From power to punishment: consumer empowerment and online complaining behaviors

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how psychological empowerment affects individuals' likelihood of publicly punishing a company with whom they had unsatisfactory experiences through online complaining behaviors.

Design/methodology/approach – A 3 (intrapersonal empowerment: high/low/control) by 3 (interactional empowerment: high/low/control) online experiment was designed using the priming technique. Following the priming tasks, participants were given a scenario in which a restaurant failed their expectations followed by dependent and control measures.

Findings – Results revealed a significant main effect of interactional empowerment: participants in the low interactional empowerment condition reported being less likely to engage in the revenge-motivated online public complaining behaviors than participants in the control condition. The study also found a significant interaction effect between interactional and intrapersonal empowerment.

Practical implications – The study findings yield practical application for crisis management and relationship management. Understanding the linkage between power and online complaining behaviors should help corporate communication professionals to better perform risk assessment, environmental scanning and crisis communication and management.

Originality/value – Limited empirical studies have investigated the linkage between empowerment and online complaining behaviors in the consumer context. The present study fills this gap by conceptualizing online public complaining as a revenge-motivated behavior. The study yields both theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords Empowerment, Service failure, Punishment, Revenge, Online complaining

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In September 2011, Bank of America (BOA) proposed a $5 monthly fee for its debit card users. Resentment arose among BOA's customers and among them was a 22-year-old college graduate Molly Katchpole. Katchpole's anger led her to launch a petition on Change. org to repeal the $5 fee. The response was overwhelming. In less than a month, more than 300,000 people from all 50 states joined the petition. More than 21,000 people pledged to close their BOA checking accounts. Negative comments poured into BOA's Facebook and Twitter accounts. As complaints mounted from bank customers and the online pretest gained national media attention, BOA announced it would drop its banking fee in less than one month of announcing the proposal. Within weeks, other major financial institutions such as Citi, Wells Fargo and JPMorgan Chase announced dropping their debit card fee plans due to public pressure.

BOA's debit card fee crisis illustrates increasing consumer power in online social networks. Social media have brought significant changes to how people communicate and interact with organizations. The internet gives people more buying choices, makes it easier to exit and switch and facilitates conversations as never before (Chang and Chin, 2011; Hassan and Ariño, 2016; Kucuk, 2008). Consequently, consumers are becoming more demanding of their relationships with brands online. Some consumers gain power through this change: they are using social media to exert personal influence and to punish organizations for wrongdoings. In some cases, this power accelerates online activism. The determining factor behind all these changes is power. As stated by Russell (1938), power is a

fundamental concept for social science, in the same way that energy is for physics and logic is for mathematics. Studying power is of vital importance to help us understand the changes brought by the new media.

From the organization's perspective, failures are inevitable (Sengupta *et al.*, 2015). When consumers encounter unsatisfactory experiences due to service failures, they are likely to voice their dissatisfaction by complaining (Chang and Chin, 2011; Singh, 1988). While some complaining behaviors are constructive – in that they provide a feedback mechanism to management about options to amend the relationship (Huefner and Hunt, 2000) – other complaints are more destructive, especially when the complaints are taken publicly online (Ward and Ostrom, 2006). This study investigates online complaining behaviors and deems it as punitive in nature, because online complaints present the failure to a mass audience, with the added impact of affecting the broader public perception of the company image and its reputation. Further, the present study explores whether intrapersonal empowerment and interactional empowerment gained through the new media transfer into the online complaining behavior, which is operationalized in this study as a punitive public complaint behavior on the internet or via social media aimed at negative publicity.

Limited empirical studies have investigated the linkage between empowerment and online complaining behaviors in the consumer context. To fill this research gap, this study draws insights from community psychology, consumer psychology and marketing research. Specifically, this study investigates psychological empowerment in a negative context where consumers have unsatisfactory experiences with a company. Through a 3 (intrapersonal empowerment: high/low/control) by 3 (interactional empowerment: high/low/control) online experiment, it is argued that perception of power increases an action orientation in the power holder, which transfers into a revenge behavior when users complain about the failure online to publicly shame the company.

Literature review
Psychological empowerment
The construct of empowerment has been studied in a variety of disciplines, including political science, organizational communication, social welfare, education, health, management, public relations and community psychology (see Hur, 2006 for a summary). It has also been examined at the individual level (Leung, 2009; Mo and Coulson, 2010; Schneider *et al.*, 2013), organizational level (Berger, 2005; Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002; Peterson and Zimmerman, 2004) and community level (Hur, 2006; Zimmerman, 1995). Researchers have studied empowerment as both a mental process of the individual being empowered (Menon, 1999; Mo and Coulson, 2010) and as an outcome (Hur, 2006; Zimmerman, 1995).

This study adopts the psychological empowerment framework at the individual level from community psychology research. Psychological empowerment is "the connection between a sense of personal competence, a desire for, and a willingness to take action in the public domain" (Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988, p. 725). The basic assumptions for this conceptualization are that empowerment takes different forms for different people and contexts and it may change over time (Zimmerman, 1995). For example, some individuals may gain empowerment through collective actions, while perceived competence or desire for control maybe a more salient trait in another context.

