



Is service recovery of equal importance for private vs public complainers?

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Service recovery
Service failure
Justice theory
Public exposure
Observers

ABSTRACT

The current research questions if service recovery has differential effects on complainers depending on the way that they initially complain, being *privately* (e.g., emails, phone call) or *publicly* (e.g., social media, blogs). Using four studies, the current research offers several core contributions. First, building on justice theory, our findings show that a recovery is especially effective at appeasing private complainers' negative affect, while this same recovery has less impact for public complainers. Second, we show that for public complainers, the role of a recovery will be different depending on the level of public exposure. When public complaints are viewed by just a few observers on social media (i.e., low exposure), such complainers assess their own actions of justice restoration as being ineffective. Third, we find that our previous findings are robust no matter if the customer is a complainer or an observer.

1. Introduction

Digital channels now present a plethora of opportunities for customers to express their dissatisfaction. These disgruntled consumers can now choose to voice their displeasure with the firm either *privately* (e.g., email, phone, private messaging) or *publicly* (e.g., posting their complaint on social media or online platforms such as Yelp). Recent studies show that email and phone call—two private channels of communication—remain the favorite avenues for customers to complain against firms (Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, 2020; Maughan, 2019). However, these studies also indicate that consumers are increasingly using public media (e.g., online platforms) to voice their dissatisfaction with firms. For instance, Customer Care Measurement & Consulting (2020) noted that 14 % of complainers used some form of public platform to complain against firms. For private complainers, a vast body of literature has highlighted that an appropriate service recovery is essential to restore their sense of justice and to appease their negative affect (i.e., anger, frustration). However, this stream of research almost exclusively focuses on the benefits of service recovery for private complainers (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Orsingher et al., 2010), with limited research on whether this body of knowledge is applicable to public complainers. Hence, the current research investigates if a service recovery is equally important for private vs public

complainers.

Here, we argue that a service recovery will be less effective in restoring justice for public complainers because they are driven by different motives when compared to private complainers (Grégoire et al., 2019). Customers *privately* complain to firms when they seek a recovery (e.g., compensation and/or apology). For these customers, getting an appropriate recovery is the main objective guiding their actions. In contrast, customers *publicly* complain when they are driven by a desire to alert other consumers and tarnish a company's reputation in front of an audience (Grégoire et al., 2018). For them, getting a recovery is not the main goal guiding their actions (Ward & Ostrom, 2006), although such a recovery could be viewed as a nice supplement. To address these issues, we conduct three main experiments, and one additional experiment is reported in Web Appendix. By doing so, the current research makes three core contributions to theory and practice.

First, we posit, in Study 1, that the effects of a recovery vary depending on whether customers complain privately or publicly. By doing so, we respond to recent calls made in favor of adaptive recovery, which proposes that service recovery should be adapted according to customers' characteristics and situational contexts (Khamitov et al., 2020; Nazifi et al., 2021; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). Building on justice theory (Arsenovic et al., 2021; Tax et al., 1998), we find that a recovery is especially effective at enhancing *private complainers'* justice

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.08.049>

Received 1 December 2021; Received in revised form 18 August 2022; Accepted 25 August 2022

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restoration (defined as the extent to which customers perceive that their actions were effective at restoring the balance with a firm; DeWitt et al., 2008) and decreasing negative affect, while this same recovery has a diminished return for *public complainers*. This finding brings some nuance to the commonly held belief that a service recovery is the most effective solution in all contexts and for all customers (e.g., Béal et al., 2019; Mattila, 2001). Through private complaining, customers have the assurance that the firm is aware of their actions (Grégoire et al., 2018)—and thus, they hope that the firm will respond by providing a recovery. In this case, a recovery has a significant impact on their perceived justice restoration, which substantially decreases their negative affect about the situation. In contrast, public complainers try to restore justice on their own by exposing the company online (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). In their case, they have fewer expectations about receiving a recovery, and this has a smaller impact on their justice restoration and negative affect.

Relatedly, our second contribution is to unveil what appeases public complainers, considering that recovery has limited impact on pacifying these individuals. Given that public complainers are mainly motivated by warning observers, we investigate the effect that public exposure (low vs high) has on the perceived justice restoration of these individuals. Here, observers are defined as other customers who are present on online platforms and who witness the interactions between complainers and firms (Bacile et al., 2018; Hogreve et al., 2019), and public exposure thus refers to the support (e.g., likes and shares) received by a public complaint (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). In Study 2, we argue that public complainers experience a significant increase in justice restoration when their complaints have been viewed and supported by a sufficiently large number of observers. In the context of highly popular public complaints, a recovery would become less important for these individuals. In contrast, when a public complaint fails to reach a large audience, the presence of a recovery serves as a suitable alternative for restoring justice. In other words, when public complainers are not able to restore justice for themselves by reaching a large audience, they derive a sense of justice restoration through a typical service recovery, just as private complainers do.

Third, we consider the role of customers' perspective—that is, if the involved customer is the *complainer* vs an *external observer*. Recent literature on public complaining has highlighted the importance of examining the responses of online observers (e.g., Hogreve et al., 2019; Schaefer & Schamari, 2016), who form their judgments on the basis of firms' responses to the complainers (e.g., recovery). To better understand the role of observers, Study 3 examines whether a core interaction

of this research—that is, “service recovery by public exposure”—depends upon the perspective of the customer, that is, whether the customer is a complainer or an observer. We hypothesize in general that our key theoretical contentions should apply to both complainers and observers, since justice theory has been successfully applied to both types of individuals in recent research (Bacile et al., 2018).

