

SERVICE EXEMPTIONS ARE A COMPLAINT AWAY: MODERATED MEDIATION ANALYSIS OF CONSUMER ENTITLEMENT ON CONSUMER SERVICE HYPOCRISY

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ABSTRACT

Online digital media has publicized consumer entitlement behaviors (e.g., unwarranted demands) that exhaust service employees and negatively impact business marketing operations. Consumer Entitlement Theory explains certain customers believe they are deserving of extra benefits because they are generally owed by others. We extend the theory to study consumer service hypocrisy. We conducted surveys with a large U.S. sample (N = 532). Through five novel consumer service hypocrisy scenarios, we quantified gaps between supporting service policies while supporting unreasonable exceptions to these policies. Path analysis demonstrated consumer entitlement related to higher consumer service hypocrisy. Indirect path analysis showed that, in the presence of high cautiousness, high consumer entitlement was associated with higher individualism. Higher individualism is associated with higher consumer service hypocrisy. This expands our understanding of unreasonable demands and helps marketers better address consumer entitlement behaviors. We discuss modifications businesses can implement to serve these challenging customers.

INTRODUCTION

A medical clinic sends repeated reminders to arrive 10 minutes early and to reschedule if they cannot make their appointment on time. A patient arrives 20 minutes late. The patient is asked to reschedule because they are past their scheduled appointment time. The patient fumes, it is not their fault for being late. They claim that as paying customers they have the right to be seen and the clinic is lucky to have them as a customer to keep their business open. Despite standard company policies, entitled customers will demand services that directly contradict them as if they are exempt. There is a sense of unwarranted deservedness just because they are paying customers. They expect special treatment unlike the standard policies and services others receive. Are entitled consumers more likely to support contradictory service exemptions? How does individualism influence this relationship?

Online digital media has publicized egregious cases of consumer entitlement. For example, dissatisfied customers demanding to speak to service managers have circulated online through social media (Negra & Leyda, 2021). Forceful demands (including microaggressions) from service employees are unnecessary and socially inappropriate because it is possible to calmly explain most grievances. Consumers complain when cognitive reasoning, an emotional response,

and dissatisfaction triggers the behavior (Boote, 1998). Consumer complaints require effort (Huppertz, 2014). It intends to seek restitution. Consumer entitlement behaviors burden service employees and companies. Consumer entitlement behaviors shift costs (e.g., time and resources) to service providers (H. C. Lee et al., 2022; Wetzel et al., 2014). For example, medical offices often remind patients to arrive early to account for navigation errors and fill out medical intake forms. Unfortunately, when certain patients disregard these recommendations and policies, it disrupts operations. The timeliness of other patients becomes absorbed by entitled patients who believe they can arrive late or have their way regardless of policies by voicing their opinions. Entitlement behaviors negatively impact service employees, who are expected to provide excellent service while enforcing company policies (Poddar & Madupalli, 2012). Poddar and Madupalli (2012) found consumer entitlement behaviors related to greater exhaustion and job dissatisfaction among service employees.

Cultural consumerism has normalized consumer entitlement behaviors (Ma et al., 2018). Consumer culture, following the phase the “customer is always right,” has inflated an individual’s sense of oneself (Gursoy et al., 2017). For example, by offering undeserved free perks, consumers gain a false sense of deservingness (Polyakova et al., 2014). Meanwhile, loyalty programs (i.e., selling status with unique offerings) have contractual benefits consumers are entitled to have. Companies face elevated expectations to cater to detailed and often unreasonable customer demands (Melancon et al., 2021). Melancon et al. (2021) explain that loyal and highly entitled customers can negatively impact a company. With deeper investments of time/money, they are more likely to voice opinions or seek restitution. The competitive advantage companies have used to build loyalty has also elevated consumer service expectations. Baseline services have become a minimum, and unique benefits have become expected for entitled consumers. Generating consumer satisfaction fosters customer loyalty (Dahl & Peltier, 2015; Nowak et al., 2023b) We expand research on entitled consumers to investigate scenarios of consumer service hypocrisy in which they support exemptions to standard corresponding service policies.

Services face a value proposition conundrum when serving a large customer base (Bowden et al., 2015; Kapanen, 2004; Shah & Murtaza, 2005). Serve customers with strictly enforced standard policies to increase operation efficiency or have flexible policies that customers override with demands. Complaining customers can constitute a company’s loyal customer base that buy more from a company (Ashley & Varki, 2009). Not meeting their demands can dissolve customer relationships and sever ties to the company. Nonetheless, service policies are frequently violated daily (e.g., hotel late customer checkouts). Is it worth upsetting a customer and negative word-of-mouth for charging a late hotel checkout fee? This research helps quantify the extent entitled consumers will support contradictory exemptions. Businesses can utilize findings to shape better policies that balance efficiency while maintaining customer relationships.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Consumer Entitlement Theory and Consumer Entitlement Behaviors

Consumer entitlement theory identifies consumers with a self-inflated prerogative derived from a component of narcissistic personality disorder (i.e., entitlement) (Boyd III & Helms, 2005). Entitled consumers believe they deserve special treatment from service providers (Butori, 2010; Pizzi et al., 2022; Zboja et al., 2021). This personality style is related to an exchange of money, products, or services. For instance, the payment for a hotel reservation has baseline offerings. An entitled consumer believes they are to receive these baseline services and then some if they demand more (e.g., late checkout time, waived fees, and unearned credit). Entitlement comes from

perceiving oneself to be generally owed or in a deficit (Campbell et al., 2004). Seeking additional benefits attempts to offset this perceived psychological debt. While it may appear that exchanging money for baseline services is sufficient, entitled consumers feel owed exemplary services because their presence and money are worth more than the average consumer.

