

It makes me feel vulnerable! The impact of public self-disclosure on online complaint behavior

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Abstract

Genuine reviews are essential for financial performance and for customer trust. In the case of a negative experience, withholding negative reviews may lead to biased online information. This paper aims to investigate two factors that may prompt customers to withhold their complaints (i.e., identity disclosure and locus of control).

The study adopts a sequential exploratory mixed-method approach. An exploratory interview phase compares public vs anonymous online environments, and explores the reasons why dissatisfied customers might decide not to complain. An experiment then shows that vulnerability is a key mechanism preventing negative reviews. This effect is exaggerated when customers perceive that they do not have control over the events happening in their lives (i.e., external locus of control).

Our work uncovers an important determinant of online complaint behavior, vulnerability. It also offers practical suggestions, such as improving confidentiality, to increase a customer's willingness to complain following a negative experience.

Key words: customer complaint behavior, vulnerability, public self-disclosure, locus of control, financial performance, online reviews

1 Introduction

Customer complaints are a valuable source of information that serves as an early warning to anticipate failures (Loo et al., 2013). The development of the Internet and online communication platforms, however, means that these complaints are seen as a threat to businesses (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Due to their critical and negative nature, online complaints tend to be made anonymously (Sparks & Browning, 2010; Woong Yun & Park, 2011). In the hotel industry, some platforms force customers to disclose their true names (Joinson et al., 2008; Buglass et al., 2016) to minimize the negative effects of customer-generated online complaints on a hotel's reputation (Sparks & Bradley, 2017). For instance, Airbnb employs a "Verified Identity" policy, and so it does not provide anonymity to either hosts or guests. As a result, people are hesitant about leaving negative reviews (Teubner & Hawlitschek, 2018).

Not leaving genuine negative feedback results in a lack of transparency of communication platforms (Pera et al., 2019; Ert & Fleischer, 2019). Thus it is a major issue

because people rely on online reviews before their actual purchase to reduce risk and avoid undesired consequences of these purchases (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008; Bronner & De Hoog, 2011; D'Acunto et al., 2019; Nieto-Garcia et al., 2019). This is especially true for the tourism and hospitality industry because over 95% of travelers read and rely on reviews left by previous tourists (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Hu & Kim, 2018).

Despite the importance of non-complaint behavior, research has mostly been focused on the reasons that drive customer complaint behavior (Davidow, 2003). As a result, there is a void of knowledge in customer non-complaint behavior literature (Chebat et al., 2005). The main aim of the study is to explore why customers decide to withhold their complaints. We suggest that vulnerability is what hinders customer complaint processes, and specifically, that when a customer's personal information is disclosed, they are unwilling to complain online because they feel vulnerable. We propose that customers' locus of control plays a key role in moderating this relationship. The concept of locus of control shows the degree to which customers believe they have control over the events happening in their lives (Kowalsky, 1996). It is a continuum that runs from strong external locus of control (ELOC) at the one end to strong internal locus of control (ILOC) at the other end (Rotter, 1966). Internal (external) locus of control implies high (low) level of trust in one's ability to control these events (Gursoy et al., 2007). We argue that non-complaint behavior will be exacerbated in the case of external locus of control, as customers believe that events in their lives are not contingent upon their actions.

Methodologically, this paper applies a sequential exploratory mixed methods design. A qualitative phase uncovers the mechanisms behind the customers' complaint behavior. This is followed by the experimental study, which demonstrates the role of vulnerability in decreasing complaint behavior.

This paper makes several theoretical and practical contributions. First, the study contributes to the literature on online customer complaint behavior and explains why customers are reluctant to complain online when their identities are disclosed (Chang & Chin, 2011; Joinson, 2001). Second, it contributes to research on self-disclosure by studying the effects of personality traits (locus of control) and situational risks (online complaining) on customer's willingness to disclose personal information online (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). Third, in the same vein as Baker et al. (2005), it extends the customer-driven definition of vulnerability and presents evidence that vulnerability is an important contextual phenomenon that inhibits people from complaining online. From a managerial standpoint, this study offers ways to maintain customers' privacy helping to preserve a trustworthy review system. Finally, it suggests the importance of first-hand customer feedback (i.e., book of complaints, face-to-face feedback,

printed feedback form, etc.) in order to address issues that might be kept hidden due to online non-complaint behavior.

2 Literature review

2.1 Customer complaint behavior

Previous literature on customer behavior has proposed different conceptualizations of customer complaint behavior. According to Singh and Widing (1991), customer complaint behavior deals with the identification and evaluation of all aspects involved in the customer's reaction to service failure and consequent dissatisfaction. Phau and Sari (2004) suggested that customer complaint behavior involves the customer's negative reaction to dissatisfaction derived from a low quality of delivered services, whereas dissatisfaction is the negative gap between what customers expect to receive and what they actually receive (Thøgersen et al., 2009).

Customers have various opportunities by which to express their dissatisfaction with a service experience. They can be categorized into two broad groups: behavioral and non-behavioral responses (Singh, 1990). Behavioral responses include all actions that customers may take to express their dissatisfaction, whereas non-behavioral responses are those when customers, even when dissatisfied, will avoid complaining (Heung and Lam, 2003).