2. Research background and hypotheses

2.1. The differential effect of a recovery for private vs public complainers

Fig. 1 presents the conceptual model of our research and the hypothesized relationships among constructs. Our model is based on a well-established process—that is, a service recovery enhances justice restoration, which in turn decreases negative affect (Grégoire et al., 2018). All key constructs of our study and their definitions are summarized in Table 1.

The complaint management literature has intensively investigated the crucial role of service recovery for pacifying customers' negative

Table 1
Definition and origin of model constructs.

Construct	Definition	References
Service recovery	All actions a firm can take to redress the grievances caused by a service failure.	Mattila (2001)
Justice restoration	The extent to which customers perceive that their actions, taken after a service failure, were effective at redressing the balance with a firm.	Ambrose and Schminke (2009)
Negative affect	A subjective lack of pleasure that includes feelings of anger and frustration about a situation.	Watson et al. (1988)
Public exposure	The extent to which a complainer can gather intensive support from observers for its post; the level of public exposure and support is reflected in the cumulation of observers' likes and shares.	Ward and Ostrom (2006)
Observers	Other customers in an online environment who are virtually present, and who observe the service recovery experience of a complainer.	Bacile et al. (2018)
Trust (Study 3)	A collection of beliefs about a company's credibility, integrity, and benevolence.	Hogreve et al. (2019)

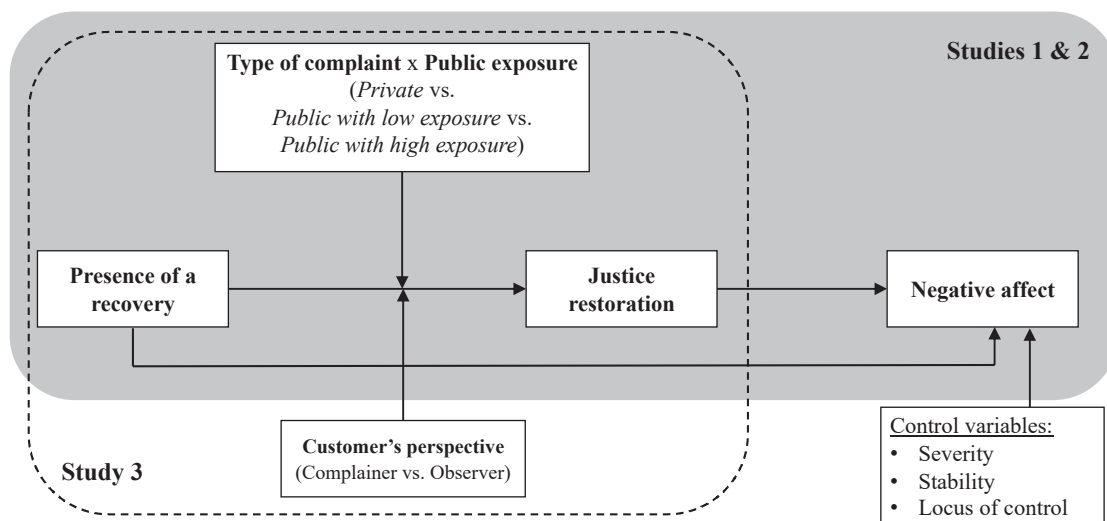


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

affect (Valentini et al., 2020). Justice theory is a popular and dominant paradigm to explain the benefits of service recovery (Mattila, 2001; Tax et al., 1998), as confirmed by previous meta-analyses (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Orsingher et al., 2010) and a recent systematic review (Khamitov et al., 2020). Thus, the effectiveness of a service recovery in reducing customers' negative affect is explained by a recovery's ability to restore customers' sense of justice. Evaluations that justice has been restored (or not) by a service recovery is a cognitive appraisal that elicits an emotional response (Valentini et al., 2020). Accordingly, customers who feel under-rewarded during the recovery process will judge that justice has not been restored; and as a result, they are more likely to experience negative affect (Chebat & Slusarczyk, 2005). Thus, we build on this well-established sequence: "service recovery → justice restoration → negative affect."

The core contribution of our research is to investigate if this sequence is robust for all types of complainers. Recent adaptive recovery literature urges companies to adapt their recovery efforts in relation to customers' characteristics and situational circumstances (Khamitov et al., 2020; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019). For instance, in the context of flight overbooking, Nazifi et al. (2021) find that a recovery would become more (or less) effective depending on customers' voluntary (or involuntary) offload. In the same vein, a company must adapt its recovery according to customers' prior relationship (Gelbrich et al., 2016) or cultural models (Ringberg et al., 2007). In this research, we investigate whether firms should adapt their recovery depending on the type of complaint (i.e., privately vs public).