Researchers have identified consumers to have a chronic sense of deservingness (Campbell et al., 2004; Neave et al., 2020), whereas others posit entitlement is situational based on a given exchange (Martin et al., 2018). Chronically entitled customers regularly seek unwarranted additional services because they are paying customers. Of course, a customer can feel wronged and need corrective action if there is an overcharge. However, some consumers frequently want unwarranted special service treatment. For example, there is a general understanding that monetary bills have a due date or will result in a late fee. Entitled customers perceive services as negotiable and can at least request modifications (Asmuß, 2007) They believe they can reach customer call center managers and complain their way to reversing charges. This is captured by the common phrase, “The squeaky wheels get the grease.” This means someone who speaks up to voice their opinions, regardless of deservedness, will be heard and their demands met.

Consumer entitlement is different from advocating for a correction. For instance, an overcharge while checking out at a store and stating that the price was labeled differently in the aisle is different from demanding for the lower marked price. The intention, behavior, and/or source of the grievance comes from a place of feeling owed (Gillespie Finney & Zachary Finney, 2010; Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010). It comes from a place of hurt or debt that requires a form of compensation like money or an apology (Yagil, 2021). Consumer entitlement theory derived the construct from one of the three psychological components of narcissism (entitlement/antagonism) (Boyd III & Helms, 2005). Temporally, narcissistic entitlement qualities can be trait-level (regular/engrained) or state-level (occasional) (Edershile & Wright, 2022). When a narcissist’s perceived entitlement is threatened, antagonistic behavior follows to recoup what was taken. Complaining has temporary psychotherapeutic benefits to release stress and negative emotions (Nyer, 1999). We study consumer entitlement within the context of services and aberrations from standard consumer policies (e.g., paying bills on time versus demanding a late charge fee be overturned). Thus, trait-level and state-level consumer entitlement qualities could be evaluated.

Entitled consumers believe they are worthy of special treatment from service providers (Martin et al., 2018). Entitled consumers have an inflated sense of self-importance and will denigrate service workers to get what they want (Fisk & Neville, 2011) Fisk and Neville (2011) studied entitled consumers. They associated servitude perceptions with waitstaff and willingly vocalized disrespectful opinions that dehumanized service workers. While they may support standard policies, entitled consumers personally believe they do not have to abide by them because they are more deserving than others. Thus, their reasons for unreasonable demands are self-justified but do not follow social norms.

Loyalty programs have contractual benefits that customers are entitled to receive (J. S. Lee et al., 2014). Such added benefits to certain customers over others embolden customers to exhibit entitlement behaviors such as complaining. Loyalty program customers may purchase more from companies but complain more when unmet expectations are unmet (Ashley & Varki, 2009). This is because they are more invested in the company and feel more deserved. Perceived status-based marketing strategies with customer tiers and unique offerings have primed consumers to expect preferential treatment (Ma et al., 2018). For example, someone who pays for platinum-tier services with an airline credit card expects airport lounge privileges. Researchers have found that existing

customers can feel distributive justice when new customers are offered exclusive promotions while existing ones are not (Gardner & Melancon, 2023). Gardner and Melancon (2023) found that these existing customers will express lower repurchase intentions, higher intent to switch service providers, and more complaining behavior.

Consumer Service Hypocrisy

We define consumer service hypocrisy as supporting a service policy while also supporting an exemption that violates the corresponding policy (e.g., espousing support for late fees to bills while supporting exemptions for those who call in to complain). There are typical standard policies (like late fees) that the general U.S. consumer is aware of and follow. A contradiction exists when others are to follow standard policies, but certain individuals do not have to abide by them. These exemptions are not earned or deserved but are associated with payment. For example, researchers studied academic entitlement with entitled students agreeing with the statement, “Because I pay tuition, I deserve passing grades.” (Jackson et al., 2020). Individuals will make unwarranted claims to fulfill their demands. Instructors set class policies and students perform coursework to earn grades. When students try to circumvent class policies (everyone else abides by them) for individual gains, they seek an unwarranted exemption. This is contradictory because they expect everyone else to have to perform coursework for grades, while they can complain their way to a passing grade.

Entitlement behaviors include verbal complaints and communication of excuses that reflect their thinking. These excuses reflect an inflated sense of self-importance, such as how a traffic delay caused them to be late, as opposed to taking personal responsibility and considering that their presence commuting is also adding to the traffic. The entitled will often use whatever possible to get their way. For example, a class attendance policy clearly states that one point is awarded for being on time and half a point for being late. An entitled student (late because of rain delays) claimed, “I should not be marked late. It was storming! Did you want me to die?” The student attempted to use safety to justify earning full attendance credit for arriving to the class at all. This student sought undeserved credit. All other students took measures to leave earlier because of weather delays or accepted half credit for being late. No other students asked for an exemption and the late student did not advocate for other students to receive an exemption. An entitled consumer will care about their individual gains while overlooking its immediate impact on operations and perceived fairness (see Figure 1).

