Analyzing the effectiveness of suppliers’ empathetic responses for negative comments on viral websites

Mina KOGURE a*, Shigemitsu MOROKAMI b*

a HOSEI University Graduate School of Sociology, 4342 Aiharacho, Machida-shi, Tokyo, 194-0298 Japan
b Faculty of Social Science, Department of Media and Communication Studies, HOSEI University, 4342 Aiharacho, Machida-shi, Tokyo, 194-0298 Japan

Abstract

Posting negative comments on viral websites can be regarded as a kind of complaint behavior, that adequate responses to those negative e-WOMs from supplier may cure customer’s dissatisfaction and are effective to their repurchasing decision making. In our previous study, we have examined the effect of replies and found that responding to negative review had positive effect. Also, the effect of empathetic response differed depending on customer’s motivation for posting negative e-WOMs. However, some factors relating customers’ attributes or purchasing contexts are not well discussed. Based on these backgrounds, we have examined how the customers’ gender and the attributes of merchandize may figure in, with respect to the psychological effect that supplier’s empathetic response may have on customers who write negative reviews. 881 participants were surveyed by web-based questionnaire to measure the psychological effect of reply itself and the empathy expressed in it. The results showed that gender of the contributor and controllability of the problem are both significantly affecting the evaluation of supplier’s responses. While in case of “low controllable” problem, the results agree well with earlier studies, in case of “high controllable” problem, empathetic comments worked negatively. This study implicates that the type of response expected for negative reviews is qualitatively different from what is expected in the case of a ‘complaint’ which requires certain response from the supplier.

Keywords: negative e-WOM, dissatisfaction, complaints, empathy, controllability

1. Introduction

Customers are gradually changing the way in which they express their dissatisfaction with the services they have purchased. Up until recently, customers directly make complaints to suppliers or public institutions. Besides, in recent years, more people are expressing their dissatisfaction on viral websites or through social-networking services (SNS).

One way for companies to deal with such customer complaints is to respond to negative reviews posted on websites such as “Trip Advisor” and “Yelp”. According to a Trip Advisor's survey, hotels who have responded to negative reviews online tend to have more customer reviews, increase customer engagements, and receive more reservations, than those have not [1]. Besides, Trip Advisor reports that website viewers tend to have a better impression of hotels that provide a heartfelt response to negative reviews [2].

Regarding the psychology of customers who provide negative reviews, there are reports concerning the impact that negative reviews may have on the writers’ positive attitudes toward the service and their behavior after purchase [3] and the impact that empathizers may have on the writers of negative reviews [4]. On the other hand, there have not been adequate studies on how service suppliers should deal with dissatisfied customers who post negative reviews on viral websites even though there are some studies regarding the content of suppliers’ responses [5].

Based on these backgrounds, we have previously reported that effective response to negative reviews varies depending on the customer’s motivation for posting the review [6]. However, some other factors relating customers’ attributes or purchasing contexts may also affect to the psychological effect of replies, still remains to be discussed.

With regard to complaint behavior, it has been pointed out that the attributes of the customers and the merchandize influence the occurrence of complaints [7]. This means that an appropriate response may also differ by the attributes of the customers and the merchandize. From this point of view, this study will examine how these attributes may affect the effectiveness of suppliers’ responses.

2. Theoretical background

There are studies indicating that customers who have encountered service failure tend to feel greater satisfaction, develop strong company loyalty, and strengthen repurchase intention if they see that the supplier has responded appropriately to their complaints, than would be the case if they have not had such an experience [8,9,10].
On the other hand, the posting of negative reviews, the topic of this study, is pointed out that people are motivated to vent negative feelings, to concern for other consumers, to help the company, and to advice seeking by Henning-Thurau et al. They also suggested that these customers do not really expect that the supplier would respond to their complaints [11]. Rather, customers post negative review to merely express the dissatisfaction that they have felt or a desire to share that feeling with many other people.

Based on these studies, it should be emphasized that the type of response expected for negative reviews is qualitatively different from what is expected in the case of a complaint which requires certain response from the supplier. Therefore, indeed there exist many earlier studies concerning complaints handling, it is not appropriate to apply those findings to handle negative reviews without modifications.