Following a service failure, customers can opt for different mediums to convey their dissatisfaction with the firm. Specifically, some disgruntled customers choose to privately voice their dissatisfaction to service providers, while others publicly complain by employing online platforms including social media (Grégoire et al., 2015). On the one hand, *private complainers* choose a private channel of communication (e.g., phone or email) to reach out to the firm. Private complaints are deliberately chosen to ensure that the defaulting firm is aware of a customer's dissatisfaction. On the other hand, *public complainers* express their dissatisfaction using a public channel of communication, like social media and online platforms (e.g., reviews sites, blogs). These complainers post their complaints publicly in order to mobilize a large public audience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Siret & Sabadie, 2022). As noted in the introduction, the popularity of social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) as well as specialized online platforms for user-generated content (e.g., Yelp and TripAdvisor) is on the rise, making the phenomenon of public complaining more rampant than ever. According to recent studies (Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, 2020; Maughan, 2019), between 14 % and 25 % of complainers report using social media to voice their dissatisfaction to the firm. In contrast, private channels (e.g., phone or email) have been on the decline in the past few years; while 70 % of complainers conveyed their dissatisfaction by phone in 2017, they were only 42 % in 2020 (Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, 2020).

Private and public complaints differ on three main aspects. First, these complaints typically differ in their medium of communication, with private complaints often being channeled through phone calls and emails, whereas public complaints are shared on online platforms. However, it should be noted that some forms of private complaining can also take place on online platforms—through direct messaging on Twitter for instance. Second and relatedly, complaints are considered as private when the act of complaining is solely known by the complainer and the firm at fault; other parties are not aware of the complaint and the ensuing recovery. In contrast, complaints are considered as public when they also involve an audience of observers, who directly witness the situation (Bacile et al., 2018; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). This element is central to the "private vs public" complaints distinction. Third, these two types of complaints are driven by different motivations. Customers generally complain privately to seek a recovery from the firm, but they complain publicly to harm a company's reputation and alert other

consumers (Grégoire et al., 2019).

Specifically, this last aspect, which is related to motives, is crucial to capture why private and public complainers do not give equal importance to a service recovery. Private complainers directly contact the firm to seek a form of redress for their service failure; accordingly, a recovery should be highly important in restoring justice for private complainers (e.g., Arsenovic et al., 2021; Béal et al., 2019). In turn, many studies show that public complainers are primarily motivated by a desire to harm the firm's reputation and warn observers about the company's misadventures (Berger, 2014; Bonfield & Cole, 2007; Siret & Sabadie, 2022). These public complainers try to restore justice on their own by alerting others rather than waiting for a recovery from the firm. Here, receiving a recovery is not the "end goal" for them, although it could represent an appreciated supplement. Accordingly, a firm's recovery has an attenuated effect in increasing the sense of justice restoration for public complainers, compared to private complainers:

H1: The type of complaint interacts with the presence of a recovery for predicting justice restoration, such that for private complainers—compared to public complainers—the presence of a recovery has a stronger effect on justice restoration, which in turn reduces negative affect.

2.2. What really satiates public complainers: the moderating role of public exposure

Given that recovery has a limited effect on public complainers' perceptions of justice restoration, we further investigate mechanisms through which public complainers can be pacified. Earlier, we stated that public complainers try to restore justice by tarnishing the company's reputation in front of a wide audience. Thus, we consider the critical role of *public exposure*, which constitutes the extent to which a complainer can gather intensive support from observers for her/his post (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Given that public complainers are not seeking redress in the form of a recovery—they are instead motivated by exposing the firms to others (Grégoire et al., 2019; Kähr et al., 2016)—we hypothesize that their sense of justice restoration is conditioned by the level of public exposure (e.g., likes and shares) received by their complaints (Schaefer & Schamari, 2016). Receiving many likes from observers is a signal of complainers' success at publicly exposing the firm. Accordingly, we argue that justice restoration should be higher for public complainers when their complaints receive significant support from observers (i.e., many likes and shares), compared to when such complaints receive little attention (i.e., a few likes and shares).

When public complainers receive significant attention from a large audience, any additional recovery from the firm should have a limited effect on justice restoration. The attention received from the observers confirms the success of these complainers in harming a company's reputation, which leads to a strong perception of justice restoration (Berger, 2014). Thus, even in the absence of a recovery, we posit that public complainers perceive a high sense of justice when they reach a large audience, as opposed to a small one. In turn, when public complaints fail to capture the attention of a substantial audience, these complainers are unable to accomplish their goals of harming a company's reputation and alerting others. In this case, public complainers consider that they have failed at restoring justice "on their own." These public complainers' efforts do not result in any loss for the firm (in terms of reputation or brand image), which makes them believe that the firm remains unaffected by their actions (Kähr et al., 2016). So, when public complainers are unable to restore justice by themselves, we suggest that a recovery could prove effective. In simple terms, when public complainers fail to mobilize a large audience, they will consider a recovery as an acceptable alternative for restoring their sense of justice. Thus, although they initially opted for a public complaint, these customers become similar to private complainers in terms of the importance attributed to a recovery. Formally:

H2: For public complainers, the amount of public exposure interacts

with the presence of a recovery on justice restoration, such that the presence of a recovery will have a stronger effect on justice restoration for public complainers with low public exposure, compared to individuals with high public exposure.

