

When Customer Love Turns into Lasting Hate: The Effects of Relationship Strength and Time on Customer Revenge and Avoidance

This article explores the effects of time and relationship strength on the evolution of customer revenge and avoidance in online public complaining contexts. First, the authors examine whether online complainers hold a grudge—in terms of revenge and avoidance desires—over time. They find that time affects the two desires differently: Although revenge decreases over time, avoidance increases over time, indicating that customers indeed hold a grudge. Second, the authors examine the moderation effect of a strong relationship on how customers hold this grudge. They find that firms' best customers have the longest unfavorable reactions (i.e., a longitudinal love-becomes-hate effect). Specifically, over time, the revenge of strong-relationship customers decreases more slowly and their avoidance increases more rapidly than that of weak-relationship customers. Third, the authors explore a solution to attenuate this damaging effect—namely, the firm offering an apology and compensation after the online complaint. Overall, they find that strong-relationship customers are more amenable to any level of recovery attempt. The authors test the first two issues with a longitudinal survey and the third issue with a follow-up experiment.

Keywords: service failure recovery, customer revenge, customer avoidance, online public complaining, customer relationships, time effect

The potential for customers to get even with firms has grown exponentially with the Internet (*The Economist* 2006). “Homemade” anticorporation Web sites (e.g., Starbucked.com) represent only the tip of the iceberg of online public complaining, a phenomenon defined as the act of using the Internet to publicly complain about firms. Now, a vast array of online third-party organizations offers preformatted platforms that customers can use with even more convenience. For example, complaint Web sites (e.g., Complaints.com) and consumer agencies (e.g., bbb.org) provide online environments in which customers can post their misadventures and chat with others. User-generated content Web sites, such as YouTube.com, also offer accessible venues for complaining. In light of these developments, the business press has identified online complaining as a growing threat that needs managers' consideration (Arieli 2007; McGregor 2008). Yet, despite these warnings, this phenomenon has received limited attention (for an exception, see Ward and Ostrom 2006).

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To guide managers' actions, the current research examines the evolution of online complainers' grudges over time. In this examination, we pay special attention to firms' best customers—that is, those who believe that they have strong relationships with firms. Specifically, we focus on three core and unstudied issues:

1. Do online complainers hold a grudge against firms over time?
2. If so, how does a strong relationship affect the evolution of this grudge? In other words, do firms' best customers hold this grudge over a longer period than other customers?
3. Can firms attenuate such a love-becomes-hate effect by offering a recovery after the online complaint occurs?

Our first question is important because managers need to know whether online complainers naturally reduce their retaliation over time. If online complainers persist, managers may need to act to stop them. The current research posits that complainers hold a grudge against firms as long as they maintain a desire for revenge (i.e., punishing and causing harm to firms) and/or a desire to avoid any form of interactions with the firms (McCullough et al. 1998). Despite recent progress on customer revenge or vengeance (Bechwati and Morrin 2003, 2007) and avoidance (Zourrig, Chebat, and Toffoli 2009), the evolution of these desires over time remains unexplored for consumers.¹

To date, predictions about the effects of time on customer revenge and avoidance rely more on intuition than

¹We use the concepts of “revenge” and “vengeance” synonymously in this research.

theory. For example, a popular adage is that “time heals all wounds,” which suggests that revenge and avoidance fade away with time. Indeed, some evidence shows that because of its association with intense cognitions (McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang 2003) and emotions (Bonifield and Cole 2007), a desire for revenge may be difficult to sustain and should decrease over time (Bies, Tripp, and Kramer 1997). Nevertheless, the same may not be true for avoidance. This second desire may increase over time, sustaining complainers’ grudges. Indeed, as time passes, these customers may remain unwilling to forget the incident, leading them to transfer their patronage to other firms. These differentiated effects of time on revenge and avoidance constitute the baseline effects of our research and our first contribution.

In light of a potential grudge holding, our second question becomes especially crucial. Given the profitability of strong-relationship customers (Hogan, Lemon, and Rust 2002), firms need to know whether their best customers hold grudges more permanently. Thus, we make our second contribution by examining (for the first time in the literature, to the best of our knowledge) the moderating role of a customer relationship on the effects of time on revenge and avoidance. On the basis of growing evidence that relationship strength may amplify customers’ negative responses in service contexts (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Aggarwal 2004; Dawes 2009; Grégoire and Fisher 2008), we predict that a form of love-becomes-hate effect takes place over time. Compared with customers who have weaker relationships, the desire for revenge of strong-relationship customers should be maintained over a longer period, and their desire for avoidance should increase more rapidly. Given its damaging effects on firms, a longitudinal love-becomes-hate effect constitutes our core contribution.

As the next logical step, our third question explores the possibility that firms can attenuate this love-becomes-hate effect by offering an apology and compensation (after the online complaint). Although the revenge of strong-relationship customers is more sustainable (when no action is taken), we propose that a modest recovery attempt should substantially reduce this desire and “break” the love-becomes-hate effect. This third contribution is based on the work of Ringberg, Odekerken-Schröder, and Christensen (2007), who find that the relational orientation of strong-relationship customers makes them more amenable to recovery efforts.

In the remainder of this article, we first develop the hypotheses related to our first two issues. Then, we test these hypotheses with a longitudinal survey of online complainers (Study 1). In light of these findings, we perform a follow-up experiment (Study 2) that specifically examines the effect of a postcomplaint recovery attempt (i.e., third issue).

Conceptual Background and Hypotheses

In this section, we describe the conceptual background of the research by defining online public complaining and our two focal constructs (i.e., revenge and avoidance). We then present the hypotheses related to our first two core issues.

Online Public Complaining Context

In contrast to private complaining (i.e., when customers voice their concerns only to firms), public complaining involves customers going beyond firms’ borders to alert the public about a service failure episode (Singh 1988). Although public complaining occurs less frequently than private complaining, it deserves special attention because of its damaging consequences for firms, especially in an online context (Ward and Ostrom 2006).

Not all service failure situations are likely to lead to online and public actions. Customers typically engage in online public complaining when a service failure is followed by failed recoveries—that is, when firms keep failing to address customers’ private complaints (Ward and Ostrom 2006). In summary, most online complainers have been the “victims” of a series of failures, a situation that leads them to experience vivid desires for revenge and avoidance (Bechwati and Morrin 2003; Bonifield and Cole 2007).

Desire for Revenge Versus Desire for Avoidance

Accordingly, our two focal constructs are the desire for revenge and the desire for avoidance. These two constructs are appropriate because they reflect the presence of a customer grudge or lack of forgiveness (Aquino, Tripp, and Bies 2001; Wade 1989), which is likely to characterize online public complaining. Formally, a desire for revenge is defined as customers’ need to punish and cause harm to firms for the damages they have caused (Bechwati and Morrin 2003; Grégoire and Fisher 2006). In turn, a desire for avoidance is defined as customers’ need to withdraw themselves from any interactions with firms (McCullough et al. 1998). These two desires are related because both reflect customers’ inability to “let go” (Finkel et al. 2002). As long as customers maintain these desires (or one of them) over time, they hold a grudge against firms and fail to forgive (McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang 2003).

Though related, these two desires are also conceptually distinct (McCullough et al. 1998), and they lead to different actions. Whereas a desire for revenge is associated with punishments directed at firms, avoidance is more passive and relies on escape. Using a “fight–flight” analogy, we can describe a desire for revenge as constituting the essence of a “fighting” strategy, and it is at the origin of most retaliatory behaviors, such as private vindictive complaining (Bonifield and Cole 2007), negative word of mouth (Grégoire and Fisher 2006), and public complaining through online venues (Ward and Ostrom 2006). In turn, a desire for avoidance motivates customers to “take flight” by reducing their patronage of firms to avoid further damage. Note that revenge and avoidance are not mutually exclusive; both desires can coexist. For example, a customer can diminish his or her patronage (i.e., avoidance) while talking negatively about a firm to friends and on complaint Web sites (i.e., revenge).

The Effects of Time on Revenge and Avoidance: The Baseline Effects

Given their different nature, we posit that the revenge and avoidance desires evolve following different patterns over

time (see Figure 1). The specification of these patterns is important for both theoretical and managerial reasons. First, they constitute the baseline effects on which the rest of our logic lies (i.e., a love-becomes-hate effect). Second, they address our first core issue: Do customers hold a grudge over time?

