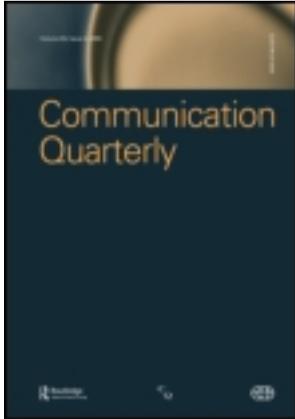


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Consumer Complaining Behavior, Imagined Interactions, and Communication Traits: Cognitive Processing Following an Organizational Failure

San Bolkan & Alan K. Goodboy

This study examined the use of imagined interactions following the violation of consumers' expectations operationalized as organizational failures. Communication-based personality traits were also examined with respect to consumer complaining behavior and the use of imagined interactions. Participants were 235 people exposed to a hypothetical organizational failure involving violated expectations for a hotel reservation. The results indicate that people do use imagined interactions to help process organizational failures and that they are more likely to do so for rehearsal and self-awareness functions than for cathartic purposes. Moreover, several communication-based personality traits (e.g., argumentativeness, blurtatiousness, verbal aggressiveness, and communication apprehension) are significantly associated with imagined interactions and measures of complaining behavior.

Keywords: Communication Traits; Consumer Complaining; Imagined Interactions

Customer satisfaction and consumer loyalty are important goals for organizations that provide services and products to the public. The attainment of these goals can differentiate successful companies from unsuccessful ones. In fact, according to Reichheld and Sasser (1990), it is customer loyalty that explains the difference in

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profitability among organizations. Customer satisfaction is important to the bottom line as well. Both sales growth and market share have been positively linked to this variable (Morgan & Rego, 2006). Moreover, high levels of customer satisfaction have been associated with word-of-mouth behaviors, customer spending, and consumer retention (Keiningham, Aksoy, Cooil, & Andreassen, 2008).

Unfortunately, not all organizations keep customers satisfied all the time. In reality, it is not uncommon for businesses to lose 15% to 20% of their customers per year (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Despite the benefits of conducting business in a way that would satisfy their customers, organizations fail consumers in many ways. For example, companies may supply faulty goods, customers may be stuck with lengthy waiting times, promises to consumers may not be kept, there may be poor staff attitude, and company procedures may be inappropriate or poorly applied (Bailey, 1994). When things go wrong, consumers can become dissatisfied. Subsequently, they have a variety of options. Some of these options include making complaints to friends and family, involving a third party, terminating the relationship with the organization altogether, or complaining to the offending organization (Oh, 2004). Of interest in this study was the act of complaining.

Although scholars have examined a variety of issues as they pertain to organizational complaints, there is room for further study regarding the cognitive processes related to dissatisfaction and communication-based personality traits as they relate to complaining behavior. Therefore, the purpose of this investigation was to explore the cognitive processes (in the form of imagined interactions) people use after experiencing organizational failures and to examine how communication-based personality traits relate to these cognitive processes, specifically, and to consumer complaining, in general.

Expectancy Violations

The theoretical framework for the study is expectancy violations theory (EVT), which posits that patterns in human interaction lead to expectations for behavior (Burgoon, 1978). These expectations can be cognitive, affective, or behavioral and stem from either global norms or the known behavior of individuals (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Although the adherence to standards or ideals tends to lead to positive judgments, expectations are often violated in human interaction episodes. From the perspective of EVT, deviations from expected behavior lead to cognitive arousal and subsequent evaluations of the interactant. This induces communicators to focus their attention on the source of the arousal and to make an interpretation of the irregular behavior (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). By and large, positive violations of expectations lead to positive outcomes. Positive violations can originate from positive interpretations (based on the valence of the source) or from behaviors that have inherent positive value (see Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Negative violations of expectations stem from either negatively interpreted behaviors or substandard behaviors and lead to negative outcomes.

A notion similar to EVT has been advanced in the consumer satisfaction literature—that is, research has revealed a relationship between consumer satisfaction

and the “discrepancy between expectations and actual results” (Gilly & Gelb, 1982, p. 323). Several studies support this assertion. For example, Oliver (1981) suggested that consumer satisfaction is a function of “the prepurchase expectation level and the degree to which the product or service performance deviates from that level” (p. 28). Similar to Burgoon’s (1978) second proposition for EVT, Oliver suggested that performance that exceeds expectation levels leads to satisfaction, whereas performance that falls short of expectation levels leads to dissatisfaction. In addition, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1994) concluded that discrepancies between expectations and consumers’ perceptions of organizational performance are strongly related to service quality. The researchers stated that customer assessments of organizational offerings “invariably occur relative to some norm” (Parasuraman et al., 1994, p. 112).