When viewed as a process, psychological empowerment includes two dimensions of intrapersonal and interactional empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995, 2000). Intrapersonal empowerment refers to how individuals think about themselves and their capability to influence others and the social and political systems (Menon, 1999; Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988). Intrapersonal empowerment includes three sub dimensions: perceived control refers one's belief about the ability to influence others in various circumstances; self-efficacy is the assessment of one's abilities to carry out certain tasks; perceived

competence refers to perceptions of one's capability to perform a job or task well (Hur, 2006; Petrovčič and Petrič, 2014; Zimmerman, 1995).

While intrapersonal empowerment focuses on the individual aspect, interactional empowerment addresses one's cognitive understanding of the social environment and the resources required to produce change (Zimmerman, 1995). Individuals of high interactional empowerment have a clear understanding of the norms and values of a particular context and the options available to achieve goals, which further leads to decision-making and problem-solving skills necessary to produce social changes (Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman *et al.*, 1992). Speer (2000) proposed that interactional empowerment should be composed of two aspects: collective action, which refers to one's understanding of the collectivism and the group power needed to produce change, and interpersonal relationships, which address one's understanding of the intimate interpersonal relationships needed to develop social power.

Researchers have underscored the importance of examining both individual and social aspects of the empowerment construct (Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010; Speer, 2000). Traditional investigations of empowerment focus on the individual's mastery and control, rather than the contextual or community elements (Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010; Riger, 1993). Speer (2000) argued that an individual's personal sense of control and efficacy (intrapersonal empowerment) differed from one's intellectual understanding of the contextual influences (interactional empowerment). Social change cannot be created solely from intrapersonal empowerment but must also come from strong interactional empowerment at the macro level (Speer, 2000). It is important to note that a psychologically empowered individual may possess either or both of the intrapersonal and interactional components.

Empowerment through social media

Researchers have examined how new media technologies boosted interactional empowerment (Füller *et al.*, 2009; Jayawardhena and Foley, 2000; Hanna *et al.*, 2011; Heinonen, 2011; Kucuk and Krishnamurthy, 2007; Li, 2016). With the growth of social media, individual users have access to various online channels that have tilted the balance of power in their favor. In the digital age, ordinary internet users are visible, organized and capable of virally influencing others' decisions. Without the constraints of time and location, any person who has internet access has the potential to spread a message to millions – with rapid speed. The connectivity established through online social networks can enhance users' ability to take collective actions and demand social change (Li, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2015). As a result, empowered social media users tend to demonstrate social influence by either embracing the opinions of others or expressing opinions that converge with those of others.

The advantage that social media gives citizens is spreading to the business world as well (Boyd *et al.*, 2016; Labrecque *et al.*, 2013). Empowerment is a key motive for consumer online engagement (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2003; Muntinga *et al.*, 2011). Labrecque *et al.* (2013) identified an evolution across four consumer power sources brought about by new media technologies: over time, consumer power has evolved from individual-based sources (demand- and information-based power) to network-based power sources (network- and crowd-based power). While early investigations of consumer empowerment focused more on the individual-based sources, such as increased information access and more buying and exiting options, new media technologies enhanced the network-based power via network actions through which others can add or co-create value (Labrecque *et al.*, 2013). With the development of social networks and many crowd-based functions (such as Change.org), many consumers are well aware of their potential influence over others online and the collective force that they may exert over the market process (Constantinides *et al.*, 2009), which signal strong interactional empowerment. Socially conscious consumers understand that they can use social media to organize themselves around shared values to start

effective movements. Concerned consumers use this power to express frustration and confront perceived wrongdoings (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008; Li, 2016). This power also accelerates consumer activism. In many cases, this power transforms to a punishment behavior when consumers complain publicly online to seek revenge for irresponsible corporate activities, as further discussed below.

Online complaining behavior and revenge
Consumer complaining behaviors have received considerable attention in marketing research. While many scholars have investigated the antecedents and consequences of consumer complaints (e.g. Andreassen and Streukens, 2013; Bodey and Grace, 2006), a few focused on the nature and typologies of consumer complaints. One of the earliest efforts to classify consumer complaint behaviors was represented in Singh's (1988) work, in which three dimensions of consumer complaining behaviors were proposed: voice (i.e. direct complaint to company to seek readdress), private responses (e.g. negative WOM) and third-party actions (e.g. reaching out to outside agencies). Boote (1998) further developed this taxonomy by proposing a primary/secondary classification in which third-party complaining and revenge were actions sought after only when direct complaint had failed. This classification has also been endorsed by recent research (e.g. Ro, 2013). Despite these scholarly efforts, few studies have focused on investigating the nature of consumer complaining behavior online. With the increasing popularity of online social platforms and their unique features, online complaining should be considered as a distinct channel to voice customers' dissatisfaction in additional to the traditional approaches (Andreassen and Streukens, 2013). This study focuses on online complaining and argues that, when presenting a punitive motivation, online complaining signals a revenge behavior, as discussed below.