2.3. The consideration of customers' perspective: complainers vs observers

We test the robustness of our main sequence by accounting for the role of customers' perspective—that is, a variable that captures whether the customer is the *complainer* or an *observer*. Recent research on public complaining has highlighted the importance of examining the responses of both complainers and observers (e.g., Schaeffers & Schamari, 2016; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). This literature judiciously points out that observers can also be affected by companies' recoveries. Given that such observers directly witness a complainer's grievance with the firm, they often form attitudes and intentions toward the firm according to its proposed recovery—even if observers are not directly involved in the whole episode. Such a logic relies on social learning theory that asserts that observers develop behavioral patterns and emotional responses through observation, without having to undergo personally a given experience (Hogreve et al., 2019). As a result, a significant body of research supports the view that observers tend to be highly invested in complainers' situations, as if they were directly involved in these episodes (e.g., Bacile et al., 2018; Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2013). Accordingly, we assume that the ability of a recovery to restore justice would be equivalent for all consumers, no matter their perspective (i.e., direct complainers or observers). Formally:

H3: Customers' perspective has no moderating effect on the positive effect of the presence of recovery on justice restoration.

2.4. Overview of the studies

We tested our framework in a series of three main studies and one supplementary study that is reported in the Web Appendix. Study 1 examines the interaction effect between the type of complaining and the presence of recovery on negative affect through justice restoration (H1). Next, Study 2 manipulates the public exposure received by public complainers (H2) so that we can better understand how justice perceptions are restored for public complainers. Finally, Study 3 replicates this last effect in a different service context (i.e., a garage), and it also examines the role of customers' perspective (H3).

3. Study 1

3.1. Design and measures

Study 1 is a 2 (type of complaint: private vs public) × 2 (presence of a recovery: yes vs no) between-subjects experiment that was designed to test H1. Participants were recruited through the crowdsourcing platform Prolific because participants on this platform tend to provide higher quality data (Peer et al., 2017). Twenty participants were removed after they failed one of our attention checks, resulting in a final sample of 202 U.S. participants (52.5 % female; $M_{Age} = 33.56$ years old, $SD = 11.60$). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. The experimental design had three phases (see Web Appendix A). First, participants read a description about a customer named Sebastian and his wife experiencing a service failure in a restaurant. Participants were asked to imagine themselves in Sebastian's shoes. Second, we manipulated the type of complaint. In the private complaint condition, Sebastian directly wrote an email to the restaurant's owner to convey his dissatisfaction. In contrast, in the public complaint condition, Sebastian posted his complaint on a popular online forum. We used the following item as a manipulation check: "Sebastian's reaction was an effective way to spread negative publicity about the restaurant 'Chez Albert'." As expected, this item scored higher in the "public complaint" condition compared to the "private complaint" condition ($M_{Public} = 5.76 > M_{Private} = 3.05$; $F(1, 200) = 136.38, p < .01$). Third, we manipulated the recovery: in one condition, the participants read that Sebastian received an apology and full refund from the restaurant owner. On the other hand, in the no-recovery condition, the participants read that Sebastian received no answer from the restaurant after this incident.

For our dependent variables, we measured justice restoration with a 4-item scale ($M = 4.31, SD = 1.34, \alpha = 0.82$; Ambrose & Schminke, 2009), such as "Sebastian's reaction to the restaurant balanced his relationship with the restaurant." Negative affect was measured with a 5-item scale ($M = 4.48, SD = 1.55, \alpha = .92$; Carlsmith et al., 2008), such as "In my opinion, Sebastian might feel negative." Web Appendix B provides the detailed items and their psychometric properties. We also controlled for important confounds in the recovery literature (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2014), such as failure stability ($M = 2.68, SD = 1.68$), locus of control ($M = 6.11, SD = 1.10, \alpha = 0.91$), and failure severity ($M = 5.30, SD = 1.44, \alpha = 0.94$). Further, results from multiple ANOVAs indicated that neither failure stability ($F(1, 198) = 0.01, p > .10$), locus of control ($F(1, 198) = 0.01, p > .10$), nor failure severity ($F(1, 198) = 0.98, p > .10$) differed among the conditions, eliminating the

Table 2
Detailed results of the moderated mediation for Study 1.

Variables	Justice restoration		Negative affect	
	Coeff.	t	Coeff.	t
X: Presence of a recovery (0 = No recovery; 1 = Recovery)	2.050	8.655***	-1.289	-5.854***
W: Type of complaint (0 = Private complaint; 1 = Public complaint)	1.585	5.731***		
X × W	-1.503	-4.474***		
Justice restoration			-0.257	-3.359***
Control variables				
Severity	0.040	.681 ^{n.s.}	0.040	.595 ^{n.s.}
Stability	0.046	.934 ^{n.s.}	0.057	.997 ^{n.s.}
Locus	0.049	.655 ^{n.s.}	0.237	2.755***
R ²	0.326		0.324	
ΔR ²	0.069			
	[ΔF(1, 195) = 20.014, p < .01]			
Conditional effects of a recovery at values of the moderator:				
	Effect		95 % Confidence interval	
			LLCI	ULCI
Private complaint	-0.527		-0.882	-0.238
Public complaint	-0.141		-0.342	-0.014
Coefficient of moderated mediation	0.387		0.157	0.669

Note: *** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10, n.s. = not significant.

possibility of such confounds.

