Public complaining: A blessing in disguise? Educational calling as a benevolent process that gives consumers voice on brands' social media

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ABSTRACT

When consumers use social media to complain, they threaten to undermine brands' images and online reputations. Academics and managers usually regard such public complaining as harmful or as expressions of a desire to hurt brands. Instead, an alternative, benevolent, and educational consumer motivation for complaining on brands' social media might exist. By specifying the nature of this educational calling to complain and the contextual variables that favor its emergence, the current research outlines the process by which well-intentioned consumers seek to help brands improve, even if it means publicly pointing fingers. Four experiments show that both desire for revenge and desire for reconciliation affect public complaining; strong ties and single deviation contexts favor the benevolent process of online complaining; and benevolent complainants are more amenable to process recovery communication that does not necessarily include compensation.

1. Introduction

What can Veepee improve?
Here are a few ideas:

- Allow the consumer to cancel his or her order (at least within 7 days, except for 48/72-hour sales)....
- Do not technically consider an additional order as a new order with the need to pay the shipping costs twice....
- Reward your loyal consumers with a points or credit system based on order amounts/volumes.

These are the comments of one of your very first consumers (with 210 orders over 15 years), who unfortunately is getting tired of the increasing number of problems encountered.

—Michaël P. (Veepee Facebook page, 05/01/2020).

Dissatisfied consumers frequently use social media to express their discontent (Schaefers & Schamari, 2016). Between 2016 and 2018, Twitter recorded a 250% increase in the number of tweets related to customer service (Gerber, 2018). Such public complaining represents an extreme form of negative word of mouth (Grégoire, Legoux, et al. 2018)

which—because of the strong influence of consumer opinions on potential consumer's purchasing decisions—can have a disastrous impact on brands (Chevalier & Mayzlin. 2006; Ho-Dac et al., 2013).

As online complaining becomes more pervasive, both researchers and managers seek a better understanding of the motivations of online complainers. Although some authors (e.g., Ward & Ostrom, 2006) identify the protection of others as a motive, most tend to associate public complaining with a desire for revenge, defined as "the felt urge to punish and get even with a firm for what it has done" (Grégoire, Ghadami, et al., 2018, p. 1054). We propose moving beyond such conventional motivations to investigate a counterintuitive process in which consumers choose a *benevolent* approach to public complaining and seek to help brands improve by voicing their dissatisfaction on brands' social networks. Our analysis draws on Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) work on positive word of mouth (WOM), which highlights consumers' motivations to help brands due to their willingness "to give the company 'something in return' for a good experience" (p. 42). In the context of satisfactory experiences, a motivation to help brands translates into a desire to promote them, as consumer ambassadors; we explore this benevolent motivation in a dissatisfaction context.

Furthermore, Weitzl and Einwiller (2019) identify distinct profiles of online complainers, including constructive loyalists who are

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"committed, cooperative consumers with a deep interest to restore the consumer brand relationship" (p. 1). Consumers with strong ties to service providers are less likely to complain following service failures, because they fear damaging these ties (e.g., Mittal et al., 2008), perhaps particularly in public forums, in which complaining can cause substantial damage to brands (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Pfeffer et al., 2014). This apparent danger suggests the possibility that public complaining reflects a distinct approach, as suggested by a conceptual framework from education science (Denscombe, 2001; O'Donnell, 2006; Slavin, 2019). The presence of spectators in learning contexts fuels students' education process; dissatisfied but well-meaning consumers who aim to resolve service failures similarly may seek to help brands improve by actively participating in complaint processes (Dong et al., 2008). In this strategy, the consumer publicly points out brands' dysfunctions, driven by both the benevolent logic of encouraging brand improvement and the constraining logic of exposing service failures to exert pressure on companies. We refer to this strategy as an "educational calling," based in a desire and willingness to help brands move forward by alerting them to their failures and formulating advice for them. Social ties between consumers and service providers are critical in this process; consumers sense that offering feedback to brands is an effective way to help them move forward while preserving their social ties (Umashankar et al., 2017).

In deriving these predictions, we also consider how mental schemas condition consumers' responses to service failures (Beverland et al., 2010; Grégoire, Legoux, et al. 2018; Ringberg et al., 2007) and propose that educational calling is part of a relational pattern that reflects a desire for reconciliation. In turn, we contribute to service literature in several ways. First, we identify a benevolent motivation for complaining publicly on social media: consumers' desire to reconcile with brands. In line with Joireman et al. (2013), we suggest that two motivational desires, vengeance and reconciliation, can co-occur and explain the outcomes of public complaining. Second, we specify conditions that favor the emergence of this benevolent motivation, including (1) strong consumer–brand relationships and (2) a single deviation (i.e., service failure) versus a double deviation (i.e., service failure followed by failed recovery) context (Grégoire et al., 2009). Third, we establish the validity of benevolent motivations in private customer service complaint contexts. Fourth, we confirm the benevolent and selfless nature of an educational calling, by establishing the effectiveness of differing recovery strategies, as well as the irrelevance of financial compensation. In contexts that tend to signal that public complaints are more punitive than supportive, the perspective we adopt is challenging. By clarifying these details, our findings can help managers understand the process by which consumers who complain publicly also issue constructive challenges to offending brands. Managers can embrace public complaining, as an opportunity to signal their firms' service quality and demonstrate their consumer centricity (Hogreve et al., 2019).

