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# Personal, Cognitive, and Emotive Antecedents of Consumers' Choices Regarding Complaint Messages

San Bolkan & Alan K. Goodboy

*Things can go wrong in business transactions, and when this happens it can lead to consumer complaints. Though service recovery is an important part of organizations' ability to satisfy customers, consumers play an important role insofar as the way they communicate with offending companies may influence their outcomes. In this study, 255 participants reported what they said when complaining to a company after an organizational failure. Data were collected on their personalities, cognitions, and emotions during the interaction. Results indicated that participants' personalities played little role in predicting complaint messages whereas the severity of the failure, investment in the organization, alternatives, and emotions played a larger role.*

*Keywords:* Consumer Complaining; Emotion; Investment; Personality

Organizations are concerned with keeping their consumers satisfied because repeat customers are important to companies' financial success (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Unfortunately, things do not always go right during business transactions (Hart, Heskett, & Sasser, 1990). When things go wrong, people have a variety of choices to pursue including voicing their complaints, exiting the business relationship, or staying loyal to the company (Hirschman, 1970). From these choices, most companies likely prefer that consumers voice complaints to them directly because doing so provides information regarding problematic business practices and gives

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San Bolkan (PhD, University of Texas, Austin, 2007) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at California State University, Long Beach. Alan K. Goodboy (PhD, West Virginia University, 2007) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University. Correspondence to: San Bolkan, Department of Communication Studies, California State University, Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Boulevard, Long Beach, CA 90840-2009, USA. E-mail: [san.bolkan@csulb.edu](mailto:san.bolkan@csulb.edu)

organizations the opportunity to rectify issues for individuals who complain (Davidow & Dacin, 1997; Richins & Verhage, 1985).

Though scholars have researched a variety of issues regarding consumer complaining, a survey of the literature reveals that most studies stop short of determining what, exactly, consumers say when making complaints. This trend is regrettable because, as Richins (1983) noted, consumers' satisfaction "depends, at least in part, on their ability to make intelligent and satisfying exchanges" (p. 73). Other researchers agree that the outcome of a complaint should be a function of the communication style employed by the consumer (Krapfel, 1985). Fortunately, recent advances in the study of consumer communication have led to an examination of the content of consumers' complaints. For instance, Bolkan, Griffin, and Goodboy (2014) created a measure of consumer complaining to ascertain the messages consumers use when communicating their discontent to organizations following a failure. The authors found four measurable patterns regarding the ways consumers communicate in response to service problems including: hostile communication (i.e., venting negative emotions, threatening resignation, threatening negative word of mouth, and using credibility statements), direct distributive communication (i.e., asking for refunds, pursuing a problem until it is fixed, giving statements of impact, and using pressure to insist that something be done to fix the situation), providing information (i.e., making suggestions and providing information regarding organizational problems), and indirect communication (i.e., using humor and hinting to communicate discontent). In support of the arguments made above, Bolkan et al. (2014) reported that the content of consumers' complaints influenced the perceived effectiveness of their communication and perceptions of organizational compliance.

Because the way consumers complain to organizations is an integral part of the service recovery process, it may be important to determine what makes people complain in the manner they do (Krapfel, 1985). Understanding the processes underlying consumers' choices to complain in various ways may help consumers positively influence their own outcomes. Moreover, if organizations understand the underlying causes of various forms of complaints, they may be better situated to respond to consumers in an appropriate manner (Petzer, De Meyer, Svavi, & Svensson, 2012). Thus, the purpose of the current study was to examine the antecedents of consumers' complaint messages.

### *Literature Review*

Bolkan et al. (2014) determined that consumers tend to communicate complaints using four general patterns. The first pattern includes hostility whereby consumers communicate their discontent by threatening to withdraw their patronage and spread negative word of mouth. People using this communication pattern tend also to vent negative emotions and use statements of credibility (e.g., telling the company how much money a person spends with the organization) to support their right to be angry. The second pattern includes direct complaints. When consumers use these complaints they typically provide organizations with information about how the

problem affected them negatively and ask to be compensated for their troubles. Third, informative complaints include making recommendations to the company regarding improvements for the future to help fix a problem. Finally, consumers also complain indirectly. These complaints use humor or subtlety to bring up an issue without having to come right out and talk about a problem.

Though consumers may choose to communicate their discontent in these four ways, Bolkan et al. (2014) found that people perceived direct complaints to be more effective in leading to desired outcomes whereas hostile complaints were perceived to be less effective. Because various complaint messages are perceived to be more effective than others, the current study was designed to determine what factors influence consumers' complaint-making decisions. Though scholars have yet to determine what influences the specific messages consumers communicate when they complain, researchers have uncovered a variety of antecedents to the decision to register a complaint. Generally, this research shows that consumer complaining is a function of individuals' personalities, cognitions, and the specific emotional experiences associated with organizational failures.