3.2. Results of Study 1

In order to test the moderated-mediated sequence implied in H1, we used the PROCESS macro (Model 7, Hayes, 2017; Table 2). The results show that the interaction between recovery and type of complaint on justice restoration is significant ($\beta = -1.50, p < .01$). Specifically, we find that the effect of a recovery is stronger when the complaint is private ($\beta = 2.05, p < .01$) rather than public ($\beta = 0.55, p < .05$). Further, we find that justice restoration exerts a negative influence on negative affect ($\beta = -0.26, p < .01$). Overall, the index of moderated mediation is significant and positive ($\beta = 0.39, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.157; 0.669]$), and this result indicates that the sequence “presence of a recovery \rightarrow justice restoration \rightarrow negative affect” differs depending on whether the complaint is private ($\beta = -0.53, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.882; -0.238]$) or public ($\beta = -0.14, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.342; -0.014]$). Specifically, these results show that this indirect effect is stronger for private complainers than for public complainers. H1 is validated. Web Appendix C reports additional analyses to compare effect sizes between our conditions; these additional analyses also support H1.

3.3. Discussion of Study 1

Study 1 demonstrates that a recovery’s impact on restoring justice differs across private vs public complainers. Building on justice theory (Tax et al., 1998), we demonstrate that a service recovery is especially important for restoring justice (and reducing negative affect) among private complainers. This result is aligned with the vast literature on service recovery (e.g., Béal et al., 2019). However, our findings show that this sequence is less important for public complainers. For this type of complainer, a service recovery has a smaller effect on justice restoration. This result makes us wonder how this justice-based mechanism can be applied in the context of public complainers. To further explore this issue, Study 2 investigates the role of public exposure in the justice-based process of interest (see H2).

4. Study 2

4.1. Design and measures

Study 2 is a 3 (type of complaint: public complaint with high public exposure vs public complaint with low public exposure vs private complaint) \times 2 (presence of a recovery: yes vs no) between-subjects experiment that was designed to test H2. The procedure in this study was similar to that in Study 1 (see Web Appendix A), except that we manipulated the level of public exposure (reflected in terms of the “likes”) as follows: in the “low public exposure” condition, the complaint received 5 likes, whereas in the “high public exposure” condition, the complaint received 5,000 likes. We recruited U.S. participants through the crowdsourcing platform Prolific; but 46 participants were discarded for failing attention checks, resulting in a final sample of 284 participants (53.9 % female; $M_{\text{Age}} = 33.02$ years old, $SD = 11.37$). The participants were randomly assigned to one of six treatment groups.

For manipulation checks, we used the same item as in Study 1 to check for type of complaint. This item worked as expected and was higher in the “public complaint” conditions rather than in the “private complaint” one ($M_{\text{Public}} = 5.67 > M_{\text{Private}} = 3.05; F(1, 282) = 199.47, p < .01$). Moreover, we found no significant difference in this item whether the public complaint received high or low exposure ($p > .10$). To test whether our manipulation for public exposure was successful, we used a one-item scale that asked participants if they considered that the complaint received few likes (anchored by 1) or many likes (anchored by 7). The manipulation was successful ($F(2, 281) = 304.45, p < .01$), with participants in the “public complaint with high exposure” condition indicating that the complaint received significantly more likes compared

to participants in the “public complaint with low exposure” condition ($M_{\text{High Exposure}} = 6.72 > M_{\text{Low Exposure}} = 2.04, p < .01$). Moreover, we used the same measures of justice restoration ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.41, \alpha = 0.83$) and negative affect ($M = 4.69, SD = 1.53, \alpha = 0.91$) as in Study 1 (see Web Appendix B). Further, the participants’ evaluation of the manipulations did not differ among conditions in terms of locus of control ($M = 6.05, SD = 1.10, \alpha = 0.88; F(1, 278) = 0.36, p > .10$), severity ($M = 5.31, SD = 1.40, \alpha = 0.92; F(1, 278) = 0.14, p > .10$), and stability ($M = 2.87, SD = 1.69; F(1, 278) = 0.10, p > .10$).

4.2. Results of Study 2

Given that our moderator employed three levels (private, public with low public exposure, and public with high public exposure), we ran moderated-mediation models by employing a multi-categorical analysis for the moderator. The model compared private complaint with public complaint with low public exposure (Model A), private complaint with public complaint with high public exposure (Model B), and public complaint with high public exposure and public complaint with low public exposure (Model C). Detailed results are provided in Figs. 2 and 3.