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

2.1. Public complaining in service failure literature

When consumers suffer service failures, they might complain privately and voice their dissatisfaction to the offending brands, or they might complain publicly and make their concerns known to a wider audience (Singh, 1988). *Online public complaining* refers to consumers' expressions of negative assessments of products or companies, available to a multitude of other people and organizations via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). This definition assumes that online complainers address the public, whether to alert other potential victims (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) or to call for group action (Chang et al., 2013). Because it is common for unhappy consumers to use social networks to express their dissatisfaction (Schaefers & Schamari, 2016), these communication channels represent a key challenge to brands that seek to maintain their reputations (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015).

Intuitively, public complaining behavior might seem retaliatory, such that it would not result from a motive based in a desire for reconciliation, defined as people's preference to overlook harm to preserve a relationship (Joireman et al., 2013). But such a view of public complaining only highlights negative motivations, whereas Weitzl and Einwiller (2019) suggest that online complaining also can be constructive.

2.2. Motivations to complain, according to service failure literature

2.2.1. Desires for revenge, reparation, and reconciliation

To explain online complaining, previous literature has focused on two motivations: (1) to resolve a problem (reparation) and (2) to alter the brand–consumer relationship (revenge) (Grégoire, Legoux, et al., 2018). Consumers who adopt reparation schemas focus on managing problems, which they see as tasks to accomplish (Beverland et al., 2010). They are problem-oriented; they want satisfactory solutions to the service failure. For the current research, we focus instead on brand relationship–oriented motivations, which likely have lasting effects, because they relate to the ways consumers want their relationships with brands to develop. That is, a desire for reparation relates to overcoming specific problems, rather than continuing relationships over time; we are more interested in the desires for revenge and for reconciliation, which have been identified as fundamental motivations for people's responses to service failures (Aquino et al., 2001, 2006; Joireman et al., 2013, 2016).

Online complainers may be driven by the desire for revenge or retaliation against brands, such that they hope to sanction offending brands for the harms they have caused (Bechwati & Morrin, 2003; Grégoire, Ghadami, et al., 2018). Because negative WOM is one of the most common forms of retaliation (Gelbrich, 2010; Johnson et al., 2011), it is not surprising that it often is associated with a desire for revenge (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011). Consumers are aware that their negative opinions can weaken brands' images when made public, so they may deliberately point out brands' weaknesses to punish them and use public complaining as an instrument of power (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Accordingly, most studies link public complaining with negative WOM (Grégoire, Legoux, et al., 2018), in that complainers are aware they are threatening brands' images by expressing themselves on social networks (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015), and public complaining represents their desire for revenge (Grégoire, Ghadami, et al., 2018). Yet recent evidence indicates that 40% of online complaints actually are constructive and characterized by low levels of revenge seeking (Weitzl & Einwiller, 2019).

According to Joireman et al. (2013), the desire for reconciliation also implies a desire to preserve consumer–brand relationships by ensuring that problems do not recur and reducing the stability of the problems (Folkes, 1984). Consumers who then forgive brands for incidents (Joireman et al., 2016) may wish to help them, out of a sense of benevolence. By pointing out their failings, well-meaning complainers help the brands progress, and in this sense, online complaining is part of a reconciliation process. We know of no studies that outline how the desire for reconciliation might be a pertinent mental schema for explaining public complaining though. Conciliatory consumers engage in public complaining, but rather than trying to punish brands, they complain to pressure brands to improve so they can continue their relationships with them; they seek to "work through failures, to help the company 'patch up breakdowns' in the relationship, and to endure strong challenges" (Ringberg et al., 2017, p. 197).

Finally, a desire to help firms drives positive WOM, as a supportive behavior to reward firms' efforts (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) and repay "favors" when brands have done well. In a service failure context, dissatisfied but well-meaning consumers may wish to support brands by constructively pointing out their shortcomings and functioning like advisors, to help them avoid future incidents. Noting that education is defined as the provision of knowledge to learners, to form and train them (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020), we argue that such a constructive

approach mimics education processes. We define the concept of an *educational calling* as a willingness to help brands advance by alerting them to their failures and formulating relevant advice. It is similar to brand-helping motivations (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), with three notable differences: (1) it results from dissatisfaction, not satisfaction; (2) it is oriented toward the brand, not other consumers, who instead function as bystanders to the exchange; and (3) consumers are aware that they can threaten brands' images, and thus encourage their progress, by using the presence of other consumers as leverage. Public complaining may indicate consumers' desire to see changes in brand management, such that they adopt a dual strategy that both constructively encourages brand improvement and coercively makes other consumers witnesses to their demands. We study this benevolent motivation in a complaint context, proposing that its public form can be an educational device.

2.3. Public complaining as an educational process

The public context of complaining helps us predict how the helping dimension and brand reputation endangerment combine in the same educational process. By complaining publicly, dissatisfied consumers become active contributors to the marketing functions of companies (Malthouse et al., 2013); they assume roles as brand educators by alerting the brands to issues and giving them advice. The public dimension thus is an essential ingredient, such that the audience of spectators increases pressures on and incentives for brands, with positive influences on the likely success of the educational process.

Education science underlines the beneficial effect of spectators in the learning process, such as in classrooms (e.g., O'Donnell, 2006). Group pressures inform educational processes in three ways: First, they limit the adoption of undesirable behaviors (Coggans & McKellar, 1994; Denscombe, 2001; May, 1993). People who complain publicly may take advantage of the presence of other consumers to limit the occurrence of future failures and increase brand vigilance. Second, group pressures promote desirable social interactions (Cooke & Apolloni, 1976; Maloney et al., 1976; Strain et al., 1976) and skills (Dineen et al., 1977; Egel et al., 1981; Trovato & Bucher, 1980). According to the trap effect described by Baer and Wolf (1967), once a desirable behavior is taught, the presence of peers helps maintain it. The mere presence of others during educational processes can lead members of groups to adopt desired behaviors and facilitate their maintenance, even after the processes end (Cooke & Apolloni, 1976; Smith & Fowler, 1984). Therefore, people who complain publicly may be using their audiences of users to encourage the adoption of consumer-oriented behaviors. Third, group pressures lead learners to increase their efforts, as long as the learners remain under the scrutiny of others (Bursztyn & Jensen, 2015).