Customer revenge represents "the efforts made by customers to punish and cause inconvenience to a firm for the damages it caused them" (Grégoire and Fisher, 2008, p. 248). Usually done with the intention of punishing and getting even (Hunt, 1991; Huefner and Hunt, 2000; Huefner *et al.*, 2002), revenge is a natural human behavior when people lack better means of restoring equality (DeMore *et al.*, 1988). Revenge is punitive in nature and, oftentimes, revenge and punishment are used to describe the same phenomenon in the consumer context (Zaibert, 2006). In the consumer context, revenge can take the form of direct or indirect complaining (Grégoire and Fisher, 2008). In its direct form, consumers can engage in vindictive complaining, which occurs when a consumer verbally abuses the company or its employees to cause inconvenience or be unpleasant with them (Grégoire and Fisher, 2008; Hibbard *et al.*, 2001). Indirectly, consumers can spread negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) or complain to a third party (e.g. the internet) with the aim of generating negative publicity of the company's actions (Grégoire *et al.*, 2010).

This study aims to extend the previous discussion and theoretical development on consumer complaining behaviors by presenting online complaining as a revenge behavior. Many online complaints amplify the seriousness of the issue or frame the grievance in a way that it becomes a concern for other present and potential consumers (Ward and Ostrom, 2006). The online complaint publicizes the resentment to a mass audience rather than to one's close social ties (Bijmolt *et al.*, 2014; Li and Stacks, 2017). By complaining publicly online, dissatisfied consumers often present the companies' failures as violations of norms or betrayals of consumer rights worthy of public outrage. Many of them structure negative comments to persuade others to avoid or oppose the company (Laczniak *et al.*, 2001). Given this, online complaining is operationalized in this study as a punitive public complaint behavior on the internet or via social media aimed at negative publicity (Li and Stacks, 2017). Further, this study posits that online complaining behavior is directly associated with consumer empowerment, as discussed below.

Empowerment and online complaining behavior

The underlying concept of empowerment is power, which is inextricably linked with the empowerment construct. According to Thomas and Velthouse (1990), "to empower means to give power to" (p. 667). Power, however, is a multi-dimensional concept that yields many different definitions from different context (Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). In its simplest form, power means the ability to produce intended effects (Laswell and Kaplan, 1950; Russell, 1938). Another conception of power challenged the dominance and control discourse of power and emphasized on the dimension "characterized by collaboration, sharing and mutuality" (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 61). The latter view overlaps with the empowerment construct. Given the conceptual linkage, this study argues that the effects of power and empowerment are transferrable.

Findings of previous research reveal that power has a direct association with negative action outcomes (Aquino *et al.*, 2006; Grégoire *et al.*, 2010). Empirical evidence suggests that power is linked to the feelings of personal control (Hong, 2018; Fast *et al.*, 2009; Obhi *et al.*, 2012). The classical, albeit ethically controversial, Stanford prison experiment demonstrated that people's behaviors could change dramatically when placed in a position of power (Zimbardo, 2007). When the student participants acted as guards (a position of power), their behaviors turned violent and abusive toward the inmates (a powerless position). They started punishing the participants acting as prisoners when they did not meet the directions and demands of the guards. This linkage between power and punishment was also evidenced by recent neuroscience research, which found that people primed for high power had a different neural mechanism that might cause them to lose empathy (Hogeveen *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, psychological research on power found that power increased an action orientation (Galinsky *et al.*, 2003; Magee *et al.*, 2007). Studies by Galinsky *et al.* (Anderson and Galinsky, 2006; Galinsky *et al.*, 2003; Magee *et al.*, 2007) revealed that research participants primed for high power were more likely to engage in risky behavior (e.g. unprotected sex), initiate aggressive negotiation techniques and act against a disturbing research stimulus.

Marketing researchers argue that a consumer's empowerment is a psychological state that motivates behavior. Madrigal and Boush (2008), for example, found that consumers were willing to reward corporations as a way to empower themselves and affect movement toward their personal goals. Sweetin *et al.* (2013) extended the framework to study willingness-to-punish corporations and found that empowered consumers were willing to punish the corporate brand for socially irresponsible actions. Further, Grégoire *et al.* (2010) found that individuals of lower power status are reluctant to engage in direct revenge for a fear of counter-retaliation. Individuals of high-power status, on the other hand, are less fearful of counter-retaliation and therefore more inclined to engage in direct revenge. Moreover, Chang and Chin (2011) found that people's perceptions of control and self-efficacy affected their intention to complain. Based on the above reasoning, it follows that there is a connection between psychological empowerment and revenge-motivated online complaining behaviors. In the context of consumer complaint, the study hypothesized a main effect of psychological empowerment: individuals of higher power status would be more likely to engage in online complaining when encountering an unsatisfactory failure situation. This effect should be salient for both intrapersonal and interactional empowerment. However, existent literature offers limited insights as to how intrapersonal empowerment and interactional empowerment may interact with each other. Therefore, the following research question and hypotheses are proposed:

RQ1. Are there any interaction effects between intrapersonal empowerment and interactional empowerment on consumers' online complaining behaviors?

H1. Intrapersonal empowerment has a main effect on online complaining behaviors such that individuals primed for high intrapersonal empowerment are more likely to

complain online than those in the control condition; conversely, individuals primed for low intrapersonal empowerment are less likely to complain online than those in the control condition after encountering an unsatisfactory failure situation.

H2. Interactional empowerment has a main effect on online complaining behaviors such that individuals primed for high interactional empowerment are more likely to complain online than those in the control condition; conversely, individuals primed for low interactional empowerment are less likely to complain online than those in the control condition after encountering an unsatisfactory failure situation.