Because consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction are often defined through a comparison to a norm or standard, it is appropriate to interpret organizational failures as inherent expectancy violations. As such, the violations of expectations in business-oriented relationships, operationalized as organizational failures, may lead to reactions that are similar to the reactions people have in respect to violations of expectations in interpersonal relationships. According to EVT, “Deviations are assumed to activate the observer’s interest or attention and to arouse adaptive or defense mechanisms to cope with the deviation” (Burgoon, 1978, p. 133). If the same is true following organizational failures, it may be the case that people who experience violations of expectations regarding an organization’s products or services experience heightened arousal that triggers certain cognitive processes. In this study, we examine (a) whether these processes include imagined interactions, (b) whether the use of imagined interactions following an organizational failure are influenced by communication traits, and (c) the relationship between communication traits and consumer complaining behavior.

Imagined Interactions

Imagined interactions are “mental interactions we have with others who are not present” (Zagacki, Edwards, & Honeycutt, 1992, p. 60) and are “a type of self-controlled daydream in which individuals envision themselves in the act of discouraging with others” (Allen & Berkos, 2005–2006, p. 307). According to Allen and Berkos, imagined interactions are a symbolic process people use for interpreting events on the basis of likely or possible communication episodes. In essence, imagined interactions are mental representations of conversations (Edwards, Honeycutt, & Zagacki, 1988) that “may precede, follow, or even help constitute the decision making process” (Allen, 1990, p. 116). Generally, imagined interactions function as rehearsal for anticipated interaction (rehearsal), to increase understanding of the self and others (self-awareness), and as a cathartic vehicle for relieving tension (catharsis; Zagacki et al., 1992).

Imagined interactions take place in a variety of interpersonal settings. These settings include romantic relationships, friendships, and family relationships (Allen & Berkos, 2005–2006; Edwards et al., 1988). Imagined interactions also occur in more

professional settings as well. These professional settings include work-related contexts (Allen & Berkos, 2005–2006; Edwards et al., 1988), educational contexts (Berkos, Allen, Kearney, & Plax, 2001), and in health care facilities (Gotcher & Edwards, 1990). Although a variety of topics are available when people use imagined interactions, one of the most common is conflict in relationships. In fact, according to Allen and Berkos, it appears as a theme in up to 41% of such interactions.

Considering imagined interactions take place in business settings and often involve conflict, it may be the case that people construct them in response to organizational failures and complaints. Because a significant proportion of complaints arise in response to a failure to meet consumer expectations (Bennett, 1997) and because previous research has shown that imagined interactions serve as processing and coping mechanisms in cases involving the violations of norms (Berkos et al., 2001), one can reasonably assume that people create imagined interactions in the face of organizational failures. Hence, we posed the first hypothesis:

H1: Participants will report using imagined interactions as a reaction to organizational violations of their expectations.

Moreover, because scholars assert that imagined interactions function for a variety of reasons (i.e., rehearsal, self-awareness, and catharsis), we posed the following research question:

RQ1: Are participants most likely to use imagined interactions for rehearsal, self-awareness, or catharsis when faced with organizational violations of their expectations?

Communication Traits

Complaining about organizational failures is, fundamentally, an issue of communication. Complaining to an organization typically involves people communicating something negative regarding a product or service to the firm manufacturing or marketing the product or providing the service (Jacoby & Jaccard, 1981). Moreover, it has been espoused that imagined interactions may be influenced by personal characteristics (Allen, 1990; Edwards et al., 1988). Consequently, another purpose of the study was to more specifically determine how various communication-based traits are associated with complaining behavior and people's use of imagined interactions.

To date, research examining personality traits and complaining behaviors has revealed various relationships. For example, Huang and Chang (2008) reported that consumers with Type A personalities (characterized by competitiveness, impatience, and aggression) are more likely to complain and are more likely to engage in aggressive forms of complaining than are consumers with Type B personalities. Huang and Chang also reported that consumers who had an internal locus of control were more

likely to complain and had higher expectations for service recovery than consumers who had an external locus of control.

