unattractive servicescapes, when experiencing a service failure. Vigilance becomes even

more complicated when the source and outcome of negative stimuli is ambiguous (Hock et al. 1996). For example, passengers flying on an airline may perceive more negative events than if they were in a surface level service encounter, due to the uncertainty that accompanies airline flights.

Feelings of powerlessness also contribute to vigilance due to peoples’ beliefs that they have very few resources to cope with the negative event (Rotenberg et al. 2001). Fiske et al. (1996) took vigilance a step further and showed that powerless people tend to show heightened vigilance towards



more powerful others, even when a negative event is not imminent. In other words, people who find themselves in a powerless situation, will purposely search for negative events, and when found, will attribute those events as intentional by the more powerful party (Overbeck, et al. 2006). Each example in Table 4 below shows examples of people who felt that the service failure was purposely conducted by airline personnel. Of course we will never know if these stories are

completely accurate or not, as we do not have the airline personnel's perspective. But the important point is these consumers felt they were singled out for persecution. Also, it may be true that the service representatives described in these complaints purposely did go out of their way to harass customers. Either way, the customers' perceptions were highly attuned to negative overtures from the customer service representatives.

TABLE 4

## Heightened Vigilance

<p>“She [the flight attendant] left the [food] cart, but returned later and without warning she pivoted the cart rapidly and very forcefully into my leg. The pain of this was excruciating. I said, ‘What is up with this, you running this cart into me?’ <i>She replied, proudly and smugly, ‘I forgot and walked off.’</i>” *Note* The consumer received an injury to his leg that limited the use of it.</p>
<p>“The agent at the international check-in was rude and I feel misrouted my luggage <i>intentionally.</i>”</p>
<p>“He [a desk service representative] actually picked up the phone and called security. We never saw the security, but the scene was <i>designed to humiliate me</i> in front of the kids.</p>
<p>“You put us in these seats in row 15 at the emergency exits. I think that was done out of anger for us too. The employee's way of <i>getting back at us</i> a little too.” *Note* The writer mentioned that he had back and leg problems and consequently could not open an emergency door.</p>
<p>“I am not being vindictive when I say, ‘I think she [flight attendant] <i>had it in for me.</i>”</p>

**Fear**

Powerlessness is characterized by events that are beyond an individual's control. If an event occurs that is out of an individual's control or beyond his or her coping resources the emotion displayed is

likely to be sadness, anxiety or fear (Timmers, Fischer, and Manstead 1998). The expression of fear is inferred as a powerless emotion because powerless emotions imply internal blame, vulnerability, and one's inability to cope with negative events (Fischer et al. 2004).

Experiencing anxiety or fear is not implying that a person lacks the internal ability to cope with negative events, but the outcomes of the negative events are beyond the person's control. Examples of service encounters that might cause a customer to experience fear are service personnel whom falsely accuse customers of misdeeds, yell at customers, or discriminate against customers (Chung-Herrera, Goldschmidt, and Hoffman 2004). Some customers do not complain while the service failure is occurring because they fear that complaining will lead to punishment (Sbaraini and Carpenter 1996),

such as retaliation and victimization by the service provider.

As Table 5 reveals, there are various reasons that customers felt fear. Causes of fear included mechanical failure, unruly passengers, unruly flight attendants, spending the night alone in the airport, and threats of arrest. In each of these instances, the customers did not complain too long, for fear of reprisal. But they did say that they planned to take action as soon as they were out of the powerless situation.

**TABLE 5**

**Fear**

<p>“We had some serious mechanical problems in the air!!! We couldn't rise to cruising altitude and we were too heavy to land. We had to circle around Chicago and then land. <i>I was so scared.</i>”</p>
<p>“At this time the plane was already loaded and the supervisor and the airline ‘thug’ took us aside and told us if we complained about anything, she would have us arrested immediately. So of course we didn't say anything to anyone. <i>We were both extremely frightened.</i>”</p>
<p>“A man kept hitting the back of my seat with extreme force every time he got up to go to the back of the plane. He was a large man and I was rather afraid of him.”</p>
<p>“_____ is a <i>psycho flight attendant</i>. Look out for her! She accused me of hitting her, which is an absolute lie! She had me arrested! Of course the case was dismissed because it wasn't true.”</p>
<p>“There are no rooms available [at the hotel]. At this point <i>I am tired, frustrated and scared</i> that I have to be there [the airport] all alone all night.”</p>

