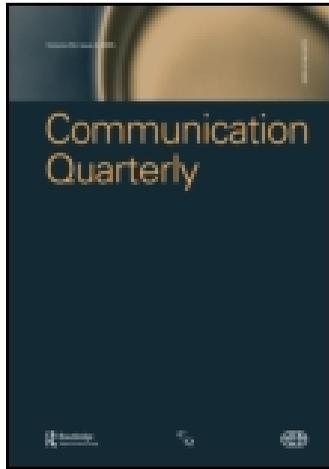


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### Communicating Consumer Complaints: Message Content and its Perceived Effectiveness

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# Communicating Consumer Complaints: Message Content and its Perceived Effectiveness

San Bolkan, Darrin J. Griffin, & Alan K. Goodboy

*Consumers sometimes experience discontent when they interact with companies and may complain to communicate their dissatisfaction. To date, most researchers have focused on what organizations do to remedy consumer dissatisfaction without examining the content of the complaint messages. This is regrettable considering the degree to which organizations comply with complaints may be a function of what consumers say. Using Garner's (2009) typology of organizational influence and dissent as a theoretical guide, we created a measure of consumer complaining to determine what people say when they complain to companies and what messages they perceive to be effective in gaining compliance.*

*Keywords: Communication; Complain; Consumer; Effective; Organization*

Consumers and companies depend on each other, and the interactions that exist between the two may resemble those of interpersonal relationships (Bolkan, Goodboy, & Bachman, 2012). Unfortunately, like interpersonal relationships, not all interactions between these parties are smooth, pleasant, or problem-free. In fact, problems are not uncommon in organizational settings (Hart, Heskett, & Sasser, 1990). The way organizations handle these problems is crucial because their communication to, and the relationships they maintain with, customers are linked to consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Ford, 2003). This is the case because most patrons prefer to work with companies that understand and care about them as people. Specifically, consumers prefer organizations that are engaged with them, attentive to their needs, and sensitive to

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their feelings (Ford, 2003). That said, the maintenance of positive communication and relationships with customers is crucial to organizations because the inability to provide service that promotes these ideas may ultimately result in the loss of business and profits (Ford, 2003). However, promoting positive interactions is not solely the responsibility of organizations; communication between companies and consumers is transactional in nature. After experiencing dissatisfaction, the way consumers communicate with offending companies might affect the outcomes they can expect from, and their subsequent relationships with, these organizations.

Broadly speaking, when organizations have problems that affect their customers, consumers can choose to react in four ways: they can exit the relationship, communicate their discontent to family and friends (i.e., negative word of mouth), complain to third party organizations (e.g., the Better Business Bureau), or voice their dissatisfaction to the offending organizations directly (Oh, 2004). Of these options, most companies would prefer consumers to communicate dissatisfaction to them directly because doing so provides organizations with an opportunity to correct the problem for the individual and adjust business practices to reduce the possibility of similar problems in the future (Davidow & Dacin, 1997). These ideas are crucial for companies because taking care of consumer complaints properly can lead to customer satisfaction (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998) and repatronage intentions (Bolkan et al., 2012), two ideas that are critical to companies' bottom lines (Reichheld, 1993; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Fortunately for organizations, previous studies have provided important insights regarding organizational remediation following consumer complaints. These studies include findings regarding the types of messages organizations communicate to consumers that are the most effective (Bolkan & Daly, 2008, 2009), the types of compensation consumers value most (Okimoto & Tyler, 2007), and how perceptions of justice influence consumers' reactions (Tax et al., 1998). Despite the advancements made by researchers regarding organizational remediation, most of these inquiries involve studying business transactions after an organizational failure from the standpoint of the organization as sender. As it stands, researchers remain largely unaware of the types of messages consumers communicate when they complain to organizations and the effect that these messages may have on the remediation process.

Because "relatively little research attention has concentrated specifically on communication in the consumer complaining process" (Garrett & Meyers, 1996, p. 445), we focused on what consumers say when they voice their dissatisfaction to offending organizations. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to create a measure of consumer complaints to examine the messages consumers communicate when expressing their dissatisfaction to organizations and to ascertain consumers' perceived effectiveness regarding these various complaint messages.

## Literature Review

Although few scholars have examined the specific content of complaints registered to organizations directly, several researchers have studied the content of *complaint-like* messages. For example, Tuzovic (2010) examined electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM)

complaining (e.g., complaining to other consumers on an online forum) to determine how the use of capitalization and emotion-laden words were used to reference consumers' experiences with organizations. The author suggested that the more frustrated consumers were, the more likely their communication moved from (a) venting but coping to (b) venting and protest (e.g., no longer patronizing the organization) to (c) influencing and warning others to (d) attempting to sabotage the offending organization. Similarly, Sparks and Browning (2010) examined a word-of-web context to determine the structure of the messages created by dissatisfied consumers. From their results, the authors claimed that the stories posted on EWOM forums could be summarized as containing orientation clauses (e.g., "Here is where I went and why I went there"), complicating actions (e.g., "This is what happened when I was there"), evaluations (e.g., "Here's how I felt about what happened"), and codas (e.g., "I will not return"). Relatedly, Ward and Ostrom (2006) examined consumer messages on dedicated "complaint" websites and found that individuals typically framed their dissatisfaction from the perspective of injustice as a way to rally potential consumers behind their sentiments. In short, Ward and Ostrom found that when communicating by EWOM, people created messages that articulated an injustice (why the person has a right to be upset), an identity (the party responsible), and an agency (what people should do).