Other personality characteristics may influence complaint-related behavior as well. For instance, people high in guilt or low in self-esteem are less likely to complain and are more likely to simply stop doing business with an offending supplier (Bennett, 1997), people who are susceptible to social influence are more likely to complain (Jones, McCleary, & Lepisto 2002), and customers who score high on measures of neuroticism are less likely to repurchase from organizations and are also less likely to complain to them following a failure (Mooradian & Olver, 1997). Extraversion and conscientiousness also reportedly influence complaining. Specifically, people who score high in measures of extroversion and conscientiousness have a higher propensity to complain to offending organizations than people who score low on these measures (Harris & Mowen, 2001).

The notion that communication behavior relates to personality has support in prior research (e.g., Beatty & McCroskey, 1998) and offers a potentially fruitful domain for scholars interested in consumer complaining behavior. Because consumer complaining is an inherent communication process, it seems likely that communication-based personality characteristics have the potential to influence this behavior. However, the association between communication-based traits and complaining behavior has yet to be studied. Of interest in this study were the communication-based personality traits of argumentativeness, blurtatiousness, verbal aggression, and communication apprehension.

Argumentativeness reflects a person's predisposition to advocate his or her position and attack those of others (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Individuals who score high in argumentativeness perceive arguments as challenging and exciting, and have a tendency to approach arguments. In initial studies, Rancer (1979, as cited by Infante & Rancer, 1982) discovered that a person's level of argumentativeness is predictive of the perceived probability of success in an argument and the perceived importance of success of an argument. Both of these constructs have been linked to a person's propensity to complain (Granbois, Summers, & Frazier, 1977; Oh, 2004; Richins, 1983). Moreover, recent research has revealed that people who score high in argumentativeness are less likely to censor themselves when they consider expressing an opinion that is contrary to that of their audience (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005). In light of these findings, we posed the following hypothesis:

H2: Trait argumentativeness is positively related to a person's attitude toward complaining, propensity to complain, and likelihood of complaining.

In addition to *H2*, we examined the relationship between argumentativeness and imagined interactions in a scenario featuring an organizational failure. In doing so, we posited the following research question:

RQ2: How is argumentativeness related to imagined interactions in scenarios involving organizational violations of expectations?

Blirtatiousness refers to “the extent to which people respond to others quickly and effusively” (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001, p. 1160), and has been associated with self-perceived self-confidence, assertiveness, extraversion, and global self-esteem. According to Swann and Rentfrow, high blirter tend to express themselves when thoughts enter their minds, whereas low blirter are typically slower to respond to others. In two of their initial studies on the topic, Swann and Rentfrow determined that people high in blirtatiousness were more likely to say something to an obnoxious confederate than people low in blirtatiousness. The authors suggested that because of their lack of social inhibition and their speed of responding, high blirter are more likely to confront a frustrating person, whereas low blirter are likely to say nothing. Hence, we posed the following hypothesis:

H3: Blirtatiousness is positively related to a person’s attitude toward complaining, propensity to complain, and likelihood of complaining.

Moreover, because people high in blirtatiousness tend to respond quickly without processing information, the following hypothesis was posed:

H4: Blirtatiousness is negatively related to the likelihood of one’s constructing imagined interactions in situations involving organizational violations of consumer expectations.

Verbal aggressiveness refers to a person’s predisposition to “attack the self-concepts of other people instead of, or in addition to, their positions on topics of communication” (Infante & Wigley, 1986, p. 61). Verbal aggression has been negatively and significantly associated with a non-confrontational style of conflict management and positively associated with a controlling strategy (Rogan & La France, 2003). Such findings suggest that, rather than avoid conflict, people high in verbal aggressiveness may be more likely to confront others and may be more likely to argue persistently for their positions. Hence, we posed the following hypothesis:

H5: Verbal aggressiveness is positively related to a person’s attitude toward complaining, propensity to complain, and likelihood of complaining.

In addition, we sought to ascertain how trait verbal aggressiveness relates to imagined interactions. To that end, we posed the following research question:

RQ3: How is verbal aggressiveness related to imagined interactions in scenarios involving organizational violations of consumer expectations?

Communication apprehension refers to a person’s anxiety as related to either actual or anticipated communication with others (McCroskey, 1977). People high in communication apprehension are more likely to censor themselves by withholding their true feelings from an audience whose members presumably disagree with them

(Hayes et al., 2005). Such individuals are also likely to be accommodators or avoiders in respect to their conflict styles (Schockley-Zalabak & Morley, 1984) and are more apt to be introverted, less likely to think of themselves as competent communicators, and generally less willing to communicate (MacIntyre, 1994; Sallinen-Kuparinen, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1991). These findings led to the following prediction:

H6: Communication apprehension is negatively related to a person's attitude toward complaining, propensity to complain, and likelihood of complaining.