### *Personality*

Personality has been linked to communication behavior for some time (see Daly, 2002 for a review), and research supports the conclusion that "individual differences affect how people communicate in various interpersonal settings" (Daly, 2002, p. 156). Specifically, personality traits have been linked to complaining behavior and are thought to be important in the complaint process (Davidow & Dacin, 1997). For instance, Machiavellianism and risk taking have been associated with consumers' attitudes toward complaining and their propensity to complain (Bodey & Grace, 2007). In addition, people high in impulsiveness are more likely to complain whereas people high in self-monitoring are less likely to do so (Sharma, Marshall, Reday, & Na, 2010). Other traits associated with a propensity to complain include individuals' argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, blurtatiousness, and communication apprehension (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011). Additionally, Type A personalities, an internal locus of control (Huang & Chang, 2008), and conscientiousness (Harris & Mowen, 2001) have been associated with consumer complaint behaviors. Moreover, complaining has been linked to neuroticism (Kowlaski, 1996; Mooradian & Olver, 1997), extraversion, and agreeableness (Kowalski, 1996).

In addition to consumer complaint behavior, some studies have found that Big Five personality traits influence the specifics of complaint-like communication behavior in interpersonal contexts as well. The Five-Factor Model of personality (FFM; John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & John, 1992) identifies five overarching personality dimensions for systematically studying macrolevel traits: neuroticism (i.e., the tendency to experience negative emotional states), extraversion (i.e., the tendency to be sociable), openness (i.e., the tendency to be intellectual and curious), agreeableness (i.e., the tendency to be pleasant with others), and conscientiousness (i.e., the tendency to have impulse control and follow norms). As it pertains to

conflict, Antonioni (1998) found that Big Five personality traits account for between 11% and 25% of the variance in people's conflict styles.

Other researchers have found associations between personality traits and communication styles. For instance, Buss (1991) has shown that both husbands and wives who score high on measures of neuroticism are more likely to complain about one another. Moreover, Caughlin, Huston, and Houts (2000) demonstrated that individuals in married relationships who are predisposed to neuroticism tend to communicate more negatively. Similarly, LePine and Van Dyne (2001) showed that providing constructive feedback and criticism in organizations was related positively to conscientiousness and extraversion, and associated negatively with neuroticism and agreeableness. They also found that cooperative communication in organizations was associated positively with conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness, and associated negatively with neuroticism.

In summary, although they have not yet been linked to specific complaint messages, the work of previous researchers makes a logical case for exploring the influence of personality traits on consumers' choices for complaining. Because personality traits can be considered an explanation for communication behavior (e.g., Beatty, McCroskey, & Heisel, 1998), and because consumer complaining is an inherently communicative process, we examined the link between consumers' personality traits and their complaint messages. Little research exists to guide specific hypotheses, thus we explored this link through our first research question.

- RQ1: What are the associations between individuals' Big Five personality traits (i.e., openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) and the messages they use to communicate a complaint (i.e., hostile, direct, informative, indirect)?

### *Cognition*

Researchers studying consumer complaints have posited several cognitive antecedents to complaining, including consumers' perceptions of justice (Schoefer & Diamantopoulos, 2008), attitudes toward complaining (e.g., Thøgersen, Juhl, & Poulsen, 2009), perceptions of the severity of the organizational failure, service importance (Oh, 2004; Richins & Verhage, 1985), likelihood of success (Bougie, Peters, & Zeelenberg, 2003), self-presentational concerns, perceptions of complaint utility, and violations of consumers' expectations (Kowalski, 1996). Though these studies highlight reasons *why* consumers might complain, they have failed to study what might influence *how* consumers complain.

Despite a dearth of research regarding cognitive antecedents of customers' choices for complaint messages, these variables have been studied by researchers examining interpersonal relationships. Importantly, several researchers support the notion that consumers may conceptualize their relationships with organizations as interpersonal in nature (e.g., Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011; Bolkan, Goodboy, & Bachman, 2012; Breivik & Thorbjørnsen, 2008; Fournier, 1998). Researchers who examine the content of interpersonal complaints in response to relational transgressions have

incorporated variables associated with the investment model of relational stability in their studies. The investment model predicts that stability in relationships is a function of commitment, which itself is a function of satisfaction, investment, and the quality of alternatives (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). According to Rusbult et al. (1998), commitment refers to the “intent to persist in a relationship” (p. 359), satisfaction refers to the positive affect experienced in a relationship, investment refers to the resources that have been spent on a relationship, and alternatives refer to the desirability of other relationships. The more people are satisfied and invested in a relationship and the fewer quality alternatives they have, the more commitment they should experience. Commitment, in turn, influences relational stability.

As was alluded to above, in addition to predicting relational stability, the investment model has been used to predict individuals’ behaviors following relational dissatisfaction. For example, Rusbult, Zembrodt, and Gunn (1982) found that in the face of relational dissatisfaction, individuals were more likely to discuss problems and suggest solutions when satisfaction and investment were high. The authors concluded that the more satisfied and invested individuals were in their relationships, and the fewer alternatives they had, the more likely they were to react constructively as opposed to destructively in response to dissatisfaction. The same pattern seems to be true from an organizational perspective. In a study of consumer complaining, Bolkan et al. (2012) found that consumers were less likely to exit the relationship if they were satisfied with the organization prior to the failure, invested in the organization, committed to the organization, and had fewer alternatives to the organization. Related to the specifics of complaint messages, Guerrero and Bachman (2008) studied communication following relational transgressions in dating relationships and used investment model variables to predict people’s communication messages following a relational offense.