**Grudge-Holding**

Grudge-holding is defined as the condition when people maintain a victim role and perpetuate negative emotions associated with rehearsing the hurtful offense (Witvliet, Ludwig, and Vander Laan 2001). Nursing a grudge is associated with a commitment to remain angry about a particular offense (Witvliet et al. 2001). A benefit of holding a grudge towards a perpetrator of a wrongdoing

is that it provides the victim a moral high ground by virtue of having been wronged (Exline and Baumeister 2000). In order to adjust to feelings of powerlessness, people label themselves as victims, thus justifying “ongoing feelings of anger and righteous indignation—emotions that can make them more powerful” (Exline and Baumeister 2000, p. 147).

Grudge-holding is also evident in the marketing context, such as when a customer

blames a service failure on a marketer and vows to never return to that marketer (Hunt, Hunt, and Hunt 1988). Grudges in the marketplace can form for several different reasons, such as the product may be poor quality, repairs are done incorrectly, and the service is poor or slow. Although some people may hold grudges due to a core product failure, Hunt et al. (1988) found that a majority of consumers hold grudges because

of the way they were treated by marketing personnel. This finding underscores the importance of recognizing and effectively working with the interpersonal interaction that occurs between the service provider and the consumer (Iacobucci and Ostrom 1996).

Table 6 shows the comments made by respondents who said they will never fly with this airline again.

**TABLE 6**

**Grudge-Holding**

“I am very upset with the amount of time you have taken from me and <i>I have no intentions of ever using your airline again.</i> ”
“I will fly in a bed of nails before getting into a _____ flight.”
“_____ is an incompetent carrier with little regard for customer service. From delayed schedules, changed flight times, delayed luggage, and rude employees, <i>I will never use _____ again.</i> ”
“We are extremely disappointed in this whole situation and <i>will never even try to use _____ again for family or animals.</i> ”
“What a bunch of idiots. My wife and I have put up with lost baggage, cancelled flights without notification, rude customer service. <i>We’re done with this incompetent, uncaring airline.</i> My wife and I were both Premier flyers with _____.”

**Retaliation**

In marketing, retaliation has been defined as a consumer’s action to intentionally hurt a store or business (Hunt 1991). Retaliation is defined as aggressive behavior by a person with the intent of getting even with the offending party (Huefner and Hunt 2000). Retaliation is closely tied to attributions of intent. For example, if a “victim” believes that another party “hurt” him or her on purpose and could have controlled that “hurt,” then the victim is more likely to retaliate. Also, people will retaliate when his or her trust has been violated or if their social identity is threatened or harmed (Bies and Tripp 1996).

In regards to retaliation, one of the advantages of the powerful is the ability to deal with offenses more openly than the less powerful (Baumgartner 1984). Frijda (1994) noted that for the most part, people tend to retaliate if they feel they have the power to do so, and refrain from retaliation if they feel their actions would not bring any extra benefit to them. The effect of power asymmetry on retaliation can be explained by the fact that a high status offender can more negatively affect the victim’s welfare than can a lower or equal status offender (Aquino et. al. 2001).

When a company wrongs a customer that feels less powerful, that customer still has the potential to exact revenge, sometimes through covert retaliation. Covert retaliation

is defined as “secret, aggressive action by an aggrieved party to inconvenience an offender” (Morrill and Thomas 1992, p. 415). Covert retaliation by a victim results in the offender remaining completely unaware that revenge has been taken or restitution exacted (Baumgartner 1984).

The desire for vengeance, but not the actual carry-through is referred to as retaliation-desire or revenge-fantasy (Bies and Tripp 1996). Bougie, Peters, and Zeelenberg (2003) used content analysis to explore the feelings, thoughts, and action tendencies of customers after a negative service incident. They found that desires for revenge and tendencies toward aggressive actions were consequences of service failure. Retaliation desire is a safe route for the less powerful as they react to harm by resorting to revenge fantasy (Bies and Tripp 1996). For example,

a customer may wish that the offending company will experience bankruptcy or become entangled in a messy scandal.