Finally, we examined the relationship between communication apprehension and imagined interactions. The public-speaking dimension of communication apprehension has shown a relationship to the catharsis function of imagined interactions (Honeycutt, Choi, & DeBerry, 2009). However, the relationship is still not fully understood. Despite that, and given the definition of communication apprehension as the fear of real or *anticipated* communication, one may assume that people high in communication apprehension tend not to use imagined interactions for the rehearsal or self-awareness functions either. Our specific hypothesis was as follows:

H7: Communication apprehension is negatively related to the use of imagined interactions.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited from several upper-level and lower-level communication classes at a midsized Eastern university, and received extra credit in return for their participation. Because researchers posit that the direction of a violation and its magnitude of deviation dictate its valence and the outcomes (e.g., Burgoon, 1978; Burgoon & Hale, 1988), we created four scenarios to manipulate the level of discrepancy from expectations (operationalized as the severity of an organizational failure and the likelihood for redress) to assess their differential impact on the participants' use of imagined interactions. We expected that the more severe the organizational failure and the less likely the organization was to provide redress, the more the participants would report using imagined interactions to cope with the failure. Participants who agreed to take part in the survey read a scenario describing an organizational failure that was either high or low in severity and high or low in likelihood for redress (see the Appendix), and then responded to a questionnaire. The sample ($N = 235$) consisted of 83 men (35%) and 152 women; ages ranged from 18 to 29 ($M = 19.53$, $Mdn = 19.00$, $SD = 1.60$).

Measures

The measure of *imagined interactions* consisted of 27 items adapted from Berkos et al. (2001). Nine of the items related to the rehearsal function of imagined interactions,

nine items to the self-awareness function, and nine items to the catharsis function. Sample items include, “In order to prepare what I was going to say to someone in the offending organization, I would use imagined interactions to plan what I would say” (rehearsal), “Having imagined interactions with someone from the offending organization would go a long way toward understanding how I should (or should not) communicate with him/her” (self-awareness), and “I would feel better if I could imagine an interaction where I told someone from the offending organization what I really thought about the failure” (catharsis). Responses could range from 7 (*very likely*) to 1 (*very unlikely*). Although Berkos et al. reported that the items constituted a one-dimensional scale, our data suggested the existence of three distinct factors (see the Results section).

Similar to Berkos et al. (2001), we also included a single-item measure tapping participants’ expressed likelihood of using imagined interactions in the scenario presented to them. Participants were asked, “How likely would you be to use imagined interactions if you were involved in an organizational failure like the one described in this project?” Responses could range from 7 (*very likely*) to 1 (*very unlikely*) ($M = 4.87$, $Mdn = 5.00$, $SD = 1.54$).

The index of *argumentativeness* was the 20-item Argumentativeness Scale (Infante & Rancer, 1982). Ten items related to a person’s tendency to approach argumentative situations, and 10 items to his or her tendency to avoid arguments. Responses could range from 5 (*almost always true*) to 1 (*never true*). One’s argumentativeness score was the difference between the total for the 10 avoid items and the 10 approach items. Cronbach’s alpha was .86 for the approach items and .81 for the avoid items ($M = -0.06$, $Mdn = -0.10$, $SD = 1.12$).

The eight-item Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Responsiveness Test (BLIRT; Swann & Rentfrow, 2001) served as the measure of *blirtatiousness*. People who score high on the BLIRT are more likely to express themselves as soon as a thought enters their minds than are people who score low. Responses could range from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Cronbach’s alpha was .83 ($M = 2.93$, $Mdn = 2.88$, $SD = 0.70$).

Verbal aggressiveness was measured using the 20-item Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Items in this index ask participants to respond to such statements as, “When individuals are very stubborn, I use insults to soften the stubbornness,” and “When individuals insult me, I get a lot of pleasure really telling them off.” Responses could range from 5 (*almost always true*) to 1 (*never true*). Cronbach’s alpha was .83 ($M = 2.49$, $Mdn = 2.45$, $SD = 0.54$).

The measure of *communication apprehension* was McCroskey’s (1982) Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA–24). The PRCA has a total of 24 statements that pertain to apprehension in a variety of contexts, including public speaking, dyadic interaction, and group communication. Responses to the statements could range from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Cronbach’s alpha was .95 ($M = 66.11$, $Mdn = 65.00$, $SD = 17.16$).