H1: *Consumer entitlement will positively relate to higher consumer service hypocrisy.*

While consumer service hypocrisy is socially undesirable, we believe a state of entitlement to seek compensation for feeling owed takes precedence. Those with narcissistic personality traits (where consumer entitlement theory stems from) are less likely to follow social norms (Salman Akhtar & Thomson Jr, 1982; Twenge et al., 2010). Service providers follow set company policies, and their enactment over time becomes social norms. Consumer service hypocrisy occurs when there is a violation of service norms that creates a double standard for an individual.

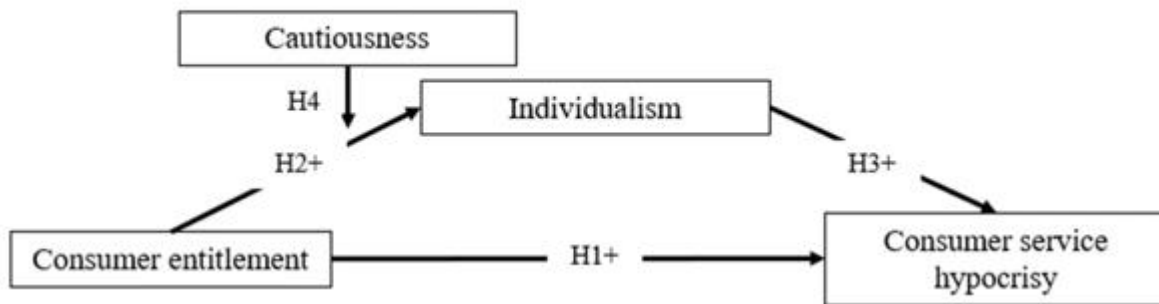
Individualism and Consumer Entitlement

Researchers evince that consumer entitlement is the social norm in highly individualistic nations (Edey & Knight, 2018). Consumer entitlement is a state of feeling personally deserving

of unwarranted compensation or special treatment (Fisk & Neville, 2011). Consumer entitlement places someone’s individual personhood at the center of the trying to overset a perceived deficit. Individualism places greater emphasis on oneself rather than the collective good of society (Arieli & Sagiv, 2018; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). Individualists value competition and winning for independent gains (Hamamura, 2012; Vandello & Cohen, 1999). For example, an entitled consumer delayed at an airport will demand a voucher for personally waiting, not necessarily a voucher for everyone on the plane. Consumer entitlement is a state of needing individual compensation for perceived debt owed. Thereby, consumer entitlement will relate to individualism because someone is seeking personal gains.

H2: *Individualism will mediate the relationship between consumer entitlement and consumer service hypocrisy. Thereby, consumer entitlement will positively relate to higher individualism.*

Figure 1
Hypothesized Model of Effects on Consumer Service Hypocrisy



Researchers explain that individualistic societies and consumer culture have “raised the bar of expectations so high that mental health suffers” (Twenge et al., 2010, p. 152). These researchers highlight an inflated sense of self in highly individualistic nations. Qualities of narcissism and self-centeredness are exhibited in entitlement behaviors. We posit that individualism mediates the relationship between consumer entitlement to consumer service hypocrisy because consumer entitlement places someone’s individual well-being over the overall well-being of a business or social group. For example, entitled consumers argue for restitution for themselves, usually not compensation for others also affected. Such complaints start with “I” (e.g., “I have been wronged.” or “I have been waiting for thirty minutes;” Asmuß, 2007) a collectivist may say, “We should be refunded for the canceled trip.” Consumer entitlement behaviors first benefit the individual within a given exchange.

H3: *As a mediator, individualism will positively relate to higher consumer service hypocrisy.*

We acknowledge that consumers can care about corrective actions that resolve systematic problems to help customers at large. For example, pointing out a broken keyboard at a check-in

station that caused a 2-minute delay can help the individual and subsequent customers. However, consumer entitlement behaviors help an individual's situation before others.

Cautiousness (Concern for Safety) and Consumer Entitlement Behaviors

Cautiousness is a behavioral or psychological construct concerned with safety. For example, consumers have practiced caution when adopting mobile shopping (Ghazali et al., 2018). Consumers exhibit cautiousness when they are wary of financial loss or physical harm (Sawang et al., 2023). Sawang et al. (2023) identified hesitant consumers who weigh financial, temporal, and performance risks before deciding on a purchase. These customers will take the "extra steps to ensure that the product or service they purchase meets their expectations" and performs as advertised (Sawang et al., 2023, p. 2). Cautious consumers can take more precautionary actions (e.g., wearing a life vest while swimming) or consider more factors (e.g., planning a ride home after a night of partying). Our research investigates this less-studied personality trait within the context of services.