Considering the threat that public complaining poses to brands' reputations and brands' desire to preserve their relationships, we suggest that strong consumer–brand ties link negatively and directly to public complaining. That is, strongly tied consumers might "go easy" on brands to preserve their relationships with them (Mittal et al., 2008). In this respect, benevolent consumers should avoid complaining, especially publicly in ways that threaten to undermine brands' online reputations, and forgive brands for incidents (Joireman et al., 2016). Yet they also might feel compelled to complain publicly to improve the brands, reflecting their educational perspective. Finally, public complaining can be motivated by the desire for reconciliation. Because public complaining also arises from a desire for revenge (e.g., Gelbrich, 2010; Grégoire, Legoux, et al. 2018; Tripp & Grégoire, 2011), we consider the familiar, malevolent route to public complaint (through desire for revenge) in the course of investigating the benevolent route (through desire for reconciliation and educational calling). In line with our acknowledgment of two competing paths that potentially explain public complaining, we propose that the desire for reconciliation positively influences intentions to complain online through educational calling, and the desire for revenge positively influences intentions to complain

online too. Formally,

H1: Educational calling mediates the relationship between desire for reconciliation and intentions to complain, such that desire for reconciliation positively influences educational calling, which positively influences intentions to complain using social media.

H2: Desire for revenge positively influences intentions to complain using social media.

2.4. Tie strength and online complaint

To explain the appearance of the educational process, we turn to relationship marketing (RM) (e.g., Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier et al., 2007). A basic contention of the RM framework is that it is necessary to build and preserve strong consumer relationships that enhance sellers' performance outcomes (Palmatier et al., 2006). Successful RM efforts improve firm performance by establishing stronger relational bonds (De Wulf et al., 2001). Various relational constructs capture these bonds, such as commitment, or an enduring desire to maintain valued relationships (Moorman et al., 1992); trust, which is confidence in exchange partners' reliability and integrity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994); tie strength, defined as the potency of the bond between members of networks (Granovetter, 1973); and communal relationships, in which consumers develop a strong sense of belonging and the drive to maintain emotional ties with brands (Ringberg et al., 2007).

We focus on the bonds between relational partners as a construct that defines how consumers react following service failures. Specifically, the strength of brand–consumer relationships is the strength of the link between the two actors (Mittal et al., 2008; Umashankar et al., 2017). For consumers with strong relationships, complaining may create a dilemma. On the one hand, consumers who feel strong ties to service providers are less likely to complain following service failures, because they wish to preserve their relationships (Harari, 1992; Mittal et al., 2008; Umashankar et al., 2017). This concern might be justified, especially in the public sphere, because complaints that are visible to large audiences may induce online reputation crises for brands (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). On the other hand, consumers with strong relationships might be more willing to devote the time and effort required to offer feedback, because the relationship is important to them (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Therefore, they may regard complaining as a preservation strategy that indicates their interest in repairing threatened social ties (Umashankar et al., 2017). Furthermore, consumers who are strongly tied to brands may be more likely to offer diagnostic feedback as a way to attract brands' attention and encourage them to progress (Harari, 1992). The strength of brand–consumer ties also likely influences the desire for revenge. Good prior relationships might protect brands from the detrimental effects of their shortcomings (Grégoire & Fisher, 2006; Umashankar et al., 2017), or relationship quality might exacerbate malevolent reactions, due to feelings of betrayal (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008), through a "love becomes hate" effect (Grégoire et al., 2009). We hypothesize:

H3: Strongly tied (vs. weakly tied) consumers experience a strong (vs. weak) desire for reconciliation, which positively influences intentions to complain using social media, through educational calling.

H4: Strongly tied (vs. weakly tied) consumers experience a strong (vs. weak) desire for revenge, which positively influences intentions to complain using social media.

2.5. Consumers' reactions to double deviation situations

A double deviation, or a service failure followed by a failed recovery (Bitner, 1990), is associated with greater service failure severity and firm blame (Obeidat et al., 2018). Compared with a single deviation, a double deviation generates greater anger and desires for revenge (Aquino et al., 2001; Bonifield & Cole, 2007; Grégoire et al., 2009; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2009). We study an educational calling in the context of a single deviation, which is more likely to give rise to a desire

for reconciliation, then verify its occurrence following a double deviation, which may favor the desire for revenge. Arguably, educational calling should encourage public complaining in double deviation contexts, such that consumers with strong ties invest time to maintain relationships even after a double deviation. Social media provide a means to create dialogue with brands, as an alternative to traditional customer service interactions. The risk associated with public exposures of brand failures seems even more plausible in the case of a double deviation, when an initial challenge to a brand has proved ineffective (Bitner, 1990). A public educational calling also encourages brands to demonstrate their consumer orientations and desires to maintain relationships. Joireman et al. (2013) highlight the persistence of desires for reconciliation, even after a double deviation. We formulate the following hypothesis:

H5: Consumers subject to double (vs. single) deviation experience lower (vs. higher) levels of desire for reconciliation, which positively influences their intentions to complain using social media, through educational calling.

H6: Consumers subject to double (vs. single) deviation experience higher (vs. lower) levels of desire for revenge, which positively influences intentions to complain using social media.