From this point of view, this study focuses solely on negative e-WOMs and revalidate the customers’ attributes concerned with expected response.

In previous studies about complaint behavior, it has been pointed out that the way in which people express their anger is suppressed or fanned influenced by their personal attributes and various situational factors [12, 13]. For this reason, the effective action in soothing people’s anger may also depend on their personal attributes and situational factors. The posting of negative reviews, along with complaint behavior, can be regarded as an external expression of anger. Thus, its occurrence must also be examined. Prior studies have listed the attributes of merchandise and the attributes of customers as factors associated with the occurrence of complaint behavior [7].

As for merchandise attributes, complaint behavior is said to occur more readily when the product or service is expensive [14, 15], when the problem is so serious that the customers cannot solve it themselves [14, 16], and when the supplier is being perceived as reluctant to address the problem [14].

As for customers’ attributes, Warland investigated the relationship among customers’ social engagement, income, educational level, and complaint behavior, and argued that their community involvement is strongly related to their complaint behavior [17]. In addition, the higher the customers’ self-esteem, the stronger their attitude toward complaining [18]. Thus, the influence of individual psychological characteristics has also been confirmed. Regarding the influence of demographic factors and with respect to the influence of the customers’ gender, it has been confirmed that women are more likely to complain than men are [19] and that women tend to communicate their dissatisfaction to other people more often than men do [20]. Rather, women tend to share their experiences with a wider array of individuals than do men [21]. Therefore, it is conceivable that women are more likely than men to complain, and that women expect a higher level of response from the supplier.

Then, what kind of message would be effective while appeasing dissatisfied and complaining customers? Sensui [4] and Kogure et al. [6] have indicated that an empathetic message is effective in handling customers who post negative reviews. The effectiveness of an empathetic message has been identified as a HEAT skill that is necessary for dealing with complaints [22]. Its positive effect has also been confirmed when it comes to appeasing people in interpersonal relationships [23, 24].

Even so, there have also been reports that empathetic messages are not necessarily effective in every situation that the effectiveness of an empathetic message depends on the relationship between the sender and the recipient [25]. Also, the effectiveness of an empathetic response differs depending on the customer’s motivation for posting negative reviews [6].

Therefore, this paper will examine, based on these hypotheses listed below, how the effectiveness of a supplier’s empathetic response in influencing how customers feel about the service may be affected by the customer’s gender and the merchandise associated with the occurrence of the complaint.

H1: When a customer posts a negative review on a viral website, the presence or absence of empathy in the supplier’s response influences the customer’s psychological evaluation of the supplier’s services and response.

H2: The effectiveness of H1 differs depending on the customer’s gender.

H3: The effectiveness of H1 differs depending on the price range of the merchandise subject to complaints.

3. Survey overview

3.1 Survey preparation

In this study, we selected service goods as the target of research for the following reason. Service goods has the difficulty to maintain same quality at all times and their quality evaluation tend to be easily affected by individuals’ subjective opinions [26]. Therefore, customers who are not be satisfied with service goods express their emotions via negative word of mouth instead of complaining directly. In addition, we selected hotels and beauty salons considering that there are many viral websites that allow operators to respond to negative reviews.

As part of the instructions presented to the participants to this experiment, we used negative reviews posted on viral websites concerning actual hotels and beauty salons and created hypothetical scenarios in which customer found that the services rendered to them left them feeling dissatisfied. We then selected the following scenarios in which the degree of customers’ discontent matched the negative reviews on viral websites (according to our prior research [6]).

Scenario: hotel

I went on an overnight trip with my friend during the spring break. We stayed at a hotel that we had never stayed in before. It was located near the railway station. The atmosphere of the building was good. Staff members were friendly. They were courteous when we checked in.
at the front desk. The assigned room was clean, and its atmosphere was calming. However, it was disappointing that the heater hardly worked when we turned it on to warm the room since it was a chilly day.

