THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DETERRENCE TACTICS TO REDUCE ILLEGITIMATE COMPLAINING

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ABSTRACT

Illegitimate customer complaints are a growing problem for many firms, and research is needed to develop ways to deter them. The 'deterrence-neutralization-behavior' (DNB) framework by Dootson et al. (2018) suggests that certain deterrence tactics may deter customers, especially if the tactic matches the neutralizations (excuses) customers use to rationalize their illegitimate complaining. The purpose of this study is to test the DNB framework.

A scenario-based, between-subjects experiment found that illegitimate complainers exposed to a deterrence tactic experience higher cognitive dissonance and lower intention to complain illegitimately than customers in the control group. However, matching the deterrence tactic with the neutralization used by the customer does not have an additional effect.

The results suggest that deterrence tactics work, not because they address and invalidate the specific excuse illegitimate complainers use, but because they make existing cognitive dissonance salient again. It is important that deterring messages are impossible to avoid ("in your face") and strategically timed (immediately before any planned unethical act).

INTRODUCTION

Even the best service providers and manufacturers sometimes deliver failing services and faulty products, despite their best efforts to monitor and control product and service quality (Del Rio-Lanza et al., 2009; Hess et al., 2003); (Paulssen & Catenazzo, 2015). This may cause customers to be dissatisfied and complain (Tang et al., 2010; Prim & Pras, 1999; Blodgett et al., 1993). Evidence suggests the number of complaints to firms is rising sharply in many countries (Juhl et al., 2006), although most dissatisfied customers are hesitant to complain directly to a firm (Huppertz, 2000), for instance, because they fear the time and effort they have to put in to succeed (Huppertz, 2014).

After a complaint, firms will often try to restore the customer's satisfaction during the service recovery process (Blodgett & Li, 2007; Hess, Ganesan, &, Klein, 2003). Not every customer complaint, however, is a legitimate complaint. A growing number of complaints stem not from genuine dissatisfaction but from a variety of other motives, such as financial gains, venting emotions, or achieving intrapsychic goals (Arora & Chakraborty, 2020; Kim & Baker, 2019; Khantimirov & Karande, 2018). Many firms also report an increase in the number of illegitimate complaints. L.L.Bean, for instance, observed a remarkable increase in illegitimate product returns (Hagenbuch, 2018) and Alibaba reported more than 200.000 illegitimate complaints (Yin, 2017).

These illegitimate complaints hurt the firm because spending money, time and energy in handling illegitimate complaints is a waste of firm resources (Michel, Bowen and Johnston 2009) which might negatively impact service quality (Berry & Seiders, 2008), employee workload (Harris & Reynolds, 2003), employee job satisfaction (Berry & Seiders, 2008), staff retention (Harris & Reynolds, 2003), firm image (Sansalvador & Brotons, 2018) and firm profitability (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004; Harris & Reynolds, 2003). It is, therefore, of utmost importance to look for ways to deter illegitimate complaining (Harris & Daunt, 2013).

A promising theory on discouraging illegitimate complaining is the 'deterrence-neutralization-behavior' (DNB) framework by Dootson et al. (2018). Dootson proposes that individuals engaged in deviant behavior (like illegitimate complaining) use neutralization (excuses that justify or rationalize bad behavior) to prevent cognitive dissonance, feelings of guilt, and accusations of others. Neutralization techniques might even be used before the act of claiming illegitimately and thus function as a driver. For example, the customer might say to herself, "Everyone does it" (claim of normalcy; Harris & Dumas, 2008).

DNB proposes that (specific) deterrence tactics may counteract this soothing effect of neutralizations on cognitive dissonance. Deterrence tactics are essentially messages that aim to reintroduce cognitive dissonance that has previously been reduced through neutralization techniques by presenting the consumer with a competing piece of information that challenges their attitudes, beliefs, or behavior (Dootson et al., 2018).

For instance: the deterrence tactic "communicating social proof" challenges the 'claim of normalcy' neutralization technique. Essentially, social proof is communicating a message to the customer that other customers similar to her do not engage in illegitimate behavior. When people learn that most others are not engaging in illegitimate behaviors, they are more likely to not engage in these as well (Goldstein et al., 2008). In other words: deterrence tactics are mechanisms that will reintroduce cognitive dissonance (previously reduced through neutralization techniques) by presenting to the consumer information that challenges their attitudes, beliefs, or behavior (Dootson et al., 2018).

However, the implications of the DNB framework have not been tested empirically. The purpose of the present study is to test the DNB framework. The research question is: What is the effect of deterrence tactics on cognitive dissonance and illegitimate complaining? This study contributes to literature by empirically testing Dootson et al.'s DNB framework. The results may also contribute to a better understanding of how firms can deter illegitimate behavior, to prevent having to waste their resources (e.g., time, money, etc.) on illegitimate complainers.

The next section will discuss illegitimate complaints, cognitive dissonance, neutralization techniques, and deterrence tactics. The discussion will result in hypotheses about the effect of deterrence tactics, which will be tested in a scenario-based experiment.