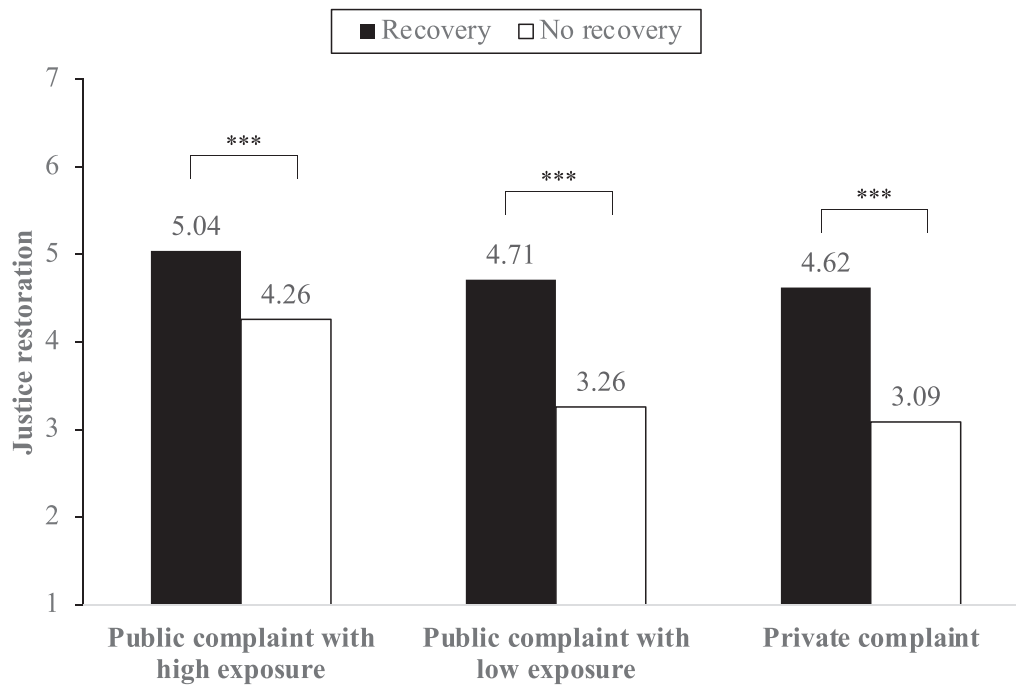
For Model A, the index of moderated mediation is not significant ($\beta = 0.02, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.165; 0.187]$). Specifically, we find no difference in the indirect sequence “recovery \rightarrow justice restoration \rightarrow negative affect” between private complainers ($\beta = -0.34, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.564; -0.147]$) and public complainers with low exposure ($\beta = -0.32, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.568; -0.130]$). Thus, when public complainers received low public exposure, they gave similar importance to a recovery as private complainers do. For Model B, the index of moderated-mediation is significant ($\beta = 0.15, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.008; 0.357]$). Specifically, we find that the indirect sequence “recovery \rightarrow justice restoration \rightarrow negative affect” is larger for private complainers ($\beta = -0.34, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.564; -0.147]$) than for public complainers with high exposure ($\beta = -0.18, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.318; -0.070]$). Finally, for Model C, the index of moderated mediation is marginally significant ($\beta = -0.14, 90\% \text{ CI } [-0.318; -0.008]$). Specifically, the indirect sequence “recovery \rightarrow justice restoration \rightarrow negative affect” tends to be larger for public complainers receiving low exposure ($\beta = -0.32, 90\% \text{ CI } [-0.520; -0.158]$) than for public complainers with high exposure ($\beta = -0.18, 90\% \text{ CI } [-0.295; -0.087]$). Overall, these results are consistent with H2. For public complainers, receiving strong support from observers (high public exposure) reduces the importance of a recovery. Web Appendix D reports additional analyses to test the differences in effect sizes between the three levels of moderator.

4.3. Supplementary study

We checked the robustness of our key conclusion—that is, a recovery is more important for public complainers with low exposure compared to those with high exposure—by conducting a supplementary study that replicated the core results of Study 2 in a different service context (i.e., a garage). The detailed analyses of this study are provided in Web Appendix E. Briefly, the results confirm the main conclusions of Study 2. Again, we find that a recovery has a stronger influence on negative affect, through justice restoration, when the public complaint received low exposure ($\beta = -0.35, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.552; -0.162]$) compared to a public complaint with high exposure ($\beta = -0.22, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.363; -0.105]$). H2 is supported.

4.4. Discussion of Study 2

Study 2 complements Study 1 by investigating the role of public exposure in restoring justice for public complainers. Specifically, we find that a service recovery has a different impact among public complainers, depending on their level of public exposure. Specifically, the conclusion of Study 1—a recovery is less important for public complainers—mainly holds when such complainers are successful in reaching a large audience. However, a service recovery remains important for public



Note: *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$, n.s. = not significant.

Fig. 2. Interaction plot between type of complaint and the presence of a recovery on justice restoration – Study 2. Note: *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$, n.s. = not significant.

