

# The Contribution of Gratitude to Satisfaction Models for Complaining Customers

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**Abstract** Consumer research has shown that satisfaction with complaint handling strongly influences word of mouth behaviour, but affects to a lesser extent repurchase intent. To better explain the performance outcomes derived from complaint handling, we propose a conceptual model in which gratitude along with satisfaction are assumed to be critical mediators of the effects of recovery investments on performance outcomes. This model was tested using a quasi-experimental survey drawing on data from multiple industries. Our results show an opposing pattern of results for each mediator. Whereas gratitude strongly influences repurchase intent, but is not related to word of mouth, satisfaction with complaint handling exhibits a high contribution to word of mouth and no significant effect on repurchase intent. Our findings suggest that the mediating role of gratitude and satisfaction rely on different psychological mechanisms. Overall, the research empirically demonstrates that short-term feelings of gratitude generated by a complaint handling act are

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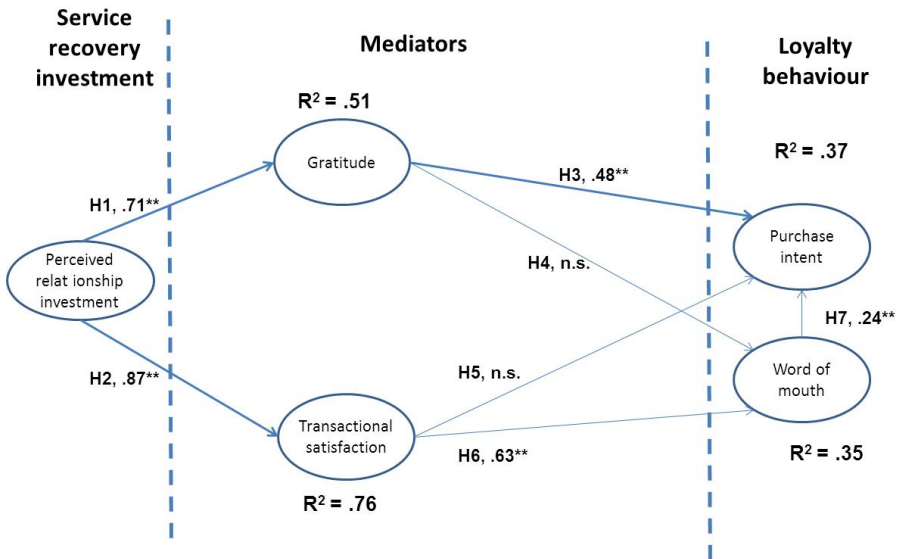
likely to increase purchase intentions. Finally, we draw on the findings of this study to offer implications for service recovery researchers and managers.

## **1 Introduction and purpose of the research**

Reflecting the managerial importance of complaint handling, a large body of research has emphasized the crucial role of transactional satisfaction, which refers to a customer's satisfaction with a complaint handling process. According to this theoretical perspective, transactional satisfaction is assumed to be the main mediator between a company's recovery investments and customers' behaviour. Regarding the consequences of the construct, previous literature (see for a meta-analysis, Orsingher et al, 2010) has shown that positive word-of-mouth has the highest average correlation among the investigated consequences, confirming the well-known tendency of service customers to share their satisfying or dissatisfying service experience with other people, while the effect on repurchase intent is more tenuous. However, analysis of the underlying mechanisms explaining the weaker influence on repurchase intent is lacking.

Integrating the relationship marketing literature on reciprocity behaviours (e.g. Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Morales, 2005; Palmatier et al, 2009) with theoretical considerations of transactional satisfaction, the purpose of this research is twofold. First, we propose that the influence of recovery investments on performance outcomes is mediated by both gratitude and satisfaction derived from the complaint-handling process. To our knowledge, the study is the first to address the role of gratitude in the context of complaint handling. While transactional satisfaction reflects the fulfilment of a consumer's expectations in a confirmation/disconfirmation perspective, gratitude is expected to serve as the emotional basis of a complaining consumer's reciprocal behaviours (Palmatier et al, 2009). Second, we rely on a parsimonious model to investigate the contrasting effects of the two mediators. Consistent with Maxham and Netemeyer (2002), we argue that transactional satisfaction prompts customers to tell family and friends about their positive experience primarily due to the salience and recency of the experience, but this is not enough to increase customers' intent to repurchase. Conversely, short-term feelings of

gratitude are likely to induce reciprocal behaviours consisting of favours perceived as being particularly valued by companies (e.g. Tsang, 2006), that is, purchase intent. In addition, we postulate that word of mouth intent is an antecedent of repurchase intent, given that individuals tend to behave in accordance with their cognition (e.g. Szymanski and Henard, 2001). Figure 1 shows the hypothesised model for this study.