The literature on consumer behavior suggests that people behave differently in public vs. anonymous settings (Ratner & Kahn, 2002). According to Matthews et al. (2009), when individuals are free to choose their mode of action, that is, when the constraints on them present as minimal, they can be themselves and fully express their personalities as they are. In contrast, external pressure and stress hamper the expression of personality. Ratner and Kahn (2002) find that interpersonal influences have an effect on customer's choices. They argue that people who feel observed are more likely to switch away from favorite items because of how they expect to be perceived by others. Consistent with this idea, some studies in psychology (Zimbardo, 2007) suggest that people adhere more to social norms in an environment when their personalities are identifiable than when the environment is anonymous. For instance, when individuals participating in research reveal personal information to others, they display socially desirable behavior. Contrarily, when the environment is private or anonymous, people are more relaxed and exhibit their true behavior (Ratner & Kahn, 2002).

Research has shown that there are two main reasons why people avoid leaving negative reviews. First, to protect the self from the social consequences of a negative review, such as emotional or physical reaction of the recipient towards the complainant. Second, to

maintain a desired positive self-image in social interactions (Jeffries & Hornsey, 2012; Woong Yun & Park, 2011). Moreover, research into the privacy concerns of Internet users who wish to complain suggests that a substantial percentage of people are concerned about disclosing identifiable information online (Mesch, 2012; Jeffries & Hornsey, 2012). Public self-disclosure is the act of revealing personal information, making it available to others (Joinson, 2001). A customer's willingness to disclose the identity thus depends on the level of risk associated with self-disclosure. In the case of a negative experience, people are more reluctant to disclose their identities (Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Qian & Scott, 2007). Particularly, if there is a risk of being sanctioned for expressing unpopular opinion people will avoid posting (Woong Yun & Park, 2011) or will use a pseudonym (Qian & Scott, 2007).

Anonymity can mitigate this unwillingness to leave a negative review. Anonymity is the state in which a person cannot be identified (Marx, 1999). It can be either discursive or visual (Mesch, 2012). Discursive anonymity is the condition in which specific comments cannot be linked to a specific individual (Scott, 2004) so that factors such as name, gender, location, email address, and so on are not revealed. Visual anonymity refers to the absence of any physical presence of the source (e.g., pictures, videos) (Mesch, 2012). All in all, anonymity provides people with the opportunity to leave negative online reviews about an experience, and opinions on a service they have used, without fear of being judged or shamed (Verhagen et al., 2013). In fact, preserving anonymity when complaining online is crucial for some individuals. In addition to protecting their personal information, it fosters the delivery of their true experiences to others (Joinson, 2001; Woong Yun & Park, 2011). Therefore we expect that public disclosure prevents online behavior in case of a negative experience. Formally,

H1: *Compared to an anonymous setting, public self-disclosure decreases a customer's complaint behavior in case of a negative experience.*

2.2 Motives for not complaining

Although there is a large body of literature investigating the determinants of complaint behavior (Crie, 2003; Gursoy et al., 2007; Ngai et al., 2007; Loo et al., 2013; Gonçalves et al., 2018; Ghazi, 2017), research on complaint avoidance motives is still scarce. Table 1 presents a brief summary of the motives behind customer decisions to avoid leaving a negative review. These reasons range from rational elements such as the cognitive efforts spent on writing negative reviews, to more emotional mechanisms such as empathy (Pera et al., 2019) or brand love (Bıçakcıoğlu et al., 2018).

Table 1. Motives that inhibit customer’s online complaints

2.2.1 Mediating role of vulnerability

One aspect that has been overlooked in the literature is vulnerability. Vulnerability is the state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally (Buglass et al., 2016). Traditionally, elderly people, people with low incomes or without work, long-term disabled people and ethnic minorities are classified as the “vulnerable population” (Jafari et al., 2013). Contemporary studies emphasize the multidimensional nature of vulnerability (Baker et al., 2005; Brennan et al., 2017), and thus the debate has moved beyond a customer’s individual traits and characteristics towards broad agreement that vulnerability is relative and dynamic, and therefore it is subject to change depending on the circumstances.

Baker et al. (2005) argue that anyone can be vulnerable if placed into a situation over which they have little control. An important setting to consider is the online environment. Online vulnerability involves an individual’s capacity to experience detriment to their psychological, reputational or physical wellbeing as the result of their online activities (Buglass et al., 2017). Online vulnerability takes different forms, including online harassment, loss of