Revenge-fantasies, or retaliation-desires, are not just intrapsychic phenomena, but shared with coworkers and friends as well (Bies and Tripp 1996), thus adding texture to negative word-of-mouth behavior. A consumer may cope with feelings of powerlessness by sharing or even harboring a desire to retaliate. Examples of the three different levels of retaliation uncovered in the Untied.com database are provided in Table 6. The first three examples deal with actual retaliation measures, the fourth example is covert retaliation, and the fifth quote is retaliation-desire, in the sense that this person would like to see the airline shut down, but can do nothing about it.

**TABLE 7**

**Retaliation**

<p>“I intend to use all of professional connections, all of my life’s savings and all personal sweat I can muster to sue this company because of the intentional acts of your employee.”</p>
<p>“I will do everything necessary to contact media among others who may be interested in the wonderful treatment received by your company.” *Note* The word “wonderful” is used in a sarcastic manner as the complaint described a situation that was anything but wonderful.</p>
<p>“If you don’t want children on your airline you should put that on your website. I will be posting it on my website and I am also forwarding a copy of this email to the FAA, and to every family, child, and parenting magazine I can think of.”</p>
<p>“No one at the airline will probably read these letters but it feels good to vent!”</p>
<p>“Really, this airline can’t maintain its fleet; so it must be ordered to stop all flights. Please, just stop pussy footing around with these people. They must stop now.”</p>

**Relationship between Antecedents, Powerlessness and its Consequences**

Since this research is exploratory, no hypotheses were tested, and it is difficult to derive associations between the antecedents to, and the consequences of, powerlessness.

But some trends were found in the results which shed some light on how the antecedents to powerlessness might relate to the consequences of powerlessness. Table 8 highlights the associations between the antecedents, powerlessness, and consequences.



**TABLE 8**

**Associations between the Antecedents To and Consequences Of Powerlessness:  
A Summary of Tally Counts**

<b>Antecedents</b>	<b>Descriptions of Powerlessness</b>			<b>Consequences of Powerlessness</b>				<b>Total</b>
	<b>Sub- ordination</b>	<b>No Correction</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Vig- ilance</b>	<b>Grudge- holding</b>	<b>Retal- iation</b>	<b>Fear</b>	
Rude service representative	24	13	37	7	13	5	12	37
Flight delays	7	7	14	2	8	2	2	14
Policy misunderstandings	5	6	11	0	7	3	1	11
Lost luggage	2	6	8	3	3	2	0	8
Flight cancelled	2	4	6	1	4	0	1	6
Other passengers	3	2	5	1	2	0	2	5
Separated from the traveling party	1	4	5	0	0	2	3	5
Missed flight	2	3	5	0	4	0	1	5
Lost seat on airplane	2	3	5	2	0	2	1	5
Mechanical problems	0	4	4	1	0	1	2	4
Multiple small problems add up	1	2	3	1	1	1	0	3
Ordered off the plane	2	0	2	1	0	1	0	2
In-flight amenities	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
Flew to wrong destination	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1
Unaccompanied minor	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1
	51	57	108	20	43	19	26	108

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to explore different ways in which customers express feelings of powerlessness. Since flying on an airplane involves so many variables, such as airport security personnel, other customers, procedures, and customer service representatives, the potential for a service failure is high. Additionally, airline travel is replete with ambiguous variables, such as flight safety issues, unpredictable customer service, weather related delays, and the disposition of other customers. Powerlessness is heightened in ambiguous situations, and even without a service failure, managers should recognize these dilemmas and be prepared to calm and empower customers.

The impact of service personnel on consumers' overall satisfaction with their experience is already well described in the marketing literature, but the integrated results of the current inquiry reveal that not only was rude service personnel the most widely cited reason for feeling powerlessness, but it also held the largest association with grudge-holding and fear. Future research should not only test vigilance, grudge-holding, retaliation, and fear as consequences of powerlessness, but also as alternative consequences to service failure. Perhaps rude service representatives add a new dimension of fear to customers who are already feeling as if they have little control over their experiences.

Disgruntled consumers describing their feelings of subordination also embedded such feelings in their remarks about rude customer service representatives. Even if customers are not feeling powerless when they begin their quest to change a negative service encounter, they may end up feeling powerless after interfacing with rude service personnel. The impact of rude service personnel should not be underestimated by

service providers and needs to be studied more systematically by marketing scholars.

Grudge-holding was the largest reported consequence of powerlessness, which means there were a large percentage of powerless customers who stated that they will never fly United airlines again in the future. It may be extremely difficult if not impossible to regain positive relationships with these consumers, but it is important to understand what circumstances led to grudge-holding and the manner in which managers plan for and try to correct those situations deserves special attention.