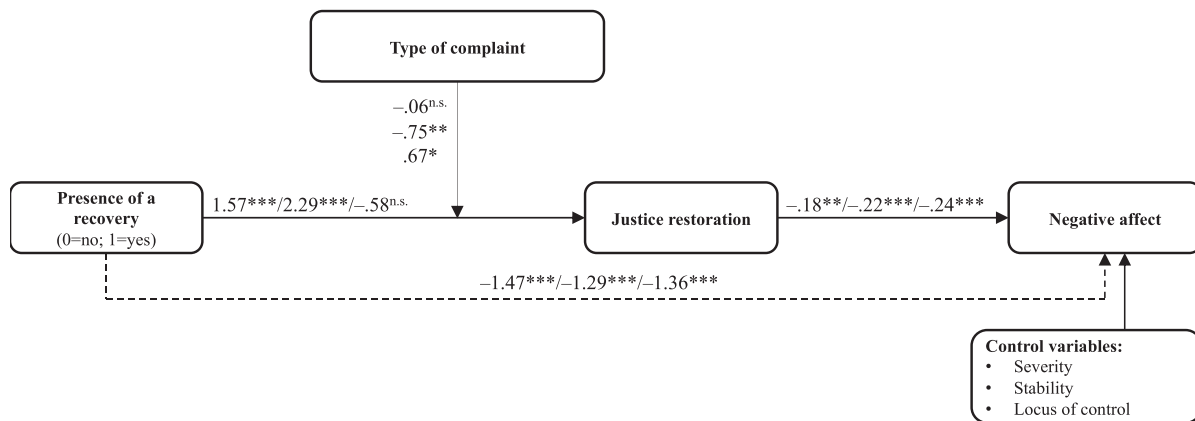


Fig. 3. Detailed results for moderated-mediators for Study 2. Note 1: On each arrow, the first number presents the analyses in which we compare private complaint (coded 0) and public complaint with low exposure (coded 1), the second number presents the analyses in which we compare between private complaint (coded 0) and public complaint with high exposure (coded 1), and the third number presents the analysis in which we make a comparison between public complaint with high exposure (coded 0) and public complaint with low exposure (coded 1). Note 2: n.s. = not significant, *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$.

complainers receiving limited attention and exposure. Because such complainers are unsuccessful at reaching a large audience, they consider that they have failed to restore justice for and by themselves (Berger, 2014). In this situation, a recovery from the firm becomes a suitable alternative for restoring the perceived lack of justice. Our results suggest that these customers should be considered as private complainers in terms of importance given to a recovery.

5. Study 3

5.1. Design and measures

Study 3 is a 2 (public exposure: low vs high) × 2 (presence of a recovery: yes vs no) × 2 (customers' perspective: complainer vs observer)

between-subjects experiment designed to test H2 and H3. For this study, we did not consider a "private complaint" condition because we would not be able to compare observers' and complainers' reactions here; by definition, observers cannot witness private complaints. Public exposure was manipulated in terms of likes and retweets ("19 likes and 1 retweet" for low exposure and "488 likes and 527 retweets" for high exposure). Then, the presence of a recovery was manipulated as follows. In the recovery condition, the participants were told that the garage had posted a response below the customer's initial review wherein the garage apologized and offered a refund. In the no-recovery condition, the customer never received a response from the garage. Finally, we manipulated customers' perspective by informing the participants that the problem directly happened to them and that they had posted the complaint on social media (i.e., complainers' perspective). For the other

condition (i.e., observers' perspective), the participants read that the problem happened to another customer, and that they were just an external observer of the situation on the Internet (see Web Appendix F for detailed manipulations). We recruited participants through Prolific, but 23 participants had to be dismissed because they failed the attention checks—which resulted in a final sample of 485 U.S. participants (49.5 % female; $M_{\text{Age}} = 36.96$ years old, $SD = 12.52$). Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight treatment groups.

The manipulation for public exposure was assessed using the same one-item scale as used in Study 2, which indicated that the manipulation was successful ($M_{\text{High Exposure}} = 6.40 > M_{\text{Low Exposure}} = 1.68$, $F(1, 483) = 2,056.52$, $p < .01$). For customers' perspective, participants had to report on a 7-point Likert item whether they put themselves in the shoes of an observer (coded 1) or the complainer (coded 7). The manipulation was successful as participants in the complainer's perspective condition reported a higher score than those in the observer's perspective condition ($M_{\text{Complainer}} = 6.15 > M_{\text{Observer}} = 1.33$, $F(1, 483) = 1,173.90$, $p < .01$). Measures were collected for justice restoration ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.32$, $\alpha = 0.85$) using the same scale as earlier (see Web Appendix B). Further, as in previous studies, participants reported no significant difference in perceptions related to locus of control ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 1.52$, $\alpha = 0.95$; $F(1, 477) = 1.02$, $p > .10$), stability ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.64$; $F(1, 477) = 1.93$, $p > .10$), and severity ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.29$, $\alpha = 0.93$; $F(1, 477) = 0.13$, $p > .10$).

5.2. Results of Study 3

To test H2 and H3, we used PROCESS macro (Model 2), with the presence of a recovery as the independent variable, type of complaint and customers' perspective as parallel moderators, and justice restoration as the dependent variable.¹ The results show that the interaction term between the presence of a recovery and public exposure is significant ($\beta = -0.49$, $p < .05$), such that a recovery has a stronger effect on justice restoration when the complaint has received low exposure ($\beta = 1.19$, $p < .01$) rather than high exposure ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < .01$), as suggested by H2. Web Appendix G reports additional analyses to test the robustness of the results in terms of effect sizes, depending on whether the complaint received low or high exposure. We also found no significant interaction between customers' perspective and the presence of a recovery on justice restoration ($\beta = -0.13$, $p = .56$). In other words, the ability of a recovery to restore justice does not differ between complainers and observers. This result supports H3. We only found that customers' perspective exerts a direct effect on justice restoration ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < .05$), such that justice restoration is higher for complainers compared to observers ($M_{\text{Complainer}} = 4.40 > M_{\text{Observer}} = 4.11$, $F(1, 483) = 6.14$, $p < .05$).

Ruling out the effect of trust. In this research, we build on justice theory to justify the centrality of justice restoration in our model; this variable has been shown to play a key role in previous research focusing on complainers (Orsingher et al., 2010). Although justice theory has been regularly used to investigate observers' reactions (e.g., Bacile et al., 2018), some research also considers that trust is a valid alternative mechanism to understand observers' intentions (Hogreve et al., 2019; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). To test this possibility, we conducted an additional analysis where we replicated our Model 2 by considering trust as dependent variable. Trust was measured with a 6-item scale ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.66$, $\alpha = 0.94$; Hogreve et al., 2019; see Web Appendix B for items). Our findings reveal that neither the interaction terms with public exposure ($p = .40$) nor customers' perspective ($p = .55$) are significant. Such additional analyses rule out the possibility that trust could play a role in explaining our results.