The measure of *attitude toward complaining* was a four-item scale taken from Bodey and Grace (2007). This measure taps one’s overall attitude regarding

complaining as reflected in responses to such items as, "I admire people who complain to service providers when they are unhappy," and "Overall, I think that people should complain when they are unhappy with the service they are getting." Responses could range from 7 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Cronbach's alpha for the scale in this study was .67 ($M=4.21$, $Mdn=4.25$, $SD=0.91$); the alpha reliability of this scale has been previously reported at .76 (Bodey & Grace, 2007).

The measure of a person's *propensity to complain* consisted of seven items taken from Bodey and Grace's (2007) inventory that ostensibly captures one's inclination to complain to an organization. Respondents either agreed or disagreed with statements such as, "If there is a service failure, I will complain to the company," and "I do not hesitate to complain if I think it is warranted to do so." Responses could range from 7 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). The alpha reliability of the scale in this study was .77 ($M=4.36$, $Mdn=4.29$, $SD=0.99$).

Likelihood of complaining was assessed using a single-item measure. After being exposed to a scenario, participants were asked, "How likely would you be to complain to an organization if you were involved in a situation like the one described in this project?" Responses could range from 7 (*very likely*) to 1 (*very unlikely*) ($M=5.64$, $Mdn=6.00$, $SD=1.37$).

Results

Manipulation Check

After reading their respective scenarios, the participants responded to the following statement: "I would consider this organizational failure to be . . ." Responses could range from 10 (*very severe*) to 1 (*not at all severe*). The participants also responded to the following question: "How willing do you think the hotel would be to provide a remedy for this situation?" Responses could range from 10 (*very willing*) to 1 (*not at all willing*).

We conducted independent-samples *t*-tests to determine whether differences between participants' perceptions of severity and likelihood of redress in the high and low conditions were significant. The results indicated that our manipulation for severity was successful, $t(233)=4.82$, $p=.01$. Participants in the high severity condition perceived the organizational failure to be more severe ($M=7.06$, $SD=1.91$) than did those in the low severity condition ($M=5.85$, $SD=1.93$). The results also indicated that our manipulation for likelihood of redress was successful, $t(233)=10.74$, $p=.01$. Participants in the high likelihood of redress condition perceived the organization in question to be more likely to provide redress ($M=7.56$, $SD=1.90$) than did participants in the low likelihood condition ($M=4.74$, $SD=2.13$).

We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance to determine whether the participants were more or less likely to report using imagined interactions for any particular reason (e.g., rehearsal, self-awareness, or catharsis) as a function of the experimental conditions to which they were assigned (i.e., high severity vs. low severity and high likelihood of redress vs. low likelihood of redress). Contrary to

our predictions, the reported use of imagined interactions did not differ either for the severity of the failure (Wilks's $\lambda = 1.00$), $F(4, 228) = 0.25$, $p = .91$; or for the likelihood of redress following the failure (Wilks's $\lambda = 0.99$), $F(4, 228) = 0.80$, $p = .52$. Because the participants' use of imagined interactions did not differ on the basis of the two independent variables, we tested our hypotheses and research questions without reference to the experimental conditions.

Factor Analysis

We conducted an exploratory factor analysis (principal axis factoring) to determine the dimensional structure of the 27 items relating to the various categories of imagined interactions. We used direct oblimin rotation to allow for correlation between factors, and we suppressed loadings $< .40$. Three factors with eigenvalues above 1.0 emerged (and accounted for 52.55% of the variance). Item nine for both self-awareness and catharsis did not load on any factor at $.40$ or higher and were, therefore, excluded from our analysis.

*One-Sample *t*-tests*

H1 predicted that participants would report using imagined interactions to process organizational failures. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a one-sample *t* test involving a comparison of participants' scores for the 25-item imagined interaction scale, with a theoretical mean of four. The scores were significantly different from the theoretical mean, $t(234) = 9.42$, $p < .01$, which provided support for the hypothesis.

Functions of Imagined Interactions

In reference to *RQ1*, we conducted a within-subjects analysis of variance to examine whether participants were most likely to use imagined interactions for rehearsal ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.18$), self-awareness ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.10$), or catharsis ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.23$) following an organizational failure. Our results revealed a significant *F* ratio, $F(2, 468) = 14.98$, $p < .01$. *Post hoc* analyses using the Bonferroni adjustment indicated that participants were equally likely to use imagined interactions for the rehearsal and self-awareness functions following an organizational failure ($p = .16$), but were less likely to do so for the catharsis function as compared to both the rehearsal function ($p < .01$) and the self-awareness function ($p < .01$).