Though the studies mentioned above were designed to examine what people said when they complained to other customers, it is also important to ascertain what people say when they complain to companies directly. In fact, some researchers have studied this notion. For example, Richins (1983) developed a typology of complainers based on their willingness to use the complaint strategies of assertiveness and aggressiveness as a way to determine consumer complaining styles. The author outlined four types of consumers: nonassertives, assertives who stand up for their rights, "resort to aggression consumers" (p. 80) who may begin with an assertive position and then switch to more aggressive methods if they are met with resistance, and aggressive consumers who are not afraid of telling off customer services representatives. In a different vein, Garrett and Meyers (1996) studied phone conversations with a telephone service company to determine what consumers and organizations said to one another during complaint episodes. The researchers concluded that expectations are rarely discussed by consumers, but that equity and performance are major conversational themes. According to the authors, the typical conversation unfolded in two steps. First, customers talked about the cause of the problem and, next, the conversation switched to the notion of equity and the way to restore it—this portion of the conversation tended to be dominated by the customer service representative.

Results of the studies mentioned in this literature review indicate that there are measureable patterns in the messages consumers create following a failure. However, many of the studies cited above did not examine communication directed toward companies themselves and therefore do little to inform us about what people might say when they complain to organizations. Without examining the specific appeals people make when they complain to companies, it is difficult to tell what specific influence tactics consumers use when they complain and, subsequently, their effectiveness when employed in the complaint process.

While scholars have yet to detail the exact content of what consumers say when they voice their dissatisfaction to organizations, recent examinations of a similar concept known as *dissent*—defined as “sharing concerns directly and openly with management, supervisors, and corporate offices” (Kassing, 1998, p. 207)—provide some insight regarding the possible content of consumer complaints. Dissent occurs and has been studied successfully in other power-laden contexts, including teacher-student relationships (Goodboy, 2011), coach-athlete relationships (Kassing & Anderson, 2014), and employee-employer relationships (Garner, 2012). Thus, it is plausible to assume that the consumer-business context might also represent a situation where dissent may function as a way to articulate complaints to people who have the power to make decisions regarding one’s outcomes.

In his study of organizational dissent messages, Garner (2009) surveyed 30 years of research on organizational influence and dissent and determined that employees attempt to influence others in common and measurable ways. Specifically, Garner identified 13 strategies of influence that could be used within organizations to “change another person’s behaviors and/or beliefs according to one’s own objectives” (p. 199). These influence/dissent strategies include: *ingratiation* (praising the receiver, making the receiver think that he or she has come to the conclusion), *direct-factual appeals* (using logic and reasoning to present information about one’s situation), *exchange* (using the rule of reciprocity to affect change), *circumvention* (pursuing the complaint with a higher authority), *coalitions* (recruiting others to support your position), *pressure* (demanding compliance), *inspiration* (appealing to morals and values), *repetition* (repeated dissenting), *threatening resignation* (threatening to quit if your issue is not addressed), *solution presentation* (providing solutions to the cause of your dissention), *venting* (describing your emotions), *asking for information* (asking others about their interpretation of events), and *humor* (using wit to communicate discontent). After identifying these 13 strategies, Garner sought to determine if the organizational influence tactics could be considered appropriate measures of dissent in the workplace. The results of his analysis led him to answer in the affirmative, suggesting an overlap between what people do when they communicate to influence others in an organization and what people say when they share specific concerns regarding their dissatisfaction in the workplace.

Just as organizational influence tactics have been associated with organizational dissent, we think it is possible that organizational influence and dissent may be theoretically linked to consumer complaining. In fact, research on the topic of consumer complaining seems to support this conclusion. For example, scholars have demonstrated that individuals complain for a variety of reasons, including: to ask for a refund/replacement/better service for one’s self, to ask for an apology or an explanation, to alert the business that something is wrong, to tell a company that something needs to be fixed, to tell the story of what happened, or to protect other people from dissatisfaction (Kowalski, 1996; Landon, 1977). Discriminating readers may recognize that many of these reasons for complaining match the dissent strategies mentioned above. For instance, asking for a refund, an apology, or protecting others from experiencing a failure in the future are theoretically similar to the notion of solution

presentation. In addition, asking for an explanation appears to be similar to the organizational dissent strategy entitled asking for information. Furthermore, simply telling an organization that something needs to be fixed or telling the story of an organizational failure are similar to the dissent strategy labeled direct-factual appeals. Moreover, recall that Richins (1983) studied the idea of assertiveness and aggressiveness. If a person was to examine Richins' scale of aggressiveness, he or she might recognize the tactic of pressure, considering that aggressive complainers are willing to "make a scene at the store if necessary" to get complaints handled to their satisfaction (p. 81).

In addition, complaint intensity has been studied by scholars who assert that when consumers complain to organizations, they can do so at varying levels of intensity (e.g., Cunliffe & Johnston, 2008; Tuzovic, 2010). Collectively, these authors operationalize intensity as a function of negative labeling, intense emotional language, and discussions regarding the removal of service. These ideas correlate with the dissent categories of venting (negative labeling and emotional language) and threatening negative action. Other scholars in the complaint literature also mention ideas that are similar to the message types people use when dissenting. For example, recall that in addition to complaining to organizations directly, people can contact third parties to intervene (Oh, 2004). This notion encompasses consumers' decisions to contact agencies that may be able to mediate the conflict and is similar to the notion of circumvention. Finally, after experiencing dissatisfaction, consumers can also spread negative publicity to others (e.g., Bolkan et al., 2012). This notion of telling friends and family members about a dissatisfying experience is similar to the conceptualization of coalitions, which entails recruiting others to support a position.

### Research Questions

It should be clear that similarities exist between organizational dissent strategies and the types of messages consumers might communicate when they complain. However, despite the conceptual overlap, complaining to organizations might contain exigencies that differ from other organizational contexts (e.g., consumer may have more alternatives, less investment, and less commitment compared to employees; Bolkan et al., 2012) and these exigencies may influence the types of messages consumers choose to communicate. Therefore, the current study was conducted to examine whether the same dissent strategies used to communicate discontent in organizations are enacted by consumers when they complain to offending companies. To determine if this is the case, we sought to create a measure of consumer complaining messages based on the typology articulated by Garner (2009).