Method

To test the study hypotheses and research question, the study conducted an online experiment with a 3 (intrapersonal empowerment: high/low/control) by 3 (interactional empowerment: high/low/control) between-subject design. The experiment instrument was developed via Qualtrics and a link was distributed through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is an online panel run by Amazon.com, and it is widely used for behavioral research and survey studies (Goodman *et al.*, 2013; Mason and Suri, 2012). For sample selection, a qualification standard was employed by asking that at least 95 percent of the tasks done by a worker had been approved. The workers' location was restricted to the USA. A total of 641 responses were collected.

To ensure data quality, two attention-check questions were included where participants explicitly selected "agree" as their answers. Those who missed the attention-check questions were excluded from the final sample. Additionally, participants responded to two questions related to the experiment manipulations. Participants were expected to select the answers that correspond to their experiment conditions. Moreover, the worker IDs and respondents' IP addresses were carefully monitored to exclude any duplicate responses. After filtering through all the above-mentioned exclusion criteria, a final sample of 273 responses were retained consisting of 53.8 percent male and 46.2 percent female respondents. The respondents' average age was 36 (SD = 12.77). The majority of the respondents indicated themselves as being non-Hispanic White (79.9 percent), with a bachelor's degree (41.0 percent), and having an annual income of below $40,000 (52.0 percent).

Manipulation and stimuli

The priming technique was used to manipulate the study controls. A widely used approach in psychology research, priming is an implicit memory effect in which exposure to one stimulus influences response to another stimulus (Bargh and Chartrand, 1999). Priming, often used in experimental manipulations, provides an unobtrusive control over participants' perceptions, impressions, motivations or moods (Bargh and Chartrand, 2000).

Intrapersonal empowerment manipulation. For manipulation of intrapersonal empowerment, the procedure developed by Galinsky *et al.* (2003) was adopted in which the participants completed a short essay reflecting on an empowering or disempowering experience. Participants in the control condition wrote an essay on a neutral prompt.

Specifically, participants assigned to the high-power condition received the following instructions:

> Please recall a particular incident in which you had control or authority over another individual or individuals. This may be a situation in which you controlled the ability of another person or persons to get something they wanted, or were in a position to lead or evaluate those individuals. Please describe this situation in detail – what happened, how you felt, etc.

Participants assigned to the low-power condition received the following instructions:

> Please recall a particular incident in which someone else had control or authority over you. This may be a situation in which someone had control over your ability to get something you wanted, or was in a position to lead or evaluate you. Please describe this situation in detail – what happened, how you felt, etc.

Participants in the control condition received the following instructions:

> Please recall your day yesterday. Please describe your experiences yesterday in detail – what happened, how you felt, etc.

Interactional empowerment manipulation. For manipulation of interactional empowerment, participants reviewed a CNN news report about how social media have empowered users (high-power condition) or restricted users (low-power condition) to gain control over their interactions with companies. Participants in the control condition read a neutral report about how social media have contributed to small business growth. The story pages were designed to mock the same format of the CNN webpage. Each story also had a highlights section, which emphasized the article's key points. The three stories were of equivalent length and sentence structure, except for the keywords that manipulated the central argument. Appendix presents the three interactional empowerment conditions.

To reinforce the manipulation of interactional empowerment, participants answered two "reading comprehension questions" after reading the article. Both questions asked participants to select a statement that represented the opinions in the article. Each question had five answer choices: a highlight statement from story one, a highlight statement from story two, a highlight statement from story three, none of the above and all of the above. The two reinforcement questions also served the purpose of attention check: participants were expected to select the answers that correspond to their manipulation condition.

Experimental procedure
Prior to the main study, a pretest ($n = 75$) was conducted to verify the study manipulation and measurement instrument. Minor adjustments were made to the wordings of the scale items to enhance clarity. In the main study ($n = 273$), participants were told that the study consisted of two parts. Part I aimed to evaluate the relationship between reading comprehension and writing. Part II was a separate study about how consumers react to service failures. After agreeing to the consent form, participants were presented with the two prime conditions. To avoid order effect, participants were randomly assigned to the different experimental conditions. Further, to counterbalance the potential influence of one priming condition over the other, the order of the two prime manipulations received by the participants was also randomized in the study. These procedures were taken to minimize the common method biases (Malhotra *et al.*, 2006; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

Following the two priming conditions, participants were then presented the manipulation check measures of interactional empowerment. Afterwards, in a seemingly unrelated task, a hypothetical service failure scenario was introduced in which their expectations were not met:

> You invited some friends for your birthday party at a local restaurant. You made a dinner reservation on the restaurant's website for a table of ten at 7 pm. Everyone showed up in time and the restaurant was packed. However, the receptionist told you that they did not receive your reservation so they cannot set aside a large table for you. You said you made the reservation online a week ago and the website confirmed your reservation. The receptionist said unfortunately they cannot accommodate your request at this time, and you and your friends have to wait for approximately 30-40 minutes to be seated.

The scenario was designed and verified through the pretest to ensure that it was severe enough to generate dissatisfaction among respondents. After reading the hypothetical scenario, participants were then presented the dependent measures, control measures and demographic questions. Finally, participants were asked to guess the purpose of the study and debriefed. The last question served as a filter to avoid responses with demand characteristics.