LITERATURE

Illegitimate Complaints

Research in the area of customer complaining has increased in recent years (Dahl & Peltier 2015). Most authors propose that customer complaints are legitimate in nature and caused by dissatisfaction (Macintosh & Stevens, 2013; Ro & Wong, 2012; Daunt & Harris, 2012; Wirtz & McColl-Kennedy, 2010). A growing number of studies, however, acknowledge the existence of illegitimate complaints (e.g., Huang et al. 2014; Baker et al., 2012; Huang & Miao, 2013; Daunt & Harris, 2012; Jacoby & Jaccard, 1981). Harris and Reynolds (2005), for instance, found that a large majority of their respondents could recall at least two occasions in which they personally had made an illegitimate complaint within the last six months. Similarly, Baker et al. (2012) found that many customers abuse firms' service recovery policies by making untrue claims to get compensation. Illegitimate complaining is defined by Baker et al. (2012) as fictitious complaints by individuals to service providers to receive compensation for their make-believe service failures. According to Ro and Wong (2012), illegitimate customer complaints are complaints from customers deliberately fabricating problems. Illegitimate complaining is a form of dysfunctional

customer behavior, which represents customers' actions that are against the expected and accepted normative conduct in the consumption context (Fullerton & Punj, 2004). Making illegitimate claims violates social norms and rules and can be considered deviant (Agboola & Salawu, 2011) and unethical behavior (Arora & Chakraborty, 2020).

Cognitive Dissonance

When people behave deviantly or unethically, they feel bad about themselves. But they do not like feeling bad about themselves, so they will try to change that feeling. This effect is explained by cognitive dissonance theory (Arora & Chakraborty, 2020; Sharma, 2014; Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance theory proposes that inconsistencies between attitudes, beliefs, and actions generate an aversive arousal that will then motivate inconsistency-reducing strategies (Veer & Shankar, 2011). In the case of illegitimate complaining, customers do something (illegitimate complaining) which they know to be unfair, unethical and illegal and which violates their own beliefs. This conflict generates psychological discomfort, motivating them to find inconsistency-reducing strategies (Stephens, 2017). One strategy is to change their behavior towards more legal and ethical practices. The other strategy is to adapt their attitudes towards the illegal activity (Metin & Camgoz, 2011; Aronson, 1969). To reduce the discomfort and adapt their attitude towards the illegal activity, individuals use neutralization techniques to justify their behavior (Dootson et al., 2018; Stephens, 2017).

Neutralization Techniques

Neutralization techniques are mechanisms for resolving the conflict of the individuals' intention to perform deviant consumer behavior for benefit and not having to negatively update one's self-concept (an individual's perception of oneself; Dootson et al., 2018; Vitell & Grove, 1987). Sykes and Matza (1957) first introduced the concept of neutralization techniques to explain juvenile delinquency. The authors proposed five major types of neutralization techniques: 'denial of responsibility' *("I didn't mean to do it")*, 'denial of injury' (*"No one is getting hurt"*), 'denial of the victim' (*"They deserved it"*), 'condemnation of the condemners' ("*They are just as bad*"), and 'the appeal to higher loyalties' ("*I did it to feed my family*") (Kaptein & Helvoort, 2019). Later, others proposed additional techniques such as the 'defense of necessity' ("*I had no other choice but to do it*"), 'claim of entitlement' ("*I should get what I want, when I want it*"), 'normal practice (i.e. claim of normalcy,' "*Everybody else is doing it*"), 'claim of relative acceptability' ("*There are much worse individuals than me*") (Dootson et al., 2018; Cromwell & Thurman, 2003), 'postponement' ("*At the time I did not think about the consequences of my behavior, that only occurred later*"), and 'denial of the probability of punishment ' ("*I won't get caught*") (Dootson et al., 2018). Neutralizations are considered an important, or even the most important explanation of deviant behavior (Kaptein & Helvoort, 2019; Gruber & Schlegelmilch, 2014; Vitell & Grove, 1987).

Deterrence Tactics

According to Dootson et al. (2018), deviant consumer behavior is any behavior that violates consumer laws, policies, or accepted norms of conduct. It can be directed toward employees, merchandise, financial assets, physical or electronic premises, or other consumers. Deterrence theory proposes two ways to control deviant behavior (Dootson et al., 2018). First, -following the principles of social learning theory- punishment of offenders will deter others from offending based on fear of punishment. When individuals see others being caught and punished for an action,

they will avoid the same behavior to avoid punishment. Second, punished and convicted offenders will refrain from reoffending due to their punishment. The authors offer the 'deterrence-neutralization-behavior' (DNB) framework to better understand how deviant consumer behavior can be deterred. It is grounded in self-concept maintenance theory and cognitive dissonance theory. Self-concept maintenance theory suggests that individuals will only be able to engage in deviant consumer behavior, allowing their positive self-concept to be maintained. Individuals may be able to lie or cheat while maintaining a positive self-perception, whereas a higher degree of deviant behavior, such as fraud, may negatively update their self-concept to reflect their bad behavior. Acting in a way that violates one's cognitions will likely cause cognitive dissonance, which leads to psychological discomfort that needs to be reduced. Reducing dissonance involves using a neutralization technique. The neutralization techniques enable deviant customer behavior by distorting the link between the individual's actions and their consequences. This could cause an individual to engage in behaviors they originally considered unacceptable without them experiencing much cognitive dissonance. The DNB framework illustrates the positive relationship between neutralization techniques and engagement in illegitimate behavior, as the techniques reduce the level of cognitive dissonance, leading to an increase in the intention to complain illegitimately. Additionally, the framework proposes the moderating role of deterrence tactics. Deterrence tactics are mechanisms that will reintroduce cognitive dissonance (previously reduced through neutralization techniques) by presenting the consumer information that challenges their attitudes, beliefs, or behavior. So, the deterrence tactics aim to undermine the effectiveness of the neutralizations in reducing customers' cognitive dissonance.