It is the authors' belief that the concept of powerlessness should find a more prominent place in the marketing literature because of its prevalence in the service sector (e.g., hospitals, utilities, airlines). Due to the situational nature of powerlessness, it is felt by people who have both high and low self efficacy, and frustrates a wide range of customers. It is also clear that other research designs besides the content analysis of complaints is necessary to test any hypotheses regarding powerlessness, its antecedents and consequences. For example, experimental designs could be useful in testing the impact of each of the antecedents mentioned in this article on powerlessness.

As we have discovered, disgruntled customers who feel powerless tend to resort to hyperbole when they relate their stories. These customers state that they will *never* return, *all* the representatives were incompetent or rude, and the *whole flight* was miserable. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that powerless customers are highly vigilant to negative incidences, and every incident has the potential of being interpreted in a negative manner. As a result, one negative incident could transfer to the whole entire service experience (i.e., a negative halo effect is likely). Even innocent actions by service personnel can be interpreted as malicious intentions by a customer experiencing heightened vigilance.

The consequences of powerlessness have the potential of greatly impacting service encounters, and it is important to include powerlessness as a viable theory in the service failure/recovery literature.

### LIMITATIONS

Perhaps the biggest limitation of this research stems from the inability to talk to the customers who wrote their complaints on the website. The content analysis can capture a small picture of how they felt, but it is lacking in the depth that is obtained when face-to-face interviews are conducted with customers. Also, some of the complaints might be exaggerated and we are not sure if the service failures happened to the degree claimed by each of the disgruntled customers. Additionally, we do not have the "other side of the story" that would have to be given by the relevant service personnel of United Airlines. It is known that customers can and do sometimes inflict dissatisfaction upon themselves by their own actions, and this problem is not ascertainable by solely examining the Untied.com website.

Additionally, only one database created by disgruntled customers of United Airlines was used as the unit of analysis, thus reducing the potential of generalizing this research to other complaint situations. To generalize the results, other complaint databases, including Internet based and corporate based databases should be analyzed to determine if the powerlessness themes are consistent between all of the databases. Also, other forms of research, such as a survey or experimental design would help further the field's knowledge regarding powerlessness in service failure situations.

### REFERENCES

- Abramson, Lyn Y., Martin E. P. Seligman, and John D. Teasdale (1978), "Learned Helplessness in Humans: Critique and Reformulation," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 87 (1), 49-74.
- Aquino, Karl, Thomas M. Tripp, and Robert J. Bies (2001), "How Employees Respond to Personal Offense: The Effects of Blame, Attribution, Victim Status, and Offender Status on Revenge and Reconciliation in the Workplace," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86 (1), 52-59.
- Ashforth, Blake E. (1989), "The Experience of Powerlessness in Organizations," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 43 (April), 207-242.
- Bandura, Albert, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila A. Ross (1963), "A Comparative Test of the Status Envy, Social Power, and Secondary Reinforcement Theories of Identificatory Learning," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67 (6), 527-534.
- Baumgartner, M. P. (1984), "Social Control from Below," in *Toward a General Theory of Social Control, Vol. 1*, ed. Donald Black, New York, NY: Academic Press, 303-345.
- Bies, Robert J. and Thomas M. Tripp (1996), "Beyond Distrust: 'Getting Even' and the Need for Revenge," in *Trust in Organizations: Frontiers of Theory and Research*, eds. Roderick M. Kramer and Tom R. Tyler, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 246-260.
- Boozer, Robert W., David C. Wyld, and James Grant (1990), "Using Metaphor to Create More Effective Sales Messages," *Journal of Services Marketing*, 4 (3), 63-71.
- Bougie, Roger, Rik Pieters, and Marcel Zeelenberg (2003), "Angry Customers Don't Come Back, They Get Back: The Experience and Behavioral Implications of Anger and Dissatisfaction in Services," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 31 (4), 377-393.