Because investment model variables have been linked to consumer behavior following complaint processes (Bolkan et al., 2012), and because these variables have been linked to the types of messages people communicate following the experience of a transgression (Guerrero & Bachman, 2008), the current study examined investment model variables to assess their relationship with consumer complaining. Thus, the following research question was proposed:

RQ2: Do individuals’ perceptions of their satisfaction with an organization, investment with an organization, commitment to an organization, and alternatives to an organization predict the messages they use to communicate a complaint (i.e., hostile, direct, informative, indirect)?

Another cognitive variable to consider is the severity of the organizational failure. In previous studies, severity has been an important predictor in the complaint process. This is true for organizational contexts where it has been linked to making complaints and negative word of mouth (e.g., Bolkan et al., 2012; Oh, 2004), as well as interpersonal contexts where the severity of a failure has been associated with the content of posttransgression communication (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Guerrero

& Bachman, 2008). Because problem severity has been shown to influence both consumer complaining and the messages individuals use when communicating their dissatisfaction in relationships, the following research question was posited:

RQ3: Does problem severity predict what messages consumers use to communicate a complaint (i.e., hostile, direct, informative, indirect)?

### *Emotion*

A variety of researchers claim that emotions are important antecedents of complaint behavior (e.g., Bougie et al., 2003; Folkes, Koletsky, & Graham, 1987; Petzer et al., 2012; Tronvoll, 2011; Tuzovic, 2010; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). In fact, some researchers argue that “emotions are central to the actions of consumers” (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999, p. 184) and that the majority of consumers experience emotions as the result of a service failure (Maute & Dubes, 1999; Tronvoll, 2011). Though consumers may experience a variety of feelings, researchers examining consumer complaining suggest that negative emotions are of particular consequence because they are likely to arise from problems or failures to achieve goals/plans (Bagozzi et al., 1999), impact perceptions of service (e.g., Edvardsson, 2005; Schoefer & Diamantopoulos, 2008; Smith & Bolton, 2002; Tronvoll, 2011; Westbrook, 1987; Yi & Baumgartner, 2004), and affect consumer communication with offending organizations (Folkes et al., 1987; Sanchez-Garcia & Curras-Perez, 2011; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998; Tuzovic, 2010; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004).

Importantly, instead of studying negative emotions from a general standpoint, researchers claim it is important to study discrete negative emotions in the context of consumer complaining (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004) because “patterns of action readiness show distinct relations to various emotion categories” (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Shure, 1989, p. 212). That said, some researchers note that frustration (e.g., resignation, powerlessness, despair) and anger (e.g., irritation, disgust, rage) are two important emotions in reaction to an organizational failure (e.g., Bougie et al., 2003; Sanchez-Garcia & Curras-Perez, 2011; Svavi, Slatten, Svensson, & Edvardsson, 2011; Tronvoll, 2011) with disappointment being influential as well (e.g., Smith & Bolton, 2002; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). These emotions are important to the process of service recovery because they have been shown to influence consumers’ behavioral choices (i.e., making complaints, voicing discontent to third parties, and communicating negative word of mouth) following organizational failures.

According to various researchers, anger, frustration, and disappointment should be considered distinct in consumer complaining contexts. This is true insofar as anger involves attributing blame to the service provider (Sanchez-Garcia & Curras-Perez, 2011) and “arises when customers appraise an event as unfair, with high service provider control over the service failure, and a stable cause of the service failure” (Bougie et al., 2003, p. 378). In contrast, frustration is defined as having an obstacle block progress (Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994). People who are frustrated think about how their goals are blocked and work to overcome the obstacle. Finally,



disappointment stems from organizational outcomes do not live up to consumers' expectations (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). These different emotions are likely to lead to differences in consumers' complaint choices. In support of this argument Bougie et al. (2003) showed that disappointed consumers tended to think about what they "missed out on" and made deliberate judgments regarding how to act. On the other hand, anger was associated with feelings of exploding and being overtaken by emotion. Customers who were angry reported experiencing unfairness and, as a result, thought of violence and aggressive behavior (Bougie et al., 2003). According to Bougie et al., angry customers wanted to get back at an organization/person and reported doing so by saying something nasty in an attempt to hurt someone.

Because emotions can influence the act of making complaints and consumers' behavioral tendencies following complaints, we sought to determine if consumers' emotional responses to organizational failures would influence their choice of complaint messages. To help guide our research, we utilized the following research question.

- RQ4: After controlling for satisfaction, investment, commitment, alternatives, and severity, do individuals' experiences of emotions (i.e., anger, frustration, and disappointment) predict the messages they use to communicate a complaint (i.e., hostile, direct, informative, indirect)?