Cautious individuals want to reduce potential harm and increase the odds of self-preservation (Costa & McCrae, 2008). Researchers studied coaching interventions for deceptive marketing (Boush et al., 2015). They believed those who self-identified as cautious were more likely to process marketing content with scrutiny. This attention to detail becomes readily available information to cautious consumers about service policies and perceived benefits they are owed. For example, a delayed flight that causes someone to miss their connecting flight can result in precautionary requests for hotel and transportation vouchers that protect someone's bank account from further subtraction. When cautious consumers believe they are entitled to benefits, this can result in service requests. These are individualistic requests that attempt to prevent further loss. We believe cautious consumers can also exhibit entitlement behaviors to protect their investments. In fact, there is a greater concern to act for self-preservation. It is like an inflated perceived threat of financial ruin if someone does not receive money back on a return. It can elevate someone's response to speak louder or demand to speak to the manager more forcefully. For entitled consumers, in the presence of high cautiousness, we postulate that someone's need for self-preservation increases. An individual's personhood becomes more salient when consumers feel wronged.

H4: *Cautiousness moderates the relationship between consumer entitlement and individualism. The presence of high consumer entitlement and high cautiousness heightens individualism and, thereby, consumer service hypocrisy.*

Environmental factors, like an economic downturn, can influence cautious spending (Alimen & Bayraktaroglu, 2011). Practicing cautiousness can be situational and based on what consumers feel owed. We believe entitled consumers are more likely to take extra precautionary measures to address their perceived deficit. For instance, despite being late to a medical appointment, rescheduling will result in future loss of time and potential medical issues from the delay in treatment. Demanding to be seen late factors in these precautions to protect one's well-being. Regardless of the social perception of a double standard, making precautionary individualistic demands is necessary to compensate for the perceived deficit. This cautiousness is taking additional corrective measures regardless of deservedness.

METHODOLOGY

Overview of Study and Participants

On Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) participants agreed to give consent, answered demographic questions, and responded to survey questions. Participants represented the diverse demographic and geographic U.S. population suitable for research (Coppock & McClellan, 2019; Levay et al., 2016). Participation required approval ratings over 97% (recommended $\geq 95\%$) (Keith et al., 2017). The researchers applied data quality procedures, like attention checks, recommended for better generalization of results (Buhrmester et al., 2016). Of the initial five hundred sixty-six convenience sample participants, twenty-one did not complete the survey and thirteen did not pass attention checks. The researchers conducted analysis on the remaining participants (N = 532). Males represented 55.5% of the participants and the median income was between \$60,000-\$69,999 USD (see Table 1). 90.2% of participants earned a GED/high school degree or higher at the time of the study.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

Demographic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	295	55.5
Female	237	45.5
Household Income		
Less than \$10,000	23	4.3
\$10,000-19,999	32	6.0
\$20,000-29,999	30	5.6
\$30,000-39,999	58	10.9
\$40,000-49,999	50	9.4
\$50,000-59,999	49	9.2
\$60,000-69,999	45	8.5
\$70,000-79,999	55	10.3
\$80,000-89,999	38	7.1
\$90,000-99,999	39	7.3
\$100,000 and over	113	21.2
GED/high school degree		
no degree	52	9.8
degree	480	90.2

Measures

Independent Variable. The researchers used the Consumer Entitlement Inventory to measure customer expectations for special treatment and automatic firm compliance using nine items (e.g., “In this modern age of technology, I should be able to ask a salesperson any question and have it answered instantly”) ($\alpha = .75$) (Boyd III & Helms, 2005).

Moderator Variable. Four horizontal individualism and four vertical individualism items were averaged on a 9-point scale (1 – never or definitely no to 9 – always or definitely yes) to form the individualism measure (Matsumoto et al., 1999; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). For example, horizontal individualism included the item, “My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me.” ($\alpha = .81$). Vertical individualism included the item, “Competition is the law of nature.” ($\alpha = .82$). Researchers have averaged vertical and horizontal individualism items into a suitable independent measure of individualism (Rhee et al., 1996). Measures with fewer items and overall similar reliability scores can sufficiently measure constructs while reducing participant fatigue from longer surveys (Donnellan et al., 2006; Schmidt et al., 2003).

Mediation Variable. Cautiousness measures someone’s carefulness in what they say or do to avoid dangers using ten items from the NEO Personality Inventory (e.g., “Choose my words with care.”) ($\alpha = .76$) (Costa & McCrae, 2008).

Dependent Variable. Service settings include hotels, schools, customer service call centers, medical offices, and airports. We developed a variety of service scenarios to capture consumer service hypocrisy for generalizability. A comprehensive academic literature search of hypocritical service scenarios was reviewed. The search yielded tangential examples such as moral hypocrisy (Polman & Ruttan, 2012) and expectations from gifts (Sherry Jr et al., 1993). Many articles studied the effects of corporate social responsibility hypocrisy on customer perceptions (Goswami et al., 2018; Hai-Ming et al., 2020; Ioannou et al., 2023). Complaining about unmet expectations was studied as hypocrisy (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Gültekin & Güvercin, 2022; Schurtz, 2015). This provided additional support for the need to study this topic. From this search and review of standard service policies in different settings, the researchers deduced that hypocrisy would come from espousing support for standard service policies with corresponding unwarranted exemptions. The contradictory individual exemptions to service policies were carefully designed second-level interpretations of researchers’ observations from these emergent themes (Wright & Larsen, 2023).