On the one hand, we assert that a desire for revenge decreases over time as its related emotions (i.e., anger), negative cognitions (i.e., rumination and betrayal), and retaliatory behaviors become too costly to maintain. A desire for revenge is associated with extensive psychological resources—in terms of emotion (Bonifield and Cole 2007) and cognitions (Ward and Ostrom 2006)—that are difficult to sustain over time (Bies, Tripp, and Kramer 1997). This desire also leads to retaliatory actions that require energy to plot and pursue without any promise of material gains (Bechwati and Morrin 2003). Maintaining such a high level of investment appears unreasonably costly for customers, who naturally aspire to reduce their psychological costs over time (Tripp and Bies 1997). Furthermore, this decreasing pattern may be supported by a potentially “quenching” effect of online public complaining. Customers may believe that they have satisfied their desire for revenge by taking public actions against the firms.

On the other hand, we argue that a desire for avoidance increases over time. Although McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang (2003) and McCullough, Bono, and Root (2007) find a decreasing pattern of this desire in intimate relationships, we suggest the opposite direction in the consumer context because commercial relationships are more replaceable (Aggarwal 2004). After online public complaining, customers still may be unwilling to view their relationship as it was before the service failure. Then, such customers increasingly turn toward avoidance, which is less costly than revenge.

We propose two specific reasons for this increased avoidance pattern. First, this increase may be caused by the time it takes to terminate the recovery stage. After the online complaints, customers may keep interacting with the firm to find a solution, even if they stop buying any items or

services. Eventually, customers give up hope in finding a resolution and avoid the firm completely. Second, as customers reduce their patronage of firms, they search for alternative solutions with the competition. Given enough time, most customers will find an acceptable alternative and then will no longer need to maintain any interactions with the initial firm. Over time, customers’ patronage habits erode, and the desire for avoidance with the initial firm keeps growing. In H_1 , we formulate our two baseline effects:

H_1 : After online public complaining, a desire for revenge (desire for avoidance) decreases (increases) over time.

The Moderation Effects of Relationship Quality on the Baseline Effects

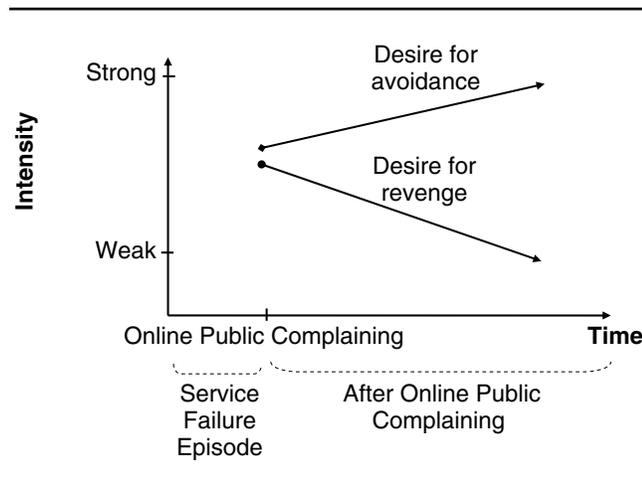
We now focus on our second and central issue: How does a strong relationship affect the evolution of revenge and avoidance over time (as predicted in H_1)? Although research has documented the moderating role of customer relationship in service contexts (e.g., Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Aggarwal 2004), to our knowledge, the unfolding of this effect over time has not been examined.

Initial service research posits that a strong relationship leads customers to respond more favorably to most recovery attempts (Hess, Ganesan, and Klein 2003; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998), which is consistent with the “buffering” effect of commitment found in the information-processing literature (Ahluwalia 2002; Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava 2000). Notably, recent work has studied the conditions under which this favorable effect could be reversed (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). For example, the negative responses of strong-relationship customers were amplified when (1) a service interaction was perceived as a transgression of their relational norms (Aggarwal 2004), (2) a service recovery was viewed as unambiguously unfair (Grégoire and Fisher 2008), and (3) customers had sufficient time and cognitive capacity to assess a severe performance failure (Roehm and Brady 2007). Because situations of online public complaining reflect these itemized conditions, we also expect an unfavorable effect of a relationship over time—namely, a longitudinal love-becomes-hate effect.

Consistent with prior work (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002), we employ the notion of relationship quality to conceptualize the strength of a relationship. Relationship quality is defined as a second-order construct consisting of trust (i.e., confidence that a firm is dependable and can be relied on), commitment (i.e., a willingness to maintain a relationship with a firm), and social benefits (i.e., a perception of a “one-to-one” connection through the personalization and customization of services).

Customers who perceive a high level of relationship quality are more likely to take offense if they are the victims of a service failure episode, especially if they asked for help throughout the episode. High-relationship-quality customers may think, “I have always been there for you, and you let me down when I needed your help.” In other words, these customers may believe that firms “owe” them more than they owe low-relationship-quality customers. In these

FIGURE 1
Evolution of Revenge and Avoidance over Time
(Baseline Effects Predicted in H_1)



conditions, high-relationship-quality customers may feel especially betrayed (i.e., a customer's belief that a firm has intentionally violated what is normative in the context of their relationship) (Elangovan and Shapiro 1998; Ward and Ostrom 2006).

Here, we maintain that perceived betrayal may provide useful insights into comprehending a love-becomes-hate effect. First, perceived betrayal is relevant because strong-relationship customers tend to feel more betrayed after unfair service failure and recovery (Grégoire and Fisher 2008). Second, because this greater sense of betrayal is difficult to forget and let go, it is likely to drive these customers to engage more vividly in revenge and avoidance (Bies and Tripp 1996; Koehler and Gershoff 2003; Ward and Ostrom 2006).

We apply this "static" evidence to our longitudinal context. Specifically, we expect relationship quality to unfavorably influence the two longitudinal baseline effects described in H_1 . First, high-relationship-quality customers should maintain their desire for revenge over a longer period. Specifically, we expect that the desire for revenge of high-relationship-quality customers decreases at a slower pace over time than that of low-relationship-quality customers. Second, we follow a similar reasoning for qualifying the rate of change of a desire for avoidance. Over time, high-relationship-quality customers should experience an invigorated desire to escape the firms. Thus, the desire for avoidance of high-relationship-quality customers increases at a faster rate over time than that of low-relationship-quality customers.

In summary, we formalize a longitudinal love-becomes-hate effect in H_2 , which qualifies our baseline effects (e.g., H_1). To account for the potential role of betrayal, we expect to find the following sequence at any given period: relationship quality \rightarrow perceived betrayal \rightarrow revenge/avoidance desires.

H_2 : Compared with low-relationship-quality customers, the desire for revenge (desire for avoidance) of high-relationship-quality customers decreases more slowly (increases more rapidly) over time.

H_3 : At any given time, (a) relationship quality is positively related to perceived betrayal, (b) which in turn is positively related to a desire for revenge and a desire for avoidance.

Study 1: A Longitudinal Field Study of Online Public Complaining

Our Context: ConsumerAffairs.com and Ripoff Report

Customers have different online venues to complain publicly. First, they can build their own "homemade" anticorporation Web sites (see Ward and Ostrom 2006). Second, they can post to a vast array of preformatted Web sites provided by third-party organizations. In our main study (i.e., Study 1), we examine two third-party preformatted Web sites: an online consumer agency (ConsumerAffairs.com) and a complaint Web site (Ripoffreport.com). Both Web sites are credible and professionally managed, and they have received national coverage (Sydell 2007). Ripoff Report

recorded more than 266,500 complaints in September 2007, and the newsletter of ConsumerAffairs.com has a readership base of approximately 30,000 subscribers.

Although both organizations aim to protect and inform consumers, they also possess unique features. On the one hand, ConsumerAffairs.com uses the complaints received to write a weekly newsletter. Approximately 10% of the complaints received are posted on its Web site. On the other hand, Ripoff Report relies on a more confrontational approach. All complaints are posted with minimal changes, and they constitute the first comment of a Weblog.