## Method

### *Participants and Procedures*

After securing approval from the institutional review board, students from upper-division communication classes at a large university on the West Coast were recruited to participate in the study. In return for their participation, students were offered minimal extra credit. Participants included 255 individuals (77 men and 178 women) with ages ranging from 18 to 54 ( $M = 22.9$ ,  $SD = 5.09$ ). Participants who agreed to take part in the study were asked to think of a time in the last 6 months when they made a complaint to an organization. Complaints could be formal or informal. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Bolkan & Daly, 2009), participants were told that as long as they had complained to an organization (e.g., told a waiter that the food was not up to par, complained to an airline representative about a flight being late, wrote a letter to a company about a defective product) in some fashion (e.g., to a manager, via e-mail, verbally to an employee) they could take part in this study. To facilitate recall, participants were asked to first answer open-ended questions regarding the complaint, including the name of the organization, what happened to make them complain, and what they said when complaining. This method is known as the critical incident technique and is frequently applied in consumer complaint research (e.g., Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998). We asked participants to recall their emotions, in line with research suggesting that recall-based ratings of emotion are valid and "contain accurate information about momentary emotion



experiences” (Barrett, 1997, p. 9). Following the open-ended questions, participants were asked to respond to the measures described below.

### *Instrumentation*

#### *Big five personality traits*

Although there are hundreds of personality traits to consider, we focused on cardinal traits which are posited to underlie the majority of surface-level traits (Harris & Mowen, 2001). Thus, the Big Five personality traits were measured using Costa and McCrae’s (1992) personality inventory which assesses participants’ personality traits along five dimensions (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism). The total measure is 60 items (12 items per trait) with response options ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (5) *strongly agree*. Openness to new experiences was measured with items such as “I have a lot of intellectual curiosity” and “Once I find the right way to do something, I stick to it” (reverse coded;  $\alpha = .68$ ,  $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = .48$ ). Conscientiousness was measured using items including “I am not a very methodical person” (reverse coded) and “I strive for excellence in everything I do” ( $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = .56$ ). The measure of extraversion included items such as “I usually prefer to do things alone” (reverse coded) and “I really enjoy talking to people” ( $\alpha = .78$ ,  $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = .51$ ). Agreeableness was measured with items including “I try to be courteous to everyone I meet” and “I would rather cooperate with others than compete with them” ( $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = .53$ ). Finally, neuroticism was measured with items such as “I often feel tense and jittery” and “I often get angry at the way people treat me” ( $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = .61$ ).

#### *Investment model*

Investment model variables were measured using scales from Bolkan et al. (2012) based on work from Rusbult et al. (1998). Three of the measures (investment, alternatives, and commitment) used 9-point Likert scales ranging from (1) *do not agree at all* to (9) *agree completely*. The measure of investment contained five items (e.g., “Compared to other people I know, I have invested a great deal in doing business with this organization” and “My daily activities would become more complicated if I decided to stop doing business with the company I complained to”), and had an alpha reliability of .92 ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 2.15$ ). Alternatives were measured with five items (e.g., “Organizations other than the one I complained to are very appealing for the same product/service” and “If I did not do business with the organization I complained to I would be fine—I would find another company to take its place”), and had an alpha reliability of .88 ( $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 2.15$ ). Commitment was measured with seven questions including “I am committed to doing business with this organization” and “I want to do business with this organization for a long time.” This scale had an alpha reliability of .90 ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 2.09$ ). Satisfaction with the organization was measured using three items borrowed from Tax et al. (1998). These items were anchored by semantic differentials (very negative/very positive, very good/very

bad, excellent/very poor) ranging from 1 to 7. Using these items, participants were asked to report their sentiments regarding their experiences with the organization prior to the organizational failure. This scale had an alpha reliability of .87 ( $M = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ).

### Severity

The measure of perceived severity of the failure was one item and was borrowed from Oh (2004). This measure asks respondents to rate the extent to which the failure was (1) *not at all severe* to (10) *very severe* ( $M = 6.98$ ,  $SD = 2.29$ ).

### Emotions

The measures of anger and frustration came from Tronvoll (2011). The measure for anger is four items and asks respondents the extent to which they experienced sentiments including “anger” and “rage.” The measure of frustration is also four items and asks respondents the extent to which they experienced feelings such as “frustration” and “powerlessness.” Responses could range from (1) *not at all* to (7) *very much*. Alpha reliabilities for these scales were .78 for anger ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ), and .77 for frustration ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ). The measure of disappointment came from Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) and is a two-item measure asking respondents the extent to which they felt disappointed in the service/product and the extent to which the service/product was worse than expected. The first question solicited responses with ranges from (1) *none* to (7) *very much*. The second question solicited responses with ranges from (1) *not at all worse* to (7) *much worse*. Alpha reliability for this scale was .84 ( $M = 4.81$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ).

### Complaint messages

The measure of complaints came from Bolkan et al. (2014) and asks respondents the extent to which their complaints match 35 statements with options ranging from (1) *not at all similar to what I said* to (5) *extremely similar to what I said*. These 35 statements reflect 13 first-order messages (see Table 1). According to Bolkan et al. (2014), these 13 messages may be condensed into four, second-order message types including hostile communication (threatening resignation, negative word of mouth, venting, credibility;  $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), direct communication (pressure, impact, repetition, refunds;  $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = .97$ ), providing information (suggestions, information;  $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ), and indirect communication (hinting, humor;  $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = .93$ ). Because the second-order factor structure had not yet been confirmed empirically, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to assess model fit. Results suggested that the model fit the data reasonably well with four messages types predicted by 12 messages ( $\chi^2 = 137.27$ ,  $df = 48$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $RMSEA = .09$ ,  $SRMR = .06$ ,  $CFI = .96$ ). All subsequent analyses are conducted using the second-order factors.