Finally, the desire for reconciliation is evident in traditional offline complaints (e.g., Basso & Pizzutti, 2016; Joireman et al., 2013); we assert it should hold in other channels too and might help explain private complaining. But private complaining does not punish brands for failures, so the malevolent route to public complaining (through revenge) might disappear when consumers complain privately. Formally,

H7: The number of deviations negatively influences intentions to complain privately, through the desire for reconciliation and educational calling, such that double (single) deviation induces low (high) desires for reconciliation, which positively influence educational calling, which then positively influences intentions to complain to customer service.

2.6. The effectiveness of recovery strategies according to complainants' motivations

Previous service recovery literature has studied the impact of organizational responses on consumer behaviors, such as compensation (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011). But consumers motivated by a desire for reconciliation tend to be more concerned with process recovery communication (PRC), in the form of feedback from firms that describes how they have learned from consumers' complaints and improved their processes to prevent similar failures (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2012). To deal with complaints motived by a desire for reconciliation, managers should commit particularly to finding appropriate responses to strong-tie consumers who desire reconciliation. Prior literature identifies three main recovery strategies: Apologies acknowledge fault for unfortunate past events (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Wong, 2004) and help restore satisfaction (e.g., Roschk & Kaiser, 2013; Wirtz & Mattila, 2003); compensation is a commonly used complaint management strategy (Bitner, 1990; Hoffman et al., 2003) that increases post-recovery satisfaction (Roschk & Kaiser, 2013); and PRC addresses the benefits of complaints and how they influence internal procedures, rather than managing the complaints themselves.

We assume that apologies and compensation are ineffective for dealing with complainers who are motivated by their educational calling, because they are out of step with expectations. The goal of educationally motivated complainers is to help brands move forward and ensure that similar problems do not recur (Folkes, 1984). Therefore, they should experience greater satisfaction when they know they have achieved their goal. Just as teachers can confirm the achievement of their goals by assessing students' acquisition of knowledge and reasoning (Slavin, 2019), complainers can confirm the achievement of their goals if brands demonstrate they have learned and improved.

Therefore, we expect PRC meets the expectations of benevolent consumers, by informing them about what companies have done in response to consumer complaints. Such communication also may increase consumers' perceptions of the brand's investment in the consumer relationship (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2012). Consumers—especially strong-tie consumers—expect acknowledgment of their relationships; PRCs represent such acknowledgments, because they go beyond simple failure reparation. In contrast, though compensation adequately offsets service failure, it is not in line with consumers' focus on helping brands move forward to maintain good relationships. Accordingly, we expect that compensation does not improve consumers' post-recovery satisfaction and hypothesize:

H8: Different levels of recovery have distinct effects on the satisfaction exhibited by strong-tie consumers, such that (a) PRC, compared with simple apology, produces greater satisfaction with service recovery and (b) PRC with or without compensation produces the same level of satisfaction with service recovery.

To test these hypotheses, we adopt the experimental research protocol depicted in Fig. 1. In Study 1, we test for the existence of benevolent and malevolent routes to public complaining in a single deviation context (H1, H2). In Study 2, we test the validity of these two routes in a double deviation context, and we consider the influence of the strength of brand–consumer ties on these two routes (H3, H4). In Study 3, we study the influence of the number of deviations (one vs. two) on public complaining and private complaining through the two previously mentioned routes (H5, H6, H7). Finally, in the complementary Study 4, we validate the benevolent and altruistic nature of educational calling by testing the effectiveness of different service recovery strategies (H8).

3. Study 1

3.1. Research design

In a scenario experiment, respondents read that they had decided to purchase a new sweater in a store they particularly liked and from which they regularly made purchases. We put the respondents in a single deviation situation: Despite normal use of the sweater after purchase and having followed the washing instructions, they noticed a very rapid deterioration of the garment. We then asked respondents a series of questions that measured their desires, educational calling, and intentions to complain publicly on a brand's social media page. We collected data from a sample of 229 consumers in France through an online questionnaire. Students distributed the questionnaire to consumers in their personal and professional environments, in return for course credit. After we deleted 11 cases, on the basis of quality and attention checks, our sample contained 218 participants (53.2% women; M_{Age} = 22.24 years, standard deviation [SD] = 3.89).

After reading the scenario, participants responded to questions about the independent variable, the dependent variable, and the mediators. We measured all variables using scales from previous work adapted to our research context (see Table A1) and rated on 7-point Likert scales (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). To assess the realism of the scenario, we asked participants to respond to the following statements: "The situation described is realistic" and "This situation could happen in real life." The average realism score was 6.06, indicating that participants perceived the experiment as realistic, across conditions.

We assessed the psychometric properties of the scales using a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The model produced satisfactory fit, with a comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.959, a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of 0.052, and a chi-square of 252.296 (df = 160, $p \leq 0.001$). In this model, the loadings (λ) were large and significant ($p < .001$), the average variances extracted (AVEs) equaled or exceeded 0.50 for all constructs; and the Cronbach's alphas were greater than 0.7 (Appendix A). As an indication of discriminant validity, the AVE for each construct was greater than the squared correlation between that construct and any other construct in
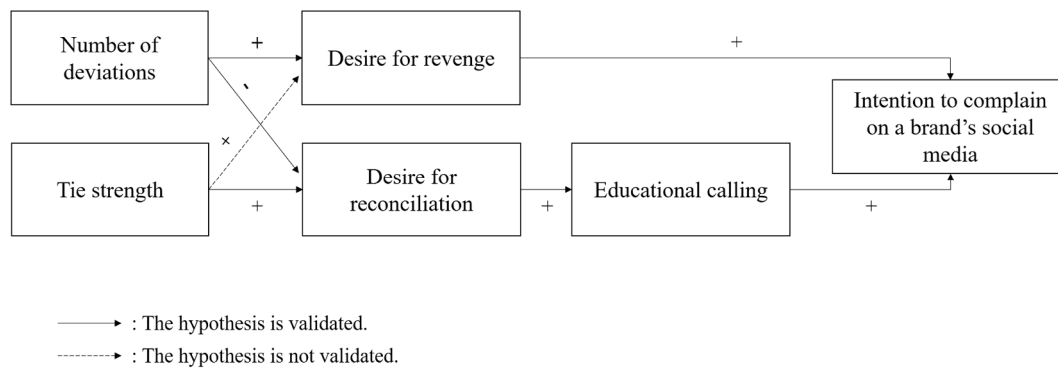
Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of two routes (benevolent and malevolent) that lead to public complaining.