Procedure and Sample

This study involves a series of four questionnaires (i.e., waves) that were administered every two weeks (see McCullough, Bono, and Root 2007). We surveyed customers who sent an online complaint to the Web sites in the ten days preceding the first questionnaire. We used a short time between the online complaint and the first questionnaires to reduce memory bias.

Given our interest in the dynamics of revenge and avoidance, a longitudinal design was required (Rindfleisch et al. 2008). In addition, the current design addresses key limitations of cross-sectional surveys (e.g., Aquino, Tripp, and Bies 2001; Grégoire and Fisher 2006). Here, a longitudinal design has been identified as an effective method to control for common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003) and to draw causal inference (Bolton and Lemon 1999).

Initially, the sampling frames were composed of 1434 and 952 complainers on the ConsumerAffairs.com and Ripoff Report Web sites, respectively, for an overall sampling frame of 2386 people. In our first e-mail, the potential respondents were invited to go to Qualtrics.com to complete the first questionnaire. This initial e-mail was followed by two reminders. We used a similar multicontact approach for Waves 2–4. The participants who completed the four waves were included in a drawing for one grand prize of \$500 and ten prizes of \$50.

After the first wave, 431 participants completed the first survey, with 247 and 184 participants for Consumer Affairs.com and Ripoff Report, respectively. For Wave 1, the overall response rate was 18.1%. The number of respondents decreased by 131 between Waves 1 and 2, by 85 between Waves 2 and 3, and by 43 between Waves 3 and 4. Overall, 172 respondents completed the four phases of the survey, with 111 and 61 respondents for Consumer Affairs.com and Ripoff Report, respectively. The total sample size is similar to that of a recent longitudinal service study (Homburg, Koschate, and Hoyer 2006). Before conducting our analyses, we confirmed through a series of t-tests that the respondents who did not complete all four waves did not differ from the respondents in the final sample on any of the key constructs ($ps > .06$). The equivalence of these two groups suggests that data were missing at random and that our longitudinal data were unbiased by attrition (McCullough et al. 2001).

Of the final sample, 61% were women, and the average age of the respondents was 44.10 years ($SD = 11.97$). On average, the respondents spent 17.76 hours ($SD = 15.72$) per week on the Internet. At the time of the failure, respon-

dents had been customers of the firms for an average of 34.0 months (SD = 63.92). The respondents formulated complaints in 53 industries, including automotive (11%); retail (10.5%); credit, debt, and mortgage services (10.3%); cell phone providers (9.5%); Web sites and online services (6.3%); appliances (5.3%); and computers (5%). The other industries received less than 5% of the complaints.

Online Complaints Coding

Two independent coders analyzed the content of the 431 original online complaints. Each complaint was codified in one of the following categories: (1) a single service failure with no recovery requested (i.e., silent customers); (2) a service failure followed by a failed recovery, also named a “double deviation” (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990); (3) a service failure followed by a positive recovery; and (4) a service failure for which the recovery was unspecified. The level of agreement between coders was high (79.1%), and differences were resolved through discussion. Overall, 17.5% of the complaints were classified as “unspecified recovery stage.” After excluding these instances, 96.2% of the complaints were classified as double deviations. The coders identified only 13 (3.5%) service failures with no recovery request and only 1 service failure recovery followed by a positive recovery. For the double-deviation instances, the coders also coded whether the recovery was requested (1) only once or (2) many times (agreement level of 80.2%). They found that 83.1% of these respondents requested many recoveries from the firm. Consistent with Ward and Ostrom (2006), our codification revealed that almost all online public complaints resulted from a double deviation that encompassed a series of failed recoveries.

Questionnaire and Measurement

We performed a pretest with 103 undergraduate students at a major U.S. public university. The purpose of this pretest was to learn about the longitudinal procedure of our data collection software package (i.e., Qualtrics.com) and to validate the scales of our key constructs.² This new software makes it possible to send automatic reminders to the non-respondents at each wave and to track responses over time. This pretest involved students who experienced a service failure and a failed recovery (but did not complain online) over a period of six weeks (i.e., three waves). Because no problems were identified with the software, constructs, and questionnaires, we proceeded with our study with “real” online complainers.

²Because of their novelty, we examined in the pretest the psychometric properties of the scales for a desire for revenge, a desire for avoidance, and perceived betrayal. We did not include relationship quality because its measurements are well established. We performed three exploratory factor analyses, one for each time. We obtained a clear three-factor solution in each model. Overall, the items strongly loaded on their respective factors in all the models: between .80 and .93 for a desire for revenge, between .79 and .91 for a desire for avoidance, and between .73 and .87 for betrayal. Cross-loadings were minimal in all models: less than .29 for a desire for revenge, less than .36 for a desire for avoidance, and less than .42 for betrayal. In all three models, Cronbach's alphas of each construct were greater than .87.

In the first wave of the main study, respondents answered questions related to their prior relationships, desires for revenge and avoidance, perceived betrayal, and the control variables. Waves 2–4 used fewer measures, and the respondents mostly answered questions about their desires, perceived betrayal, and some behaviors. Most measures are influenced by or adapted from previous work. Unless otherwise indicated, the measures are based on seven-point Likert scales (1 = “strongly disagree,” and 7 = “strongly agree”). The scale items (after purification) appear in the Appendix.

Desires for revenge and avoidance. We measured the two focal constructs by adapting to a consumer context the scales developed by McCullough and colleagues (see McCullough et al. 1998; McCullough et al. 2001; McCullough, Bono, and Root 2007). We measured a desire for revenge with a five-item scale, including “I want to take actions to get the firm in trouble,” and a desire for avoidance also with five items, such as “I want to keep as much distance as possible between the firm and me.” Note that McCullough and colleagues' (1998) scales have been successfully adapted to workplace (Aquino, Tripp, and Bies 2001) and customer (Grégoire and Fisher 2006) contexts. In terms of face validity, our revenge scale is consistent with the positive items of Bechwati and Morrin's (2003) vengeance scales.

Relationship quality. This second-order construct was reflected in trust (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002), commitment (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001), and social benefits (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002). We measured the three first-order constructs with validated scales (see the Appendix).

Perceived betrayal. We measured perceived betrayal with three items adapted from the scale of Grégoire and Fisher (2008). These scales included items such as “I felt betrayed by the firm” and “The firm let me down in a moment of need” (see the Appendix).

Control variables. We also controlled for various situational variables that could affect the desires for revenge and avoidance, such as perceived severity (Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999) and distributive and interactional fairness (Bechwati and Morrin 2003; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998). We measured all these constructs with validated multi-item scales (see the Appendix). We also accounted for the behavioral aspects of a relationship (i.e., duration length and interaction frequency), age and gender (Aquino, Tripp, and Bies 2001), and the Web site.

Measurement Models and Nomological Validity

Confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs). The psychometric properties of the scales were assessed with five CFAs (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). Our first model included distributive fairness, interactional fairness, failure severity, and relationship quality, the last of which is a second-order construct reflected in commitment, trust, and social benefits. The 21-item model produced a satisfactory fit with a comparative fit index (CFI) of .97, a Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) of .96, a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .057, and a chi-square of 430.71 (d.f. = 180,

$p \leq .001$). In this model, the loadings (λ) were large and significant ($ps < .001$), the average variance extracted (AVE) equaled or exceeded .50 for all constructs, and Cronbach's alphas were greater than the .7 guideline (see the Appendix).

The second to the fifth CFA models had the same structure and incorporated the same reflective constructs. However, the second CFA model was performed with the data collected at Time 1, the third CFA model was performed with data at Time 2, and so forth. These models contained desire for avoidance (five items), desire for revenge (five items), and perceived betrayal (three items) at Times 1–4. In all these models, we deleted one of the items of desire for avoidance because of high correlation errors. Then, the 12-item models fit the data acceptably, with chi-square values between 344.46 and 427.08 (d.f. = 51, $ps \leq .017$), CFIs $\geq .95$, TLIs $\geq .94$, and RMSEAs varying between .052 and .088. In all these models, the loadings (λ) were large and significant ($ps < .001$), the AVE exceeded .50 for all constructs, and Cronbach's alphas were greater than the .7 guideline (see the Appendix). As we expected, revenge and avoidance desires were positively and moderately correlated in all models (between .37 and .11). They were also distinct constructs. As evidence of their discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981), the square roots of the AVE for both a desire for revenge (varying between .91 and .92) and a desire for avoidance (between .81 and .90) were substantially higher than any of their correlations.