¹ Because of space constraints, we consider solely justice restoration as the dependent variable and do not report the indirect sequence involving negative affect as in Studies 1 and 2.

5.3. Discussion of Study 3

Study 3 replicates the main conclusions from Study 2—that is, a recovery is more important for public complainers when they fail to reach a large audience. More importantly, we also include customers' perspective. When a company recovers from public complaints, their responses will influence both complainers and observers (Schaefer & Schamari, 2016). Here, the results show that customers' perspective has no moderating effect on our main sequence. This result reaffirms our core contention: a service recovery is more effective at restoring justice when the public complaint receives low exposure, compared to high exposure. In addition to the results, we also find that justice restoration tends to be higher for complainers than for observers.

6. General discussion

6.1. Theoretical implications

Is service recovery equally effective for all complainers, no matter whether they complain privately or publicly? The vast literature on service recovery considers that a recovery is crucial to restore justice, but this body of research almost exclusively focuses on private complainers. This literature seems at odds with a growing proportion of customers who now express their dissatisfaction publicly (on social media and online platforms). Surprisingly, it is still unknown if these public complainers attach the same level of importance to a service recovery as private complainers do. Addressing this question, this research makes three core contributions.

First, we contribute to the recent adaptive recovery literature, which argues that firms should adapt their recovery strategies depending on customers' characteristics or contextual aspects (Gelbrich et al., 2016; Nazifi et al., 2021; Ringberg et al., 2007). Here, we suggest that companies should adjust their recoveries depending on the type of complaint (private vs public) because a recovery is less effective at restoring justice for public complainers in comparison to private complainers. When customers complain privately, we find that service recovery has a larger effect on justice restoration, in line with the conclusions from previous research (e.g., Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). However, our study questions this commonly held view by showing that the role of a recovery is weaker for public complainers. These complainers try to restore justice on their own by damaging the company's reputation and discouraging observers from purchasing from this firm. Receiving a service recovery from the firm is not the main objective of their actions; it is merely a "nice bonus," especially when a public complaint receives a high level of public exposure, as we discuss next.

Second, as we question the importance of a recovery for public complainers, our findings give some insights about what really appeases them by incorporating the notion of public exposure (Grégoire et al., 2018; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). As mentioned earlier, such complainers articulate their dissatisfaction in public because they wish to hurt a firm's reputation in the eyes of many observers. Here, the success of their action is contingent upon the size of the audience reached. Specifically, for public complainers who receive a high public exposure, the effect of recovery is still limited. However, when public complainers fail to elicit a significant amount of public exposure, they end up behaving like private complainers—that is, they are pacified with a recovery.

Third, we examine in Study 3 if these conclusions are robust or differ depending on the perspective of a customer, that is, whether s/he is a complainer or an observer. In the case of public complaints, recent research shows the necessity for companies to consider not only the complainer but also the observers, who are bound to develop attitudes and intentions toward the company based on its public actions (Bacile et al., 2018; Hogreve et al., 2019). Our results show that our key predictions (i.e., H2) hold and that customers' perspective exerts no moderating effect (H3). Social learning theory explains that observers can be as invested as complainers in these situations, as if they were

directly involved in these episodes.

6.2. Managerial implications

Our research also offers several managerial implications for practice. Managers face numerous complaints daily, with some complainers reaching out to the firms privately, while others choose to complain publicly through various online platforms. Our research informs managers that their service recovery has differential influence on these complainers, and that the effects of their actions to restore justice would not be the same depending on the type of complainer (private or public). For private complainers, a service recovery is crucial. Managers should be very aware that these complaints should be treated with great caution, as these individuals would highly value a service recovery. However, for public complainers, a service recovery can also restore justice; but in this case, this effect becomes less important. Importantly, our research informs managers about the importance of considering the level of public exposure associated with public complaints. Although all complainers should be treated with consideration, they can also be treated differently depending on the situation. For instance, it may not be necessary to offer expensive recoveries to public complainers receiving much attention (i.e., many likes and shares). In their case, partial refunds and/or public apologies could be appropriate and sufficient. Although firms could use less costly recoveries for popular public complainers, we still recommend providing minimal recoveries to these individuals to send a positive signal to the observers.

6.3. Limitations and avenues for further research

This research also pertains to some limitations that can highlight avenues for future research. First, our research manipulated the presence of recovery by offering a full refund and apology. However, past research has classified recovery according to type of recovery (e.g., voucher, discount, money back) and level of compensation (e.g., 50 % or 100 % reimbursed). Future research could investigate if the type of recovery has differential effects on these two profiles of complainers. Second, we explain customers' decision to complain privately or publicly by referring to their different motivations; such an approach is well-established in the literature. However, customers' personality traits could also influence their propensity to engage (or not) in some behaviors. Future research could investigate how personality traits interact with a recovery to explain justice restoration.

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Mathieu Béal: Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Anshu Suri:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Nguyen Nguyen:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. **Yany Grégoire:** Methodology, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Sylvain Sénécal:** Methodology, Resources.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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