Consumer service hypocrisy measured the number of scenarios (out of five) in which participants had a double standard between company policy (part one) and an entitled exception (part two). Demographic questions between Parts One and Two distracted participants from immediately responding to Part Two to reduce the social desirability bias of appearing hypocritical. Part one scenario items represented standard service policies supporting normal operations and fairness (e.g., a late fee for an overdue bill) (see Table 2). Part 2 scenario items represented unearned or unwarranted individual changes that shift accountability to the service provider for an exception to the policy (e.g., an extension on a late bill for calling in to complain). Participants responded to each set of scenario items on a 7-point scale from 1 — Strongly disagree to 7 — Strongly agree with the prompt: "Please rate how much you disagree/agree with the following statements."

Consumer service hypocrisy was calculated as a value of one if ‘Somewhat agree,’ ‘Agree,’ or ‘Strongly agree’ was selected for parts 1 and 2 of a scenario (see Table 3). This indicated the presence of a double standard. The values ranged from 0-5. The average consumer service hypocrisy score was 1.73 (SD = 1.31) scenarios.

Control variables. Path analysis included gender, household income, and GED/high school degree as control variables.

Table 2
Entitled Service Policy Statements and Percentages.

#	Part 1: Service policy	Percent support	SD	#	Part 2: Entitled exception	Percent support	SD
1	After a due date, a company will charge a late bill fee.	90%	.31	6	After a due date, certain people can receive an extension on a bill if they call in to complain.	63%	.48
2	A medical office asks patients to arrive early before their appointment to fill out forms and patiently wait to be called in for examination.	91%	.29	7	A patient can be seen for their medical appointment after their scheduled time, however late.	44%	.50
3	A hotel gives a courtesy call for checkout time.	59%	.49	8	A guest never received a courtesy call for checkout time and should not have to pay extra for checking out late.	27%	.44
4	A student will be marked tardy for arriving late to class.	87%	.33	9	Because of rainy weather, a student should receive attendance credit despite being tardy.	34%	.48
5	An airline will offer a voucher to customers for loss luggage with photographic proof of contents.	58%	.49	10	For loss airline luggage, customers can verbally claim belongings for a voucher without photographic proof.	38%	.49

Notes: SD = standard deviation. Parts separated by a distraction task (demographic questions). Participants responded to each set of scenario items on a 7-point scale from 1 — Strongly disagree to 7 — Strongly agree with the prompt: "Please rate how much you disagree/agree with the following statements."

Table 3
Classification of Consumer Service Hypocrisy

- 1) IF for both scenario items 1 AND 6 "Somewhat agree", "Agree", or "Strongly agree" selected → classified hypocritical
- 2) IF for both scenario items 2 AND 7 "Somewhat agree", "Agree", or "Strongly agree" selected → classified hypocritical
- 3) IF for both scenario items 3 AND 8 "Somewhat agree", "Agree", or "Strongly agree" selected → classified hypocritical
- 4) IF for both scenario items 4 AND 9 "Somewhat agree", "Agree", or "Strongly agree" selected → classified hypocritical
- 5) IF for both scenario items 5 AND 10 "Somewhat agree", "Agree", or "Strongly agree" selected → classified hypocritical

Note: Sum of consumer service hypocrisy could range from 0-5 in variability where zero represented no hypocrisy.

RESULTS

Path Analysis Results

Table 4 displays descriptive statistics and variable correlations. Moderated mediation analysis was performed using SPSS PROCESS V3.5 with the 10,000 bootstrapped sampling procedure (A.F. Hayes 2012, 2017; Preacher et al., 2007). Moderated mediation modeled path analysis was presented in Table 5 and Figure 2. This was considered statistically significant when zero was not between the 95% upper and lower bound confidence intervals. The omnibus moderated mediation test of consumer entitlement and cautiousness demonstrated a significant indirect effect of individualism on consumer service hypocrisy [$b = .014$, $SE = .006$ ($LLCI .0037$ $ULCI .0273$)] (Hayes, 2015, 2018). Consumer entitlement associated with higher consumer service hypocrisy [$b = .123$, $t = 2.506$, $SE = .049$, $p < .05$ ($LLCI .0266$ $ULCI .2198$)] (H1). Consumer entitlement associated with higher individualism [$b = .372$, $t = 8.593$, $SE = .043$, $p < .0001$ ($LLCI$

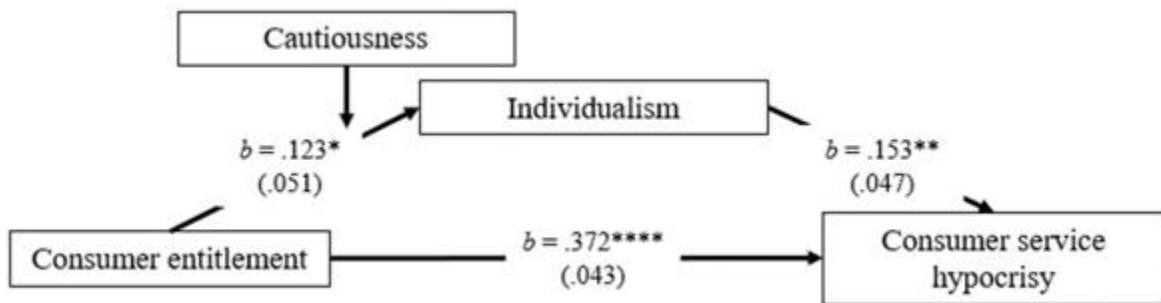
.2761 *ULCI* .4573) (H2). Higher individualism associated with higher consumer service hypocrisy [$b = .153, t = 3.280, SE = .047, p < .01$ (*LLCI* .0615 *ULCI* .2451) (H3). SPSS AMOS V25 analysis of fit indicated adequate values on recommended to report indexes ($\chi^2/df = 3.051, p < .0001, RMSEA = .062, SRMR = .063, CFI = .887$) (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2015; Shi et al., 2019).