(Scenario: beauty salon)

I wanted to refresh myself. So, I made a first-time visit to a beauty salon that I was curious about. A clerk was very helpful when I tried to make a reservation. I arrived there a little early, but they served me right away. They were careful while shampooing my hair so that the water would not hit my face. The finish was also good. However, it was unfortunate that the towel smelled unseemly and the beautician smelled like cigarette smoke.

3.2 Survey methodology

We conducted an online survey targeting 881 men and women in their 30s living in Tokyo and Kanagawa, since these participants from this segment are familiar with online communication and can be expected to have usage experiences to both service goods.

We first presented them with the above scenarios and asked them to imagine that they were in these situations. We then asked them to write reviews. The respondents were divided into two groups. One group was given an un-empathetic response, while the other was given an empathetic response. We created hypothetical responses to these complaints with a reference to Osawa et al. [5] which classified hotel’s response on viral sites based on contents of response.

We gave them these responses and assessed their willingness to forgive the supplier with regard to the cause of their discontentment, their level of satisfaction with these responses, their level of satisfaction with the service, and their repurchase intention. We used a three-item measurement for the level of forgiveness [27], a one-item measurement for both, the level of satisfaction with the service and contents of response.

We conducted an online survey targeting 881 men and women in their 30s living in Tokyo and Kanagawa, since these participants from this segment are familiar with online communication and can be expected to have usage experiences to both service goods.

We first presented them with the above scenarios and asked them to imagine that they were in these situations. We then asked them to write reviews. The respondents were divided into two groups. One group was given an un-empathetic response, while the other was given an empathetic response. We created hypothetical responses to these complaints with a reference to Osawa et al. [5] which classified hotel’s response on viral sites based on contents of response.

We gave them these responses and assessed their willingness to forgive the supplier with regard to the cause of their discontentment, their level of satisfaction with these responses, their level of satisfaction with the service, and their repurchase intention. We used a three-item measurement for the level of forgiveness [27], a one-item measurement for both, the level of satisfaction with the service and contents of response.

We then asked them to write reviews. The respondents were divided into two groups. One group was given an un-empathetic response, while the other was given an empathetic response. We created hypothetical responses to these complaints with a reference to Osawa et al. [5] which classified hotel’s response on viral sites based on contents of response.

We gave them these responses and assessed their willingness to forgive the supplier with regard to the cause of their discontentment, their level of satisfaction with these responses, their level of satisfaction with the service, and their repurchase intention. We used a three-item measurement for the level of forgiveness [27], a one-item measurement for both, the level of satisfaction with the service and contents of response.

We conducted a simple main effect test (Bonferroni method) to identify the effects of empathetic response with respect to each service (Figure1). The group that received an empathetic response showed a significantly higher level of forgiveness (F(1,773)=7.369, p<.01), satisfaction with the response (F(1,773)=16.181, p<.001), satisfaction with the service (F(1,773)=25.787, p<.001), and repurchase intention (F(1,773)=23.546, p<.001). Thus, we conducted a simple main effect test (Bonferroni method) to identify the effects of empathetic response with respect to each service (Figure1). The group that received an empathetic response showed a significantly higher level of forgiveness (F(1,773)=7.369, p<.01), satisfaction with the response (F(1,773)=16.181, p<.001), satisfaction with the service (F(1,773)=25.787, p<.001), and repurchase intention (F(1,773)=23.546, p<.001). Thus, we conducted a simple main effect test (Bonferroni method) to identify the effects of empathetic response with respect to each service (Figure1). The group that received an empathetic response showed a significantly higher level of forgiveness (F(1,773)=7.369, p<.01), satisfaction with the response (F(1,773)=16.181, p<.001), satisfaction with the service (F(1,773)=25.787, p<.001), and repurchase intention (F(1,773)=23.546, p<.001). Thus, we conducted a simple main effect test (Bonferroni method) to identify the effects of empathetic response with respect to each service (Figure1). The group that received an empathetic response showed a significantly higher level of forgiveness (F(1,773)=7.369, p<.01), satisfaction with the response (F(1,773)=16.181, p<.001), satisfaction with the service (F(1,773)=25.787, p<.001), and repurchase intention (F(1,773)=23.546, p<.001).