Table A1

Study 1: Measures.

Variables	Loadings
Desire for reconciliation adapted from *Desire for reconciliation* (Joireman et al. 2013)	
α = 0.801, AVE = 0.59, KMO = 0.688	
• I want to start again on a good basis with this brand.	0.771
• I want to forgive the brand in spite of this incident.	0.866
• I believe that "to err is human" and I accept that the brand can make mistakes.	0.645
Educational calling adapted from *Helping the company* (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004)	
α = 0.881, AVE = 0.65, KMO = 0.833	
• I want to help the brand not make the same mistakes later on.	0.770
• I want the brand to be able to take advantage of this event to improve itself.	0.803
• I want to allow the brand to progress thanks to my testimony.	0.834
• I want the brand to be aware of its mistakes so that it can avoid them.	0.827
Desire for revenge adapted from *Desire for revenge* (Grégoire et al. 2009)	
α = 0.932, AVE = 0.77, KMO = 0.896	
• I want to take action to harm the brand.	0.897
• I want to punish the brand in some way.	0.827
• I want to cause inconvenience to the brand.	0.914
• I want to get back at the brand.	0.864
• I want the brand to get what it deserves	0.798

Notes: (1) All variables are measured on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). All factor loadings are significant at the 0.01 level. α = Cronbach's alpha; AVE = average variance extracted; KMO = Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index.

(2) Study 1 tested the effects of educational calling and desire for revenge on intentions to complain using social media by controlling gender, age, habits regarding online reviews and willingness to complain on a brand's social media. We measured willingness to complain on a brand's social media with the question, "As a result of this experience, what is the probability that you will post a negative comment on one of the brand's social networks?" rated on 7-point Likert scales (1 = "very unlikely," 7 = "very likely"). We measured habits regarding online reviews by adapting the Attitude toward online reviews scale from the work of Mafael and colleagues (2019). Controls had no effect on intentions to complain using social media except for habits regarding online reviews (b = 0.30, p <.01).

the model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

3.2. Results

We first analyzed the correlation matrix (see Table 1). The results indicated a negative correlation between desire for reconciliation and intentions to complain on a brand's social media (-0.260). With regard to educational calling, we found a high average score (5.53), as well as a positive correlation with intentions to complain on a brand's social media (0.210). We also found a positive correlation between desire for reconciliation and educational calling (0.154). Regarding desire for revenge, the results showed a negative correlation with desire for reconciliation (-0.436) but a positive correlation with intentions to complain on social media (0.560).

We used a CFA in AMOS 26 to assess the model. The model achieved good fit, including chi-square = 193.18 (df = 111, p =.001), CFI = 0.96, Tucker-Lewis index = 0.95, and RMSEA = 0.06. We followed Zhao et al.'s (2010) procedure to test the hypothesized mediating effect. First, the direct effect of the desire for reconciliation on intentions to complain on social media was significant and negative (b = −0.36, p <.05). Second, when we included educational calling as a mediator of the positive indirect effect between the desire for reconciliation and intentions to complain, we identified a positive and significant influence of the desire for reconciliation on educational calling (b = 0.15, p <.05), along with a significant and positive influence of educational calling on intentions to complain (b = 0.18, p <.05). In line with H1, the Sobel (1982) test indicated mediation as well (p <.05). The direct effect of a desire for reconciliation on intentions to complain remained significant though (b = -0.19, p <.05), so the mediation is partial. Finally, desire for revenge positively and significantly increased intentions to complain on a brand's social media (b = 0.41, p <.05), in support of H2.

We conducted a regression analysis with PROCESS macro v.4.0 (model 4) (Hayes, 2017) to test the mediation model. The results in Table 2 indicate that the direct link between desire for reconciliation and intentions to complain was significant and negative (β = -0.30; BootSE = 0.11; 95% confidence interval [CI] = [-0.53;-0.08]). However, the indirect link of desire for reconciliation with intentions to complain, through educational calling, was significant and positive (β = 0.05;

Table 1

Study 1: descriptive statistics, average variance extracted (AVE) and pearson correlations between constructs.

Variables	Mean	SD	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Desire for reconciliation	5.09	0.94	0.59	1						
2. Educational calling	5.53	1.18	0.65	0.154*	1					
3. Desire for revenge	2.52	1.26	0.77	−0.436**	0.055	1				
4. Intention to complain on a brand's social media	2.88	1.75	–	−0.260**	0.210**	0.560**	1			
5. Age	22.24	3.89	–	−0.017	−0.074	0.030	0.049	1		
6. Propensity to complain	3.76	1.25	–	0.116	−0.322**	−0.208**	−0.264**	−0.176**	1	
7. Habits regarding online reviews	2.37	1.27	–	−0.082	0.190**	0.333**	0.409**	−0.050	−0.230**	1

*p <.05, **p <.01, ns = not significant.