The authors propose seven deterrence tactics to deter six neutralization techniques. The first two of Dootson et al.'s (2018) deterrence tactics are 'communicating objective risk of formal sanctions', and 'communicating the risk of social sanctions'. These two tactics would be most effective in weakening the impact of the neutralization 'denial of punishment.' This can be achieved by communicating the objective risk of incurring formal sanctions from an authority, for example, the organization, or by incurring social sanctions from other consumers. Now, they cannot claim, "*I won't get caught*", because the consumer is now presented with objective risk measures. So, in short: if the organization communicates the objective risk of incurring formal and social sanctions, it will challenge the denial of punishment probability neutralization technique by reintroducing cognitive dissonance, lowering the intention to perform deviant behavior such as complaining illegitimately.

The third deterrence tactic is 'humanize the organization,' which matches the neutralization 'denial of the victim.' Here the aim is to trigger the empathic response some consumers have to a visible human victim by humanization. When an organization is perceived to be more human, the perceived social distance between the organization and the consumer will be smaller. Therefore, increasing the salience of the identifiable victim and decreasing the social distance will challenge the denial of victim neutralization technique because the humanization strategy reintroduces dissonance.

The fourth deterrence tactic is 'educate the consumers'. This tactic is meant to weaken the 'denial of injury' neutralization technique by increasing the awareness of the outcomes of deviant consumer behavior. Individuals who are more likely to engage in deviant consumer behavior are more focused on the benefit they gain from the behavior than on acknowledging its negative outcomes. Therefore, educating the consumers about the harm caused to the victim would change consumers' perceptions. Organizations can do this, for example, by using personal stories that create empathy with the victim.

The fifth deterrence tactic of Dootson et al. (2018) is 'social proofs', which is aimed at challenging the 'claim of normalcy' neutralization technique. When people learn that most others are engaging in an activity, they are also more likely to engage in it (Goldstein et al., 2008). Successful social proofs are positively worded and highlight the prevalence of desirable behavior. The more specific the message is, and the more closely related it is to the individual's situation, the more effective it will be in altering that individual's behavior. According to Dootson et al. (2018), consumers need to be made aware that people similar to them responded with a particular behavior. If consumers see that everybody else is engaging in legitimate consumer behavior, they will be less likely to use the neutralization of 'normal practice' and also engage in this behavior.

The sixth deterrence tactic is 'transparency of the rules'. The authors conclude that to decrease the positive relationship between the 'claim of entitlement' and engaging in illegitimate consumer behavior, the tactic 'transparency, rules and law' will be most effective. This means that organizations have to be transparent about their rules to make sure that the consumers understand them correctly. They need to be specific and clear about why the rules are in place. Being transparent about why a rule is in place will help consumers understand the rule and raise their likelihood of compliance. People are more compliant when comprehending the reasons for engaging in a specific action (Dootson et al., 2018). According to Glik (2007), the communication process must contain elements of trust, credibility, honesty, transparency, and accountability for the sources of information.

The last deterrence tactic Dootson et al. (2018) introduced is 'moral triggers'. This tactic differs from the others. While the other deterrence tactics seek to challenge one specific neutralization technique, this tactic challenges any neutralization technique. Moral triggers will increase the salience of moral values, such as honesty, to trigger self-sanctions, such as guilt or shame, to make people deter themselves from engaging in certain behaviors.

For every neutralization technique, Dootson et al. (2018) propose a matching deterrence tactic, which will weaken the positive effect of the neutralization technique on the intention to perform deviant behavior if the tactic is used. The deterrence tactic will essentially convince someone that the neutralization is not true. The groups who receive a deterrence tactic that matches the neutralization they use should experience the greatest increase in cognitive dissonance and should also experience a decrease in their intention to complain illegitimately. Therefore the following is hypothesized:

H1: *Illegitimate complainers exposed to a deterrence tactic will experience (a) higher cognitive dissonance and (b) lower intention to complain illegitimately than customers not exposed to a deterrence tactic.*

H2: *Illegitimate complainers exposed to a deterrence tactic that matches their neutralization technique will experience (a) higher cognitive dissonance and (b) lower intention to complain illegitimately than customers exposed to a deterrence tactic that does not match their neutralization technique.*

METHOD

Research Design

To test the hypotheses, an online, self-administered, scenario-based, between-subjects experiment is conducted (Charness et al., 2011). Scenario-based experiments are especially

important in the field of service failures and service recoveries (Kim & Jang, 2014). Placing people in a scenario ensures they do not have to share their illegitimate complaining behavior. Furthermore, intentions shown in a scenario-based experiment indicate actual behavior (Weyrich et al. 2020). Since illegitimate complaining is an illegal practice and a sensitive topic (Lee & Renzetti, 1990), the online self-administered questionnaire ensured that participants would not feel threatened to truthfully talk about the topic (Burns & Bush, 2009). Also, scenario-based experiments are cheap and time-saving, undesirable response biases are avoided, and a greater variation in responses is achieved (Smith & Bolton, 1998).