Crucially, though similarities exist, the nature of the complaint process is different than dissenting in organizations. That said, though the list compiled by Garner (2009) may be considered a comprehensive inventory of dissent messages within organizations, using the items from his inventory would be inappropriate for the current context because the things people say when complaining to organizations may be different than the things they say when complaining in organizations. Therefore, a first goal of this study was to adapt the dissent typology into a measure of consumer complaining

messages. Importantly, after adapting the dissent typology to fit organizational complaint messages, an examination of the factor structure should be conducted to determine the configuration of consumers' perceptions regarding the various complaining types. Thus, determining the factor structure of the adapted scale was an essential goal of the current study. In order to help guide our inquiry regarding the structure of consumers' complaints to organizations, we offered the following research question:

*RQ1: What is the factor structure of consumer complaint messages?*

We also sought to determine whether complaint messages could be organized into larger patterns. To guide our study, we offered the following research question:

*RQ2: What patterns emerge when complaint messages cluster into meta-categories?*

Finally, as a way to identify if what people say when they complain affects the outcomes of their complaints, we offered the following research question:

*RQ3: What types of complaint messages do consumers perceive to be effective?*

## Study 1

### *Methodology*

*Participants and procedure.* In an attempt to blend the dissent typology with the literature on consumer complaining in a manner that preserved ecological validity, we solicited written complaints from 175 participants to analyze their letters for message types as a way to generate a pool of items for the complaint-based scale. Specifically, after receiving IRB approval, participants were selected from upper- and lower-division communication classes at a large western and a large northeastern university to take part in an examination of consumer complaining in exchange for extra credit. Participants were 175 people (76 males and 95 females, four unreported) whose ages ranged from 18 to 37 years old ( $M = 19.99$ ,  $SD = 2.36$ ).

To participate in the study, individuals had to have experienced an organizational failure within six months of their participation. Failures were described as occasions when organizations failed to provide an adequate service or provided a product that was unsatisfactory. If participants met this criterion, they were asked to write a physical letter to the organization as if they were actually complaining. Participants were given a week to complete the task. Importantly, participants were instructed to write the letter as they would naturally and to construct the message by communicating exactly as they would in an actual complaint setting. Participants were also told to include the price of the service/product they purchased and to rate the severity of the organizational failure. Perceived severity was assessed using a one-item measure with response choices varying from (1) *not at all severe* to (10) *very severe* (Oh, 2004).

*Results and data analysis.* Complaints varied in their length from 54 to 596 words ( $M = 217.33$ ,  $SD = 109.24$ ), their price ( $M = 107.16$ ,  $SD = 228.78$ ), and their perceived severity ( $M = 7.07$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ). After examining the descriptive statistics, the first author and a research assistant examined the letters for messages that operationalized the descriptions used in the typology articulated by Garner (2009), while keeping concepts from the consumer complaining literature in mind. Each letter was read to extract specific complaint messages that fit within the general definitions of the influence tactics; this process generated a series of 20 message types that reflected the 13 categories of influence (see Table 1). Next, the first author created an initial pool of 60 items representing each of the 20 message types. Twelve items reflected the notion of solution presentation; six items were created for venting, ingratiation, inspiration, and pressure; and three items were created for asking for information, direct-factual appeal, pressure, exchange, circumvention, coalition, humor, and repetition. An organizational scholar who was unrelated to the item creation examined each statement for face validity—no changes were made to the 60 items (items are available in Table 1).

**Table 1** Garner's (2009) Typology of Dissent Manifested in Consumer Complaints

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**Solution Presentation**

*Refunds*

- 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

*Apologies*

- Ask for an apology for what happened
- Ask that someone to apologize to you
- Mention that you would like to receive an apology

*Suggestions*

- Make a recommendation for the future
- Communicate specific expectations for better food/service/products
- Offer suggestions regarding how the company can improve

*Provide information so the problem can be fixed*

- 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

**Asking for information**

*Explanations*

- Ask to be contacted by someone regarding the matter
  - Ask for an explanation of what happened
  - Request that someone assures you that the mistake will not happen again
- 

(Continued)

**Table 1** Continued

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**Pressure**

- Demand that something be done about your situation
- Insist that the organization does something to fix your problem
- Tell the company that you will not take “no” for an answer

**Venting***Emotional language*

- Include the presence of strong emotional language
- Tell the company exactly how angry you are
- Tell the company that you are completely disgusted with what happened

*Negative labeling*

- Tell the company that their food/service/product is terrible
- Label the company and/or its employees' actions as irresponsible/inconsiderate
- Label the problem in a negative manner (e.g., “this is the one of the worst experiences I have ever had”)

**Direct-Factual appeal***Provide information to support your position*

- Alert someone that something went wrong
- Inform the organization about your negative experience
- Let the business know what happened to you

**Ingratiation***Hinting*

- Hint to the company that something is wrong
- 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

*Politeness*

- Try to be polite with the organization
- Thank the organization for taking time to listen to you
- Compliment the organization (i.e., tell the organization how much you usually like their food/services/products)

**Exchange***Credibility statements*

- 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

**Inspiration***Statements of impact*

- 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
- 

(Continued)

**Table 1** Continued*Appealing to morals*

- Use values to help resolve the issue (e.g., "It's the right thing to do")
- Appeal to the organization based on what's right/fair
- Make a moral appeal to help resolve the issue

**Threatening resignation***Threats to remove business*

- Threaten to remove your business if the problem persists
- 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

*Removal of service*

- Tell the organization that you will no longer shop here/eat here/use the company
- Alert the company that, because of the problem, you do not plan on returning
- Tell the company that will never do business with them again

**Circumvention**

- Threaten third party intervention (e.g., call headquarters, the Better Business Bureau, etc.)
- Tell the organization that you are going to follow up with the matter if you do not get a proper response
- Tell the company that you will pursue this matter further if they cannot help you

**Coalition***Negative word of mouth*

- 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

**Humor**

- Use sarcastic comments to get the point of your dissatisfaction across
- Use some type of humor when you express dissatisfaction
- Bring up your dissatisfaction in a joking manner

**Repetition**

- 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

---

*Note.* Items were adapted from Garner if there were not enough examples in the solicited complaints. These include items in inspiration (appealing to morals), humor, and repetition.