With respect to the beauty salon, the group that received an empathetic response showed a significantly higher level of satisfaction with the hotel than with the beauty salon (F(1,773)=3.541, p<.10).

With respect to the hotel, the group that received an empathetic response showed a significantly higher level of forgiveness (F(1,773)=5.765, p<.05) and satisfaction with the response (F(1,773)=2.872, p<.10) than the group that received an un-empathetic response.

With respect to the beauty salon, the group that received an empathetic response showed a significantly higher level of forgiveness (F(1,773)=3.268, p<.10), satisfaction with the response (F(1,773)=6.180, p<.05), and satisfaction with the service (F(1,773)=3.679, p<.10).

4. Results

Of the 881 people (un-empathetic response group n=440, empathetic response group n=441, hotel n=441, beauty salon n=440, men n=440, women n=441), an analysis was conducted on 777 people (un-empathetic response group n=393, empathetic response group n=384, hotel n=386, beauty salon n=391, men n=377, women n=400) after excluding 104 who provided incomplete answers.

First, we conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) of three factors: whether the response was empathetic or not, the participant’s gender, and the service rendered to them. No interactions were observed among these three factors. However, significant interaction effect was found between existence of empathy and type of merchandize in some variables (Table1): forgiveness (F(1,769)=9.037, p<.01), satisfaction with the response (F(1,769)=8.979, p<.01), satisfaction with the service (F(1,769)=5.782, p<.05), repurchase intention (F(1,769)=7.279, p<.01).

|                      | Hotel        | Beauty-salon | F    |
|----------------------|--------------|--------------|------|
| Forgiveness          | Empathetic   | 5.091        | 4.7497         | 9.037**         |
|                      | Un-Empathetic| 4.790        | 4.9752         |                 |
| Satisfaction with the response | Empathetic   | 4.733        | 4.1969         | 8.979**         |
|                      | Un-Empathetic| 4.508        | 4.5253         |                 |
| Satisfaction with the service | Empathetic   | 4.592        | 3.9326         | 5.782*          |
|                      | Un-Empathetic| 4.477        | 4.2424         |                 |
| Repurchase intention | Empathetic   | 4.052        | 3.3769         | 7.279**         |
|                      | Un-Empathetic| 3.933        | 3.7386         |                 |

***p <.001, **p <.010, *p <.050

Vol. 11 No. 1 (2019)
repurchase intention \( (F(1,773)=8.334, p<.01) \), than the group that received an empathetic response.

Thus, it was confirmed that the presence or absence of empathy had impacted the level of forgiveness regarding both services, and that the level of satisfaction with the response, the level of satisfaction with the service, and the repurchase intention differed depending on the type of merchandize. In addition, it has also been found that with respect to the hotel, the presence of empathy had a greater positive impact on customers’ psychological evaluations than the absence of empathy. However, with respect to the beauty salon, the existence of empathy had a negative impact on psychological evaluations.

Next, since the main effect of the customer’s gender was observed, we analyzed the influence that gender may have on psychological evaluations (Table 3).

Our analysis has indicated that women had a significantly higher level of forgiveness, satisfaction with the response, and satisfaction with the service than men. As for the repurchase intention, there were no significant differences. Thus, this analysis has confirmed the existence of a gender-related influence. The main effect of gender was confirmed: forgiveness \( (F(1,769)=9.143, p<.01) \), satisfaction with the response \( (F(1,769)=10.359, p<.01) \), satisfaction with the service \( (F(1,769)=4.925, p<.05) \).