Nomological validity. Given the importance of the revenge and avoidance desires, we provide evidence of their nomological validity by examining their correlations with a series of retaliatory behaviors (i.e., private vindictive complaining, negative word of mouth, and online public complaining for help seeking) and one avoidance behavior (i.e., patronage reduction). The scales of these behaviors appear in the Appendix. Consistent with our definitions, we found that a desire for revenge was correlated with vindictive complaining ($r = .29, p < .001$), negative word of mouth ($r = .31, p < .001$), and online public complaining for help seeking ($r = .20, p < .001$) but was uncorrelated with patronage reduction ($r = .03, p > .56$) (after controlling for a desire for avoidance). We found opposite results for a desire for avoidance, which was only correlated with patronage reduction ($r = .31, p < .001$) but was uncorrelated with any of the retaliatory behaviors ($r < .08, ps > .20$) (after controlling for a desire for revenge). Overall, these results show evidence of the validity and distinct nature of our two focal constructs.

Tests of Hypotheses

H_1 – H_2 . To test H_1 – H_2 , we opted for an individual growth modeling approach (Bliese and Ployhart 2002) that simultaneously estimates both (1) the differences in aggregated levels over time and (2) the individual patterns of change over time (McCullough, Bono, and Root 2007; McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang 2003). This type of model is an extension of the basic multilevel approach (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002) in which the “Level 1” model fits the aggregated changes of the dependent variable (i.e., revenge and avoidance) over time and the “Level 2” model

includes the predictors that explain the differences among individuals. Our final results appear in Table 1. To provide an illustration of the evolution in the desires for revenge and

TABLE 1
Individual Growth Models for the Changes in Desire for Revenge, Desire for Avoidance, and Betrayal over Time

	Desire for Revenge	Desire for Avoidance	Perceived Betrayal
	β	β	β
Basic Model			
Intercept	4.18***	5.43***	6.15***
Time (H_1)	-.32***	.16***	-.64***
Time \times time	n.s.	n.s.	.12**
Control Variables			
Web site ^a	1.46***	.37*	.35**
Failure severity	.14*	n.s.	.19***
Distributive fairness	-.26**	-.40***	-.33***
Interactional fairness	n.s.	-.17**	-.09*
Interaction frequency	n.s.	-.01*	n.s.
Effects of Relationship Quality			
Relationship quality	-.09	-.09	.16***
Relationship quality \times time (H_2)	.08*	.11***	n.s.

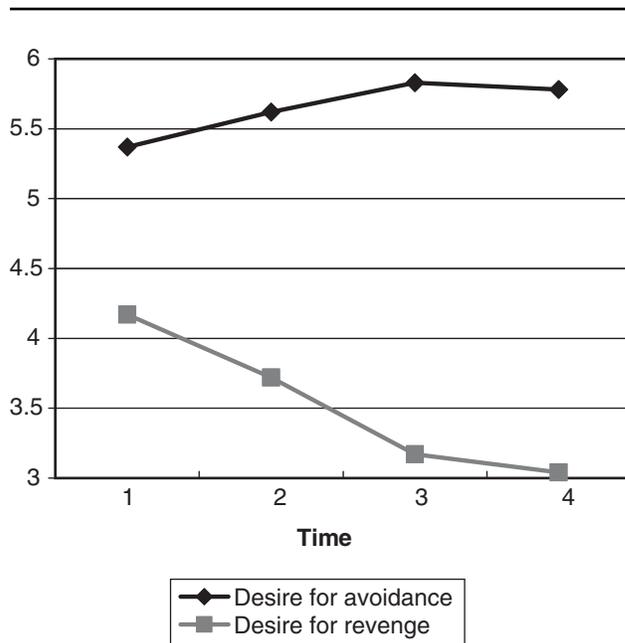
* $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

*** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

^aA dummy-coded variable for which the reference category is ConsumerAffairs.com.

FIGURE 2
Evolution of Revenge and Avoidance over Time (Observed Means)



avoidance, Figure 2 reports the observed means at each period.

The variable “time” represents the rate of change of the dependent variables over time (i.e., Level 1), and we used its coefficients to test H_1 . Then, the individual predictors (i.e., relationship quality and the control variables) are included (i.e., Level 2). We tested H_2 by examining the extent to which relationship quality interacts with time in predicting a desire for revenge and a desire for avoidance. We mean-centered the predictors and report only the significant control variables.

In the revenge model (see the first column in Table 1), the rate of change (i.e., the variable “time”) was significant and negative ($\beta = -.32, p < .001$). This result indicates that a desire for revenge decreased over time, in support of H_1 . The quadratic term (i.e., the time \times time variable) testing for a nonlinear rate of change did not achieve significance ($p = .13$), and as a result, we dropped it from subsequent analyses.

In the avoidance model (see second column in Table 1), the rate of change ($\beta = .16, p < .001$) also achieved significance. In support of the other facet of H_1 , the positive rate of change indicates that a desire for avoidance increased over time. Again, the quadratic term was not significant ($p = .12$).

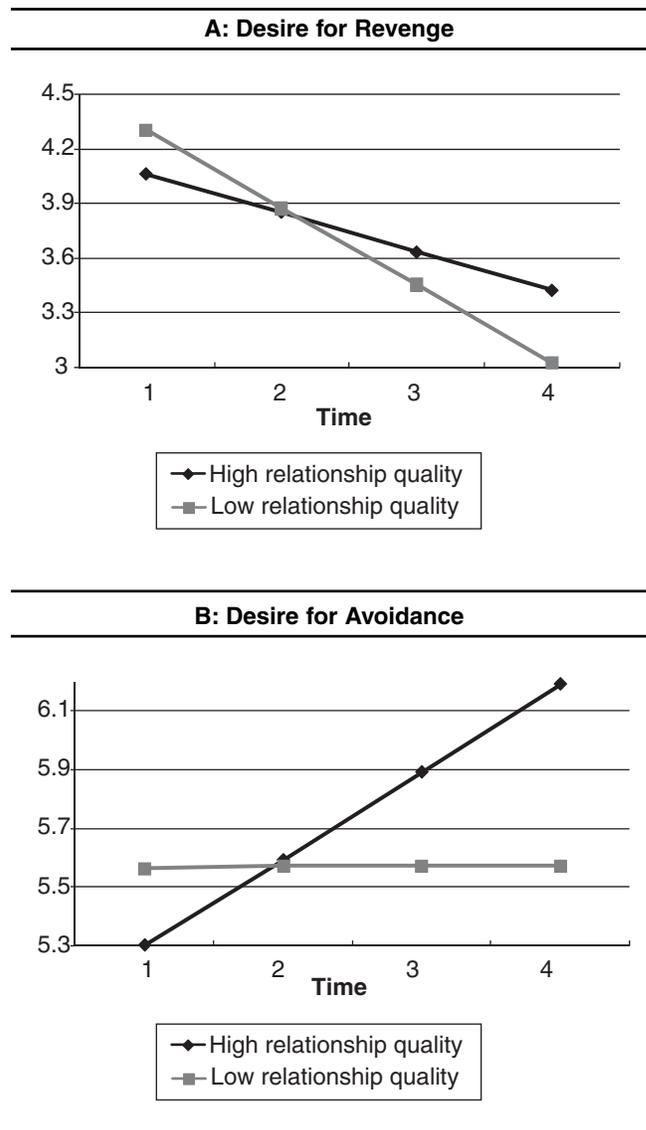
The revenge model also provides support for H_2 . We found a significant and positive interaction between relationship quality and time ($\beta = .08, p < .05$), indicating that relationship quality affects the rate of change in a desire for revenge over time. Figure 3, Panel A, shows the pattern of change over time for two levels of relationship quality (+1 and -1 standard deviations). It shows that the desire for revenge of high-relationship-quality customers decreased more slowly than that of low-relationship-quality customers.

In the model for a desire for avoidance, we also found a significant and positive interaction between time and relationship quality ($\beta = .11, p < .001$), which supports the other facet of H_2 . As Figure 3, Panel B, illustrates, the desire for avoidance of high-relationship-quality customers increases more rapidly over time than that of low-relationship-quality customers.