*Discussion*

This study was designed to create a preliminary categorization of consumer complaint messages in line with knowledge of dissent in organizations. Table 1 contains the results of our analysis and indicates the potential for 20 factors classified into 13 categories. Though this preliminary typology shows promise, it is important to ascertain if consumers who complain to organizations think of these factors as distinct categories the same way we do. Therefore, Study 2 was conducted to examine the

structure of complaint messages from the perspective of consumers who had recently been dissatisfied with an organizational experience.

## Study 2

### *Methodology*

*Participants and procedure.* The next step in our investigation was to ascertain the factor structure of the messages presented in Table 1 by conducting an exploratory factor analysis. After gaining IRB approval, we recruited 200 new participants (92 men, 108 women), aged 18 to 71 ( $M = 34.03$ ,  $SD = 12.36$ ) by placing a Human Intelligence Task on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk) website. Mturk is a crowd sourcing application where requesters post a variety of tasks online for workers to complete for nominal payment. This data pool has been used in a number of research investigations and has been found to provide reliable data from a demographically diverse participant pool (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Respondents in the current study were given \$0.25 for their participation and were asked to report on the measures described below.

*Measures.* Participants took part in an online survey where they were first asked to report whether or not they had complained to an organization in the last six months. If they had, participants were directed to the study which asked them to respond to a series of open-ended questions as a way to aid recall. Specifically, participants provided information including the name of the organization they complained to, the target of the complaint (front line employee, manager, supervisor, etc.), and the medium through which they made the complaint. In addition, participants were asked to describe what happened to make them complain and to report what they communicated when they complained. Following these open-ended questions, participants were asked to rate the severity of the organizational failure (Oh, 2004).

Once participants had completed this portion of the survey, they were asked to think about how they communicated to the organization and, specifically, what they said when they complained. Similar to the prompt used by Garner (2009, 2012) we told participants that, although their exact words may vary, we were interested in knowing the degree to which their communication was similar to the message types in Table 1. The order in which participants saw the statements was randomized and responses could vary from (0) *not at all similar to what I said* to (4) *extremely similar to what I said*.

Finally, we also solicited responses from subjects related to their perceptions of the effectiveness of their communication with the offending organizations. To measure these perceptions, we adapted a scale from Kim and Wilson's (1994) conversational constraints. Specifically, participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of their complaints using two semantic differentials ranging from (1) to (7) anchored with *ineffective/effective* and *did not lead to compliance/led to compliance* ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ).

### *Results*

To examine the factor loadings of the 60 items in our pool, we conducted a factor analysis using principal-axis factoring with oblique rotation (direct oblimin).

Sampling adequacy ( $KMO=0.88$ ) and Bartlett's test of sphericity  $\chi^2 (1770) = 8311.50$ ,  $p < 0.01$  indicated that the data were adequate for our investigation. We chose to retain only those variables that loaded on a primary factor at above 0.50 or higher and did not load on another factor at 0.30 or higher (e.g., McCroskey & Young, 1979) and only those factors with at least two loadings. Using these criteria, we retained 13 factors (representing 42 statements) explaining 70.55% of the variance.

After examining the data, it became clear that four factors had superfluous and redundant loadings. For the sake of parsimony, these factors were trimmed by removing the fourth, fifth, and sixth items loading lowest on the factor (each factor maintained a maximum of three variables; Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). Specifically, "communicate specific expectations for better food/service/products" was dropped from *provide information so the problem can be fixed*; "include the presence of strong emotional language" was dropped from the factor *venting*; "compliment the organization" was dropped from *credibility statements*; and "threaten to remove your business if the problem persists," "alert the company that, because of the problem, you do not plan on returning," and "tell the company that you will never do business with them again" were dropped from *threatening resignation*. Finally, the variable "ask for an explanation of what happened" was dropped from the factor labeled *hinting* because results indicated that keeping this variable was detrimental to the reliability of the factor. The result was 13 factors representing 35 statements (see Table 2).

**Table 2** Factor Analysis (Study 2)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	<i>Loading</i>
<b>Solution Presentation</b>				
<i>Refunds</i>	1.53	1.46	0.88	
- Ask directly for a refund				0.88
- Ask to be reimbursed for your expenses				0.91
- Tell the organization that you would like to be compensated for your troubles				0.70
<i>Apologies</i>	0.80	1.09	0.93	
- Ask for an apology for what happened				0.80
- Ask that someone to apologize to you				0.89
- Mention that you would like to receive an apology				0.89
<i>Suggestions</i>	1.59	1.26	0.74	
- Make a recommendation for the future				0.66
- Offer suggestions regarding how the company can improve				0.71
<i>Provide information so the problem can be fixed</i>	2.51	1.15	0.78	
- Tell the company about the problem to protect other people from experiencing the same dissatisfaction				0.71
- Inform someone about the issue so that they can fix the situation for future customers				0.76

(Continued)