Authors	Determinants	Key findings
Pera et al. (2019)	Empathy	Empathy plays an important role in preventing negative reviews about service problems within the hospitality context.
Ert & Fleischer (2019)	Public reputation	People are deterred from leaving a negative review due to fear of bad public reputation in peer-to-peer accommodation.
Teubner & Hawlitschek (2018)	Fear of retaliation	Negative reviews are underreported in peer-to-peer hospitality platforms due to the fear of retaliation.
Jenniely (2019)	Time and cognitive effort	Reasons for not leaving a negative review are the time and the cognitive effort it requires.
Hu & Kim (2018)	Altruism	Customers in hotel settings who are altruistic do not engage in posting negative reviews online.
Loo, Boo, Khoo-Lattimore (2013)	Seeking apology	In a hospitality context, offering apologies before an official complaint might alleviate the outcomes of failure thus inhibiting a formal negative review.
Bıçakcıoğlu, İpek, & Bayraktaroğlu, (2018)	Brand love	Brand love prevents customers from spreading negative word of mouth in case of a negative experience.
Fradkin et al. (2015)	Reciprocity	Socially induced reciprocity decreases guest’s willingness to leave a negative review in a peer to peer accommodation context due to an interaction with the host.
Osman et al. (2019)	“Here (home)” vs “There (away)” constructs	In a peer-to-peer context consumers are less likely to leave a negative review if they have developed a bond with the host and perceive their travel experiences being close to their own “home”.

privacy or misuse of personal information. Although being an online social user does not automatically create vulnerability, the type of interaction with the platform might create it (Staksrud et al., 2013). Some people believe that by leaving negative reviews on online travel platforms they are exposed to the possibility of being criticized by other customers or by the service provider, which fosters even higher sense of vulnerability. This psychological mechanism can be explained by the so-called theory of mind. (Gweon & Saxe, 2013). The theory of mind involves the important social-cognitive skill of an individual's ability to understand others' mental states and to acknowledge that they might be different from their own (Bryant et al., 2013). Theory of mind is a crucial element of people's social interactions, which is used to analyze, judge and predict the behavior of other individuals (Henry et al., 2013; Gweon & Saxe, 2013). Therefore, due to these perceptions of how other people or the company's management will react to their complaints, people avoid complaining online (Jeffries & Hornsey, 2012). With the implementation of the "Real Name Policy", which encourages people to use their real names, the level of online vulnerability has increased (Buglass et al., 2016). This policy aims to reduce the number of anonymized communications on online platforms (Hogan, 2013). As a result, one of the biggest concerns that people have when leaving online complaints is that their personal information is visible to other people. This exposes them to greater feelings of vulnerability and might prevent customers complaining online.

H2: *Vulnerability mediates the relationship between public self-disclosure and complaint behavior such that customers exposed to the disclosure of their private identity feel more vulnerable. In turn, vulnerability decreases online complaint behavior.*

2.3 The moderating role of locus of control

People tend to react differently to a service failure, based on their personalities and attitudes toward complaining (e.g., Tronvoll, 2007; Bodey & Grace, 2006; Heung & Lam, 2003). According to Kowalski (1996), locus of control (LOC) is the personality trait that is directly related to complaint behavior. Locus of control is the degree to which people believe they have control over the events happening in their lives (Rotter, 1966). A high score on the LOC scale indicates a greater sense of external locus of control (ELOC) (Gursoy, McCleary & Lepsito, 2007). Individuals with ELOC perceive results as outcomes that are not contingent upon their actions and refer to luck, fate or chance (Kowalski, 1996). Conversely, a lower score on the LOC scale demonstrates a greater sense of internal locus of control (ILOC) (Gursoy,

McCleary & Lepsito, 2007). Individuals with ILOC perceive outcomes as being entirely contingent upon their own actions (Rotter, 1966).

People with an internal locus of control are more likely to complain since they believe that this action will bring some change. On the other hand, those with an external locus of control are less likely to undertake any action due to frustration and the stress associated with it (Kowalski, 1996). Bodey and Grace (2006) suggest that “complainers” in service encounters believe they have more control over the situation than “non-complainers”.

Wheless, Erickson and Behrens (1986) found that locus of control mediates people’s self-disclosure, so that people with ELOC disclose less information about themselves than individuals with ILOC (Ryckman, Sherman, & Burgess, 1973). To the best of our knowledge there is no research investigating the relationship between a customer’s locus of control and their online vulnerability within the customer complaint behavior context, although there are some studies within the literature on social issues (Thompson & Spacapan, 1991; Gallagher, Bentley, & Barlow, 2014). Thompson and Spacapan (1991) suggest that people with less control over the events in their lives are more likely to be vulnerable. Contemporary theories of psychology also posit that ‘...a lack of perceived control over potentially negative events represents a generalized psychological vulnerability...’ (Gallagher, Bentley, & Barlow, 2014, p. 571). It is thus suggested that people who believe they have less control over the actions in their lives (presumably people with external locus of control) are more exposed to online vulnerability when complaining on online platforms.

Based on the above we hypothesize that:

H3a: *Having an external locus of control increases the negative effect of public self-disclosure on consumer complaint behavior*

H3b: *Having an external locus of control increases vulnerability in the case of public self-disclosure.*

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework. We argue that the online environment (public vs anonymous) determines customer complaint behavior, so that negative experiences are under-reported when the complainer is identifiable. We suggest that this happens because the complainer is exposed to online vulnerability.