Correlation Analyses

Testing our remaining hypotheses and answering our research questions entailed correlation analyses. The results appear in Table 1.

Our data partially support *H2*. Whereas argumentativeness related positively to attitudes toward complaining and propensity to complain, it did not significantly correlate with likelihood of complaining.

Table 1 Intercorrelations Between Variables

Variable	Likelihood of Complaining	Rehearsal	Awareness	Catharsis	Using Imagined Interactions	Argumentativeness	Blurtiousness	Aggressiveness	Attitude Toward Complaining	Propensity to Complain
Rehearsal	-.04									
Awareness	-.03	.67**								
Catharsis	-.04	.55**	.59**							
Using imagined interactions	-.03	.69**	.61**	.58**						
Argumentativeness	.06	-.09	-.15*	-.06	-.10					
Blurtiousness	.17**	-.32**	-.34**	-.27**	-.27**	.44**				
Aggressiveness	.04	-.12*	-.11*	-.11*	-.11***	.44**	.20**			
Attitude toward complaining	.33**	-.05	-.12*	-.02	-.01	.25**	.20**	.10		
Propensity to complain	.50**	-.08	-.17**	-.06	-.01	.26**	.37**	.14*	.60**	
PRCA	-.14*	.13*	.16**	.04	.08	-.35**	-.46**	.04	-.07	-.20**

Note. PRCA = Personal Report of Communication Apprehension.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p = .051$ (one-tailed).

RQ2 concerned the relationship between argumentativeness and imagined interactions. Argumentativeness negatively and significantly correlated with the function of self-awareness in imagined interactions.

In support of *H3* and *H4*, blurtatiousness was positively and significantly related to attitude toward complaining, propensity to complain, and likelihood of complaining, as well as negatively and significantly to all three functions of imagined interactions and the overall likelihood of using imagined interactions.

In partial support of *H5*, verbal aggressiveness positively and significantly correlated with propensity to complain. RQ3 addressed the relationship between verbal aggressiveness and imagined interactions. Verbal aggressiveness was negatively and significantly associated with all three functions of imagined interactions.

H6 was partially supported. Communication apprehension was negatively and significantly related to propensity to complain and the likelihood of complaining. Counter to *H7*, communication apprehension positively and significantly related to the rehearsal and awareness functions of imagined interactions.

Discussion

Similar to Berkos et al. (2001), our data suggest that when organizations violate expectations and fail consumers, people are likely to use imagined interactions to cope with and process the failure. The results from our study demonstrate that people do use imagined interactions following organizational failures and that they tend to use them similarly, regardless of the severity of the organization's failure or the likelihood of redress. In addition, the results suggest that when people use imagined interactions following organizational failures, they are less likely to do so for cathartic reasons when compared to using imagined interactions to rehearse for a potential conversation or to build self-awareness about the situation. Although imagined interactions have been identified in interpersonal relationships, this is the first study to identify the use of imagined interactions as a coping mechanism following organizational failures. Business managers reading this study should take heed of these findings, as they suggest that organizational failure episodes may not be quickly forgotten by upset consumers. Instead, the results of our study suggest that when organizations fail to live up to consumers' expectations, customers tend to think about the complaining process and reflect on the situation to help them cope with the problems they are facing.

Previous research has called for more detailed examinations of the connections between personality and imagined interactions to extend our understanding of the phenomenon (Allen, 1990). Our study sought to do just that, and our results suggest that the use of imagined interactions correlates with a range of personality characteristics in a variety of ways. Two noteworthy associations involved blurtatiousness and verbal aggressiveness. The data in our study revealed that people who tend to speak without thinking were not very likely to use imagined interactions to help them cope with an organizational failure. This result makes sense in light of the definition of blurtatious people as individuals who tend to express themselves as soon as thoughts enter their minds (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). If a person is not likely to pause before

speaking, there may not be much time for him or her to reflect on a potential conversation using imagined interactions. Moreover, people who are verbally aggressive were also not very likely to use imagined interactions following an organizational failure. This, too, makes sense considering verbally aggressive people may not take the time to think through their options when deciding whether to confront others. This conclusion is supported by the positive and significant correlation between the two personality constructs.