- Carl, Walter J. (2006), "What's All the Buzz About? Everyday Communications and the Relational Basis of Word-of-Mouth and Buzz Marketing Practices," *Management Communication Quarterly*, 19 (4), 601-634.
- Chung-Herrera, Beth G., Nadav Goldschmidt, and K. Doug Hoffman (2004), "Customer and Employee Views of Critical Service Incidents," *Journal of Services Marketing*, 18 (4/5), 241-254.
- Depret, Eric and Susan T. Fiske (1999), "Perceiving the Powerful: Intriguing Individuals versus Threatening Groups," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 35, 461-480.
- East, Robert (2000), "Complaining as Planned Behavior," *Psychology and Marketing*, 17 (12), 1077-1095.
- Exline, Julie Juola and Roy F. Baumeister (2000), "Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance: Benefits and Barriers," in *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, eds. Michael E. McCullough, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Carl E. Thoresen, New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 133-155.
- Fischer, Agneta, Patricia M. Rodriguez Mosquera, Annelies E. M. van Vianen, and Antony S. R. Manstead (2004), "Gender and Culture Differences in Emotion," *Emotion*, 4 (1), 87-94.
- Fiske, Susan T., Beth Morling, and Laura E. Stevens (1996), "Controlling Self and Others: A Theory of Anxiety, Mental Control, and Social Control," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22 (2), 115-123.
- Fornell, Claes and Birger Wernerfelt (1987), "Defensive Marketing Strategy by Customer Complaint Management," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 24 (4), 337-346.
- Frijda, Nico H. (1994), "The Lex Talionis: On Vengeance," in *Emotions: Essays on Emotion Theory*, eds. Stephanie H. M. Van Goozen, Nanne E. Van De Poll, and Joseph A. Sergeant, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 263-289.
- Geis, Karlyn J. and Catherine E. Ross (1998), A New Look at Urban Alienation: The Effect of Neighborhood Disorder on Perceived Powerlessness, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 61 (3), 232-246.
- Guttenplan, Samuel (2005), *Objects of Metaphor*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Goodwin, Cathy (1996), "Moving the Drama into the Factory: The Contribution of Metaphors to Services Research," *European Journal of Marketing*, 30 (9), 13-36.
- Halstead, Diane, Edward A. Morash, and John Ozmente (1996), "Comparing Objective Service Failures and Subjective Complaints: An Investigation of Domino and Halo Effects," *Journal of Business Research*, 36, 107-115.
- Harrison-Walker, L. Jean (2001), "E-Complaining: A Content Analysis of an Internet Complaint Forum," *Journal of Services Marketing*, 15 (4/5), 397-412.
- Hock, Michael, Heinz Walter Krohne, and Jochen Kaiser (1996), "Coping Dispositions and the Processing of Ambiguous Stimuli," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70 (5), 1052-1066.
- Huefner, Jonathan C. and H. Keith Hunt (2000), "Consumer Retaliation as a Response to Dissatisfaction," *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, 13, 61-82.
- Hunt, H. Keith (1991), "Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction, and Complaining Behavior," *Journal of Social Issues*, 47 (1), 107-117.
- , H. David Hunt, and Tacy C. Hunt (1988), "Consumer Grudge Holding," *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, 1, 116-118.
- Iacobucci, Dawn and Amy Ostrom (1996), "Commercial and Interpersonal Relationships; Using the Structure of Interpersonal Relationships to Understand Individual-to-Individual, Individual-to-Firm, and Firm-to-Firm Relationships in Commerce," *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 13, 53-72.
- Kallen, Evelyn (2004), *Social Inequality and Social Injustice*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kassarjian, Harold H. (1977), "Content analysis in Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 4 (1), 8-18.
- Keaveney, Susan M. (1995), "Customer Switching Behavior in Service Industries: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Marketing*, 59 (2), 71-82.
-