H_3 . Figure 4 presents the tests for H_3 . For each period, we present evidence of a relationship quality \rightarrow perceived betrayal \rightarrow desire for revenge/desire for avoidance linkage. In support of H_{3a} , we found that relationship quality is positively related to perceived betrayal at each period ($.17 \leq \beta \leq .31; ps < .01$). Consistent with H_{3b} , at each period, perceived betrayal leads to a desire for revenge ($.09 \leq \beta \leq .19; ps < .05$) and to a desire for avoidance ($.10 \leq \beta \leq .20; ps < .05$). We also performed detailed “process” analyses (i.e., mediation and suppression) of the role of betrayal at each time. These analyses appear in Web Appendix A (see <http://www.marketingpower.com/jmnov09>).

We also present a longitudinal test of H_{3a} (i.e., relationship quality \rightarrow perceived betrayal over time) by performing a third, individual growth model explaining the changes in perceived betrayal (see the last column of Table 1). In this model, the rate of change (i.e., “time”) was significant and negative ($\beta = -.64, p < .001$), and the quadratic term of time

FIGURE 3
The Interaction Effects Between Relationship Quality and Time on Predicting Avoidance and Revenge Desires (H_2)

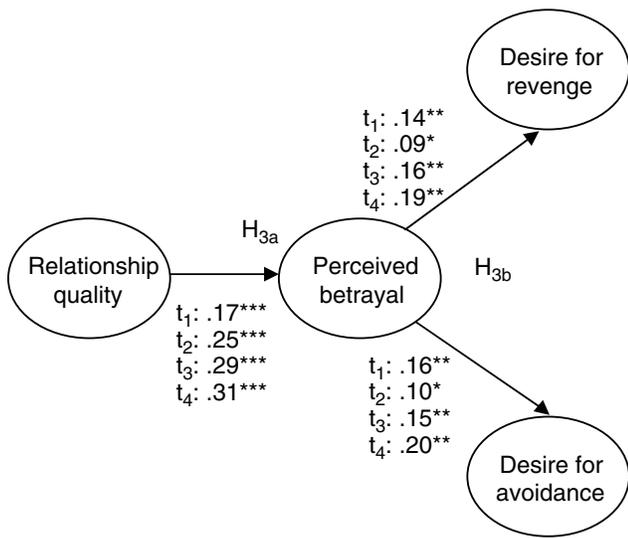


was significant ($\beta = .12, p < .01$). As Figure 5 illustrates, these results indicate that, on average, betrayal decreased over time following a nonlinear pattern. Consistent with H_{3a} , relationship quality positively affected the level of betrayal ($\beta = .16, p < .001$). Compared with low-relationship-quality customers, high-relationship-quality customers feel more betrayal over time.

Post Hoc Analyses for a Postcomplaint Recovery

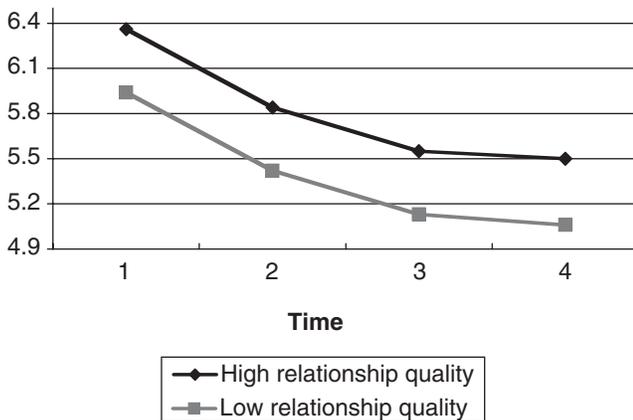
We also explore whether a recovery that customers received after their online complaint (hereinafter, we refer to this as a “postcomplaint recovery”) had any reducing effect on their desires for revenge or avoidance. To measure this variable, we asked the participants whether the service failure was resolved to their satisfaction since they complained to the Web site. The proportion of complainers who received a

FIGURE 4
The Relationship Quality → Perceived Betrayal →
Revenge/Avoidance Desires Linkage at Each
Period (H₃)



**p* < .05 (two-tailed).
 ***p* < .01 (two-tailed).
 ****p* < .001 (two-tailed).

FIGURE 5
The Effects of Relationship Quality on Perceived
Betrayal over Time (H_{3a})



recovery went from 15.4%, to 23.0%, and to 27.6% at Times 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

Customers who received a satisfactory recovery at Times 2 and 3 reported reductions in their desire for revenge that were, respectively, .97 and 1.13 scale points lower than for the other customers (*ps* < .05).³ However, a

³For each of the Times 2–4, we performed the following model: $\beta_{\text{postrecovery}} + \beta_{\text{betrayal}} = \text{desire for revenge or desire for avoidance}$. This section reports the parameters for $\beta_{\text{postrecovery}}$. “Betrayal” was a control variable.

postcomplaint recovery did not reduce a desire for revenge at Time 4 (*ps* > .56). Importantly, we found that a postcomplaint recovery had no significant effect on a desire for avoidance at any time (*ps* > .36).

Discussion of Study 1

Our first hypothesis tests the presence of longitudinal baselines and addresses the first question of this article: Do online complainers hold a grudge over time? We found that time has different effects on revenge versus avoidance desires. Consistent with prior literature (McCullough, Bono, and Root 2007; McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang 2003), we found that a desire for revenge is difficult to sustain and tends to decrease over time. On average, customers do not seem to hold a grudge in the form of revenge. However, time has a positive effect on avoidance. This result is important because it indicates that online complainers hold a grudge through their growing desire to completely disengage with firms.

In our second hypothesis (i.e., our second question), perceptions of relationship quality qualify the previous baselines. The significant interactions between the time and relationship-quality variables confirm the presence of a love-becomes-hate effect that is damaging to firms. Specifically, high-relationship-quality customers maintain their desire for revenge over a longer period, and their desire for avoidance grows more rapidly over time. In addition, we provide insights into the notion of a betrayal “route.” Specifically, we found that at each time, high-relationship-quality customers felt more betrayed, a perception that increased their revenge and avoidance desires.

Now that we have demonstrated a longitudinal love-becomes-hate effect, managers might inquire about solutions to this problem (i.e., our third question). Here, we found that a postcomplaint recovery can reduce a desire for revenge but only when the recovery was offered within the two periods that immediately followed the complaints. However, this form of recovery does not seem to bring back the business of online complainers. We found no effect of a recovery on a desire for avoidance, which continues to grow over time. From these findings, Study 2 further examines the effects of a postcomplaint recovery offered immediately after the online complaint on a desire for revenge.

Study 2: A Follow-Up Experiment

Attenuating a Love-Becomes-Hate Effect with a Recovery Attempt

We develop an experiment to address further our third question: Can a postcomplaint recovery attempt attenuate a longitudinal love-becomes-hate effect? Indeed, managers should be especially interested in finding an appropriate recovery for high-relationship-quality customers because of their lasting desire for revenge. To this end, the findings of Study 1 are encouraging: Although online complainers are unlikely to patronize the firm again, a timely recovery attempt substantially decreases their desire for revenge. Study 2 builds on this finding by examining the reducing effect of different levels of recovery (normal versus high)

on the desire for revenge of high-relationship-quality customers. Specifically, Study 2 answers the question, Do a simple apology and a modest compensation suffice for firms' best customers?

Recent evidence suggests that high-relationship-quality customers can be especially receptive to any recovery attempt, regardless of its size or economic value (Ringberg, Odekerken-Schröder, and Christensen 2007). For relationship-focused customers, "the perceived sincerity of an apology and the admission of wrongdoing" are more important than a "restitution or product replacement" (Ringberg, Odekerken-Schröder, and Christensen 2007, p. 197). This finding is consistent with the relational norms explained by Aggarwal (2004). That is, high-relationship-quality customers are more likely to perceive their relationships with firms as regulated by communal than by exchange norms. In communal relationships, partners demonstrate concerns about each other's needs with less expectation for repayment. Thus, for high-relationship-quality customers, a genuine effort to restore a relationship is probably more influential than the economic size of the recovery attempt. Using this logic, we argue that as long as firms make an effort to repair the situation, the revenge of high-relationship-quality customers should be substantially reduced. In other words, normal versus high recovery levels should have similar attenuating effects on these customers over time.