5. Discussion

In this study, we have examined how the customer’s gender and the type of merchandize (factors associated with the occurrence of customer complaints) may figure in, with respect to the psychological impact that suppliers’ empathetic response may have on customers who write negative reviews. Our study has confirmed that the type of merchandise affects the effectiveness of the supplier’s empathetic response and also, the customers’ gender affects how they evaluate the service psychologically.
Here is a summary of our discussion regarding the impact that the type of merchandise may have on the effectiveness of the supplier’s response. An empathetic response had a positive impact on the level of customers’ forgiveness and their satisfaction with the supplier’s response in the case of a hotel, but in the case of a beauty salon, an empathetic response had a negative impact on customers’ psychological evaluations, more than an un-empathetic response. This result seems to be related to customers’ judgment regarding the causal attribution based on differences in the controllability of the problem for each service. The “controllability of the problem” refers to the possibility that the supplier could have prevented the service failure. It has been reported that when customers feel that the cause of the problem is other than themselves, and that the supplier could control the problem, the customers tend to complain [14, 29]. From this, it could be surmised that, in this study, the customers felt that the problem that occurred at the beauty salon had higher controllability than the problem at the hotel, and that they were more likely to have been dissatisfied. The results also indicated that sending an empathetic response in a situation with high controllability leads to lower psychological evaluations than sending an un-empathetic response.

This suggests that the supplier would have to include some element other than empathy in its response when a problem that could have been prevented does in fact occur. Since importance of the problem [14] and price of product [15] set off complaint behavior, strength of involvement and perceived risk will be considered to be key factors, further discussion is required for this point.

Meanwhile, no gender differences were observed with respect to the effectiveness of the supplier’s response. However, it has been confirmed that women tend to evaluate services and suppliers’ handling higher than men. Our result could be explained by some previous studies that women tend to complain more than men [19], women are more likely to communicate their discontentment to those around them [20], and men tend to suppress negative emotions more often in a situation where certain decorum may be required [30].

In other words, women can more easily calm their anger because they express their dissatisfaction more readily. This will allow for further psychological evaluations. On the other hand, men find it more difficult to calm their anger because they do not usually express their dissatisfaction as frequently as women do. This leads to relatively fewer psychological evaluations.

Although further verification is required for the mechanism of the influence of this gender difference, this result suggests that the differing motivations for expressing dissatisfaction between the two genders may also affect their psychological evaluations.

To overview the results, it can be suggested that to respond heartfully with empathetic comments to negative e-WOMs, do not always work well as often mentioned in conventional complaint managements. While in case of “low controllable” problem, the results agree well with earlier studies, in case of “high controllable” problem, empathetic comments worked negatively.

Moreover, this study has implications for suppliers that they should consider some occurrence factors of the problem as well as surmising contributor’s psychological attributes (e.g. by using text mining of the negative comment or analyzing past records of postings from same contributor about other matters).

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP17K04010. We are grateful for the helpful comments and suggestions of the reviewers, which improved this paper very much.