**Table 2** Continued

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	<i>Loading</i>
- Alert the company that something needs to be fixed so that the problem doesn't happen again				0.65
<b>Pressure</b>	2.45	1.35	0.82	
- Demand that something be done about your situation				0.57
- Insist that the organization does something to fix your problem				0.50
<b>Venting</b>	2.01	1.31	0.85	
- Tell the company exactly how angry you are				0.68
- Tell the company that you are completely disgusted with what happened				0.69
- Label the problem in a negative manner (e.g., "this is the one of the worst experiences I have ever had")				0.63
<b>Ingratiation (<i>Hinting</i>)</b>	1.09	1.08	0.60	
- Ask questions as a way of getting the organization to realize that a problem has occurred without having to come out and say it				0.60
- Subtly bring up an issue so that the organization figures out that it made a mistake on its own				0.54
<b>Exchange (<i>Credibility statements</i>)</b>	1.44	1.33	0.84	
- Tell the company how loyal you are				0.77
- Tell the organization how often you eat/shop/spend money there				0.78
- Tell the organization how much money you spend with them				0.65
<b>Inspiration (<i>Statements of impact</i>)</b>	2.29	1.23	0.78	
- Explain to the company how the organizational failure impacted you				0.59
- Tell the company about how the problem inconvenienced you				0.55
- Tell the company about how their mistake caused you problems				0.60
<b>Threatening resignation</b>	1.41	1.41	0.90	
- Tell the company that if the problem continues, you will take your business elsewhere				0.69
- Tell the organization that they will lose you as a customer if they do not fix the problem				0.77
- Tell the organization that you will no longer shop here/eat here/use the company				0.72
<b>Coalition (<i>Negative word of mouth</i>)</b>	1.28	1.44	0.95	
- Threaten to tell others about what happened				0.75
- Tell the organization that you are going to let others know about your dissatisfaction				0.75

(Continued)

Table 2 Continued

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	<i>Loading</i>
- Mention that you are going to tell others about your negative experiences with the company				0.68
<b>Humor</b>	0.94	1.09	0.85	
- Use some type of humor when you express dissatisfaction				0.94
- Bring up your dissatisfaction in a joking manner				0.75
<b>Repetition</b>	1.36	1.32	0.85	
- Continue to remind the person of the problem until you see a change				0.67
- Repeat yourself until the problem gets fixed				0.58
- Pursue the problem multiple times until you get your way				0.81

### Discussion

The purpose of Study 2 was to develop a preliminary scale using consumers' perceptions of items drawn from a theoretical typology of complaint messages. In total, we dropped and/or combined seven factors from the original 20-factor measure. The result was 13 factors representing 10 categories of complaint messages. Despite having eliminated several categories from the original pool of complaint messages, our data indicated that the factors we retained essentially fit with our original categorization of complaints. However, though the items in this scale fit largely into the thematic categories we outlined, results from this study may reflect perceptions true only for the sample from which we collected our data. Therefore, the next step in our investigation was to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis using data collected from an independent sample to validate the structure of the proposed scale.

### Study 3

#### Methodology

*Participants and procedure.* After gaining IRB approval, we recruited a new sample of 157 participants from three sources that responded to an online survey. The first source was, again, Amazon's Mturk application, where we gathered responses from an additional 56 individuals (22 men, 34 women) aged 18 to 63 ( $M=35.63$ ,  $SD=11.80$ ) in return for payment of \$0.25. Using social network sites, a convenience sample of personal acquaintances was also recruited. These 41 individuals (13 men, 28 women), aged 19 to 62 ( $M=28.31$ ,  $SD=8.66$ ) were not paid for their participation. Finally, students from three upper division communication courses at a western university were also recruited to take part in this study. Sixty students (26 men, 34 women), aged 20 to 42 ( $M=22.93$ ,  $SD=4.30$ ), participated in return for minimal extra credit.

*Measures.* First, participants responded by reporting whether they had complained to an organization in the last six months. If they had, they were asked to

report the same qualitative data as in the previous study. Next, participants were asked to rate the severity of the organizational failure and then to respond to the complaint items developed in Study 2—these were, again, presented in random order. Finally, participants were asked to provide their perceptions of the effectiveness of their communication choices as indicated by the same conversational constraints measured in Study 2.

### Results

*Research question 1.* To determine whether the 13-factor model fit the data, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL 8.8 (Joreskog & Sorbom, 2007). Results indicated that the 13-factor model fit the data well ( $\chi^2 = 634.66$ ,  $df = 482$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ;  $NC = 1.32$ ;  $CFI = 0.97$ ;  $SRMR = 0.06$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.05$ ). All 35 items loaded significantly on their respective factors, ranging from 0.52 to 0.98 (average factor loading = 0.82). Having confirmed the factor structure across an independent sample taken from differing populations, we were confident in the structure of the measurement model subsequently called the Consumer Complaint Scale (CCS).

After confirming the factor structure of the CCS, we conducted a MANOVA to examine whether participants' use of various complaint messages differed based on their population of origin (e.g., Mturk versus social network sample versus student participants). Results suggested that there were no significant differences between groups regarding their use of complaint messages. This result was true when examining differences between participants in Study 3 ( $\lambda = 0.78$ ,  $F[26, 284] = 1.41$ ,  $p = 0.09$ ) and when examining the combined results of Studies 2 and 3 ( $\lambda = 0.89$ ,  $F[39, 1010.52] = 1.08$ ,  $p = 0.33$ ). Because participants' responses did not differ based on the population from which they were recruited or the time in which they were studied, we combined results for the CCS across Studies 2 and 3—these data were used to conduct all subsequent analyses. Results of a correlation analysis are available in Table 3.

*Research question 2.* To answer Research Question 2, we conducted a second-order factor analysis using the first-order correlation matrix. To conduct our analysis, we used principal-axis factoring with oblique rotation (direct oblimin). After examining the scree plot, we retained four factors accounting for 49.29% of the variance. Again, we used the 50/30 test to retain variables. The first factor represented *hostile communication* ( $M = 1.47$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) and included venting, threatening resignation, negative word of mouth, and credibility. The second factor represented *direct distributive communication* ( $M = 1.93$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) and included asking for refunds, repetition, statements of impact, and pressure. The third factor represented *providing information* ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) and included making suggestions and providing information so the problem can be fixed. Finally, the fourth factor represented *indirect communication* ( $M = 1.04$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) and included the use of humor and hinting (see Table 4).