The experiment consists of an introduction, a scenario, several Likert-type questions, questions about demographics, several manipulation checks and a reality check. In the introduction, the researcher introduces himself, the purpose of the research is explained, research ethics are discussed, and participants are asked to consent to using their answers for research purposes. Participants are then asked to imagine themselves in a specific scenario in which they plan to file an illegitimate complaint because of the promise of financial advantage. Several manipulation checks test whether participants have the desired mindset. They then are randomly assigned to one of the deterrence tactics. After they have read the deterring message, cognitive dissonance and intention to complain illegitimately are measured, followed by yet another manipulation check to test whether they remember the message correctly (deterrence tactic). The experiment ends with a realism check and demographic questions.

Operationalization

Scenario. The scenario reads: *Imagine yourself in this situation. Try to empathize with the situation*. You have not been on holiday for two years, but now that traveling abroad is possible again, you plan to rent a car and drive through Spain. While discussing your travel plans with friends, they tell you that last year they rented a car from a company in Barcelona to travel around Spain for two weeks. They tell you that once - while standing at a gas station - the car's engine would not start. However, they found a driver of another car rental car who was willing to help. He made the battery terminals connect again and started the car. Your friends also tell you that after their trip they complained to the car rental company and received a partial refund of the rental cost. The car rental company was not difficult at all. You search for information about that rental company on review websites on the internet (such as Tripadvisor.com), and you find many reviews that end up saying that this rental company is very lenient with customer complaints. You are now in Spain, and you have rented a car from the same car rental company. And you will try - just like your friends - to partially recover your rent by submitting a complaint. The complaint is completely made up. You plan to tell them tomorrow - when you return the car - that the engine did not start several times during the trip and that you needed to fix it yourself. Then you are going to ask for a discount on the rental price of the car.

Manipulation check one tests whether participants have the desired mindset of being willing to make a false claim. The question is: How high is the discount percentage that you will ask from the motorhome rental company? Provide a percentage of the car rental cost.

Manipulation check two tests whether participants experience psychological discomfort as a result of being an illegitimate complainer. The items (based on Elliot & Devine, 1994) are: I would feel uncomfortable in this situation, I would feel uneasy in this situation, I would feel bothered in this situation.

Manipulation check three tests whether participants have the desired mindset of acknowledging their false complaint, before asking about their neutralizations. The items are: To

what extent is your complaint exaggerated? To what extent did you make up the complaint? To what extent was the complaint planned in advance?

Neutralizations. Participants were then asked: What justification would you use in this situation where you will make a false complaint? Rank the justifications in order of importance, with 1= most applicable and 4= least applicable: Everyone exaggerates sometimes, I also have a right to some windfall, The car rental company deserves it for what they have done, The car rental company is not damaged by my wrongful claim. These four justifications were chosen based on the results of the pretest.

Deterrence tactics. A deterrence tactic is a message communicated to the participants just before they are planning to submit a false claim. They read: for the control group: "Dear customer. Do not forget to leave the keys of your rental car and the insurance papers and manual in the dashboard compartment. Without these items we cannot rent the motorhome to the next customer. Thank you!"; for the *social proof group*: "Dear Customer. We thank you for being honest customers. We have not received a single exaggerated or fabricated customer complaint since we started our business a few years ago. Our car rental business can only thrive if our honest services are appreciated by honest customers. We thank you for being an honest customer, just like all our customers"; for the transparency rules and law group: "Dear customer. Please note that making a fictitious or exaggerated complaint is a violation of our customer agreement and of applicable Spanish law. It harms our business and it harms our customers if you make false complaints. Our business can only thrive if you do not break these rules." ; for the educating customers group: "Dear customer. Please be aware that exaggerated or trumped-up customer complaints can seriously harm our company, our employees and our customers. Our company can go bankrupt, our employees can be fired and customer prices can rise if customers complain unfairly."; for the humanize the organization group: "Dear customer. Our family works hard every day in our family business to keep our customers happy. This is how we earn our living and can send our children to school. We are happy and satisfied if you are. We are dissatisfied and unhappy if you are. Let us know if you are really and genuinely dissatisfied"; for the moral triggers and self-sanctions group: "Dear customer, we do fair business and we are sure that you are an honest customer. We are sure you will agree that you should only complain if you have a genuine complaint and are genuinely dissatisfied".

Cognitive dissonance. After reading the deterring message, cognitive dissonance was measured, using six items adapted from Elliot and Devine (1994): I would feel uncomfortable asking for a refund, I would feel embarrassed if I asked for a refund, I would have a hard time asking for a refund, I would be annoyed with myself if I asked for a refund, I would be ashamed to ask for a refund, I'd be burdened if I asked for a refund. The items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from totally disagree – totally agree.