**Table 1** Factor Analysis

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$
<u>Hostile Complaints</u>			
<b>Venting</b>	2.62	1.21	.80
Tell the company exactly how angry you are			
Tell the company that you are completely disgusted with what happened			
Label the problem in a negative manner (e.g., "this is the one of the worst experiences I have ever had")			
<b>Threatening resignation</b>	2.10	1.33	.89
Tell the company that if the problem continues, you will take your business elsewhere			
Tell the organization that they will lose you as a customer if they do not fix the problem			
Tell the organization that you will no longer shop here/eat here/use the company			
<b>Negative word of mouth</b>	1.85	1.19	.92
Threaten to tell others about what happened			
Tell the organization that you are going to let others know about your dissatisfaction			
Mention that you are going to tell others about your negative experiences with the company			
<b>Credibility statements</b>	2.15	1.28	.84
Tell the company how loyal you are			
Tell the organization how often you eat/shop/spend money there			
Tell the organization how much money you spend with them			
<u>Direct Complaints</u>			
<b>Statements of impact</b>	3.08	1.37	.88
Explain to the company how the organizational failure impacted you			
Tell the company about how the problem inconvenienced you			
Tell the company about how their mistake caused you problems			
<b>Refunds</b>	2.39	1.39	.86
Ask directly for a refund			
Ask to be reimbursed for your expenses			
Tell the organization that you would like to be compensated for your troubles			
<b>Pressure</b>	3.53	1.31	.79
Demand that something be done about your situation			
Insist that the organization does something to fix your problem			
<b>Repetition</b>	2.08	1.28	.87
Continue to remind the person of the problem until you see a change			
Repeat yourself until the problem gets fixed			
Pursue the problem multiple times until you get your way			
<u>Informative Complaints</u>			
<b>Suggestions</b>	2.52	1.34	.77
Make a recommendation for the future			
Offer suggestions regarding how the company can improve			

(Continued)

Table 1 Continued

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$
<b>Provide information so the problem can be fixed</b>	3.39	1.31	.81
Tell the company about the problem to protect other people from experiencing the same dissatisfaction			
Inform someone about the issue so that they can fix the situation for future customers			
Alert the company that something needs to be fixed so that the problem doesn't happen again			
<u>Indirect Complaints</u>			
<b>Hinting</b>	2.29	1.18	.54
Ask questions as a way of getting the organization to realize that a problem has occurred without having to come out and say it			
Subtly bring up an issue so that the organization figures out that it made a mistake on its own			
<b>Humor</b>	1.92	1.22	.87
Use some type of humor when you express dissatisfaction			
Bring up your dissatisfaction in a joking manner			

*Note.* Because apologies dropped out of the second-order factor analysis in Bolkan et al. (2014), messages requesting apologies are not represented above.

## Results

Results indicated that participants complained largely to dining establishments ( $N=133$ , 52.2%), travel companies ( $N=23$ , 9%), entertainment companies ( $N=19$ , 7.5%), and retail stores ( $N=18$ , 7.1%). Other recipients of complaints included clothing and beauty stores ( $N=15$ , 5.9%), housing accommodations ( $N=13$ , 5.1%), communications companies ( $N=12$ , 4.7%), and electronics companies ( $N=5$ , 2%). Seventeen complaints did not fall into these categories and were organized as “other.” One hundred and fourteen complaints (44.7%) were directed to front-line employees, 112 (43.9%) were directed to managers or supervisors, and 29 (11.4%) were directed to professional customer service representatives or help desks. Finally, results indicated that 172 complaints (67.5%) were made in person, 49 (19.2%) were made over the phone, and 34 (13.3%) were communicated through e-mail or an organization’s website.

To examine our first research question, we first conducted Pearson correlation analyses between the Big Five personality traits and the four complaint message types. As can be seen in Table 2, most of the personality traits did not significantly correlate with the types of messages consumers used when complaining—only three correlations were significant. The associations that were significant were small and accounted for a minor portion of the variance in consumers’ communication choices. Because of the lack of robust associations between personality traits and the communication variables, we excluded personality from our subsequent analyses.

To examine our second through fourth research questions, we utilized hierarchical regression analyses with two blocks. Block one consisted of investment model

**Table 2** Intercorrelations between Big Five and Complaint Messages

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Complaint Messages								
1. Hostile								
2. Direct	.65**							
3. Inform	.43**	.36**						
4. Indirect	.37**	.31**	.38**					
Big 5								
5. Openness	.07	.07	.02	-.04				
6. Conscientiousness	.00	.04	.11	-.13*	.03			
7. Extraversion	.01	.03	.13*	-.02	.18**	.41**		
8. Agreeableness	-.13*	-.06	-.04	-.08	.12	.39**	.41**	
9. Neuroticism	.02	.01	-.02	.06	-.07	-.29**	-.26**	-.20**

\*\* =  $p < .01$ . \* =  $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

variables and perceived severity of the organizational failure. Block two contained emotional responses to the organizational failure. The first regression examined the predictors of hostile complaint messages (see Tables 3 and 4). Block one of the hierarchical analysis showed that the investment model variables and severity accounted for 27% of the variance ( $F(5, 244) = 19.04, p < .01$ ) with alternatives, investment, and severity representing the only significant predictors. In block two, consumers' emotions accounted for another 17% of the variance (*total model*