*Research question 3.* To ascertain participants' perceptions of the effectiveness ( $M = 5.33$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ) of their complaint statements, we conducted multiple regression analyses using the 13 factors from the first-order factor analysis and the

**Table 3** Pearson Correlation Analysis

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Refunds	–														
2. Apologies	0.29**	–													
3. Suggestions	0.02	0.33**	–												
4. Provide information	–0.05	0.21**	0.47**	–											
5. Pressure	0.44**	0.30**	0.18**	0.16**	–										
6. Vent	0.18**	0.42**	0.35**	0.28**	0.37**	–									
7. Hint	0.12*	0.27**	0.15**	0.09	0.11*	0.08	–								
8. Credibility	0.22**	0.34**	0.28**	0.18**	0.18**	0.34**	0.21**	–							
9. Statements of impact	0.30**	0.29**	0.31**	0.27**	0.51**	0.52**	0.11*	0.30**	–						
10. Threatening resignation	0.23**	0.41**	0.30**	0.16**	0.31**	0.51**	0.13*	0.54**	0.34**	–					
11. Negative word of mouth	0.22**	0.53**	0.28**	0.20**	0.32**	0.56**	0.19**	0.41**	0.39**	0.67**	–				
12. Humor	0.09	0.31**	0.17**	0.03	0.12*	0.16**	0.35**	0.29**	0.12*	0.29**	0.34**	–			
13. Repetition	0.28**	0.41**	0.26**	0.16**	0.56**	0.40**	0.18**	0.33**	0.54**	0.42**	0.47**	0.29**	–		
14. Severity	0.14**	0.10	0.11*	0.14**	0.16**	0.38**	0.06	0.10	0.27**	0.20**	0.20**	–0.07	0.26**	–	
15. Effectiveness	0.06	0.02	–0.16**	–0.05	0.11*	–0.18**	–0.07	0.06	–0.04	–0.14**	0.16**	0.08	0.06	–0.11*	–

Note: \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed),  $N = 357$ .

**Table 4** Second-Order Factor Analysis

Factor	Hostile	Direct	Informative	Indirect
Threatening resignation	<b>0.89</b>	0.03	-0.06	-0.05
Negative word of mouth	<b>0.75</b>	-0.06	0.01	0.05
Venting	<b>0.51</b>	-0.22	0.24	-0.16
Credibility statements	<b>0.48</b>	-0.01	0.06	0.17
Pressure	-0.10	<b>-0.86</b>	0.04	-0.03
Statements of impact	0.11	<b>-0.57</b>	0.26	-0.10
Repetition	0.17	<b>-0.56</b>	0.08	0.13
Refund	0.05	<b>-0.51</b>	-0.19	0.07
Provide information so the problem can be fixed	-0.04	0.00	<b>0.72</b>	-0.01
Suggestion	0.11	0.02	<b>0.62</b>	0.12
Hinting	-0.09	-0.06	0.07	<b>0.59</b>
Humor	0.20	0.04	-0.04	<b>0.53</b>
Apology	0.33	-0.17	0.12	0.27

*Note.* Credibility was kept because its loading approached 0.50 and did not have a secondary loading above 0.17 (e.g., Goodboy, 2011). Correlations (two-tailed) between the variables are: Hostile – Direct ( $r=0.53$ ), Hostile – Informative ( $r=0.38$ ), Hostile – Indirect ( $r=0.32$ ), Direct – Informative ( $r=0.24$ ), Direct – Indirect ( $r=0.23$ ), Informative – Indirect ( $r=.16$ ). All correlations are significant at  $p < 0.01$ .

four factors from the second-order analysis as predictors. Results of the first regression analysis indicated that nine variables (four positive and five negative) independently predicted consumers' perceptions of effectiveness  $F(13, 342) = 5.68$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $Adj R^2 = 0.15$ . Results of the second analysis indicated that two variables (one positive, one negative) predicted consumers' perceptions of effectiveness  $F(4, 351) = 5.02$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $Adj R^2 = .04$ . Results are available in Table 5.

*Post hoc analysis.* Similar to other studies that have examined the frequencies of various communication behaviors (e.g., Berkos, Allen, Kearney, & Plax, 2001; Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011), we conducted one sample t-tests using a theoretical mean of 1 (to determine which messages were used less frequently than “barely similar to what I said”) and a theoretical mean of 2 (to determine which messages were used more frequently than “somewhat similar to what I said”) to ascertain the likelihood of consumers using various complaint messages. Results indicated that participants reported asking for apologies infrequently and reported using pressure, statements of impact, and providing information so the problem can be fixed frequently when they complained (see Table 6).

## General Discussion

When studying consumer complaints, most researchers have examined corporate reactions to customers without looking at what messages consumers utilize when complaining. The current investigation sought to reverse this trend by examining

**Table 5** Multiple Regression Analyses

Variable	B	SE	$\beta$
Apology	0.27	0.11	0.15*
Credibility	0.31	0.09	0.21**
Humor	0.27	0.10	0.15**
Pressure	0.30	0.10	0.20**
Suggestion	-0.26	0.09	-0.18**
Vent	-0.28	0.10	-0.18**
Threaten resignation	-0.22	0.11	-0.15*
Negative word of mouth	-0.28	0.11	-0.20*
Hint	-0.26	0.10	-0.15**
Refund	-0.01	0.08	-0.01
Provide information so the problem can be fixed	0.08	0.10	0.05
Repetition	0.10	0.10	0.08
Statements of impact	-0.04	0.11	-0.02
<i>Complaint type</i>			
Direct	0.37	0.12	0.19**
Hostile	-0.39	0.12	-0.21**
Informative	-0.18	0.10	-0.10
Indirect	0.10	0.12	0.05

Note. \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 6** Post Hoc Analyses: Differences in the Use of Complaint Messages

Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t1</i>	<i>t2</i>	#	%
Pressure	2.49	1.35	20.86**	<b>6.90**</b>	179	50.1
Provide information so the problem can be fixed	2.47	1.19	23.35**	<b>7.46**</b>	144	40.3
Statements of impact	2.31	1.25	19.76**	<b>4.70**</b>	130	36.4
Venting	2.00	1.31	14.42**	-0.03	109	30.5
Suggestion	1.60	1.34	8.40**	-5.68**	87	24.4
Refund	1.55	1.45	7.16**	-5.84**	82	23.0
Credibility statements	1.40	1.35	5.62**	-8.40**	67	18.8
Threatening resignation	1.33	1.39	4.48**	-9.15**	67	18.8
Repetition	1.37	1.37	5.10**	-8.72**	64	17.9
Negative word of mouth	1.16	1.41	2.10*	-11.28**	58	16.2
Hinting	1.16	1.13	2.61*	-14.18**	34	9.5
Apology	0.78	1.11	-3.77**	-20.78**	29	8.1
Humor	0.93	1.10	-1.23	-18.46**	27	7.6

Note: *t1* = versus test value of 1, *t2* = versus test value of 2. \* =  $p < 0.05$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$  (two tailed). Items in bold (*t1*) represent factors participants report using less frequently than a theoretical mean of 1. Items in bold (*t2*) represent factors participants report using more frequently than a theoretical mean of 2. Additionally, # and % indicate the quantity and percentage of responses with means at or above 3 (representing a response of "mostly similar to what I said").

the content of consumer complaints to determine the types of messages customers communicate to organizations when attempting to influence their outcomes following an organizational failure. On the whole, our results indicated that, at least at the theoretical level, there is considerable overlap between organizational influence, dissent, and consumer complaining strategies. Ultimately, these results suggest that individuals have a core repository of influence strategies that change very little between various organizational contexts.

As one might assume however, the specific tactics people used to gain compliance differed depending on the context. Perhaps the biggest difference was related to the tactic of pressure, which, according to Garner (2009), was used the least frequently when dissenting in organizations. The opposite was true in the current study; consumers used this type of message most often when complaining. This result suggests that customers who experience dissatisfaction, and who are willing to communicate their feelings to organizations, are not afraid to insist that something be done to remedy their situations. It is our contention that the difference between consumers' and employees' willingness to use pressure may have occurred for two reasons. First, Garner's operationalization of pressure had less to do with insistence and more to do with sabotaging work and intimidating others. Considering this behavior would be inappropriate in most adult interactions, it is unsurprising that participants rarely mentioned engaging in this behavior at work. Second, it may be that people within organizations tend not to dissent in this manner because of the negative repercussions they potentially face for doing so. Because employees who dissent in organizations may be punished for doing so, they are likely to be strategic when they dissent to their superiors (Kassing, 2008). However, the same may not be true when consumers complain to companies. That is, because companies' ability to punish customers may not exist in the same way that the potential for punishment exists in employer-employee relationships, patrons may be more likely to use pressure when they communicate discontent to the organizations that have failed them.

Despite this difference, there were some similarities in the messages people used when dissenting and complaining. For example, in Garner's (2009) study, organizational dissent most frequently occurred in the form of solution presentation, direct factual appeals, inspiration, and coalitions. Similarly, when complaining to organizations, the current study revealed that consumers frequently reported providing information so the problem could be fixed and communicating statements of impact. The idea of providing information is at the heart of these messages and indicates the importance of articulating what happened to cause dissatisfaction for both employees and consumers. From these results, we may conclude that people who are discontent with organizations, both as employees and as customers, are likely to provide information about a problem and to report the negative effects of the problem to influence change in a rational fashion. As far as customer relationships are concerned however, this information does not mean that organizations need to provide refunds when consumers complain. In fact, only about a quarter of our participants reported asking for compensation compared to the 40% who wanted to provide information to fix the problem (see Table 6). That said, readers may conclude that, contrary to what

managers may think (e.g., Resnik & Harmon, 1983), people who complain might not be looking for a free ride. Instead, they may be looking to get what they paid for and are likely to let companies know what they need to do to ensure high quality customer service.

On the other hand, consumers may not complain simply to fix their situations. Underneath the attempts to rectify organizational shortcomings may be their desire to assert themselves in their relationships with organizations. Previous investigations of consumer complaining support this conclusion and have claimed that one of the reasons consumers complain to companies is to exercise personal control by making an impact on the organizations that failed them (e.g., Bolkan, Goodboy, & Daly, 2010). This exercise of control may promote perceptions of procedural justice (e.g., Lind, Kanfer, & Early, 1990) that, in turn, promote the fulfillment of consumers' personal needs (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000). Importantly, if one of the reasons people complain is to fulfill their personal needs, it may be the case that companies can react to complaints appropriately by promoting the perception of a balanced relationship (e.g., Ford, 2003), which may be accomplished by allowing customers to influence their operations (Bolkan et al., 2010). That said, from this information, we may conclude that though the transactions between organizations and customers may be business-like in nature, companies would be wise to consider people's personal needs when interacting with consumers following organizational failures.

As readers may have noticed, when consumers decided to communicate their dissatisfaction, many used several messages to complain. In fact, from the data available in Table 6, it seems that, on average, participants used a total of three messages when they communicated their dissatisfaction. These results should make it clear that there are a variety of potential conversations that can be created using the messages present in our measure. That said, various research projects have used second-order factor analysis to ascertain general patterns in their data (e.g., Cattell & Mead, 2008), and we sought to do the same in the current study as a way to determine if global complaint strategies existed. In fact, our results indicated that it may be appropriate to classify complaint messages into larger categories represented by hostile, direct, informative, and indirect communication.