Notes: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ , ns not significant, standardised coefficients reported.

**Fig. 1** Conceptual model and empirical results

## 2 Method and results

A survey approach was chosen to examine naturally occurring responses among customers who had recently experienced a service or product failure and a recovery encounter. Our research design permitted a large variety of sector activities to be represented. Data were collected from a sample of 140 undergraduate business students enrolled in a research methods course. We collected data for our study in two steps. In a first step, students were asked to report any dissatisfaction they experienced

as consumers during one 6-week period. Immediately after performing their first interaction with the company's customer service, students were instructed to complete a series of scales designed to assess their perceptions of the complaint handling. Customer service response rates were of 88.6% and 76.1%, respectively, for telephone and online channels. In total, 360 complaints were answered subject to acceptable delay. The scales used in this research have been elaborated in prior studies that report on their reliability and validity. We evaluated the psychometric properties of the constructs by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with AMOS 19.0. Then, the hypothesised model, as depicted in Figure 1, was estimated to assess path and explained variance estimates. The model yielded a good fit while supporting all hypotheses with the exception of hypotheses H4 and H5, where relationships were found to be not significant. Overall, the model explained 76% of the variance in transactional satisfaction, 51% in gratitude, 35% in word of mouth and, finally, 37% in purchase intent. In sum, the hypothesised model was mostly supported while showing a significant power to explain variance in the final variables. In addition, we investigated the mediating role of both gratitude and transactional satisfaction by calculating standardised total effects approximated from the bias-corrected bootstrapping method (Taylor et al, 2008). Our results show that gratitude partly mediates the influence of perceived relationship investment on purchase intent while transactional satisfaction is a partial mediator of the influence of this construct on word of mouth intent.

### **3 Discussion**

This study is important to theory in several ways. First, it supports the important role of gratitude in understanding the effects of a firm's recovery investments in complaint handling, thus extending the research of Palmatier et al (2009) to this specific context. It notes that marketing research that neglects gratitude and that focuses exclusively on satisfaction as a key variable may fail to capture the full effects of service recovery. Second, the study resolves some limitations in prior research on complaint handling in demonstrating that transactional satisfaction has

a notably stronger influence on word of mouth than purchase intent while gratitude leads to reciprocal behaviours which are focused on repurchase.

From a managerial perspective, our study takes a firm stand on the necessity of monitoring customer gratitude as a key indicator of customer service performance in the same careful manner as monitoring customer transactional satisfaction. As such, measures of gratitude must be systematically included in the satisfaction surveys that companies regularly issue. However, due to the emotion-based nature of gratitude, the resulting tendency to reciprocate may decay over time (Palmatier et al, 2009). Therefore, companies should give customers opportunities to reciprocate soon after providing them with complaint handling benefits. For example, companies could contact complainants with a coupon offer. This offer would provide the complainant an opportunity to act on his or her feelings of gratitude and most likely lead to an immediate repurchase.

Although this study expands our knowledge of complaint handling, it must be tempered with several limitations. Limitations due to the data collection procedure itself must be considered. First, our study uses a cross-sectional survey method of data collection focusing on a single interaction with customer service. Secondly, the use of a student sample is a limitation. Thirdly, the fact that the participants were asked to submit a complaint may be a limitation, even if their claims were duly motivated by dissatisfactions that actually emerged in the course of their everyday lives. Moreover, future research will need to consider additional variables. The authors recommend studying whether different types of relationship recovery investments are equally able to elicit gratitude in complaint handling. In that respect, research should consider interactional, procedural and distributive recovery investments and assess their different contributions to both gratitudinal and transactional routes to loyalty.

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