Intention to complain illegitimately. This construct contains three items (based on Lervik-Olsen et al. 2016): I will definitely file this complaint, I am convinced that I will file this complaint, and I'm sure I'm going to file this complaint. The items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from totally disagree to totally agree.

Manipulation check four tests whether participants correctly remember the deterrence tactic. The questions are: Do you remember what the post you read before filing a claim was about? (three answer options, one correct, one incorrect, and the control group message). 1. Control group. The message asked the customer to leave keys and papers in the dashboard. 2. Social proofs: The message pointed to the fact that the car rental company's customers are honest. 3. Transparency rules: The message pointed out that fabricated complaints violate the client agreement and Spanish

law. 4. Educating customers: The message pointed out that fabricated and exaggerated complaints can do a lot of damage to the company, employees and customers. 5. Humanize organization: The message pointed out that the car rental company is a family business that earns a family a living. 6. Moral triggers: The message pointed out that you are expected to be honest and complain only when justified.

  Realism Check. The realism scale contains 3 items (based on Maxham 2001; Goodwin and Ross 1992 and Ok, 2004) with semantic differentials: How realistic is this scenario? Can you imagine yourself in such a situation now or in the future? I think something similar could happen to me: very unlikely - very likely, The situation in the scenario is: very unrealistic - very realistic; To imagine myself in this situation is: very difficult - very easy

  Demographics. What is your age? (enter age in years), What is your gender? Man, Woman, Other/will not say; What is your highest level of education (with or without diploma)? Primary school/primary education, Secondary education, MBO, HBO, WO.

Pretest and Sample

  Twenty students were asked to participate and pretest the questionnaire in Qualtrics and report any unclarities or questions. Improvements were made accordingly. The scenario did seem to evoke the desired mindset: they admitted that their complaint was exaggerated (M = 3.75, SD = 1.29), made-up (M = 3.88, SD = 1.26) and planned (M = 3.70, SD = 1.45), and they felt discomfort (M = 3.83, SD = 1.20). Furthermore, they all remembered correctly to which deterrence tactic they were exposed and they found the scenario to be realistic (M = 3.08, SD = 1.27).

  For the experiment, convenience sampling was used to gather data from Dutch customers of 16 years or older. The questionnaire was distributed through online channels like WhatsApp, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram because this facilitates anonymity. Participants were asked to participate voluntarily. No reference was made to neutralizations, illegitimate complaining, or deterrence tactics to avoid bias due to foreknowledge. To improve statistical power, a sample size of a minimum of 30 participants is preferable (Hair, Babin, & Anderson, 2019). The experiment was randomized: each participant was randomly assigned to a different deterrence tactic.

Ethics

  This experiment was anonymous, the participants' identities were unknown, and no personal, identifiable data was collected. The participants were informed in the introduction about the aim of the research. All participants were asked to participate voluntarily and were free to quit the experiment whenever they want without having to provide an explanation. They also received the researcher's email address so they could contact the researcher if desired. The data were not used for anything other than for this study. Only the researcher had access to the data. After the research, if desired, participants could receive the results by e-mail. The participants were randomly assigned to groups using the Qualtrics survey tool. The experiment contains different manipulations, which could cause the participants to experience negative feelings. If any participant felt uncomfortable, they could contact the researcher or quit the experiment anytime. The study results are confidentially held, and the results are accurately represented.

RESULTS

Sample and Descriptives

The final sample contained 482 participants. Table 1 shows the sample characteristics. Noteworthy is the large proportion of female participants and the large proportion of participants with higher education. The sample is also relatively young. Table 1 also contains the means and standard deviations of the variables, the number of items in their scale, and Cronbach's α of that scale. The internal consistency of all variables is high.

Table 1
Sample, Descriptives, Number of Items and Cronbach's α

Variable	Category	Frequency		
Gender	Male	173 (35.9%)		
	Female	307 (63.7%)		
	Non-binary	2 (.4%)		
Education	Prim. school	1 (.2%)		
	Sec. school	20 (4.1%)		
	MBO	62 (12.9%)		
	HBO	177 (36.7%)		
	WO	222 (46.1%)		
Neutralizations	Claim of Normalcy	160 (33.2%)		
	Claim of Entitlement	170 (35.3%)		
	Denial of Victim	68 (14.1%)		
	Denial of Injury	84 (17,1%)		
Variable	**Means**	**SD**	**items**	**Cronb.α**
Age	31.65	13.94	1	
Man. check 1 (Discount%)	16.79	11.56	1	
Man. check 2 (Discomfort)	4.37	.92	3	.945
Man. check 3 (Mindset)	4.02	1.00	3	.806
Intention to Complain ill.	2.12	.88	3	.964
Cognitive Dissonance	3.83	.85	6	.972
Realism check	2.37	1.07	3	.831

Manipulation and Realism Checks

The purpose of the scenario was to put participants in the situation of someone planning to complain illegitimately by asking for an undeserved discount. The first manipulation check asked which discount the participants would ask for. Participants who did not ask for a discount were

removed from the sample. The remaining sample asked, on average, for a discount of 16.79 percent. The purpose of the scenario was also to induce discomfort in the participant because (s)he did something unethical. Manipulation check two measured the degree of discomfort. On average, participants felt highly uncomfortable (M=4.37, SD=.92). We also checked whether participants considered the scenario to be realistic. Participants scored the realism of the scenario on average relatively low (M=2.37, SD=1.07). Based on the difference in (average) scores on the three different items of the scale, it is our impression that this low score can be explained by the fact that participants likely felt compelled to express the socially desirable notion that they themselves cannot imagine themselves engaging in illegitimate complaining (items 1 and 3), not by the fact that participants feel that the type of illegitimate complaining described in the scenario would not exist in real life (item 2).

Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the deterrence tactics. A last control question asked participants to identify (at the end of the questionnaire) the correct deterrence tactic from a list of 4 short descriptions of deterrence tactics, of which only one was the correct one that they had received. Participants who did not answer this question correctly (80) were not used in the hypotheses test because they were considered not to have been successfully manipulated.

Hypotheses Testing

> **H1***: Illegitimate complainers exposed to a deterrence tactic will experience (a) higher cognitive dissonance and (b) lower intention to complain illegitimately than customers not exposed to a deterrence tactic.*

H1a. A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of deterrence tactics on cognitive dissonance. Subjects were randomly divided into 6 groups, based on the deterrence tactic they received (1= control group, 2= social proof, 3=transparency of rules and the law, 4=humanize the organization, 5=educating customers, 6=moral triggers and self-sanctions). Only participants who answered the manipulation check question about their deterrence tactic correctly were used in the Anova.

Levene statistic is significant (3.566; p = .004), so the Games-Howell post-hoc test is most suitable. There was a statistically significant difference at the p<.05 level for the 6 groups [(Fwelch (5, 168)=15.43 p=.000)]. Games-Howell post-hoc tests show that group 1 (control group; M=3.25, SD=.60) is statistically different from all other groups, but there is no significant difference between these other groups. The effect size (eta squared) is .09, a medium-sized effect. The test confirms Hypothesis 1 (a) that illegitimate complainers exposed to a deterrence tactic (groups 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6) experience a higher cognitive dissonance than illegitimate complainers who have not been exposed to a deterrence tactic (group 1: control group).

H1b. A similar test was conducted to explore the effect of deterrence tactics on the intention to complain illegitimately. There was a statistically significant difference at the p<.05 level for the six groups [(F(5, 396)=8.23 p=.000)]. Tukey posthoc tests show that group 1 (control group; M=2.58, SD=.81) statistically different from all other groups except group 2. The mean of group 2 (M=2.21) is lower than the mean of group 1 (M=2.58) but not low enough to be a statistically significant difference. The only other significant difference is between group 2 and group 4. The effect size (eta squared) is .12, a large effect. The test confirms Hypothesis 1 (b) that illegitimate complainers exposed to a deterrence tactic (groups 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6) experience a lower intention

to complain illegitimately than illegitimate complainers who have not been exposed to a deterrence tactic (group 1).

Table 2
Man Cognitive Dissonance Per Deterrence Tactic Group

Cognitive Dissonance	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error
1 control group	76	3.25	.60	.069
2 social proof	86	3.86	.82	.088
3 transparency	41	3.93	.83	.129
4 humanize	61	4.16	.85	.109
5 educating	69	4.04	.81	.098
6 moral triggers	69	3.77	.86	.103
Total	402	3.81	.84	.042

Table 3
Mean Intention to Complain Illegitimately per Deterrence Tactic Group

Intention to Complain Ill.	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error
1 control group	76	2.58	.81	.093
2 social proof	86	2.21	.93	.101
3 transparency of rules	41	2.04	.91	.142
4 humanize organization	61	1.72	.80	.103
5 educating customers	69	1.94	.78	.094
6 moral triggers	69	2.05	.81	097
Total	402	2.11	.88	.044

Now we know that deterrence tactics are able to mitigate the soothing effect of neutralizations on cognitive dissonance and intention to complain illegitimately, the next question is whether this soothing effect is even larger when the deterrence tactic matches with the neutralization an illegitimate complainer uses.

> **H2:** *Illegitimate complainers exposed to a deterrence tactic that matches their neutralization technique will experience (a) higher cognitive dissonance and (b) lower intention to complain illegitimately than customers exposed to a deterrence tactic that does not match their neutralization technique.*

> *H2a.* A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of a match between deterrence tactics used by the firm and neutralizations used by a customer on cognitive dissonance. Subjects were divided into 3 groups (group 1= no match between deterrence

tactic and neutralizations, group 2= match between deterrence tactic and neutralization, and group 3= no deterrence tactic used / control group). The Levene statistic is significant (4.406; p = .013), so Games-Howell post-hoc test is most suitable. There was a statistically significant difference at the p<.05 level for the 3 groups [(FWelch (2, 95.74)=30.612 p=.000)]. The Games-Howell post-hoc tests show that group 3 (control group; M=3.27, SD=.80) is statistically different from group 1 and 2, and there is no significant difference between group 1 and 2. The effect size (eta squared) is .22, a large effect. The test rejects Hypothesis 2 (a) that illegitimate complainers exposed to a deterrence tactic matching with their neutralization (group 2) experience a higher cognitive dissonance than illegitimate complainers who have not been exposed to a deterrence tactic matching with their neutralization (group 3). Similar to hypothesis 1 however, groups who have experienced any type of deterrence tactic (matching or not-matching) have a higher cognitive dissonance than groups who were not confronted with a deterrence tactic.