First, hostility encompassed the notions of communicating negative emotions and threatening the withdrawal of patronage while also threatening to advertise consumers' negative experiences. Essentially, this grouping of complaint messages reflects an angry customer who is upset and willing to communicate his or her discontent in a threatening manner. This complaint style is similar to Richins' (1983) conceptualization of aggressive complainers who are not afraid of telling off customer service representatives. Interestingly, credibility statements loaded on this factor as well. In our opinion, this result indicates that when people make threats, they know it is important to support their warnings by making known the importance of their loyalty. That is to say, it seems consumers know that threats of withdrawal may not be taken seriously if companies do not know what they stand to lose when their customers defect.

An examination of negative predictors of effectiveness highlights the fact that consumers largely perceived that their complaints were ineffective when they were hostile.

This might be the case because hostile communication may trigger defensive reactions from organizations rather than compliance (Krapfel, 1985). Of course, if hostile communication does not lead to compliance, one may wonder why people would choose to communicate in this manner. This might be the case because people who complain may be so overwhelmed with emotion that they fail to filter their responses. If people experience extreme dissatisfaction, depending on their disposition, they may be unable to help themselves when reporting their grievances to organizations (Richins, 1983). Alternatively, dissatisfied customers may not always have compliance as one of their primary goals when complaining; after experiencing organizational dissatisfaction, some consumers simply want to vent their anger. If this is true, the response from organizations may not be of any significance to the people registering their complaints.

The second major category of complaining was direct complaints. People using these complaints asked for compensation directly and used stories of how companies caused harm as a way of justifying requests. Moreover, people using these complaints used pressure and repetition as a way to insist that something be done to rectify customers' situations. This type of message parallels Richins' (1983) conceptualization of assertive complainers who are not afraid to stand up for themselves. Generally speaking, participants perceived direct communication to be effective in gaining compliance from organizations. This conclusion has theoretical support from previous research that has proposed consumers whose "principal objective is economic redress may initiate the complaint in a factual, calm manner" (Krapfel, 1985, p. 348). However, considering direct communication is perceived to be effective, it seems odd that consumers do not use these messages more often when they complain. One explanation for this phenomenon may be that consumers simply do not have enough experience complaining. If this is the case, consumers may not be familiar with the results of their communication and therefore may not change their behaviors strategically. Alternatively, it may simply be that consumers are not mindful of their interactions in complaint situations. That is to say, consumers may simply voice their discontent without thinking about how the messages they send influence the outcomes they might expect.

Finally, the results of our analysis indicated that people may also be either informative or indirect when they make complaints. Though these categories of complaining were not significant predictors of perceived effectiveness, informative communication approached significance ( $p = 0.07$ ). Still, these results seem to suggest that people think providing information to companies does little to change their outcomes. This is bad news for companies, considering the probability that consumers voice their complaints increases as organizations are perceived to be more receptive to customer input (Singh & Wilkes, 1996). Ultimately, informative and indirect complaints may not be perceived as being particularly effective by consumers because these types of complaint tactics do not highlight the legitimacy of consumers' dissatisfaction and may not offer obvious solutions to the problems—two factors that have previously been found to influence managers' likelihood of satisfying consumers' requests (Resnik & Harmon, 1983).

In summary, given the choice of messages to communicate to companies once people have experienced organizational failures, our advice would be for individuals

to be upfront with their requests and professional in their delivery. Specifically, we would recommend that after experiencing dissatisfaction, people do their best to withhold aggressive and threatening communication and instead provide rational arguments that highlight the negative experience and articulate its impact while insisting that something be done to rectify the situation. Moreover, we suggest that it may be wise to stay in a positive mood and to alert companies to the importance of consumers' relationships with the offending organizations. Nonetheless, it is important that we mention that this advice may only be pertinent to people who wish to have their situations rectified. For people who simply want to vent their feelings, adopting a hostile communication style may lead to cathartic release.

### Limitations and Future Directions

As with any study, the current investigation has its limitations. First, we gathered information regarding complaint styles (Study 1) from participants who wrote physical letters. Although we were looking for instances of complaining that matched previously articulated typologies, it could be the case that asking for complaints in the form of letters to organizations (as opposed to simply asking for complaints) influenced the messages we gathered.

Another limitation of this study relates to our methodological choices. Specifically, we used a convenience sample of participants. Although previous research has demonstrated that the Mturk application solicits participation from a demographically diverse participant pool (Buhrmester et al., 2011), we did not independently verify that our sample was, indeed, representative of any larger population. The same is true for participants in Study 3. Though we tried to gather information from different populations, each of them was, ultimately, a convenience sample. Moreover, another methodological limitation of the current study is that we asked participants to recall a complaint episode. Because we did not examine the primary interactions between participants and organizations, it could be the case that our results may be skewed due to selective retention and other potential biases. Future researchers may consider examining actual complaint episodes from a verifiably representative sample to determine if the choices consumers make regarding their communication with organizations are similar to what we found in the current study.

Additionally, the discussion of effectiveness may not be entirely appropriate for an investigation regarding consumer complaints. For example, according to Krapfel (1985), "when consumers feel they have been wronged, either by a product failure or by a marketing representative's treatment, their dominant response to that perceived injury may be driven by hurt and anger, even more so than the desire to made economically whole" (p. 347). If this is true, consumers may be more likely to use "threatening appeals and aggressive complaint styles" (p. 347) as a way to bolster their sense of self-worth. This goal is different than the desire to obtain a refund, which, according to Krapfel, "should motivate a complaint appeal that is factual, reasonable, and forthright" (p. 347). Because people may choose their complaint styles for differing reasons, future researchers may consider investigating if people

are able to meet their goals by complaining instead of simply investigating the effectiveness of their complaints in producing compliance.

Finally, this study examined consumer complaining from the standpoint of customers' perceptions of effectiveness. Because the outcome of complaining depends on the interactions between customers and their respective organizations, it may be important to examine how the messages consumers communicate when they complain influence organizational perceptions of effectiveness. Although consumers may be adequate judges of their outcomes, it may be useful to study corporate reactions to complaint messages from this alternative perspective.

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