Measures
The manipulation check measures of interactional empowerment conditions were adapted from the scale developed by Speer (2000). Specifically, four statements measured participants' perception of high interactional empowerment and two statements measured participants' perception of low interactional empowerment. To check the manipulations of intrapersonal empowerment, participants' personal experiences were evaluated qualitatively to ensure their experiences did reflect the corresponding intrapersonal empowerment or neutral manipulation.

For dependent measures, participants answered how likely they would be to complain publicly online or via social media. This variable is hereafter labeled the likelihood to complain online. Participants also indicated the likelihood that they would complain online via three revenge motivation-specified questions (Li and Stacks, 2017): complain online to spread NWOM about the restaurant, complain online to persuade potential customers not to come to the restaurant and complain online to publicize the poor behavior of the receptionist. These measures (hereafter labeled likelihood to seek revenge online) correspond to the operational definition of revenge behaviors by specifying a punishment motivation. The Cronbach's α value was 0.75 for the scale. Additionally, because the focal dependent variables involve complaining online or via social media, participants' social media usage was measured via the question "please indicate how frequently you engage in activities on social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Yelp," as a control variable. This control measure was included to make sure that participants' online complaining intent was not confounded with their social media usage. All measures were based on a seven-point scale.

Results
Manipulation checks
To check the manipulations of interactional empowerment, the four statements measuring high interactional empowerment and the two statements measuring low interactional empowerment were each averaged to form the high-power score and low-power score, respectively. Following this procedure, two one-way ANOVA tests were conducted. Results showed significant mean differences among the three conditions for high-power score ($F_{(2, 270)} = 41.54$, $p < 0.001$) and low-power score ($F_{(2, 270)} = 38.31$, $p < 0.001$). To evaluate further the pairwise mean differences among the three conditions, *post hoc* follow up tests were conducted using Tukey's adjustment. Results showed that participants in the high interactional empowerment condition ($M = 6.15$, SD $= 0.66$) scored significantly higher with the high-power score than participants in the low interactional empowerment ($M = 5.09$, SD $= 0.96$, $p < 0.001$) and control ($M = 5.41$, SD $= 0.83$, $p < 0.001$) conditions. Meanwhile, participants in the low interactional empowerment condition ($M = 4.08$, SD $= 1.31$) scored significantly higher with the low-power score than participants in the high interactional empowerment ($M = 2.64$, SD $= 0.88$, $p < 0.001$) and control ($M = 3.04$, SD $= 1.15$, $p < 0.001$) conditions. Thus, manipulations of both high and low interactional empowerment conditions were successful.

To check the manipulation of high and low intrapersonal empowerment, the personal experiences written by the participants were carefully screened and qualitatively evaluated to make sure they indeed reflect empowering (high intra-power), disempowering (low intra-power) or neutral (control) experiences. Responses that did not fit in the corresponding manipulation conditions were excluded from the final sample.

Hypotheses testing

To test the study's hypotheses and research question, a series of two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) tests were performed. Interactional empowerment and intrapersonal empowerment were entered as the two factors and participants' social media use was included as the covariate. Participants' likelihood to complain online and likelihood to seek revenge online was each tested as the dependent outcome.

Likelihood to complain online. The first two-way ANCOVA test used the question, "How likely are you to complain publicly online or via social media (e.g. Twitter or Facebook page)?" as the dependent variable. Some basic assumptions need to be checked before performing two-way ANCOVA. First, the covariate should be linearly related to the dependent variable. Second, the variance of dependent variable should be equal across all groups, also known as homogeneity of observation. The first assumption was examined by checking the Pearson correlation between the covariate and each dependent variable. Results showed significant linear relationships ($p < 0.05$) between social media use and the dependent variable, confirming the first assumption. To check the second assumption, Levene's test was requested. Levene's test is an inferential statistic that examines the equality of variances of a dependent variable for two or more groups. Result of Levene's test was found significant, $F(8, 264) = 2.41$, $p < 0.05$. To correct the bias, the α value of 0.025 instead of 0.05 was used as a threshold for the subsequent ANCOVA significance testing.

Analysis of the two-way ANCOVA showed a significant interaction effect of the two empowerment constructs, $F(4, 263) = 2.85$, $p < 0.025$. Hence, further analyses focused on interpreting the interaction effects. To explore the difference further, simple effects were estimated. As shown in Table I and Figure 1, interactional empowerment had a significant simple effect only when intrapersonal empowerment was high, $F(2, 263) = 4.70$, $p < 0.01$. Among the participants who were primed with high intrapersonal empowerment, those with high interactional empowerment ($M = 6.20$, $SE = 0.19$) were more likely to complain online than those with low interactional empowerment were ($M = 5.26$, $SE = 0.27$), $p < 0.05$. Those with low interactional empowerment ($M = 5.26$, $SE = 0.27$) were less likely to complain online than those in the control condition were ($M = 6.15$, $SE = 0.22$), $p < 0.05$.