For low-relationship-quality customers, the concerns and advice are different. These customers are especially motivated by financial repayments and exchange norms (Aggarwal 2004), and they believe that they should be fully compensated for their problems (Ringberg, Odekerken-Schröder, and Christensen 2007). Thus, the size of the compensation is more important to them than the social efforts. Accordingly, their desire for revenge should decrease in proportion to the level of recovery offered. Specifically, their desire for revenge should be the most reduced over time when they receive a high recovery. Formally,

H₄: The levels of recovery have different effects on the desire for revenge of high- versus low-relationship-quality customers. (a) For high-relationship-quality customers, any level of recovery (normal or high) substantially reduces their desire for revenge over time. (b) For low-relationship-quality customers, only a high level of recovery substantially reduces their desire for revenge over time.

Method

Design. To address this third issue, we performed a scenario-based experiment (Aggarwal 2004; Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999) with 113 undergraduate students who participated in this study for class credit. The design was a 2 (relationship quality: low versus high) × 3 (recovery: none, normal, high) × 2 (time: responses before and after the recovery) mixed design. The first two factors were between subjects, and the last factor was within subject. Consistent with Study 1, the scenario described a double deviation (at Time 1), which was followed by a recovery attempt after an online public complaint (at Time 2).

This design addresses a key limitation of Study 1 related to the time of measurement of relationship quality. In Study 1, the participants were asked to recall their prior relationship after they had engaged in online public complaining, and as a result, this recall may have been biased (Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999). In Study 2, we manipulate relationship quality before the occurrence of the service failure to minimize this bias.

Stimuli and procedure. Participants read a fictional scenario, in which they were asked to imagine themselves in the role of a customer who experienced a service failure with a French restaurant. The detailed stimuli appear in Web Appendix B (see <http://www.marketingpower.com/jmnov09>). In the first part of the scenario (Time 1), the participants were exposed to the relationship-quality manipulations and then read the information about a service failure and a failed recovery. The total value of the meal was \$75. After reading this, the participants answered a series of questions about the dependent variables. To simulate online public complaining, all participants were asked to write a blog about the restaurant on "an influential newsgroup about French cuisine."

After completing a filler task, participants read a sequel (Time 2) that mentioned that the customer met the owner in a parking lot two weeks later. In the "no-recovery" condition, the owner did not offer any apologies or compensation. In both recovery conditions (i.e., normal and high), the owner recognized his fault and offered an apology. He then offered a \$50 gift certificate in the "normal-recovery" condition and a full reimbursement (\$75) and a bottle of French wine (\$25) in the "high-recovery" condition. Then, the participants completed another series of dependent variables. Overall, participants viewed the scenarios as plausible and involving ($M = 5.73$ on a seven-point scale), and we found no differences between conditions ($ps > .19$).

Results

Manipulation checks. We measured relationship quality with an abbreviated scale that captured trust, commitment, and social connection (three items, $\alpha = .78$; $M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.72$). A full-factorial analysis of variance revealed that the relationship manipulation had a significant effect on this check, with the means in the expected direction ($M_{\text{high-relation}} = 5.69 > M_{\text{low-relation}} = 3.03$; $F(1, 111) = 166.12$, $p \leq .001$). We also measured at Time 1 the effect of this manipulation on perceived betrayal ($\alpha = .86$; $M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.37$). Consistent with our logic (H_{3a}), high-relationship-quality customers felt more betrayed than low-relationship-quality customers at Time 1 ($M_{\text{high-relation}} = 5.72 > M_{\text{low-relation}} = 5.08$; $F(1, 111) = 6.39$, $p = .013$).

At Time 2, the postcomplaint recovery manipulation was validated with a two-item scale (two items, $\alpha = .98$; $M = 5.02$, $SD = 2.55$). The question stem was "The owner offered a resolution which was..." The first item ranged from "less than satisfactory" (1) to "beyond satisfactory" (9), and the middle point (5) was "satisfactory." The second item ranged from "insufficient" (1) to "more than sufficient" (9), and the middle point (5) was "sufficient." Our analyses revealed that the recovery manipulation had a sig-

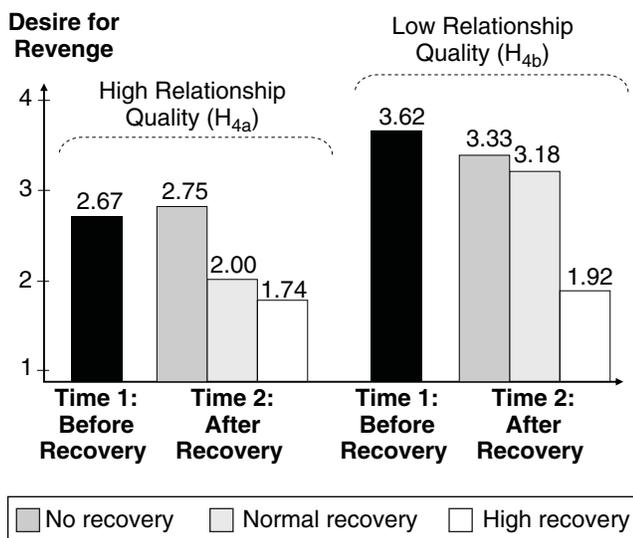
nificant effect on this scale ($F(2, 107) = 64.13, p \leq .001$) but not the relationship manipulation or their interaction ($ps > .14$). The means were of correct amplitude ($M_{\text{no recovery}} = 2.46 < M_{\text{normal}} = 5.45 < M_{\text{high}} = 6.94$).

H₄. We performed a 2 (relationship quality) \times 3 (recovery) \times 2 (responses over time) mixed analysis of variance with desire for revenge as the dependent variable. This model revealed a significant within-subject effect ($F(1, 107) = 59.10, p < .001$), which indicates that, on average, a desire for revenge decreases over time ($\text{Revenge}_{t1} = 3.12 > \text{Revenge}_{t2} = 2.45$). We also found a general between-subject effect of relationship quality ($F(1, 107) = 11.11, p < .001$; $M_{\text{high-relation}} = 2.45 < M_{\text{low-relation}} = 3.12$). More important, and consistent with *H₄*, we found a significant three-way interaction of relationship quality \times recovery \times time ($F(2, 107) = 5.65, p < .01$). Figure 6 illustrates this interaction. We performed simple test analyses for *H₄*.

In support of *H_{4a}*, the desire for revenge of high-relationship-quality customers substantially decreased when a normal recovery ($\text{Revenge}_{t1} = 2.67 > \text{Revenge}_{t2} = 2.00, p < .05$) or a high recovery ($\text{Revenge}_{t1} = 2.67 > \text{Revenge}_{t2} = 1.74, p < .001$) was offered. We did not find any significant difference ($p > .44$) between the desires for revenge at Time 2 in the normal-recovery ($M = 2.00$) versus high-recovery ($M = 1.74$) conditions. In the high-relationship-quality condition, the desire for revenge stayed unchanged when no recovery was offered ($\text{Revenge}_{t1} = 2.67 \approx \text{Revenge}_{t2} = 2.75, p > .82$).

FIGURE 6

The Effects of Recovery Attempts on the Desire for Revenge of High- Versus Low-Relationship-Quality Customers (*H₄*)



Notes: The three-way interaction of relationship quality \times recovery attempts \times time is significant ($F(2, 107) = 5.65, p < .01$). We found no significant difference in the desire for revenge at Time 1 between the three recovery conditions in the high-relationship-quality ($p > .17$) and low-relationship-quality ($p > .53$) conditions.

In support of *H_{4b}*, the desire for revenge of low-relationship-quality customers substantially decreased only when a high recovery ($\text{Revenge}_{t1} = 3.62 > \text{Revenge}_{t2} = 1.92, p < .001$) was offered. In the low-relationship-quality condition, the desire for revenge stayed unchanged when no recovery ($\text{Revenge}_{t1} = 3.62 \approx \text{Revenge}_{t2} = 3.33, p > .35$) or a normal recovery ($\text{Revenge}_{t1} = 3.62 \approx \text{Revenge}_{t2} = 3.18, p > .23$) was offered. We did not find any significant difference ($p > .33$) between the desires for revenge at Time 2 in the no-recovery ($M = 3.33$) and the normal-recovery ($M = 3.18$) conditions.