Table 4
Mean Cognitive Dissonance per Matching, No Matching Tactic Group

Cognitive Dissonance	*N*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Std. Error*
1 no match	41	3.91	.85	.134
2 match	71	4.09	.73	.086
3 control	82	3.27	.60	.066
Total	194	3.70	.80	.057

H2b. A similar test was conducted to explore the effect of deterrence tactics on intention to complain illegitimately. There was a statistically significant difference at the p<.05 level for the 3 groups [(F(2, 191)=10.742 p=.000)]. Post-hoc tests show that group 3 (control group; M=2.58, SD=.79) is statistically different from groups 1 and 2, but there is no significant difference between group 1 and 2. The effect size (eta squared) is .10, a moderate effect. The test rejects Hypothesis 2 (b) that illegitimate complainers exposed to a deterrence tactic matching with their neutralization (group 2) experience a lower intention to complain illegitimately than illegitimate complainers who have not been exposed to a deterrence tactic matching with their neutralization (group 1). Similar to hypothesis 1 however, groups who have experienced any type of deterrence tactic (matching or not-matching) have a lower intention to complain illegitimately than groups who were not confronted with a deterrence tactic.

Additional analyses. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the cognitive dissonance and intention to complain illegitimately scores for males and females. There were significant differences for cognitive dissonance [males (M=3.64 SD=.79), females (M=3,94 SD= .87); t(478)=-3.74, p=000]. The magnitude of the differences in the means is small (eta squared= .03). There were also significant differences for intention to complain illegitimately [males (M=2.27 SD=.82), females (M=2,03 SD= .90); t(478)=-2.82, p=005]. The magnitude of the differences in the means, however is small (eta squared=.02). The results demonstrate that women experience more cognitive dissonance and are less inclined to complain illegitimately after a deterrence tactic.

Table 5
Mean Intention to Complain Illegitimately
Matching, No Matching Tactic Group

Intention to Complain Ill.	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error
1 no match	41	2.08	.83	.130
2 match	71	1.99	.85	.101
3 control	82	2.58	.79	.087
Total	194	2.26	.86	.062

We also conducted an Anova to test for differences in scores on cognitive dissonance and intention to complain illegitimately between groups based on their level of education. No statistically significant differences were found. Finally, we conducted an Anova to test for differences in scores on cognitive dissonance and intention to complain illegitimately between age groups 16-35, 36-55, and 56-99. No statistically significant differences were found here either.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

As there is a growing number of illegitimate complaints that are exaggerated or made up (Khantimirov & Karande, 2018), the costs for firms are also rising, and firms are suffering from this illegitimate behavior. This research attempted to find empirical evidence supporting the propositions made by Dootson et al. (2018), proposing that deterrence tactics can deter illegitimate complaining. To investigate those propositions, an experiment has been conducted to answer the research question: What is the effect of deterrence tactics on illegitimate complaining?

The results show that illegitimate complainers exposed to a deterrence tactic will experience (a) higher cognitive dissonance and (b) lower intention to complain illegitimately than customers not exposed to a deterrence tactic. Women experience more cognitive dissonance, and are less inclined to complain illegitimately after a deterrence tactic. The results also show that illegitimate complainers exposed to a deterrence tactic that matches their neutralization technique will not experience (a) higher cognitive dissonance or (b) lower intention to complain illegitimately than customers exposed to a deterrence tactic that does not match their neutralization technique.

The conclusion is, therefore, that deterrence tactics increase cognitive dissonance and decrease intention to complain illegitimately, regardless of whether the tactic matches neutralizations used by a customer. Therefore, this research does not confirm the main propositions of Dootson et al. (2018). However, the results of this study confirm that deterrence tactics are effective in increasing cognitive dissonance (large effect) and decreasing intention to complain (moderate effect).

Festinger (1957) offered two hypotheses on cognitive dissonance: (a) the psychological discomfort accompanying the presence of dissonance motivates individuals to attempt to reduce it and restore consonance, and (b) persons will actively avoid situations and information that would likely increase the dissonance. It seems that -if and when a deterring message reaches an individual- s/he has already failed to avoid that situation and information, which would likely increase the dissonance. It doesn't matter whether the deterring message declares illegitimate complaints unlawful, unethical, harmful for the firm or unacceptable to your peers. At the moment an individual is confronted with such a message, (s)he is reminded of something that (s)he already

knows, but which (s)he was able to put aside for a moment, which is that the planned action is wrong. And it doesn't matter what kind of wrong the message highlights for cognitive dissonance to step in again. If one engages in illegitimate complaining despite reading and understanding the warning, self-justifying that behavior is no longer possible. Deterrence tactics work not because they address and invalidate illegitimate complainers' specific excuse but because they make existing cognitive dissonance salient again.