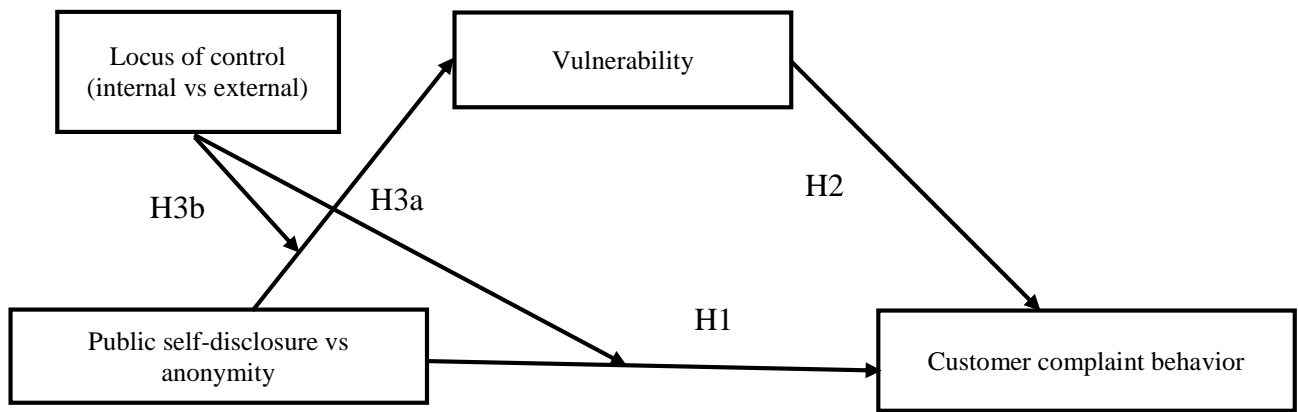


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

3 Methodology

The current study adopts a sequential exploratory mixed-method approach (Creswell et al., 2003). First, we propose an exploratory study to investigate the facets and extent of the perception of vulnerability. Most studies have defined customer vulnerability using socio-demographic dimensions (Laufer & Gillespie, 2004; Pavia & Mason, 2014; Commuri & Ekici, 2008). People attributed to the highly vulnerable groups may disagree that they are actually vulnerable because vulnerability is not a permanent state but rather a contextual phenomenon (Baker et al., 2005). Moreover, the same authors argue that the actual vulnerability occurs at the same time as it is experienced so that it can be understood only by listening to reports of customer experiences. The qualitative phase is thus important for an insightful view of customer experiences and motives of complaint behavior, offering also more clarity on the conceptualization of vulnerability.

An experimental study complements the qualitative evidence, by measuring under controlled settings the impact of the level of anonymity on complaint behavior through vulnerability. It also provides initial fine-grain evidence of boundary conditions, such as locus of control, which might affect complaint behavior.

3.1 Study 1

3.1.1 Design, participants and procedure

Face-to-face interviews (n= 24) lasting 40 min on average were conducted in the UK. The interviews were in English and all respondents were fluent English speakers. Participants were explained the aim of the current study and were then asked to sign a consent form. Since vulnerability is an important behavioral aspect that cannot be observed either directly or by another person, qualitative data were collected using the critical incident technique (CIT). CIT is a qualitative interview procedure that investigates “critical incidents” identified by the

respondent, behavioral responses to it and sequential outcomes (Gremier, 2004). This method is used to understand an individual's behavior in a particular situation (Bitner, Boom & Tetreault, 1990). It is therefore a reliable technique for collecting and interpreting data from a negative experience, customer dissatisfaction and the consequent complaint behavior.

The study took place in July 2019. There was an initial screening question which required participants to state whether they had experienced a negative experience in a hotel in the last 12 months. Participants who answered no were excluded from the study. Participants were aged between 24-45, both female and male respondents who had left negative reviews on online travel platforms (OTP), and those who did not do so, after a negative experience in a hospitality context. The study involved both self-employed professionals and employees, as well as students. Once the saturation point was reached, further data collections were discontinued (Saunders et al., 2018). Interviews were developed mostly with questions similar to:

Have you been unhappy with a stay within the last twelve months? What was the incident?

Did you make a complaint?

If yes, how, to whom, what are the desired effects?

If no, what was the reason you did not complain?

Have you left an online review after your stay?

If yes, on which platform, and did you use your real name?

If no, what prevents you from leaving a negative review?

How much information do you usually disclose on online communication platforms?

In general, how concerned are you about security (privacy, confidentiality or proof of identity) on the Internet?

How concerned are you about security (privacy, confidentiality or proof of identity) in relation to making complaints online?

Have you ever experienced any criticism towards yourself online?

Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed individually. The first author carried out initial coding. The following phase involved all authors in the search for emerging themes and similar patterns within the interviews. Building on these patterns, we derived the key themes, which were common in most interviews, for further analysis. Two authors independently repeated reliability assessments by analyzing five randomly chosen questions per 8 interviews. The inter-coder reliability check scored 87%. Items where there was disagreement were later discussed, analyzed and agreed upon.