Betrayal analyses. We performed additional analyses with betrayal at Time 2 to understand our previous result. Our analysis revealed a significant relationship quality \times recovery interaction on betrayal at Time 2 ($F(2, 107) = 4.90, p = .009$). Compared with the low-relationship-quality condition, high-relationship-quality customers felt more betrayed when no recovery was offered ($M_{\text{high-relation}} = 4.87 > M_{\text{low-relation}} = 4.04; p < .05$), less betrayed with a normal recovery ($M_{\text{high-relation}} = 3.50 < M_{\text{low-relation}} = 4.61; p < .01$), and similarly betrayed with a high recovery ($M_{\text{high-relation}} = 3.19 \approx M_{\text{low-relation}} = 3.70; p > .18$). Perceived betrayal was positively correlated with a desire for revenge at Time 2 ($r = .38, p < .001$).

Discussion of Study 2

We designed Study 2 to examine whether firms can attenuate a love-becomes-hate effect by offering a postcomplaint recovery. Although high-relationship-quality customers felt more betrayed when no recovery was offered, this perception and their desire for revenge are greatly attenuated (over time) by an apology and a modest postcomplaint recovery. In their case, an expensive recovery is not necessary because it does not have more “revenge-quenching” power. However, note that our conclusion is different for low-relationship-quality customers, who seemed to be more calculative and instrumentally oriented. Only an expensive, high-recovery attempt had a reducing effect on the revenge of these customers over time.

General Discussion

Managerial Implications

*Do online complainers hold a grudge over time (*H₁*)?* We answer yes to this question. Time does not fully “heal” the problem related to online public complaining. Although customers’ desire for revenge decreases with time, they hold a grudge through their growing desire for avoidance. After their online complaints, these customers have an intense and growing desire to cut any forms of interactions with firms. Their patronage seems definitely lost, a situation that has drastic repercussions on the estimations of customer lifetime value (Hogan, Lemon, and Rust 2002). In addition, this patronage is unlikely to be restored with any recovery initiatives. A postcomplaint recovery did not have any attenuating effect on avoidance in our main study. Online complaining could be interpreted as a form of divorce that is announced publicly. Complainers claim strenuously that they will not return to these firms, and they do not.

Despite this pessimistic outlook, managers can find comfort in the decrease of revenge over time. Online complainers may leave permanently, but at least their grudge does not take the form of permanent retaliation. Our data suggest three possible reasons for this decrease:

1. Perceived betrayal, as a key predictor to a desire for revenge, is a cognition that takes extensive psychological energy, and as such, it is difficult to sustain over time (see Figure 5). Consequently, a desire for revenge loses its intensity with time.
2. A recovery attempt may reduce the desire for revenge of customers (see the third issue of this discussion).
3. We performed additional analyses and found no evidence that customers “quench” their desire for revenge through retaliation.⁴ In contrast, we find that prior retaliatory behaviors (Time 1) increase a desire for revenge at Time 2 ($\beta = .20, p < .05$). However, this effect is small, and it becomes nonsignificant at Times 3 and 4 ($ps > .07$).

Do firms’ best customers hold this grudge over a longer period (H₂–H₃)? Again, we answer yes. Relationship quality affects the evolution of revenge and avoidance desires in a manner that can damage firms. After their online complaints, firms’ prior best customers maintain their desire for revenge over a longer period than other customers. Best customers’ desire for avoidance also increases at a faster pace over time. This form of the love-becomes-hate effect represents another piece of evidence that shows that strong relationships can “backfire” on firms after a poor recovery (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). We contribute to this literature by examining the effect of a relationship on the evolution of revenge and avoidance over time. Overall, this stream of research and our findings challenge the preconception that strong relationships always offer a “safety cushion” in service failure contexts.

The “betrayal route”—relationship quality → perceived betrayal → revenge/avoidance—is omnipresent in both Studies 1 and 2. In summary, high-relationship-quality customers always feel more betrayed when no recovery is offered, and this increased betrayal is durable over time. We argue that this betrayal route explains, at least in part, why the desire for revenge of strong-relationship customers declines more slowly and why their desire for avoidance grows more quickly. In support of this view, perceived betrayal mediates (partially or fully) the effects of relationship quality on both revenge and avoidance in Study 1, starting at Times 3 and 4 (see Web Appendix A at <http://www.marketingpower.com/jmnov09>). These two periods constitute the moments when high-relationship-quality customers begin to experience greater desires for revenge and avoidance than the low-relationship-quality subgroup (see

Figure 3). We note that the betrayal route is not the only influence at work at Time 1. We discuss this issue further in the “Theoretical Implications” subsection.

Could firms attenuate a longitudinal love-becomes-hate effect by offering a postcomplaint recovery (H₄)? Our answer to this question is mixed: a no for a desire for avoidance but a yes for a desire for revenge. The main study provides a first longitudinal assessment of the effectiveness of a postcomplaint recovery attempt. As we reported previously, this form of recovery has a minimal effect on complainers’ desire for avoidance. However, this approach is more successful at attenuating a desire for revenge. When firms act within five weeks (i.e., Times 2 and 3) of the online complaint, they can substantially reduce a complainer’s desire for revenge. Because a desire for revenge naturally decreases, we found no effect of a recovery after this critical time.

Study 2 examines further the effects of a postcomplaint recovery on a desire for revenge in different contexts of relationship quality. We find encouraging results for high-relationship-quality customers. Their sense of betrayal and desire for revenge almost disappear over time when they receive any level of recovery. Indeed, we find no differences in their desire for revenge after receiving a normal recovery (a \$50 gift certificate) versus a high-end recovery (i.e., a \$75 cash value and a \$25 bottle of wine) for a \$75 dinner. These results suggest that firms need not “go beyond the call of duty” with high-relationship-quality customers, who seem to be more interested in the social than the economic value of a recovery. Overall, we advise firms to pay particular attention to tracking the online activities of these customers. When such customers are identified, firms should quickly offer them a recovery that includes an acknowledgment of responsibility, an apology, and a “normal” compensation in the form of a gift certificate or replacement rather than a cash reimbursement.

However, firms should be cautious about using a post-complaint recovery with low-relationship-quality customers who complain online for two key reasons. First, these customers’ desire for revenge is conditioned by the level of a recovery. As a result, firms must invest in a costly recovery to obtain a pronounced decrease in their revenge. A normal recovery is not sufficient. Because these customers are unlikely to return, they may not be worth such a high investment. Second, low-relationship-quality customers’ desire for revenge decreases more quickly and becomes very low after five weeks (Time 3) even when no recovery is offered. In other words, time naturally reduces the revenge of low-relationship-quality customers.

Theoretical Implications

In addition to the theory developed for our three key issues, we also provide insights into the effects of a relationship in service failure contexts. This literature is puzzling because both sides of the argument have received support. Many researchers have found a “protection” effect that shows that a strong relationship inhibits negative responses (e.g., Ahluwalia 2002; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998). However, others have posited that a strong relationship

⁴We performed multistage regressions (Bolton and Lemon 1999) in which prior retaliatory behaviors (at Times 1, 2, and 3) predict subsequent desire for revenge (at Times 2, 3, and 4, respectively). Here, retaliatory behaviors are composed of vindictive complaining and negative word of mouth. In these regressions, we controlled for perceived betrayal and the prior desire for revenge. Detailed analyses are available on request from the first author.

amplifies negative responses (e.g., Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). Given the unfavorable nature of our longitudinal findings (e.g., H_2), we positioned our research in the second school of thought. However, several of our specific findings (e.g., the lower level of revenge among high-relationship-quality customers at Time 1) suggest that “protection” and “amplification” can coexist under some circumstances. We provide two explanations to help reconcile these two schools of thought: the reciprocity norm and time contingency.