**Table 3** Intercorrelations between Investment Model Variables, Emotions, and Complaint Messages

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Hostile											
2. Direct	.65**										
3. Inform	.43**	.36**									
4. Indirect	.37**	.31**	.38**								
5. Prior Satisfaction	-.09	-.18**	.00	-.01							
6. Alternatives	.28**	.19**	.10	.11	-.07						
7. Investment	.20**	.27**	.22*	.21**	.01	-.25**					
8. Commitment	-.05	-.07	.03	.02	.38**	-.44**	.59**				
9. Severity	.37**	.40**	.24**	.10	-.12	.05	.03	-.09			
10. Anger	.57**	.50**	.34**	.17**	-.19**	.09	.15*	-.13*	.56**		
11. Frustration	.56**	.51**	.28**	.16*	-.20**	.11	.17**	-.10	.43**	.69**	
12. Disappointment	.37**	.30**	.32**	.10	-.07	.21**	-.07	-.16*	.47**	.55**	.46**

\*\* =  $p < .01$ . \* =  $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

**Table 4** Hierarchical Regression Analysis—Hostile Complaints

	B	SE	$\beta$
Block 1			
Prior Satisfaction	.01	.05	.01
Alternatives	.14	.03	.30**
Investment	.16	.03	.33**
Commitment	-.04	.04	-.09
Severity	.16	.02	.35**
Block 2			
Prior Satisfaction	.04	.04	.05
Alternatives	.13	.03	.26**
Investment	.09	.03	.18**
Commitment	.01	.04	.01
Severity	.04	.03	.08
Anger	.20	.05	.31**
Frustration	.18	.05	.27**
Disappointment	.00	.04	.01

\*\* =  $p < .01$ . \* =  $p < .05$ .

*adjusted*  $R^2 = .44$ ,  $F(8, 241) = 25.59$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In the final model, alternatives, investment, anger, and frustration positively predicted hostile communication.

The second regression examined the predictors of direct complaint messages (see Table 5). Block one of the analysis showed that the investment model variables and severity accounted for 29% of the variance ( $F(5, 244) = 21.72$ ,  $p < .01$ ) with alternatives, investment, commitment, and severity representing the only significant predictors. In block two, consumers' emotions accounted for another 9% of the variance (*total model adjusted*  $R^2 = .38$ ,  $F(8, 241) = 19.96$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In the final model, alternatives, investment, severity, and frustration positively predicted direct communication.

Our third regression examined the predictors of informative complaint messages (see Table 6). Block one showed that the investment model variables and severity accounted for 12% of the variance ( $F(5, 244) = 7.47$ ,  $p < .01$ ) with investment and severity representing the only significant predictors. In block two, consumers' emotions accounted for another 5% of the variance (*total model adjusted*  $R^2 = .17$ ,  $F(8, 241) = 7.50$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In the final model, investment and disappointment positively predicted informative communication.

Our fourth regression examined the predictors of indirect complaint messages (see Table 7). Block one of the hierarchical analysis showed that the investment model variables and severity accounted for 7% of the variance ( $F(5, 244) = 42.80$ ,  $p < .01$ ) with investment representing the only significant predictor. In block two, consumers' emotions did not account for a significant change of the variance (*total model adjusted*  $R^2 = .07$ ,  $F(3, 241) = .03$ ,  $p = .48$ ).

**Table 5** Hierarchical Regression Analysis—Direct Complaints

	B	SE	$\beta$
Block 1			
Prior Satisfaction	-.05	.05	-.06
Alternatives	.09	.03	.20**
Investment	.19	.03	.41**
Commitment	-.08	.04	-.17*
Severity	.15	.02	.35**
Block 2			
Prior Satisfaction	-.02	.04	-.03
Alternatives	.08	.03	.17**
Investment	.14	.03	.30**
Commitment	-.05	.04	-.10
Severity	.08	.03	.18**
Anger	.10	.05	.15
Frustration	.17	.05	.26**
Disappointment	-.01	.04	-.02

\*\* =  $p < .01$ . \* =  $p < .05$ .

**Table 6** Hierarchical Regression Analysis—Informative Complaints

	B	SE	$\beta$
Block 1			
Prior Satisfaction	.08	.06	.09
Alternatives	.06	.04	.10
Investment	.18	.04	.32**
Commitment	-.07	.05	-.13
Severity	.12	.03	.23**
Block 2			
Prior Satisfaction	.09	.06	.10
Alternatives	.04	.04	.06
Investment	.15	.04	.28**
Commitment	-.05	.05	-.09
Severity	.03	.04	.05
Anger	.11	.07	.15
Frustration	.03	.07	.03
Disappointment	.14	.05	.20**

\*\* =  $p < .01$ . \* =  $p < .05$ .



**Table 7** Hierarchical Regression Analysis—Indirect Complaints

	B	SE	$\beta$
Block 1			
Prior Satisfaction	.05	.05	.06
Alternatives	.05	.03	.13
Investment	.14	.03	.33**
Commitment	-.06	.04	-.14
Severity	.03	.03	.07
Block 2			
Prior Satisfaction	.05	.05	.17
Alternatives	.05	.03	.12
Investment	.13	.04	.30**
Commitment	-.05	.04	-.12
Severity	.00	.03	.01
Anger	.06	.06	.09
Frustration	.02	.05	.04
Disappointment	.00	.04	.05

\*\* =  $p < .01$ . \* =  $p < .05$ .