3.1.2 Results and discussion

Key themes pertaining to online customer complaint behavior involved their (un)willingness to leave a complaint, concerns with regards to the public disclosure of identity, online criticism, emotional insecurity and the reasons for complaining or not complaining (inherent to locus of control). Based on the theory of mind, the following analysis of the interviews suggests that an underlying phenomenon behind customer complaint avoidance online is the perception of how other people will react to negative reviews. Table 2 shows an illustrative coding of emerging themes for complaint and complaint avoidance behavior that were common to most of interviews. We summarized the themes raised in all interviews into three major subject groups that affect a customer's (un)willingness to complain online. The first was the negative consequences of public self-disclosure. The majority of respondents opted to complain anonymously or under pseudonyms. They highlighted the main concern related to the public complaints online, which is the loss of privacy or identity. For instance, *"I am very concerned about my privacy. I would never leave any negative review under my real name. What if someone steals my identity and uses it?"* (Sarah)¹. The second theme is related to the level of risk associated with online complaints. As stated by a considerable percentage of the interviewees, they did not feel safe complaining online, particularly when they are identifiable, due to the potential for exposure to online attacks from other people: online vulnerability. For instance, *"I would complain online only if I remain completely anonymous. If the content I post offends someone then they might initiate attacks towards me. Given this possibility, I feel threatened if my identity is disclosed"* (Nick)¹. We have therefore proposed online vulnerability (i.e., loss of privacy and online criticism) as a mediator that explains the effect of online complaint environment on customer complaint behavior.

Finally, all participants were asked whether they had reviewed their stays on online platforms and what their motives - if any were - for (not) reviewing. As stated, those who complained online wished to warn potential customers and inform the hotel about what exactly went wrong. For instance, *"I write negative comments because when other people book their stays they should know what they are looking for and if this is actually the best value for their money or not"* (Sam)¹. Whereas those who had not complained stated that online reviews were not worth their time, since little will be done to resolve these complaints. For instance, *"It does not deserve my time and effort to write a negative review because hotel management does not address them adequately"* (Pina)¹. These attitudes towards online complaints are associated to customers' locus of control. Specifically, to the degree customers believed their actions would bring change in this particular situation. Locus of control thus seems to be an appropriate

boundary condition that explains a customer's motives to (not) complain. Based on the information above, public self-disclosure, vulnerability and locus of control have been recognized as essential facets of a customer's (un)willingness to complain within the qualitative phase, and were tested in the experimental study.

¹ Names used in this study are fictional as respondents opted to stay anonymous.

Table 2. Illustrative coding

Informant	Incident	Public self-disclosure	Online vulnerability	Locus of control
<i>Complaint</i>				
Interviewee 1	I had a negative experience with one hotel recently. The last time we went to Brazil we arrived according to our check-in time. However, when we entered the room we found it had not been cleaned so we had to wait a couple of hours. I was angry. They apologized and explained that previous guest had checked out late, however, it did not alleviate the situation.	I left a negative review online; however, <i>I used a nickname</i> .	The internet cannot be trusted. <i>You never know what to expect from other people, and how they would react to your comments</i> , so personally, I prefer not to use any personal information by which I can be identified while complaining.	The reason for complaining was to let this hotel know that I was not happy. <i>I pointed out their weaknesses to prompt some changes in the future</i> and improve their services.
Interviewee 2	The hotel room I had booked had an adverse smell. On top of that, the bedsheets were dirty. To say I was shocked is an understatement. I asked to change rooms but I was told that the hotel was fully booked for that night. I did not want to stay there for another 3 nights. They changed the bedsheets, but the smell was unbearable so I left the next morning.	I complained online. I left a negative review on the official web page of this hotel, on booking.com and on TripAdvisor. <i>I did it anonymously</i> .	<i>I have seen how aggressive managers can be. They disprove of your complaints and make you the bad guest</i> . Thus, I will not use my name under any conditions.	<i>This is a matter that other customers should be aware of</i> . It should not ruin someone else's vacation.
Interviewee 3	I had a very poor experience in one of the hotels in London. The shower in my room did not work properly and there was no hot water. Moreover, the next room was very noisy. That was my worst stay. Luckily, it was only one night.	When I complained, <i>I did it anonymously</i> because I do not want the hotel to know who had written the review.	There is a reason I did not complain directly to the hotel. <i>I do not want to confront them</i> . Instead I do it on online platforms. Because under anonymous conditions no one is looking at me, it is just my phone and me.	I want <i>to let the management of the hotel and the staff know which fields have to be improved</i> .
Interviewee 4	It happened in Saudi Arabia. There were two reasons I was not happy about my stay. First, I was not happy with the general level of hygiene of the room. By the time we went there, we found that the toilet was not cleaned. It was actually used. Second, the reception service was poor. I felt it was not worth the money I had paid.	I always give comments about hotels I have stayed in, especially negative ones for people who travel on business. However, <i>I prefer nicknames</i> because I do not want to be recognized at all.	Sometimes <i>people fight me online about my comments</i> , but since they do not know who I am I do not feel they can actually harm me. This is just my computer and me.	I used to work in a hotel, and to me this has two benefits. First is <i>to let the business know what they are doing wrong and what they can change</i> to make their business better. The second is <i>to warn tourists</i> because through these honest reviews they will be able to choose the hotel that would be the best for them to stay in.