Argumentativeness correlated negatively with the use of imagined interactions in our study—specifically, with the function of self-awareness. This result indicates that people who tend to attack the positions of others may not necessarily need to use imagined interactions to understand their own position on an argument. This notion is supported by research on a person's willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, 1994), which suggests that the more confident a person is in their communication skill, the more willing they are to initiate communication with others. It could be the case that people who score high on trait argumentativeness are confident in their positions and do not think about their situations when it comes to their own points of view.

The relationship between imagined interactions and communication apprehension was somewhat surprising. We assumed that people who were apprehensive about communication would be likely to use imagined interactions as a substitute for interaction. However, that was not the case. Contrary to our predictions, we detected no significant relationship between communication apprehension and the catharsis function of imagined interactions. Moreover, we found that communication apprehension related positively to the rehearsal and awareness functions of imagined interactions. These results suggest that when people are highly apprehensive about communicating with others, they may use imagined interactions as a tool to learn about their feelings and then practice what they are going to say in an attempt to reduce their apprehension when it comes time to confront an organization. This interpretation has implicit support from Allen and Honeycutt (1997), who observed that a lack of preparation for communication episodes may lead to increased anxiety; and explicit support from Rosenblatt and Meyers (1986), who reported that people use imagined interactions to simulate an interaction that they "intend to have, would like to have, or are anxious about having" (p. 319). People who are high in communication apprehension may simply be less likely to confront an organization when dissatisfied with a product or service—at least immediately. Instead, they may be more likely to feel a need to prepare themselves for a potential complaint than people who are low in communication apprehension.

Important for the consumer complaining literature are our findings as they pertain to communication-based personality traits. Our results showed that various communication-based traits are associated with people's attitudes about complaining, propensity to complain, and intentions to complain following an organizational failure. Attitudes toward complaining were positively and significantly associated with argumentativeness and blurtatiousness. These results suggest that people who are likely to respond quickly to others and people who like to defend their positions and attack the positions of others were less likely to think of complaining in a

negative light. Considering the possibility that complaining may be seen by some people as a version of an argument with an organization, it makes sense that people who are high in trait argumentativeness would be more likely to condone complaining. Moreover, because high blirters are more likely to be assertive, lack social inhibition, and confront others (Swann & Rentfrow, 2001), it makes sense that such individuals would view the act of confronting an offending organization favorably. Attitude toward complaining did not correlate with either verbal aggressiveness or communication apprehension. These findings imply that people who are likely to attack the self-concept of others do not necessarily hold favorable attitudes about complaining to organizations. These findings also suggest that people who are apprehensive about communication do not necessarily perceive the act of complaining more negatively than people who are not apprehensive. These results are intriguing because they indicate that, although people who are high in communication apprehension may not be likely to complain, it is not due to a lack of perceived appropriateness.

Propensity to complain significantly correlated with all four communication-based personality characteristics. Propensity to complain was positively associated with argumentativeness, verbal aggressiveness, and blirtatiousness, which indicates that people who score high on these traits are more likely to perceive themselves as the type of people who will actually make a complaint when an organization fails them. Propensity to complain was negatively associated with communication apprehension. These results suggest that people who are reticent about communication may also consider themselves less likely to make a complaint to an offending organization than do people who are not apprehensive about communication.

However, we also assessed the participants' intentions to complain in this study, and only two communication-based personality traits showed a correlation. First, participants who scored high on the measure of blirtatiousness also scored high on their intentions to complain. This could indicate that, although people who are high in argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness consider themselves to be more likely to complain following a failure episode, it is mainly those who respond without thinking who actually complain. Perhaps argumentative and verbally aggressive individuals are more calculating in their approach to complaining and may, after the initial temptation to complain, decide not to address the organizational failure after all. This could be the case for a variety of reasons. In fact, research suggests that complaining is potentially affected by a host of variables: for example, the severity or importance of the failure (Oh, 2004; Richins, 1983), the perceived retailer responsiveness (Granbois et al., 1977; Richins, 1983), the perceived "worth" of complaining (Day & Ash, 1979), and consumer emotional responses (Chebat, Davidow, & Codjovi, 2005). Although high blirters complain regardless of the circumstances, this might not be true for individuals who are more likely to think before they speak.