When comparing the simple effects of intrapersonal empowerment within each condition of the interactional empowerment, as shown in Table II and Figure 1, only the low interactional empowerment condition was significant, $F(2, 263) = 5.22$, $p < 0.01$. Among the participants who were primed with low interactional empowerment, those with high

Intrapersonal empowerment conditions	(I) Interactional empowerment conditions	(J) Interactional empowerment conditions	Mean difference (I–J)	SE	Sig.[a]	Univariate test[b]
High	High	Low	0.95*	0.32	0.01	$F(2, 263) = 4.70$
	High	Control	0.05	0.29	1.00	$p = 0.01$
	Low	Control	−0.89*	0.35	0.03	$\eta_p^2 = 0.04$
Low	High	Low	−0.27	0.33	1.00	$F(2, 263) = 0.39$
	High	Control	−0.03	0.30	1.00	$p = 0.68$
	Low	Control	0.24	0.33	1.00	$\eta_p^2 = 0.00$
Control	High	Low	−0.23	0.31	1.00	$F(2, 263) = 1.84$
	High	Control	−0.60	0.31	0.17	$p = 0.16$
	Low	Control	−0.36	0.31	0.73	$\eta_p^2 = 0.01$

Table I.
Simple effects within intrapersonal empowerment conditions on likelihood to complain online

Notes: [a]Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni; [b]each *F* tests the simple effects of interactional empowerment manipulation conditions within each level combination of the intrapersonal empowerment conditions. These tests are based on the linearly independent pairwise comparisons among the estimated marginal means. *Significant at the 0.05 level

Figure 1.
Estimated marginal
means of likelihood to
complain online

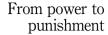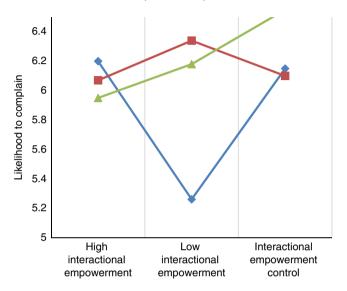| Interactional empowerment conditions	(I) Intrapersonal empowerment conditions	(J) Intrapersonal empowerment conditions	Mean difference (I–J)	SE	Sig.[a]	Univariate test[b]
High	High	Low	0.13	0.28	1.00	$F(2, 263) = 0.39$
	High	Control	0.25	0.29	1.00	$p = 0.68$
	Low	Control	0.12	0.31	1.00	$\eta_p^2 = 0.00$
Low	High	Low	−1.09*	0.37	0.01	$F(2, 263) = 5.22$
	High	Control	−0.93*	0.34	0.02	$p < 0.01$
	Low	Control	0.16	0.33	1.00	$\eta_p^2 = 0.04$
Control	High	Low	0.05	0.31	1.00	$F(2, 263) = 1.21$
	High	Control	−0.40	0.31	0.62	$p = 0.30$
	Low	Control	−0.45	0.31	0.46	$\eta_p^2 = 0.01$

Notes: [a]Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni; [b]each F tests the simple effects of intrapersonal empowerment manipulation conditions within each level combination of the interactional empowerment conditions. These tests are based on the linearly independent pairwise comparisons among the estimated marginal means. *Significant at the 0.05 level

Table II.
Simple effects within
interactional
empowerment
conditions on likelihood
to complain online

intrapersonal empowerment ($M = 5.26$, $SE = 0.27$) were less likely to complain online than those with low intrapersonal empowerment were ($M = 6.34$, $SE = 0.25$), $p < 0.05$, or those in the control condition ($M = 6.18$, $SE = 0.21$), $p < 0.05$. This finding is quite interesting as it seemingly contradicts the study prediction. The observed power is moderate (0.83) so this is unlikely to be an artifact. Figure 1 illustrates the interaction and simple effects across different conditions.

Likelihood of seeking revenge online. The second set of two-way ANCOVA tests used the three motivation-specific behaviors as the dependent variables[1]. Interactional empowerment

and intrapersonal empowerment were the two factors, and participants' social media used was included as the covariate. Both assumptions were checked and confirmed. No interaction effects were found for any of the three ANCOVA tests. No main effects were found for intrapersonal empowerment; thus, *H1* was rejected. However, as shown in Table III, there were significant main effects of interactional empowerment for two of the three dependent measures: spread NWOM about the restaurant ($F(2, 191) = 4.31$, $p < 0.05$) and to persuade potential customers not to come to the restaurant ($F(2, 191) = 4.08$, $p < 0.05$). Further analysis revealed that participants in the low-power condition ($M = 4.97$, SE = 0.21) reported being less likely to spread NWOM than those in the control condition ($M = 5.76$, SE = 0.17), and participants in the low-power condition ($M = 4.96$, SE = 0.22) were also less likely to persuade potential customers not to come to the restaurant than participants in the control condition ($M = 5.76$, SE = 0.18).

To further explore the robustness of the result, the three dependent measures of revenge were averaged to form a composite variable. The composite variable served as the dependent outcome in a two-way ANCOVA test. Both assumptions were checked and confirmed. Results showed similar patterns: no significant interaction effect or main effect of intrapersonal empowerment was detected. However, interactional empowerment had a significant main effect on the composite revenge outcome ($F(2, 191) = 5.02$, $p < 0.01$). Further analysis revealed that participants in the low-power condition reported lower scores ($M = 5.20$, SE = 0.16) than those in the control condition ($M = 5.85$, SE = 0.13), and such differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Thus, *H2* was partially supported.

Discussion

Drawing insights from community psychology, consumer psychology and marketing research, this study investigates whether the personal power and power gained through the new media transfer into a revenge behavior when consumers complain publicly online after encountering an unsatisfactory experience with a company. This paper contributes to the body of knowledge by introducing the framework of psychological empowerment and noting its association with online public complaining behaviors. Several theoretical implications can be drawn from the study findings, as discussed below.