- Kowalski, Robin M. and Janet R. Erickson (1997), "Complaining: What's All the Fuss About?" in *Aversive Interpersonal Behaviors*, ed. Robin M. Kowalski, New York, NY: Plenum Press, 91-110.
- Krippendorff, Klaus (2004), *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lapidus, Richard S. and John A. Schibrowsky (1994), "Aggregate Complaint Analysis: A Procedure for Developing Customer Service Satisfaction," *Journal of Services Marketing*, 8 (4), 50-60.
- Lee, Charles Changuk and Clark Hu (2004), "Analyzing Hotel Customers' E-Complaints from an Internet Complaint Forum," *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 17 (2/3), 167-181.
- Mattila, Anna S. and Jochen Wirtz (2004), "Consumer Complaining to Firms: The Determinants of Channel Choice," *Journal of Services Marketing*, 18 (2/3), 147-155.
- Maxham, James G. III and Richard G. Netemeyer (2002), "A Longitudinal Study of Complaining Customers' Evaluations of Multiple Service Failures and Recovery Efforts," *Journal of Marketing*, 66 (4), 57-71.
- McAlister, Debbie Thorne and Robert C. Erffmeyer (2003), "A Content Analysis of Outcomes and Responsibilities for Consumer Complaints to Third-Party Organizations," *Journal of Business Research*, 56, 341-351.
- McCorkle, Suzanne and Barbara Mae Gayle (2003), "Conflict Management Metaphors: Assessing Everyday Problem Communication," *The Social Science Journal*, 40, 137-142.
- Morrill, Calvin and Cheryl King Thomas (1992), "Organizational Conflict Management as Disputing Process," *Human Communication Research*, 18 (3), 400-428.
- Nasir, V. Ashlihan (2004), "E-Consumer Complaints About On-Line Stores," *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, 17, 68-87.
- Nyer, Prashanth and Mahesh Gopinath (2005), "Effects of Complaining Versus Negative Word of Mouth on Subsequent Changes in Satisfaction: The Role of Public Commitment," *Psychology and Marketing*, 22 (12), 937-953.
- Overbeck, Jennifer R., Larissa Z. Tiedens, and Sebastien Brion (2006), "The Powerful Want To, The Powerless Have To: Perceived Constraint Moderates Causal Attributions," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 36 (4), 479-496.
- Petrik, Norman D., Rebecca E. Petrik Olson, and Leah S. Subotnik (1994), Powerlessness and the Need to Control: The Male Abuser's Dilemma, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 9 (2), 278-285.
- Pratto, Felicia and Oliver P. John (1991), "Automatic Vigilance: The Attention-Grabbing Power of Negative Social Information," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61 (3), 380-391.
- Reynolds, Katherine J., Penelope J. Oakes, S. Alexander Haslam, Mark A. Nolan, and Larissa Dolnik (2000) "Responses to Powerlessness: Stereotyping as an Instrument of Social Conflict," *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 4 (4), 275-290.
- Rotenberg, Ken J., Vicky-Ann Shewchuk, and Teresa Kimberley (2001), "Loneliness, Sex, Romantic Jealousy, and Powerlessness," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 18 (1), 55-79.
- Sbaraini, Silvia and John Carpenter (1996), "Barriers to Complaints: A Survey of Mental Health Service Users," *Journal of Management in Medicine*, 10 (6), 36-40.
- Seeman, Melvin (1959), "On the Meaning of Alienation," *American Sociological Review*, 24 (December), 783-91.
- Spreng, Richard A., Gilbert D. Harrell, and Robert D. Mackoy (1995), "Service Recovery: Impact on Satisfaction and Intentions," *Journal of Services Marketing*, 9 (1), 15-23.
- Stern, Josef (2000), *Metaphor in Context*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Timmers, Monique, Agneta H. Fischer, and Antony S. R. Manstead (1998), "Gender Differences in Motives for Regulating Emotions," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 24 (9), 974-985.
- Tyrrell, Brian and Robert Woods (2004), "E-Complaints: Lessons to Be Learned from the Service Recovery Literature," *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 17 (2/3), 183-190.

- Ward, James C. and Amy L. Ostrom (2006), "Complaining to the Masses: The Role of Protest Framing in Customer-Created Complaint Web Sites," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 33 (September), 220-230.
- Witvliet, Charlotte VanOyen, Thomas E. Ludwig, and Kelly L. Vander Laan (2001), "Granting Forgiveness or Harboring Grudges: Implications for Emotion, Physiology, and Health," *Psychological Science*, 12 (2), 117-123.
- Zaltman, Gerald (2003), *How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Zeelenberg, Marcel and Rik Pieters (2004), "Beyond Valence in Customer Dissatisfaction: A Review and New Findings on Behavioral Responses to Regret and Disappointment in Failed Services," *Journal of Business Research*, 57, 445-455.

**Send Correspondence Regarding This Article to:**

**Matthew P. Bunker**  
Assistant Professor of Marketing  
College of Business Administration  
345 Curris Business Building  
University of Northern Iowa  
Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0126  
Office Telephone Number: 319-273-6947  
Fax Number: 319-273-2922  
E-mail: [matthew.bunker@uni.edu](mailto:matthew.bunker@uni.edu)