Second, participants who scored high on the measure of communication apprehension tended to score low in respect to their intentions to complain to offending organizations. This seems to make sense in light of the fact that people who are high

in communication apprehension are less willing to communicate (e.g., MacIntyre, 1994), are more likely to be accommodators in conflict episodes (Schockley-Zalabak & Morley, 1984), and are less likely to voice their opinions to others who disagree with them (e.g., Hayes et al., 2005). Therefore, it is understandable that people high in communication apprehension would remain silent when faced with an organizational failure that may demand communication in a potentially aversive atmosphere; and, people high in communication apprehension may choose to remain silent because they think of themselves as less competent than other communicators (MacIntyre, 1994; Sallinen-Kuparinen et al., 1991). In other words, it may be that, although not disinclined to complain, people high in communication apprehension fail to complain because they imagine that they will be unsuccessful. This information is important for business owners insofar as scholars consider complaints to supply important information related to customers' perceptions of business practices (e.g., Oh, 2004). Based on the previous information, business owners would be wise to work hard to make the complaining process easy (e.g., Azjen, 1988) and to let their consumers know that their complaints will make an impact on both the organization and the individual's situation (e.g., Bolkan, Goodboy, & Daly, 2010).

One limitation of our study involves the method of data collection. Instead of measuring actual dissatisfaction with an organizational offering, we presented participants with hypothetical scenarios. Although this was appropriate in view of our research goals, people's reactions to "real-life" scenarios can differ from their reactions to a paper-based survey. Our study also entailed the use of a convenience sample of students who might differ from the general population in a variety of ways, including in their approaches to complaining behavior. Finally, the study included only a few communication-based personality traits as they related to complaining behavior and imagined interactions.

Future research may want to more fully investigate the relationship between communication-based personality characteristics and both complaining behaviors and the use of imagined interactions. This avenue of research seems particularly fertile for the subject of complaining. For example, researchers may consider investigating how personality traits affect actual complaining behavior—that is, scholars may want to research what communication-based personality traits are correlated with self-reports of complaining. Moreover, scholars may consider studying how communication-based personality traits influence the creation of complaints in the first place. Instead of simply studying if complaints are made or not, it may be useful for scientists to examine how various personality traits influence the content of complaints as well. Finally, researchers may consider the utility of imagined interactions in the complaining process. In other words, scholars may find it beneficial to study whether the use of imagined interactions before complaining leads to more positive outcomes with a complaint. It may be the case that people who use imagined interactions have more sophisticated complaint messages or are more thoughtful in their communication to companies. If this were the case, then perhaps using imagined interactions could be linked to positive outcomes for individuals who employ them in the course of complaining following organizational failures.

Note

- [1] The manipulation involving the severity of the organizational failure was taken from Smith, Bolton, and Wagner (1999). The manipulation regarding the likelihood of redress was created based on the definition provided by Singh (1990).

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Appendix

Scenarios¹

Low severity × low likelihood of redress

You are travelling on an important trip. You arrive at the hotel at approximately 7:00 p.m. and go to the front desk to check in. The representative at the front desk looks up your prepaid reservation and informs you that your room is ready. However, it is not the type of room (in terms of number and size of beds and smoking or nonsmoking) that you had preferred and reserved. You are upset. From what you know of this hotel it seems that they are unlikely to take appropriate action to take care of your problem if you complain. They do not seem likely to solve the problem or to be more careful to ensure that they give better service to you (or others) in the future.

Low severity × high likelihood of redress

You are travelling on an important trip. You arrive at the hotel at approximately 7:00 p.m. and go to the front desk to check in. The representative at the front desk looks up your prepaid reservation and informs you that your room is ready. However, it is not the type of room (in terms of number and size of beds and smoking or nonsmoking) that you had preferred and reserved. You are upset. From what you know of this hotel it seems that they are likely to take appropriate action to take care of your problem if you complain. They seem likely to solve the problem and to be more careful to ensure that they give better service to you (or others) in the future.

High severity × low likelihood of redress

You are travelling on an important trip. You arrive at the hotel at approximately 10:00 p.m. and go to the front desk to check in. The representative at the front desk looks up your prepaid reservation and informs you that the hotel is overbooked and you will have to stay at another hotel (several miles away) for the night. You are upset. From what you know of this hotel it seems that they are unlikely to take appropriate action to take care of your problem if you complain. They do not seem likely to solve the problem or to be more careful to ensure that they give better service to you (or others) in the future.

High severity × high likelihood of redress

You are travelling on an important trip. You arrive at the hotel at approximately 10:00 p.m. and go to the front desk to check in. The representative at the front desk looks up your prepaid reservation and informs you that the hotel is overbooked and you will have to stay at another hotel (several miles away) for the night. You are upset. From what you know of this hotel it seems that they are likely to take appropriate action to take care of your problem if you complain. They seem likely to solve the problem and to be more careful to ensure that they give better service to you (or others) in the future.