Punitive online complaining behavior

The present study took an initiative to conceptualize online complaining behavior, which has received little attention in the literature. Online and social platforms provide a unique channel for consumers to voice dissatisfaction (Andreassen and Streukens, 2013). Compared with direct and more interactive complaining behaviors (e.g. in person, via phone or e-mail), online complaining is oftentimes not intended to seek remedy of the situation (Bijmolt *et al.*, 2014). Rather, consumers complain online to vent negative emotions and to punish the

Dependent variable	High interactional empowerment	Low interactional empowerment	Control	df	F	p
I complained publicly online:						
To spread NWOM	5.47	4.97[a]	5.76[b]	(2, 191)	4.31	0.02*
To persuade potential customers not to come to the restaurant	5.36	4.96[a]	5.76[b]	(2, 191)	4.08	0.02*
To publicize the poor behavior of the receptionist	6.04	5.66	6.03	(2, 191)	1.90	0.15
Revenge responses composite score	5.62	5.20[a]	5.85[b]	(2, 191)	5.02	0.01**

Notes: [a,b]Indicate conditions with significant mean difference. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

Table III.
Main effects of interactional empowerment on likelihood to revenge online

company for unfair treatment. Given such a consideration, this study conceptualized online complaining behavior as a punitive public complaint behavior on the internet or via social media aimed at negative publicity. Three motivation-specified complaint measures were proposed and tested in this study: complaining online to spread NWOM about the incident, complaining online to persuade potential customers to avoid interacting with the business, complain online to publicize the poor behavior of the staff. Corresponding to a few scholars' proposition (e.g. Li and Stacks, 2017; Grégoire *et al.*, 2010), this study argues that online complaining behavior signals a punitive motivation because it publicizes the service failure to a mass audience. One may amplify the seriousness of the issue or frame it in a way that it becomes a concern for others (Ward and Ostrom, 2006). By complaining publicly online, dissatisfied consumers often present the companies' failures as violations of norms or as an act of betrayal. Many complaints aim to persuade others to boycott the company or product (Laczniak *et al.*, 2001). This study found that the participants who were primed with higher interactional empowerment reported greater likelihood to engage in such complaint behaviors, providing evidence for the criteria-related validity of this measure.

It should be cautioned, however, complaining publicly online may not always be punitive in nature. Unsatisfied consumers could complain online for non-punitive motivations, such as to vent anger and frustration or to warn others from suffering from similar situations (Li and Stacks, 2017; Singh, 1988). Thus, measures of online complaints should specify the consumer motivation to clarify the nature of such behavior.

Empowerment and online complaining behavior
This study investigated the linkage between empowerment and consumer online complaining behaviors. The study results confirmed that interactional empowerment was a key determinant for revenge-motivated complaining behaviors. However, significant mean differences were found only between low interactional empowerment and control conditions. According to the postulation of *H2*, participants in the high interactional empowerment condition should have a higher likelihood to undertake revenge responses. Yet, the results of the experiment showed that their responses actually did not differ from the control condition. This finding could be explained by the demographics of the study sample: the participants on MTurk were likely to be an internet-savvy group. MTurk workers were likely to sense a high level of interactional empowerment based on their familiarity and experience with internet technology, even without the study manipulation. If the study participants already had a fairly strong understanding about the power internet and social media could grant them, reading a neutral news report (control condition) would not attenuate this power; however, the low interactional empowerment condition would.

Additionally, the research question explored the interplay between interactional and intrapersonal empowerment on consumer online complaining behaviors. Prior research provides no clear answer to address this issue. Quite interestingly, the findings of this study revealed a significant interaction between the two empowerment conditions with one of the dependent measures, likelihood to complain online. Further analyses showed that the effects of interactional empowerment differed only for participants in the high intrapersonal empowerment condition: people primed for high interactional empowerment were more likely to complain online than those primed for low interactional empowerment. The expected differences were not evident for participants in the low intrapersonal empowerment condition, likely because the low level of intrapersonal empowerment suppressed the tendency to complain. In other words, the effect of low intrapersonal power overshadowed the variations in interactional empowerment.

Moreover, the results showed that the effects of intrapersonal empowerment were only evident for people in the low interactional empowerment condition. This result indicates that high interactional empowerment might have suppressed the effect of intrapersonal

empowerment variations. However, what seems intriguing is that the significant mean differences of intrapersonal empowerment were in the opposite direction as expected. As shown in Figure 1, within the low interactional empowerment condition, participants primed with high intrapersonal empowerment were less likely to complain than were those primed with low intrapersonal empowerment or control condition. This finding offers great hindsight. A possible explanation is that the combination of low interactional empowerment and high intrapersonal empowerment triggered a lesser desire for revenge but greater desire for avoidance (Grégoire *et al.*, 2009; Li and Stacks, 2017). Both desires signal the existence of a consumer grudge or lack of forgiveness (Grégoire *et al.*, 2009). However, desire for revenge leads to more confrontational behaviors such as NWOM and public complaining online (Grégoire and Fisher, 2008; Ward and Ostrom, 2006), while desire for avoidance is more passive and signals a strategy to reduce interactions with companies to avoid further damage (Grégoire *et al.*, 2009). In the present study setting, those primed with low interactional empowerment were under the impression that social media threaten interpersonal trust and estrange personal relationships. It is likely that low interactional empowerment triggered the avoidance desire because consumers' online complaining intention is directly associated with their attitude and expected situational outcomes (Andreassen and Streukens, 2013). Furthermore, participants who obtained high level of intrapersonal power could be so "obsessed" with control that they were afraid to lose it. Consequently, the avoidance intent became more evident for participants of high intrapersonal empowerment than those of low intrapersonal empowerment. It is possible that the fear for this counter effect suppressed participants' willingness to complain on social media.