<i>Table 1. continued</i>				
<i>Complaint avoidance</i>				
Interviewee 5	Our flight had arrived at 9 am, while standard check in time is 2pm. We had thus requested an early check in and paid extra. I was unhappy with the fact that when we went in early the room was still not ready.	I do not really write negative reviews online because <i>I do not feel that my personal data is fully protected.</i>	<i>People have become excessively aggressive these days, so I do not want to argue over my experience with anyone.</i> My psychological well-being is more important.	Writing online complaints is not worth my time and effort. <i>I do not believe that hotels actually care about my complaints.</i>
Interviewee 6	That happened in Spain. When I arrived with my wife in the room, it looked very bad and dirty. In addition, we found some hair on pillows and the room smelled as if a heavy smoker had stayed there before us. The problem was we did not have much choice because we arrived quite late and other hotels were fully booked. Moreover, this one was pre-paid and non-refundable. We were very upset.	<i>I do not post online. It would be very easy to identify who you are.</i> I cannot guarantee that I am anonymous because the data on the internet goes through online portals so it will be easy to identify who made the complaint.	Instead of leaving a negative review online, I prefer to leave a hand written review on the form that they usually provide. It would be more private that way so <i>I do not have to confront the hotel personnel or other customers.</i>	Negative reviews are very helpful when choosing a hotel to stay in, however, I never leave reviews online. <i>They will not change anything.</i> This room was in a very bad condition but I do not think they will refurbish it just because I have complained. I would not go there again.
Interviewee 7	The last time I stayed in a hotel in Egypt the room was not cleaned properly. There was hair in the shower. I requested cleaners to come and clean it again. They said that currently all cleaners were busy and as soon as one become available they would come over to my room, but no one came. Although I was unhappy, I did not move to another hotel.	I did not leave a negative review. I would have to register to do that and <i>I prefer to keep my privacy.</i>	I do not want to give the impression of a negative person. I will complain to friends and then forget about it. <i>I do not want to deal with strangers who might be offended by my reviews.</i>	I do not feel that complaining online is worth my time. The procedures that I have to go through in order to complain are frustrating. In addition, <i>I have a perception that even if I complain nothing will happen,</i> that is it.
Interviewee 8	We had booked our hotel through an agency. The cleanness of the room is crucial for me, so when I saw that the room did not meet my expectations I felt very unhappy. The worst part was the breakfast, which consisted of cereals, milk, tea and coffee, when on the website it was advertised as a buffet.	Normally I only leave positive comments. In this particular case, I decided not to complain because I booked it through the agency so the review would have been written under my real name. <i>I am not confident about giving my real name when commenting.</i> I wish I could have done it anonymously.	I am a very sensitive person and easily take on all negativity that is directed to me. The reason for not reviewing this hotel is that I want to keep my privacy. I do not want other people to know who I am. <i>I do not want to receive any negativity about my experience, my complaint or myself.</i>	Another reason I do not write negative reviews is that <i>I am not sure to what extent hotels actually use these comments for improvement.</i> I will not go to this hotel again.

3.2 Study 2

The findings of the qualitative phase offer insightful views on emerging issues in customer complaint behavior. An experimental study complements these findings by testing the impact of complaint environment (public vs anonymous) on customer complaint behavior through vulnerability. Moreover, the experimental study explains the extent to which boundary conditions such as locus of control influence customers' decisions whether to complain or not.

3.2.1 Design, participants and procedure

Study 2 was an online experiment. For this single-factor (public self-disclosure vs anonymity) between-subject design, we used a scenario-based experiment. This experimental design gives the researcher complete control over the unmanageable factors (Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020). Among the registered participants, through a screening question, we specifically selected subjects with at least one negative experience in the last 12 months. The total number of participants in the experimental study was 244 with a 67.2% of female participants. This sample consists of employees, students, and self-employed professionals ($M_{age}=34,5$).

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the two different conditions (public vs anonymous). The difference between the two conditions was that in the public condition the personal information was described as publicly available (e.g., name, email, gender, etc.). Conversely, the anonymous condition guaranteed a complainant's privacy by specifically stating that comments were in anonymous form and could not be linked to the specific individual. In both conditions, participants were given the following situation: *"Imagine that you booked a room in a three-star hotel. You arrive late and feel exhausted. Your bed sheets are dirty and you find some hair on the pillow upon arrival in your room. After your stay, you consider whether to leave a negative review on an online travel agency platform."* This situation is based on real life incidents reported in the qualitative phase of the study. We measured the participant's likelihood of complaining, the level of vulnerability and locus of control on a five-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree; 5-strongly agree), and collected demographic data (age and gender). According to the results of the qualitative phase, people have a great concern about complaining online due to impact on their psychological, reputational and physical wellbeing. This is common in the online vulnerability context (Buglass et al., 2017). Hence, based on the interviews, the following five-item scale was developed to measure the vulnerability: "Leaving my information publicly available online makes me feel vulnerable", "I feel uncomfortable using my real name when commenting online", "I feel exposed to the possibility of being emotionally harmed online", "I feel exposed