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics and Cross-Level Correlations

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Constructs									
1. Consumer entitlement	3.16	1.26	—						
2. Individualism	5.68	1.34	.376 **	—					
3. Cautiousness	3.87	1.41	.190 **	.035	—				
4. Consumer service hypocrisy	1.73	1.31	.213 **	.204 **	.081	—			
Covariates									
5. Gender (female)	1.45	.50	-.090 *	-.141 **	.030	-.072	—		
6. Household income	6.92	3.14	.102 *	.105 *	.052	.094 *	-.066	—	
7. GED/high school degree	.90	.30	.053	.107 *	-.048	.032	-.023	.228 **	—

Notes: N= 532, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ level (2-tailed)

Figure 2
Moderated Mediation Modeled Effects on Consumer Service Hypocrisy



Notes: Covariates included gender, household income, and GED/high school degree.

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$, **** = $p < .0001$

Moderated Mediation Results

Table 6 and Figure 3 present the moderated mediation results of consumer entitlement and cautiousness to individualism on consumer service hypocrisy. Cautiousness did not have a significant direct relationship with individualism, which was expected [$b = -.049, t = -1.265, SE = .039, p = .207$ (*LLCI* -.1259 to *ULCI* .0273)]. As hypothesized, high levels of consumer entitlement and cautiousness are associated with higher individualism [$b = .091, t = 3.432, SE = .026, p < .001$ (*LLCI* .0387 to *ULCI* .1423)] (H4). The mediation path through individualism is positively related to higher consumer service hypocrisy. High levels of consumer entitlement and cautiousness are associated with higher individualism and, thereby, higher consumer service hypocrisy. Consumer entitlement has significant direct effects on consumer service hypocrisy, and the significant indirect effect through individualism on consumer service hypocrisy indicated partial mediation (Hayes, 2018).

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Table 5
Moderation Mediation Modeled Effects of Consumer Entitlement on Consumer Service Hypocrisy.

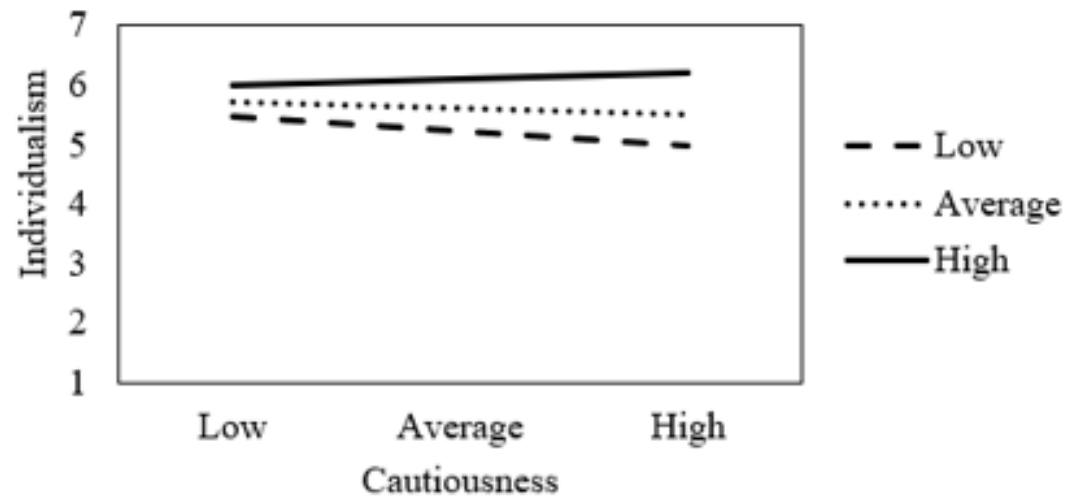
Antecedent	Outcome								
	Individualism				Consumer service hypocrisy				
	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Coeff.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	
1) Consumer entitlement	.372	.043	8.593	<.0001	.123	.049	2.506	<.05	
2) Individualism	—	—	—	—	.153	.047	3.280	<.01	
3) Cautiousness	-.049	.039	-1.265	.207	—	—	—	—	
4) Consumer entitlement x cautiousness	.091	.026	3.432	<.001	—	—	—	—	
Covariates									
5) Gender (female)	-.280	.107	-2.610	<.01	-.074	.117	-.634	.526	
6) Household income	.022	.017	1.257	.209	.027	.019	1.448	.148	
7) GED/High school degree	.276	.184	1.495	.135	-.005	.199	-.022	.982	
Model Summary	$R^2 = .181$				$R^2 = .059$				
	$F(6, 525) = 19.368, p < .0001$				$F(5, 526) = 6.633, p < .0001$				

Notes: Mean centering was applied to consumer entitlement and cautiousness variables for path analysis. Dummy coding was applied to gender (males = 1 and females = 2) and high school degree (0 = no GED/high school degree, 1 = GED/high school degree or higher).