References

[1] Trip Advisor: Responding to reviews online drives booking enquiries, study reveals, https://tripadvisor.mediaroom.com/2014-09-03-Responding-to-reviews-online-drives-booking-enquiries-study-reveals (2019/09/03)
[2] Trip Advisor : Custom Survey Research Engagement, https://www.tripadvisor.com/TripAdvisorInsights/w661 , 2015 (2019/09/03)
[3] Ando, K. : How Creating positive Word-of-months effect to own perspective?, Journal of Advertising science, Vol.59, pp1-16, 2013
[4] Sensui, K. : The Influence of Word-of-mouth Communication Contents sympathetic Others on Consumer Behavior, Studies in Ikuei Junior College, Vol.32, pp1-14, 2015
[5] Osawa, Y. , Go, A., Yasuda, R. : Negative WOM and responses on the Web site-Pointing to “Hotel booking sites”, Proceedings of the 16th annual meeting of the Association for natural language processing, pp322-325, 2010
[6] Kogure, M., Morokami, S. : Effective Replies to Online Negative Comments Based on Customers’ Motivations for Social Sharing of Emotions, Journal of Japan Association for Management Systems, Vol.36(2), pp127-135, 2019
[7] Kuroiwa, K.: Complaint Behavior: A Review with Implications for Further Research, The Journal of Masashi University, Vol.52(1), pp1-16, 2004
[8] Smith, A. K., Bolton, R. N., Wagner, J. : A Model of Customer Satisfaction with Service Encounters Involving Failure and Recovery, Journal of Marketing Research, Vol.36 (August), pp356-372, 1999
[9] MaxhamIII, J. G. : Service Recovery’s Influence on consumer satisfaction, positive word-of-mouth, and purchase intentions, Journal of Business Research, Vol.54(1), pp11-24, 2001
[10] Hocutt, M. A., M. R. Bowers, D. T. Donavan : The Art of Service Recovery : Fact of Fiction? , Journal of Services Marketing, Vol.20(3), pp199-207, 2006
[11] Henning-Thurau, T. G, Winner, P. K, Gremler, D. D: Electronic Word-of-mouth via consumer-Opinion Platforms: What Motivates Consumer to Articulate Themselves on the Internet?, Journal of Interactive Marketing, Vol.18(1), pp38-52, 2004
[12] Abe, S. : The Influences of Relationship with Perpetrator and Casual Information on Anger and Aggressive Behavior, Human science, the Graduate Course of Kansai University, Vol.60, pp117-127,2004
[13] Ohira, H. : The Influence of self-consciousness on motives and responses of anger, Japanese Journal of Social Psychology, Vol.4, pp30-37, 1989
[14] Richins, M. L. : Negative Word-of-Mouth by Dissatisfied Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaint Behavior Proceedings, Indiana University, pp41-50, 1983
[15] Landon, E. L. Jr : A Model of Consumer Complaint Behavior in consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior Proceedings, Indiana University, pp26-29, 1977
[16] Ikeuchi, H. : Reduction of Socio-psychological Factors Affecting Complaint Behavior, Economic and Political studies series of Kansai University, Vol. 142, pp 101-131, 2006
[17] Warland, R. H., Herrmann, R. O., Dan, E. M. : Consumer Complaining and Community Involvement: An Exploration of their theoretical and Empirical Linkages, The Journal of Consumer Affairs, Vol.18, pp64-78, 1984
[18] Ikeuchi, H. : The Psychological mechanism of complaining behavior, Research in Social Psychology, Vol.25(3), pp188-198, 2010
[19] Bolfing, C. P : How do customers express dissatisfaction and what can service marketers do about it?, The Journal of Services Marketing, Vol.3(2), pp5-23, 1989
[20] Tanaka, Y., Shibuya, S., Nishikawa, C., Yoshida, M. : Making Complaints and Subsequent Behaviors of University students, Mejirjo Journal of Social and Natural Science, Vol.9, pp71-79, 2013
[21] Rime, B., Mesquita, B., Philippot, P., Boca, S. : Beyond the Emotional Event: Six Studies on the Social Sharing of Emotion, Cognitive and Emotion, Vol.5(5/6), pp435-465, 1991
[22] Nakamori, M., Takeuchi, K. : Facts of complaint handlings, Nikkei Publishing Inc, 1999
[23] Rogers, C. R. : Empathic : An unappreciated way of being, The Counseling Psychologist, Vol.5(2), pp2-10, 1975
[24] Burleson, B. R. : Comforting messages : Features, functions, and outcomes, In J. A. Daly and J. M. Wiemann (Eds.), Strategic Interpersonal Communication, Hillsdale, N.J. : Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,pp135-161,1994
[25] Genjida, K., Murata, K. : Are empathic messages really effective?:The effect of these messages on the impression of message providers, Japanese Journal of Interpersonal and Social psychology, Vol.7, pp21-29,2007
[26] Komiyaji, M. : Characteristics of Services and Tasks on Service Transactions, Seijo University Economic Papers, Vol.187, pp149-178, 2010
[27] Yelena, T., Toyib, D. : Consumers’ forgiveness after brand transgression : the effect of the firm’s corporate social responsibility and response, Journal of Marketing-Management, Vol.31(17-18), pp1851-1877,2015
[28] Nakazawa, N. : The role of Caucasian models in Japanese Advertising, Master's thesis, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Colorado,1994
[29] Hess, R. L., Ganesan, S., Klein, N. M. : Service Failure and Recovery The Impact of Relationship Factors on Customer Satisfaction, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Vol.31(2), pp127-145, 2003
[30] Choi, K., Arai, K. : Relationship between Regulation of Negative Emotional Expression, Satisfaction of Friendship, and Mental Health, The Japanese Journal of educational psychology, Vol.46, pp432-441, 1998