Table 2
Study 1: mediation test.

	Educational calling				Intent to complain on a brand's social media			
	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p >.05)	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/p >.05)
Direct effects								
Desire for reconciliation	0.2342	0.0912	0.0109	[0.0544;0.4140]	−0.3024	0.1146	0.0089	[−0.5283;−0.0766]
Desire for revenge					0.5408	0.0900	0.0000	[0.3634;0.7182]
Educational calling					0.2223	0.0851	0.0097	[0.0544;0.3901]
R²	0.1611				0.4162			

	Indirect effect		
	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p <.05)
Desire for reconciliation → Educational calling → Intent to complain on a brand's social media	0.0520	0.0313	[0.0037;0.1238]

Control variables: Age, Gender, Propensity to complain, Habits regarding online reviews.

BootSE = 0.03; 95% CI = [0.01;0.12]), in line with H1. The relationship between the desire for reconciliation and intentions to complain on social media therefore was partially mediated by educational calling. In addition, desire for revenge significantly and positively influenced intentions to complain on social media (β = 0.54; BootSE = 0.09; 95% CI = [0.36;0.72]), again in line with H2.

3.3. Discussion

In contexts marked by strong brand ties, public complaining is driven by the desire for revenge, as previous research has shown (Grégoire, Legoux, et al. 2018; Tripp & Grégoire, 2011). Study 1 confirms this relationship: The greater the desire for revenge, the higher the intention to complain publicly on social media. In line with the expectation that a desire for reconciliation, rooted in a preference to preserve brand relationships, inhibits the desire to publicly denigrate brands, Study 1 also reveals a direct relationship between desire for reconciliation and intentions to complain publicly. With this finding, we provide evidence of a counterintuitive, supportive path to public complaining. The desire for reconciliation has a paradoxical influence on public complaining behavior, spanning both a direct negative impact and an indirect positive impact. The supportive route encompasses both a desire for reconciliation and educational calling; educational calling mediates the effect of a desire for reconciliation on intentions to complain publicly. Even if public complaining often is associated with desire for revenge (Grégoire, Legoux, et al. 2018), we show that it can indicate a benevolent approach to brands too.

The strength of consumer–brand relationships is integral to the complaint process (Umashankar et al., 2017). Considering that the Study 1 findings indicate the possibility of educational calling effects in a strong-tie context, we refine our analysis to specify the impact of tie strength on educational calling. We also vary the complaint context in Study 2, and to expand our analysis, we investigate whether educational calling also appears in a double deviation context, which might exacerbate the desire for revenge (Grégoire et al., 2009; Tripp & Grégoire, 2011).

4. Study 2

4.1. Research design

The scenario asked respondents to imagine purchasing a new sweater in a store, as in Study 1, but we manipulated tie strength (strong vs. weak) and created a double deviation. Respondents assigned to the strong consumer–brand tie condition chose one of their favorite brands for purchase; those with weak ties chose a brand they had never

purchased before and with which they had no particular connection. We randomly assigned respondents to one of the two conditions. Respondents read that after noticing the abnormal degradation of the quality of the sweater, they returned to the store to express their dissatisfaction; there, they encountered a salesperson who said—without apologizing—there were no manufacturing defects, and the brand could do nothing for them. They then left the store feeling very upset about this unsuccessful exchange. We then asked respondents a series of questions that measured their desires, educational calling, and intentions to complain publicly. We collected data from a sample of 144 consumers in France through an online questionnaire. Students distributed the questionnaire to consumers in their personal and professional environments, in return for course credit. After we deleted 32 cases as the result of quality and attention checks, our sample contained 112 participants (60.7% women; M_{Age} = 34.67 years, SD = 15.05).

After reading the scenario, participants responded to questions about the dependent variable and mediators. They also completed manipulation and attention checks. We measured all variables using scales from previous work, adapted to our research context (see Tables B1 and B2), and rated on 7-point Likert scales (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). We measured willingness to complain on the brand's social media with the question, "As a result of this experience, what is the probability that you will post a negative comment on one of the brand's social networks?" on 7-point Likert scales (1 = "very unlikely," 7 = "very likely"). We checked tie strength using four items adapted from Umashankar et al.'s (2017) tie strength scale: "You like the brand you buy from," "You feel connected to this brand," "You feel a certain chemistry between you and this brand," and "There is an emotional bond between you and this brand" (α = 0.917). The manipulation was successful: Respondents in the strong-tie condition reported significantly higher scores than respondents in the weak-tie condition (M_{strong} = 5.54; M_{weak} = 3.48, t = 8.07; p <.01). To assess the realism of the scenario, we asked participants to indicate their degree of agreement with the following statements: "The situation described is realistic" and "This situation could happen in real life" (M = 5.80). We found no differences in the realism index averages between the weak-tie and strong-tie conditions (p =.355). The experiment was perceived as realistic by respondents, regardless of condition.

Appendix B1 summarizes the items used, the scales' sources, and the psychometric properties. We assessed the psychometric properties of the scales using a CFA (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The model produced a satisfactory fit (CFI = 0.910, RMSEA = 0.065, χ^2 = 234.683, df = 160, p ≤ 0.001). In this model, loadings (λ) were large and significant (p <.001); the AVEs equaled or exceeded 0.50 for all constructs; and the Cronbach's alphas were greater than 0.7. Finally, discriminant validity was achieved, because the AVE for each construct was greater than the

Table B1
Study 2: Measures.