Table 6
Conditional Direct and Indirect Effects with Moderator Cautiousness

	Left-leaning Low (-1 SD)	Average Mean	Right-leaning High (+1 SD)
Consumer entitlement → individualism	.203 (LLCI .0680 ULCI .3376)	.384 (LLCI .2990 ULCI .4685)	.474 (LLCI .3756 ULCI .5729)
Consumer entitlement → individualism → consumer service hypocrisy	.031 (LLCI .0075 ULCI .0650)	.059 (LLCI .0232 ULCI .1013)	.073 (LLCI .0286 ULCI .1237)

Figure 3
Moderator Cautiousness with Consumer Entitlement on Individualism



DISCUSSION

We expand on consumer entitlement theory by finding entitled consumers who demonstrate higher consumer service hypocrisy. Path analysis demonstrated that entitled consumers supported equitable service policies while also expecting preferential exceptions to those policies. The direct relationship to consumer service hypocrisy extends prior understanding of consumer entitlement. Entitled consumers believe it is acceptable to seek exemptions to service policies that result in unwarranted benefits, such as additional time or underserved credit. For example, it is expected that if a bill is past due, there are consequences (e.g., late fees). However, an entitled consumer believes it is acceptable to complain to gain extended time and the ability to pay just the on-time costs. This shifts the burden onto a company to override billing policies and prorate late payment costs because of customer demands. A service provider can enforce policies (risking dissatisfaction) or bend to the demands of entitled consumers. Given that entitled consumers generally feel owed by others, an enforced policy could generate greater feelings of being wronged. A consumer with the propensity to complain is intensified by dissatisfaction (Prakash, 1991). This can sink company trust in service companies, which are a foundation for building loyalty (Seiders & Berry, 1998). Consumers dissatisfied with products that received satisfactory complaint resolutions, however, are more likely to repurchase (Halstead & Page Jr, 1992). This is a service failure-recovery to a negative event (Nowak et al., 2023a). Such frequent consumer demands and dissatisfaction have shifted companies to offer more generous policies (e.g., lengthy return policies for opened or unsatisfactory goods) (Davis et al., 1998). Companies try to win-win with more generous policies to satisfy demanding customers while profiting from their business over the long term. Companies have recuperated losses from long-term customer loyalty and by reducing costs elsewhere (e.g., leveraging a CRM system) (Gee et al., 2008; Reichheld et al., 2000). Factoring these immediate losses into prices and daily operations can buffer excessive consumer complaints.

IMPLICATIONS

Individualistic customers are more likely to favor post-service complaining behaviors and complain to hotel managers than collectivist customers (Huang et al., 1996; Yuksel et al., 2006). Customers in individualistic nations (like the U.S.) have grown accustomed to complaining and receiving compensation for deviations from expected services (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2013). This is captured in the common expression “satisfaction guaranteed” in service settings. Our results highlight how entitled customers are willing to push policy limits and espouse special treatment despite the risks of perceived hypocrisy. Companies need to account for these unreasonable demands with a systematic response. Creating a tiered response system can give service agents a way to match an escalation of complaints from consumers. For example, low, medium, and high-complaining customers can be offered restitution based on severity. This gives service providers a thought-out process plan that can be reviewed for ongoing improvement.

With a large base of customers, standard company policies help increase operation efficiency (Gupta & Kohli, 2006). Having clear, well-publicized policies guides most customers who will abide by them. However, findings from this research demonstrate that entitled consumers will seek exemptions regardless of standard policies. Businesses must evaluate the cost of serving more customers with highly efficient operations at the cost of potentially harming customer relationships with inflexible policies (Casadesus & Ricart, 2011). Services can create tier consequences to reduce perceived loss while maintaining standard policies. For example, a small fee can be applied instead of charging a full extra hotel night for late checkout (e.g., twenty dollars

for one hour late). While the customer will experience a loss, the alternative is perceived as worse. This dampens the negative impact of enforcing a strict policy. This also maintains standard policies so most customers will follow them.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The researchers created and studied new consumer service hypocrisy scenarios relevant to current times. However, rapid advancements in technology will continue to evolve the service industry (Chapman et al., 2003; Smith, 2006). With such advancements, hypocritical scenarios will change. For example, Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology is supplementing human customer service touchpoints (Qin et al., 2022). Arguing with an AI computer can generate more frustration, often without an appropriate resolution, even if they are reasonable demands. Demanding requests from a computer system can appear more necessary because perceived understanding can seem less than a human making eye contact and demonstrating they care. Consumer service hypocrisy in the age of service automation will transform because the psychological distance between human contact and the corporation can appear larger. We anticipate that forms of consumer service hypocrisy will morph as automation changes the way services are provided. In fact, inflexible computer systems that strictly enforce company policies may deter attempts to receive unfair advantages but result in negative online reviews and customers leaving the business out of dissatisfaction (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2013).