to the possibility of being attacked for leaving a negative review online”, “I feel unprotected when entering my personal information online”. When measuring the internal consistency of the five items included in the questionnaire, the results showed a Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient of 0.77, which is above the accepted threshold of 0.70 (Santos, 1999). This was followed by statements about locus of control adapted from Rotter (1966) and adapted to the current study. Particularly this study focuses on external locus of control, therefore, we chose six original statements about external locus of control and added one that is specific to this context, which is “I feel like my online complaint will not change anything”. Participants were asked to rate to what extent they agree with the subsequent statements. High score refers to the external locus of control, while low score means the internal locus of control.

3.2.2 Results and discussion

First, we conducted manipulation checks. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which the given situation was perceived as a negative experience and whether it corresponded to real life cases on a five-point Likert scale. The results show ($M_{\text{negative}} = 4.61$; $M_{\text{reality}} = 4.66$) that participants recognized the situation as extremely negative. Similarly, the outcome of the reality test showed that the situation described corresponds to real life service failures. The public condition was coded as 1, and anonymity as 0. Figure 2 presents the results of the moderated mediation effect of public self-disclosure and locus of control interaction on customer complaint behavior through vulnerability.

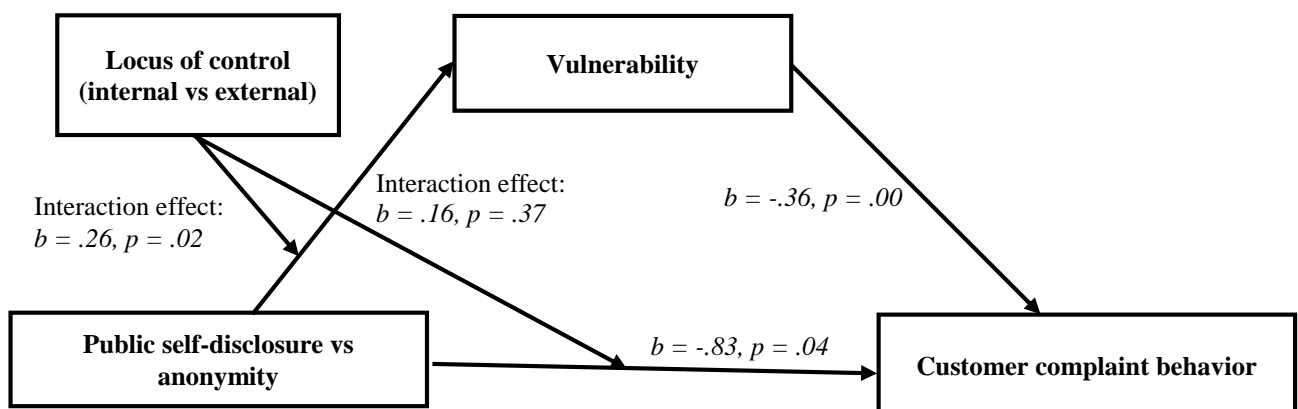


Figure 2. Moderated mediation effect of the interaction between public self-disclosure and locus of control on customer complaint behavior via vulnerability.

To test proposed hypotheses we employed Hayes’s (2018) moderated mediation model with vulnerability as a mediator and locus of control as a moderator. The results show that there is a significant relationship between public and anonymous complaint environments

and complaint behavior ($\beta = -.83$; $SE = .40$; $t(244) = -2.03$; $p = .04$), thus supporting H1. The results also support H2, suggesting that vulnerability mediates the relationship between online complaint environment and complaint behavior ($\beta = -.36$; $SE = .09$; $t(244) = -3.87$; $p = .00$). When the mediator is introduced to the model, the relationship between independent variable and dependent variable is no longer significant ($\beta = -.64$; $SE = .60$; $t(244) = -1.06$; $p = .28$), which implies that vulnerability fully mediates this relationship. The interaction between public disclosure and external locus of control had a significant effect on vulnerability ($\beta = .26$; $SE = .12$; $t(244) = 2.18$; $p = .02$). This supports H3b. However, we failed to find a significant interaction between external locus of control and public self-disclosure on consumer complaint behavior, which implies that H3a is not supported.