## Discussion

In this paper we argued that the way people complain to organizations may impact the results they experience during the service recovery process (e.g., Bolkan et al., 2014; Richins, 1983). Consequently, we examined the antecedents of consumers' message choices to determine what factors influence their complaint behavior. First, our results indicated that the Big Five personality traits had little effect on consumers' message choices. Although our review of literature made it clear that personality variables were significantly associated with consumers' choices regarding *if* they complain, it seems that, in the current study, personality had little direct impact on consumers' choices regarding *how* they complain. To be fair, our findings may be the result of the personality traits we chose to measure, and other, more specific, traits may be more likely to influence consumers' communication choices following an organizational failure. For example, customers who perceive confrontation as challenging and fulfilling and who approach arguments (Infante & Rancer, 1982) may be more likely to voice their complaints in specific ways following botched service encounters. The same may be true of aggressive individuals (Infante & Wigley, 1986). That said, it may be the case that although more general or cardinal traits such as the Big Five do not have a direct impact on consumers' choices for complaining, surface-level traits (e.g., Harris & Mowen, 2001) may be more important in determining consumers' decisions for making specific types of complaints.

Second, our results indicated that the more consumers reported being invested in an organization, the more they reported using all four types of complaint messages.

This makes sense insofar as researchers have demonstrated that voicing complaints is a constructive way to solve problems (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986) and that individuals highly invested in interpersonal relationships may be “likely to try to solve problems rather than leave the relationship” (Guerrero & Bachman, 2008, p. 18). Because voicing complaints gives organizations the opportunity to fix problems for people experiencing them and future patrons, it seems logical that people invested in a company would take the time to make their sentiments known. In fact, research on consumer-organizational relationships following an organizational failure supports this conclusion. For example, consumers who are loyal to organizations are less likely to complain to third parties when faced with failures (Oh, 2004) and are more likely to voice their complaints to organizations directly (Blodgett & Anderson, 2000).

As it pertains to specific types of complaint messages, various patterns emerged from the data. Regarding hostile communication, the first block of the hierarchical regression analysis showed that investment, alternatives, and the severity of the problem were significant predictors. However, severity of the failure dropped out of the analysis after accounting for the second block which contained negative emotions. In the second block, investment, alternatives, anger, and frustration were significant predictors of hostile communication. Ultimately, this pattern of relationships implies that the more negative emotions a person feels during a service encounter and the more options the person has as alternatives, the more likely she or he is to vent negative emotions, threaten to quit doing business with the organization, and threaten to spread negative word of mouth. It stands to reason that people who have quality alternatives and who are not afraid of losing a relationship with an organization would be more likely to engage in this sort of potentially damaging behavior. Moreover, a hostile reaction to the antecedents listed above makes sense insofar as consumers’ experiences of anger have been associated with feelings of exploding, thoughts of aggressive behavior, and a desire to get back at the organization by saying something nasty (Bougie et al., 2003). This conclusion is further bolstered by the association of anger with the desire to spread negative word of mouth (e.g., Sanchez-Garcia & Curras-Perez, 2011) which reflects the behavioral tendency of angry people to try to “get back” at others toward whom they are angry (Frijda et al., 1989; Roseman et al., 1994).

Pertaining to direct complaints, the first block of our analysis showed that these messages were a positive function of alternatives, investment, severity, and a negative function of commitment. With the addition of emotions, commitment was no longer a significant predictor whereas frustration was significant. Thus, similar to what Gutek, Cherry, Bhappu, Schneider, and Woolf (2000) found, invested consumers are likely to give organizations another chance by voicing their dissatisfaction directly to the people who can make a difference instead of exiting the relationship. Moreover, the results suggest that when consumers experience a severe and frustrating service failure, and when they have quality alternatives, they are likely to make complaints to request refunds and insist that something be done to solve the problem. Compared to hostile complaints, when people experience negative

emotions, but are not angry, they may be likely to approach offending organizations in a logical manner.

The results mentioned above may reflect differential goals for frustrated versus angry consumers. Because angry consumers report being overtaken by emotion (Bougie et al., 2003), they may be more likely to complain in an aggressive manner as a way to restore a sense of control (Bolkan, Goodboy, & Daly, 2010) or to bolster their self-images (Krapfel, 1985). In contrast, without experiencing anger, frustrated consumers may place more importance on the goal of obtaining economic redress and may therefore be more likely to complain in a logical, reasonable, and assertive manner (Krapfel, 1985). Thus, after experiencing organizational failures frustrated consumers may be more problem focused whereas angry consumers may exhibit a bigger focus on emotions (Mattila & Ro, 2008).

Informative complaints were a function of investment and severity in the first block of our analysis. In the second block, investment and disappointment were significant predictors of people's willingness to offer information about a problem when complaining. Therefore, our results indicate that consumers who experience disappointment and who are invested in the organization are likely to offer what might be considered constructive advice instead of asking for a refund or venting negative emotions. This might be the case because people who experience disappointment may be less motivated than angry individuals to pursue aggressive actions and may be more likely to want to simply understand and fix the cause of the problem (Bougie et al., 2003).