Variables	Loadings
Desire for reconciliation adapted from *Desire for reconciliation* (Joireman et al. 2013)	
α = 0.682, AVE = 0.56, KMO = 0.549	
• I want to start again on a good basis with this brand.	0.752
• I want to forgive the brand in spite of this incident.	0.835
• I believe that "to err is human" and I accept that the brand can make mistakes.	0.643
Educational calling adapted from *Helping the company* (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004)	
α = 0.769, AVE = 0.50, KMO = 0.732	
• I want to help the brand not make the same mistakes later on.	0.615
• I want the brand to be able to take advantage of this event to improve itself.	0.793
• I want to allow the brand to progress thanks to my testimony.	0.771
• I want the brand to be aware of its mistakes so that it can avoid them.	0.596
Desire for revenge adapted from *Desire for revenge* (Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009)	
α = 0.907, AVE = 0.72, KMO = 0.885	
• I want to take action to harm the brand.	0.882
• I want to punish the brand in some way.	0.842
• I want to cause inconvenience to the brand.	0.844
• I want to get back at the brand.	0.831
• I want the brand to get what it deserves	0.686

Notes: (1) All variables are measured on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). All factor loadings are significant at the 0.01 level. α = Cronbach's alpha; AVE = average variance extracted; KMO = Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index.
(2) Study 2 tested the effect of tie strength on intentions to complain using social media by controlling gender, age, habits regarding online reviews and willingness to complain on a brand's social media. Controls had no effect on intentions to complain using social media except for habits regarding online reviews (b = 0.52, *p* <.01).

Table B2
Study 2: means split by condition.

	Mean	
Variables	Weak ties	Strong ties
1. Desire for reconciliation	3.60	4.12
2. Educational calling	5.08	5.44
3. Desire for revenge	3.41	3.47
4. Intention to complain on a brand's social media	3.07	3.18

squared correlation between that construct and any other construct in the model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

4.2. Results

We first analyzed the correlation matrix (see Table 3). The results indicated no correlation between desire for reconciliation and intention to complain on a brand's social media. With regard to educational calling, we uncovered a high average score (5.26) and a positive correlation with intentions to complain (0.245). We also observed a positive correlation between desire for reconciliation and educational

calling (0.311). Regarding desire for revenge, we confirmed the correlations observed in Study 1, with a negative correlation with desire for reconciliation (-0.283) and a positive one with intentions to complain (0.486).

To test H3 and H4, we conducted a regression analysis with the PROCESS macro (v.4.0, custom model; Hayes, 2017). We coded the manipulation with one dummy variable (tie strength). The results (see Table 4) supported the existence of a positive link. Tie strength positively influenced intentions to complain on a brand's social media page through desire for reconciliation and educational calling (β = 0.10; BootSE = 0.06; 95% CI = [0.02;0.24]), in support of H3. Although desire for revenge positively influenced intentions to publicly complain, tie strength did not significantly influence these intentions through desire for revenge (CI = [-0.12;0.33]), so we cannot confirm H4.

4.3. Discussion

Study 2 confirms the existence of distinct routes to public complaining. We find, in a double deviation context, a positive indirect link between tie strength and intentions to complain publicly, through desire for reconciliation and educational calling. Thus, a benevolent approach can occur, independent of the deviation context. After a single deviation, educational calling can emerge simply from a benevolent approach to the brand, but after a double deviation, it seems to be an extreme measure that consumers take as a last resort when private approaches have not been sufficient to make brands recognize the problem. Study 2 also highlights the role of the strength of brand–consumer ties. In the presence of strong ties, the desire for reconciliation is stronger, which promotes a benevolent route to public complaint through educational calling. Therefore, Study 2 confirms the role of an educational calling as a constructive approach to maintaining relationships with brands.

5. Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 indicate the role of educational calling in explaining public complaining behavior, as well as its foundation in a desire for reconciliation. Noting prior evidence that a desire for reconciliation motivates traditional offline complaints (e.g., Basso & Pizzutti, 2016; Joireman et al., 2013), we also ask whether the phenomenon of educational calling, arising from the desire for reconciliation, online remains valid offline too.

5.1. Research design

To strengthen the external validity of our research, we devised a different scenario involving a service purchase. Respondents had to imagine booking a table in a restaurant where they previously had dined. Due to a work obligation in the early afternoon, they told the service provider, when booking their table, that they would have to leave the restaurant by 1:30p.m. The scenario indicated they arrived at the restaurant, among the first consumers, and ordered the daily special, which was supposed to be served more quickly than other menu items. Yet due to a lack of organization on the part of the waiter, time went by, and they were not served, such that they were late finishing their meal.

Table 3
Study 2: descriptive statistics, average variance extracted (AVE) and Pearson correlations between constructs.

Variables	Mean	SD	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Desire for reconciliation	3.89	1.20	0.56	1						
2. Educational calling	5.26	0.99	0.50	0.311**	1					
3. Desire for revenge	3.44	1.39	0.72	−0.283*	0.021	1				
4. Intention to complain on a brand's social media	3.12	2.04	–	−0.097	0.245**	0.486**	1			
5. Age	34.67	15.05	–	0.015	0.058	−0.166	−0.184	1		
6. Propensity to complain	3.64	1.20	–	0.251**	−0.156	−0.108	−0.075	−0.283**	1	
7. Habits regarding online reviews	2.48	1.41	–	−0.050	0.074	0.406**	0.502**	−0.215*	−0.055	1

*p <.05, **p <.01, ns = not significant.

Table 4
Study 2: mediation test.