General conclusion and implications

Customer complaint behavior is a matter of concern for practitioners in the hospitality industry, where customer satisfaction and retention depend on service (Berry et al., 2018). When a service shortfall takes place, complaints are the best tool to alert the business because “Recovery cannot occur without complaint” (Singh & Wilkes, 1996, p. 353). Advanced technologies have changed the way in which people complain, taking complaints to the online realm. As a result, customers communicate their dissatisfaction online when they have a negative experience, and their reviews are instantly available to millions (Verhagen et al., 2013). Consequently, negative reviews decrease customers’ booking intention and willingness to pay (Nieto-Garcia et al., 2017; Sparks and Browning, 2011). In fact, negative reviews are highly valued by potential customers as they are considered more diagnostic and useful than positive ones (Pera et al., 2019; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011; Xu & Li, 2016; Nieto-Garcia et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, there is a tendency to require customers to disclose their real names upon registration (Buglass et al., 2016), and that results in a decreased level of complaint behavior due to fear of the potential consequences of the negative review (Pera et al., 2019). A thorough understanding of factors influencing customer decisions whether (not) to complain is necessary to provide practitioners with the opportunity to alleviate the damage caused by service failures. This study focuses on two factors: customer complaint environment (public vs anonymous) and customer complaint behaviour.

Indeed, as shown by the results of an experimental study, when customers’ identities are disclosed to others, they are less likely to complain. These results are contingent on the findings of our qualitative phase, where interviewees stated that by disclosing their identities

publicly they become more susceptible to vulnerability. When there is a service failure, even if they would like to complain online, they therefore would not. The reason for this is the belief that they might be attacked by other customers, thus being exposed to psychological stress (Gweon & Saxe, 2013). The loss of privacy is also recognized as another reason that prevents complaint behavior. Online vulnerability is therefore the mechanism that explains customer complaint behavior under public self-disclosure conditions. This is greater in the case of external locus of control (ELOC) because customers believe that they have no control over what happens, so that ELOC increases customers' concerns about potential exposure to online vulnerability, which in turn affects their complaint behavior.

The current study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, it extends the literature on online customer complaint behavior. According to Chang & Chin (2011), factors that affect a customer's complaint behavior differ in online vs offline environmental settings. Particularly, we explain why customers avoid complaining when their identities are disclosed on online platforms. Second, it expands the literature on self-disclosure. Joinson (2001) suggested that future research should test the impact of anonymity on self-disclosure. We address this idea by identifying how anonymity vs publicity affects one's self-disclosure (e.g., willingness to complain). Moreover, Bazarova and Choi (2014) noted that self-disclosure should be studied with regards to personality traits and the level of situational risks. The current study analyzes the effect of a personality trait (i.e., locus of control) and vulnerability on customer complaint behavior. Finally, it contributes to the body of research on customer vulnerability. We propose and find evidence that vulnerability is the mechanism that inhibits customers from complaining. Most of the existing literature in marketing and consumer behavior classifies customer vulnerability through sociodemographic information such as disability, age, gender or low income (Laufer & Gillespie, 2004; Pavia & Mason, 2014; Commuri & Ekici, 2008). However, consistently with Baker et al. (2005) we find evidence that vulnerability is a contextual phenomenon, not a permanent state. Therefore, the current paper extends the literature by building on a consumer-driven definition of vulnerability, not based on individual characteristics, but related to situational contexts. Interestingly, when people feel are not in control of the events, they also tend to pay less (Viglia et al., 2019).

This study also has several implications for hospitality practice and for general service industries. Online travel agencies (OTAs) mostly mediate the conversation between hotels and customers. Given that people are greatly concerned about their vulnerability online, OTAs should guarantee mechanisms such as anonymity or the use of a nickname without personal information being required. This will protect reviewers and increase their willingness to leave

a review after a negative experience. There are actionable ways to enhance anonymity without affecting the authenticity of reviews. For instance, whereas this piece of information won't appear online, the IP address would allow tracking the sender of the review (Ananthakrishnan et al., 2018; Byng, 2015). Second, the results are consistent at different levels of locus of control, which implies that vulnerability online is a common issue and privacy should be guaranteed. In this sense, GDPR legislation in Europe improves customer rights and provides them with greater control over personal information that they disclose (European Commission, 2018). Third, in order to obtain accurate feedback on the motives that attenuate complaint behavior, hoteliers should hold in-depth interviews or focus groups with key informants to avoid common pitfalls and increase the perceived quality of the service. A possible way to increase honesty in reviewing has been identified with handwriting (Tassiello et al., 2018). Finally, the problem of non-reporting negative reviews has clear financial implications. There is a body of research showing that eWOM has an impact on hotel performance. In particular, RevPar and occupancy are the two financial measures that are mostly affected by reviews (Viglia et al., 2016; Yang et al. 2018). A bias in online reviews affects also the contractual power of hotels in corporate agreements, such as online group bookings (Li et. al, 2015).

As with any research, there are some limitations in this study that open avenues for further research. First, the current study employed a mixed method approach to provide cross validity, these findings should be complemented by future field experiments with actual hotel guests. Second, is that customer complaint behavior can be contingent on the level of price paid for the accommodation. Therefore, future studies should test whether different levels of price affect the effect of vulnerability on customer complaint behavior. Third, when exploring the effect of complaint environment on complaint behavior future studies could focus on the differences across OTAs given that the level of shared personal data varies. For instance, Booking.com and TripAdvisor might be perceived differently in terms of public-self disclosure vs anonymous environments. Finally, it would be interesting to explore whether attitudes towards vulnerability vary across cultures and the effect that culture may have on customer complaint behavior.

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