Finally, indirect complaints were only shown to be a function of individuals' level of investment in organizations. Thus, people who have put resources into their relationships with organizations, but who do not necessarily experience negative emotions as the result of a service failure, are likely to bring up the problem by making light of the issue through jokes or hints. Results indicated that invested consumers wanted to make their thoughts known; however, the lack of emotional reaction to the organizational failure may indicate that the problem was not big enough to warrant a direct confrontation with employees.

In summary, previous investigations of consumer complaining behavior identify a variety of antecedents that should predict consumer complaining behavior. However, complaint behavior in these studies has typically been defined as the act of making a complaint. When examining consumer complaining behavior from the perspective of the messages consumers choose to communicate, the picture becomes more nuanced. Our results indicated that, at least for cardinal traits, personality did not influence consumers' choices regarding complaint messages. However, similar to what Guerrero and Bachman (2008) found, investment model indicators did seem to influence these choices. In particular, invested individuals were more likely to make all four types/complaints. Moreover, consumers who had high-quality alternatives were likely to be more confrontational insofar as they were likely to insist that something be done to fix their situations (direct complaining) and vent their negative emotions (hostile complaining). Severity of the failure was also an important variable because it led to direct complaining. Finally, our results indicated that emotional responses to

service problems are important variables predicting consumer behavior. As several authors have previously argued (e.g., Bougie et al., 2003; Mattila & Ro, 2008; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004), our findings support the conclusion that differences in discrete emotions are important to study because they lead to differences in consumers' action tendencies following an organizational failure.

### Practical Applications

The results of this study are important for consumers who wish to know how best to make complaints. Our advice for people experiencing organizational failures is to take a step back from the emotional experience and to identify their desired outcomes. Instead of letting emotions get in the way of a desired outcome, it is important for consumers to behave strategically and in the manner most likely to lead to their goals. Considering that hostile communication has been reported by consumers to be less effective than other strategies (e.g., Bolkan et al., 2014), angry consumers should take some time out from the experience of an organizational failure to dissipate their feelings of rage. If angry consumers can control their emotions and instead approach their complaint in a strategic and assertive manner, they may find that their requests are more likely to be persuasive. By focusing on the negative outcome as opposed to the blameworthy actions of the organization, angry consumers may be more likely to be problem-focused like frustrated customers (Tuzovic, 2010).

In addition to being important for consumers, understanding consumers' emotions is important to organizations as well. According to Petzer et al. (2012), recognizing the emotions being experienced by consumers should help organizations "determine which corrective action and recovery strategy should be implemented" (p. 485). As mentioned earlier, angry consumers tend to be emotion-focused and frustrated consumers may be more problem-focused. If so, organizations that recognize hostile communication from consumers may react in ways to help soothe angry emotions. For example, offering an apology, expressing sympathy, and being responsive to consumers' needs may help angry customers feel as though the organization values them and is considerate of their emotional states.

On the other hand, if organizations know that consumers who ask for refunds and insist that something be done to fix their problems are frustrated and not angry, they may be able to spend less time focusing on emotions and more time on fixing the problem. Additionally, recognizing that consumers who offer information have not experienced a severe failure may help organizations save money by reducing the number of coupons or discounts given in these scenarios. Instead, a pledge to look into the situation and rectify problems may be all that is needed.

Finally, results from this study point to the notion that organizations should take the time to develop investments with consumers because consumers who are invested and who are loyal are the ones who are most likely to offer feedback (Gutek et al., 2000). Considering that complaints "provide retailers the opportunity to address and remedy the problem" (Blodgett & Anderson, 2000, p. 322), creating methods to enhance this type of information would be of value to companies. Some ways to increase organizational

investment include “rewards for spending money with an organization (e.g., frequent flyer miles), and profit-sharing incentives (e.g., annual dividend checks)” (Bolkan et al., 2012, p. 122). In addition, ways to increase consumer loyalty include developing stronger relationships with customers through increased interactions with specific service providing individuals (Guttek, Bhappu, Liao-Troth, & Cherry, 1999).

### Limitations and Future Directions

As with all studies, this one has its limitations. The first limitation includes the population under study. The participants who took part in the current investigation were all students. Some critics may argue that this population differs from others in important ways. However, it is also the case that students are avid consumers and likely experience a range of dissatisfying consumption episodes and complaint interactions. Moreover, recent research (Bolkan et al., 2014) indicates that students do not differ in the content of their complaints compared to other populations. Still, future researchers may consider studying a more demographically diverse population to determine if the same relationships uncovered in this study can be replicated across samples.

A second limitation is the study’s scope. We only examined the Big Five personality variables and these did not have a strong association to the messages consumers chose to use following an organizational failure. Future researchers may choose to use more surface-level personality traits to examine their influence on consumers’ choices regarding their complaint messages.

Finally, this study examined consumer complaining from the perspective of consumers making complaints. Future researchers may consider examining consumer complaint episodes from the standpoint of organizational reactions to the various messages consumers communicate. By understanding how organizational representatives react to various complaint messages, researchers may get a fuller picture of how various communication choices influence consumers’ outcomes following an organizational failure.

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