Practical implications
Besides the theoretical implications, the study findings also yield great application for crisis management and relationship management. Past research indicated that power increases an action orientation in the power holder, even in contexts where power is not directly experienced (Galinsky *et al.*, 2003). The application for this power-action association is evident in many online complaining behaviors. Compared to private complaining, public complaining spreads NWOM and publicizes the issue to a mass audience. Extreme public complaining behaviors intensify the issue and elevate the failure to a large scale (Ward and Ostrom, 2006). This form of response can be quite destructive, as it can easily trigger a crisis. Therefore, companies need to actively monitor consumer complaint online and on social media to minimize the negative impact (Jeong and Koo, 2015). Popular online complaining channels and sites need to be considered in performing risk assessment, environmental scanning and crisis communication and management. Furthermore, corporate communication professionals can take advantage of consumer empowerment and turn it into a positive force by encouraging constructive feedbacks (Hassan and Ariño, 2016). Such constructive complaints can provide opportunities for service recovery, reduce negative publicity and prevent future service failures.

Limitations and future research
There are a few limitations associated with the study. First, the study manipulation of intrapersonal empowerment might have been too weak. Especially for the participants assigned to take the intrapersonal manipulation first, the following task of reading the news article could have weakened the prior manipulation. Hence, future research should enhance the intrapersonal empowerment manipulation and test the effect independently without other interventions. Second, it would be beneficial if future studies could sample a different population that is less technology-savvy. This approach will generate more variations in measuring the effects of interactional empowerment. In addition, the study may suffer from

common method biases such as social desirability, consistency motif and common scale formats (Malhotra *et al.*, 2006; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Future study should adopt the study measures and design the questionnaire attentively to minimize such biases. Further, future studies should consider examining social media use and empowerment in a natural setting, such as surveying members of a brand's Facebook fan page or Google+'s circle of acquaintances. Finally, future research should test the interaction effect between intrapersonal and interactional empowerment and verify if the explanations offered in this study is valid.

Note

1. Because the motivation-specified complaint behaviors are not thoroughly conceptualized in the literature as a construct, the study proceeded with the analyses – treating the items both as separate measures and as a composite scale.

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Appendix. Interactional empowerment manipulation stimuli

Condition 1: high interactional empowerment

Condition 2: low interactional empowerment

Condition 3: control

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Tech ⌄

Social media: A new era of economic growth

By **Kelly Wallace**, for CNN

🕑 Updated 12:32 PM ET, Tue February 10, 2015

Twitter and Facebook protests are targeting everything from government actions to companies' customer service.

Story highlights

Social media technologies have facilitated interactivity and two-way communication for small businesses.

Online brand communities allow businesses to enhance consumer-brand relationships and build strong brand loyalty.

Social media is becoming a powerful tool for businesses to effectively promote their products and services.

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(CNN) — The influence of social media has moved from the companies to consumers potentially spurring economic growth, according to a recent study published in the new issue of Harvard Business Review.

Research that looked at the changing impact of social media on small business operations was conducted by two professors of marketing at Harvard Business School, Dr. Michael I. Norton and Dr. John T. Gourville.

Their study revealed that, with the growth of social media, companies have been provided a force multiplier that has tilted the use of technology in their favor. In the digital age, small businesses are present, visible and able to effectively promote their products and services with online platforms and mobile apps.

Social media technologies have accelerated the effectiveness of two-way communication. According to the study, the interactivity established through social media can enhance companies' abilities to reach out to consumers and ask for feedback.

Without the constraints of cost and access, any company that has motivation and Internet access has the potential to spread a message to millions.

As a result, " well-represented companies tend to have better performance by either publicizing their products or services or drawing more interactions with consumers when embracing new technologies," Norton and Gourville wrote.

Meantime, the leverage and influence social media give businesses are rapidly spreading into the local community. Local businesses are seeking to use the online tools and social networks to build a virtual community online, Norton and Gourville stated.

Many companies are realizing that they can use social media to market themselves towards business goals by initiating online campaigns. Social media give them a sounding board to share ideas, as well as a means to connect with target consumers, the study stated.

One example cited in the study was the Ice Bucket Challenge campaign led by ALS Association to promote awareness of the disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and, since then, similar grass root campaigns have followed.

Michael I. Norton
Professor at Harvard Business School

Norton commented that "in the coming years, if not sooner, social media will become a powerful tool that businesses will increasingly use to promote products, services and communicate with consumers for better relationships."

John T. Gourville
Professor at Harvard Business School

Simon Mainwaring, a *New York Times* best-selling author and founder of We First, commented that Americans will invariably see many more instances of business-initiated efforts, using social media to build brand loyalty that will benefit the company in many different ways.

Simply put, small businesses have taken advantage of various features of social media— and they are using it to build success as never before. the authors of the Harvard study stated.

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