The reciprocity norm. Compared with low-relationship-quality customers, the responses of high-relationship-quality customers appear to be more “elastic” in this research. When high-relationship-quality customers do not receive recoveries after their online complaints, they feel more betrayed, and their desire for revenge is more sustainable over time. However, any recovery attempts more drastically attenuate their sense of betrayal and desire for revenge than that of the low-relationship-quality subgroup. Here, we suggest that high-relationship-quality customers, given their social connections with firms, are more likely to adhere to the reciprocity norm that regulates most relationships (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001; Gouldner 1960) and to “return in kind” firms’ actions. If they feel hurt by firms’ inactions, their desire to return harm to firms becomes more permanent. However, if firms demonstrate signs of redemption (through their recovery efforts), these customers “return the favor” with a pronounced reduction in their negative responses. In summary, the norm of reciprocity constitutes a promising framework to understand the elastic responses (favorable or unfavorable) of strong-relationship customers compared with weak-relationship customers.

The time contingency. Our research identifies time as an important contingency that helps reconcile the protection versus amplification schools of thought. Consistent with a protection view, our patterns (in both studies) suggest that high-relationship-quality customers initially experience lower desires for revenge and avoidance at Time 1 than low-relationship-quality customers (see Figures 3 and 6). Then, the revenge of high-relationship-quality customers decreases at a slower pace, and by the end of the last period, this desire is higher than that of low-relationship-quality customers (i.e., the amplification effect). We observe a similar pattern in the case of a desire for avoidance in Study 1.

Our process analyses (see Web Appendix A at <http://www.marketingpower.com/jmnov09>) support this interpretation. In summary, in a short period, relationship quality tends to protect firms against online complainers’ desires for revenge and avoidance. Immediately after their online complaints, high-relationship-quality customers are less vengeful than low-relationship-quality customers. However, when a longer period is considered, the betrayal effect slowly dominates, and high-relationship-quality customers become more rancorous than regular customers. Overall, our results suggest that both schools of thought can coexist

depending on the period under consideration (i.e., short versus long). Note that this thesis is similar to an effect that Roehm and Brady (2007) report. In their research, brands held in high regard are protected from negative reactions in the short run, but this effect is reversed over time.

Limitations and Future Research Avenues

We face limitations stemming from performing a longitudinal field study with real complainers. We had limited control over the response rate, and a relatively high level of attrition occurred in our data. In addition, a perfect design would incorporate additional waves, which would enhance our ability to find nonlinear patterns for the two focal desires.

Longitudinal designs do not control for all the threats to internal validity (Cook and Campbell 1979; Rindfleisch et al. 2008), and as a result, we performed a scenario-based experiment to address some of its causal limitations. However, scenario-based experiments also have limitations regarding their ability to manipulate emotions, relationships, and time. Accordingly, we encourage replications and extensions with experimental designs that manipulate the aspects of real service failures (e.g., Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004).

Our research focuses on avoidance and revenge, which reflect a lack of forgiveness toward firms. Further research should offer a more complete examination of the forgiveness construct by examining its positive constituents, such as benevolence motivation (Finkel et al. 2002) and reconciliation (Aquino, Tripp, and Bies 2006). More attention is also needed on the effects of culture on customers’ propensity to forgive (Zourrig, Chebat, and Toffoli 2009). For managers, it is important to understand what leads customers to seek reconciliation or forgive after service failure episodes.

Two schools of thought exist about the effect of a relationship: the protection versus amplifying effects. Additional research is needed to understand the processes at work in both instances. Web Appendix A (see <http://www.marketingpower.com/jmnov09>) provides initial evidence, but more complete work on mediation or suppression should be performed in this area. We encourage the development of a unifying theory that could reconcile both views. Our results suggest that such a theory should account for the reciprocity norm and time. It would also be judicious to incorporate new conceptualizations of relationships, such as attachment (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005) or affection (Yim, Tse, and Chan 2008), that capture a deeper bonding between customers and firms.

Finally, research in psychology has studied the effects of personality traits, such as agreeableness, negative affect, and neuroticism, on revenge and avoidance (McCullough et al. 2001; Skarlicki, Folger, and Tesluk 1999). Although the effects of personality traits are found to be relatively weak (McCullough et al. 1998), their potential role in the rates of change in revenge and avoidance warrant further examination.

APPENDIX Measurements

Core Constructs

Desire for Revenge (Time 1: $\alpha = .97$, AVE = .85; Time 2: $\alpha = .96$, AVE = .84; Time 3: $\alpha = .96$, AVE = .82; Time 4: $\alpha = .96$, AVE = .84)

I want (or wanted) to ...

- Take actions to get the firm in trouble.
- Punish the firm in some way.
- Cause inconvenience to the firm.
- Get even with the firm.
- Make the firm get what it deserved.

Desire for Avoidance (Time 1: $\alpha = .87$, AVE = .66; Time 2: $\alpha = .96$, AVE = .73; Time 3: $\alpha = .91$, AVE = .73; Time 4: $\alpha = .94$, AVE = .81)

I want (or wanted) to ...

- Keep as much distance as possible between the firm and me.
- Avoid frequenting the firm.
- Cut off the relationship with the firm.
- Withdraw my business from the firm.

Perceived Betrayal (Time 1: $\alpha = .81$, AVE = .61; Time 2: $\alpha = .86$, AVE = .67; Time 3: $\alpha = .83$, AVE = .71; Time 4: $\alpha = .85$, AVE = .66)

- I felt (feel) betrayed by the firm.
- The firm broke (breaks) the promise made to me.
- The firm let me down in a moment of need.

Relationship Quality (Time 1: $\alpha = .73$, AVE = .50)

1. Trust (Time 1: $\alpha = .94$, AVE = .80)

I felt that the firm was ...

- “Very undependable” (1)–“very dependable” (7)
- “Very incompetent” (1)–“very competent” (7)
- “Of low integrity” (1)–“of high integrity” (7)
- “Very unresponsive to consumers” (1)–“very responsive consumers” (7)

2. Commitment (Time 1: $\alpha = .92$, AVE = .80)

- I was very committed to my relationship with the service firm.
- The relationship was something I intended to maintain for a long time.
- I put the efforts into maintaining this relationship.

3. Social Benefits (Time 1: $\alpha = .94$, AVE = .80)

My relationship with the service firm was based on its ability to ...

- Recognize who I am as a customer.
- Know my personal needs as a customer.
- Build a “one-on-one” connection.
- Make me feel important and appreciated.

Control Variables

Interactional Fairness ($\alpha = .89$, AVE = .68)

The employee(s) who interacted with me ...

- Treated me in a polite manner.
- Gave me detailed explanations and relevant advice.
- Treated me with respect.
- Treated me with empathy.

Distributive Fairness ($\alpha = .91$, AVE = .78)

- Overall, the outcomes I received from the service firm were fair.
- Given the time, money, and hassle, I got fair outcomes.
- I got what I deserved.

Failure Severity ($\alpha = .86$, AVE = .70)

The service failures caused me ...

- “Minor problems” (1)–“major problems” (7)
- “Small inconvenience” (1)–“big inconvenience” (7)
- “Minor aggravation” (1)–“major aggravation” (7)

Other Control Variables

- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- Before the service failure, how long have you been a customer of this firm?
- Before the service failure, how many times per year did you frequent this firm as a customer?

Retaliatory and Avoidance Behaviors (Tests for Nomological Validity)

Online Public Complaining for Help Seeking ($\alpha = .92$) (newly developed)

I complained to the Web site ...

- To have other customers help me with my disagreement.
- To ask others about the right approach to deal with the firm.
- To solicit the expertise of other customers about my issue with the firm.
- So other customers could advise me on the best way to reach a settlement.

Patronage Reduction ($\alpha = .79$) (Grégoire and Fisher 2006)

- I spent less money at this business.
- I stopped doing business with this firm.
- I reduced frequency of interaction with the firm.
- I brought my business to a competitor.

Vindictive Complaining to the Firm ($\alpha = .89$) (Grégoire and Fisher 2008)

I complained to firm to ...

- Give a hard time to the representatives.
- Be unpleasant with the representative of the company.
- Make someone from the organization suffer for their services.

Negative Word of Mouth ($\alpha = .85$) (Grégoire and Fisher 2006)

- I spread negative word of mouth about the firm.
- I bad-mouthed against this firm to my friends.
- When my friends were looking for a similar product or service, I told them not to buy from this firm.

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