Consumer entitlement is not necessarily negative from a consumer's perspective. Consumers are seeking services to satisfy their needs. While this can forcefully advocate for undeserved services, they can also ask for what other consumers desire (e.g., more flexible appointment check-in times). In fact, customer complaints can inform businesses of service gaps or malfunctions (e.g., upgraded airport luggage systems to reduce losses) (von Janda et al., 2021). With service automation increasing in the digital age, meeting customer service demands is an ongoing problem companies face (Leeflang et al., 2014). Entitled consumers who express their opinions are expending extra effort to tell a company. For example, they may be willing to wait extra time to speak to managers who can improve processes. Other customers may just patronize elsewhere or vent on social media (Melancon & Dalakas, 2018). Studying the benefits of consumer entitlement was outside the scope of this project, even though companies can gain from listening to underlying messages.

Researchers have studied consumers who perceive service with gratitude (i.e., felt obligation to reciprocate service benefits) versus entitlement (Wetzel et al., 2014). Grateful consumers can see services provided as kind gestures by fellow humans. For example, if a coffee order was incorrectly made and is asked to be redone, a customer may tip out of politeness, knowing the barista will have to do more work. Additional research can reveal differences in cultural norms and the perceived dignity of service workers. Large multinational corporations have generated headlines with enormous profits and unethical conduct (Christensen & Murphy, 2004; Clinard & Yeager, 2011). Complaining to receive a hypocritical service demand will seem less consequential to a multibillion-dollar corporation than a small local business with community ties. When customers are known as numbers and service workers are rushed to fulfill mass quantities of orders in capitalistic societies, it can dehumanize the exchange of services (Korczynski, 2009). Customers can falsely view service workers as emotionless and unaffected by consumer behaviors (e.g., irate shouting). We believe an individual's personal customer service work experience will relate to better treatment of service workers as customers. We also believe consumer service experience would relate to more service requests if they had the same industry

experience because of familiarity with what is possible. This is like requesting a customized order when someone is aware of an unlisted menu item. Future research can investigate how knowledge of unspoken service policies can influence what customers will ask for that goes beyond basic service offerings.

A company that calls out consumer hypocrisy would expect customer backlash. However, problematic customer behaviors, like unreasonable demands, exhausts employees, reduce job satisfaction, and increase turnover intentions (Poddar & Madupalli, 2012). If parenting favoritism is seen and given to one child over another, it would create resentment and dispute. Unfortunately, for companies, the motto of “The customer is always right” has instilled in customers the perceived right to have it their way regardless of standard company policy (Gursoy et al., 2017; Polyakova et al., 2014). Future research can investigate if nudging (i.e., unobtrusive interventions) could shift personal responsibility back to entitled consumers for their actions (VonBergen et al., 2016). For example, explaining the backlog and added pressure on hotel workers for late checkouts could change the minds of demanding guests. In the same way, society has shifted to empower consumers to voice complaints (e.g., business reviews on social media forums), it is also possible to encourage helpful behaviors that benefit consumers and businesses (e.g., placing dirty hotel towels on a floor pile and leaving used towels on racks for reuse) (Bunker & Bradley, 2007). With effective marketing, it is possible to redirect behaviors to favorable nudges and outcomes that accumulate over time (Kraak et al., 2017). Companies can wisely use those funds to generate unique customer value, so they do not need to game the system to gain by complaining.

Consumer perceived satisfaction is often compared to the level of service others receive. For example, a VIP ticket to an event has more value when the express entry line saves substantially more time. Social comparison theory provides an understanding of how individuals process information about others to oneself (Nowak et al., 2023a). Awareness of problems can come from service comparisons (e.g., someone receiving a benefit while another does not) (Yan & Lotz, 2009). When consumers experience dissatisfaction, they can spread negative word-of-mouth and complain to take revenge against the company. This is a form of retribution to cope with feeling wronged. Future research can investigate how social comparison can intensify consumer service hypocrisy. For instance, seeing others receiving preferential treatment can justify perceived entitled consumer demands. Dissatisfaction and consumer complaining behaviors are likely to accompany witnessing unwarranted preferential treatment.

CONCLUSION

Entitled consumers will justify their demands by placing fault elsewhere and seeking restitution as if owed. Service providers should make policies well publicized and practice consistent administration when possible. In extenuating circumstances, it is important to have additional policies that anticipate unwarranted demands from entitled consumers because of perceived deficits they experience compared to the average customer. Unprepared service providers will be caught off-guard, lose customers, and generate negative word-of-mouth without establishing protocols for these problematic customer interactions. For example, the loss of airline luggage is not intentional and does not target any one person. However, an entitled customer may feel particularly aggrieved because of their expectations for paid services and a sense of victimhood. In fact, consumers who complain are more likely to spread negative word-of-mouth than those who do not complain (Halstead, 2002). A disconfirmation of expectations will impact perceived service quality (Patterson & Johnson, 1993). Disconfirmation is a disconnect between initial service expectations and actual service performance (Halstead, 1989). In the digital age,

consumers expect reliable and responsive services (Jun & Cai, 2001; Santos, 2003). Excellent customer service goes beyond these expectations and accounts for unreasonable demands that have become more common.

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