Another aspect of the deterrence tactic is perhaps more important: the timing. Stephens (2017) and Shu and Bazerman (2011) found that a strategically timed, in situ reminder can greatly reduce cheating behavior. In their research, students were asked to sign an honor code immediately before submitting an assessment. Stephens' advice is to create unavoidable situations that lead students to know and understand their obligations related to academic integrity. In our study, this is exactly what happened: illegitimate complainers were confronted with a deterring message immediately before they had planned to make their illegitimate claim.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study are helpful for firms and can be used to decrease the number of illegitimate complaints.

This research finds that all deterrence tactics are effective in increasing cognitive dissonance and in decreasing the intention to complain. "Humanize the organization" is the best scoring tactic (although there were no statistically significant differences between the tactics). When an organization is perceived as more human, the distance between it and the (deviant) consumer is smaller and the customer can more easily identify with the firm and its employees. more identifiable. According to Jenni and Loewenstein (1997), identifiable victims seem to produce a greater empathetic response, which makes the offender more willing to engage in behavior that will reduce the harm inflicted on the victim. The deterrence tactic can be implemented (1) by firms by increasing the salience of the identifiable victim and (2) by decreasing the social distance between the consumer and the organization (Dootson et al., 2018).

The second tactic is "Educate the consumer". Illegitimate complainers are often more focused on the benefit they gain, than on acknowledging the negative outcome for others. Firms could use affective information campaigns that clearly highlight the harm that the illegitimate behavior causes to the people and the organization. Personal stories reinforce empathy with the victim.

Firms can implement the "transparency of rules" tactic to ensure that consumers understand them correctly. They need to communicate why the rules are in place. According to Glik (2007), transparency about why a rule is in place will help consumers understand it. People are more compliant when they comprehend the reasons for a rule or norm.

Implementing the "social proofs" tactic can be done by informing customers that similar people behave in a certain way. According to Goldstein et al. (2008), people are more likely to engage in certain behaviors when they learn that most others behave similarly.

Dootson et al. (2018) mention that the goal of the deterrence tactic "moral triggers" is to encourage people to think, 'It's just not the right thing to do.' It works by increasing moral values to trigger self-sanctions to deter people from engaging in certain behaviors.

To implement the different deterrence tactics, firms could for example create a message on their website on the page where customers have to file complaints. Or they could create a protocol for the employees when customers file complaints face to face or on the phone. In a shop or office

environment, a sign should work. Rogers et al. (2000) propose that warnings work if they are noticed, comprehended and lead to compliance.

Implementing those tactics will lead to firms wasting less time, money and resources on illegitimate complaints, leaving more resources for valuable 'good' customers.

Firms should also consider, however, that implementing deterrence tactics or treating customers with mistrust and suspicion might have (averse) effects on both customers and service personnel. Regular customers are likely to be alienated by suspicion (Wirtz, Paluch, & Kunz, 2021), as are legitimate complainers who consider their own complaints legitimate (Seger-Guttmann et al., 2018). Mistrust of complaining customers might also lead to a more negative view of service personnel towards interacting with customers in general (Hansen et al., 2009)

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Participants scored the reality of the scenario rather low, which suggests it was unsuccessful in creating the desired mindset in the participants. On the other hand, multiple manipulation checks confirmed that participants had the desired mindset. We assume the low score on reality is more a signal of the issue's sensitivity than proof of a lack of realism. Perhaps future research should consider using other items to measure the realism of a scenario if the studied topic is unethical behavior. Perhaps it is better not to ask if one can imagine oneself in a certain situation but rather if one can imagine someone else being in that situation. Future research could benefit from a more immersive or real-life setting or a longitudinal study.

This study's sample is overrepresented with women. The study also demonstrated that women are more affected by deterrence tactics than men. Future research should use more representative samples to estimate the effects more accurately. Future research should also investigate the cause of the difference between men and women.

This study found deterrence tactics to decrease the intention to complain illegitimately effectively. However, it is important to investigate further what impact the deterrence tactics will have on 'good' and honest customers. When these customers are threatened with a message that warns them that they might get caught, they might feel distrusted by the firm. Distrust has negative effects on economic transactions (Bigley & Pearce, 1998), and on a firm's success (McKnight et al., 2002). Therefore, firms should avoid making honest customers feel distrusted. Future studies should investigate the effect of deterrence tactics on customer-firm relationship.

In our experiment, participants were forced to rank-order predefined neutralizations. Perhaps customers use other neutralizations than the ones presented or do not use any neutralizations at all. Future research should account for this possibility.

Our study focused on Dootson et al's DNB theory. There are more theories that suggest ways to deter illegitimate or unethical behavior. Grzeskowiak and Al-Khatib (2008) suggest that the set of moral standards determines opportunistic behavior in a relationship. Retail managers can increase the role of moral standards by creating a specific exchange environment. For example, a trusting atmosphere reduces the risk of opportunistic behavior. Social distance theory proposes that lying makes individuals feel uncomfortable; therefore, they will choose less-rich media to maintain social distance between themselves and the person they are lying to (Suler, 2004; DePaulo et al., 1996). This suggests that people prefer for instance email over face-to-face communication because email and instant message are less-rich mediums. Future studies should examine whether a trusting atmosphere or specific communication channels reduce illegitimate complaints.

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