	M1 (Desire for reconciliation)				M2 (Desire for revenge)				M3 (Educational calling)				Y (Intention to complain on a brand's social media)			
	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p >.05)	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p >.05)	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p >.05)	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p >.05)
Direct effects																
X (Tie strength)	0.6386	0.2014	0.0020	[0.2393;1.0380]	0.2134	0.2521	ns	[−0.2864;0.7132]					−0.1706	0.1741	ns	[−0.5158;0.1747]
M1 (Desire for reconciliation)									0.3399	0.0841	0.0001	[0.1732;0.5066]				
M2 (Desire for revenge)													0.4439	0.1313	0.0010	[0.1834;0.7043]
M3 (Educational calling)													0.4820	0.1733	0.0065	[0.1382;0.8257]
R²	0.1535				0.1899				0.1729				0.4039			

Indirect effects	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p <.05)
X → M1 → M3 → Y	0.1046	0.0580	[0.0193;0.2449]
X → M2 → Y	0.0947	0.1108	[−0.1202;0.32284]

Control variables: age, gender, propensity to complain, habits regarding online reviews.

We then manipulated the number of deviations and randomly assigned participants to the two conditions. In the single deviation condition, the scenario indicated that they paid the bill in a hurry and rushed back to work; in the double deviation condition, it noted that when the bill came, they expressed their dissatisfaction to the waiter, who abruptly dismissed their remarks by indicating that at that time of day, it was impossible to serve them any faster. We then asked respondents a series of questions to gauge their desires, educational calling, and intentions to make private and public complaints. The data came from a sample of 240 consumers in France, through an online questionnaire. Students distributed the questionnaire to consumers in their personal and professional environments, in return for course credit. After we deleted 23 cases as the result of quality and attention checks, our sample contained 217 participants (58.4% women; $M_{Age} = 33.65$ years, SD = 14.57).

The measures all came from previous studies, adapted to our research context (see Tables C1 and C2) and rated on 7-point Likert scales (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). We measured willingness to send a private complaint to customer service with the question, "As a result of this experience, how likely is it that you will contact customer service or the restaurant manager privately?" rated on 7-point Likert scales (1 = "very unlikely," 7 = "very likely"). We measured willingness to complain on the brand's social media as in our previous studies. We checked the number of deviations with the following agreement item: "The text described a situation in which you had expressed your dissatisfaction to the server when paying the bill." The manipulation was successful: Respondents in the single deviation condition reported significantly lower scores than respondents in the double deviation condition ($M_{single} = 4.19$; $M_{double} = 5.86$, t = -6.60; $p < .01$). To assess the realism of the scenario, we asked participants to indicate to what extent they agreed "The situation described is realistic" and "This situation could happen in real life." The average of these items was high (M = 6.06), and we found no differences between groups in the

Table C1
Study3: Measures.

Variables	Loadings
Desire for reconciliation adapted from *Desire for reconciliation* (Joireman et al. 2013)	
α = 0.872, AVE = 0.71, KMO = 0.703	
● I want to start again on a good basis with this brand.	0.850
● I want to forgive the brand in spite of this incident.	0.938
● I believe that "to err is human" and I accept that the brand can make mistakes.	0.736
Educational calling adapted from *Helping the company* (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004)	
α = 0.891, AVE = 0.69, KMO = 0.825	
● I want to help the brand not make the same mistakes later on.	0.863
● I want the brand to be able to take advantage of this event to improve itself.	0.866
● I want to allow the brand to progress thanks to my testimony.	0.843
● I want the brand to be aware of its mistakes so that it can avoid them.	0.751
Desire for revenge adapted from *Desire for revenge* (Grégoire et al. 2009)	
α = 0.879, AVE = 0.68, KMO = 0.853	
● I want to take action to harm the brand.	0.826
● I want to punish the brand in some way.	0.824
● I want to cause inconvenience to the brand.	0.770
● I want to get back at the brand.	0.874
● I want the brand to get what it deserves	0.641

Notes: (1) All variables are measured on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). All factor loadings are significant at the 0.01 level. α = Cronbach's alpha; AVE = average variance extracted; KMO = Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin index.
(2) Study 3 tested the effect of number of deviations on intentions to complain using social media and intention to complain privately by controlling gender, age, habits regarding online reviews and willingness to complain on a brand's social media. Controls had no effect on intentions to complain using social media except for habits regarding online reviews (b = 0.31, $p < .01$). Controls had no effect on intentions to complain privately except for age (b = 0.18, $p < .05$).

Table C2

Study 3: means split by condition.

Variables	Mean	
	Single Deviation	Double Deviation
1. Desire for reconciliation	4.89	4.45
2. Educational calling	5.35	5.21
3. Desire for revenge	1.96	2.26
4. Intention to make a private complaint to customer service	3.45	3.07
5. Intention to complain on a brand's social media	2.98	3.41

single and double deviation conditions (p =.079). Therefore, the respondents perceived the experiment as realistic, regardless of condition.

Appendix C1 summarizes the items used, the scales' sources, and the psychometric properties. According to the CFA (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988), the model produced a satisfactory fit (CFI = 0.955, RMSEA = 0.053, χ^2 = 297.050, df = 179, $p \leq$ 0.001), with large and significant loadings (λ; $p <$.001). The AVEs equaled or exceeded 0.50 for all constructs, and the Cronbach's alphas were greater than 0.7. Finally, as an indication of discriminant validity, the AVE for each construct was greater than the squared correlation between that construct and any other construct in the model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

5.2. Results

We first analyzed the correlation matrix (see Table 5) but found no correlation between desire for reconciliation and intentions to complain privately. With regard to educational calling, we observed a high average score (5.28) and a positive correlation with intentions to complain privately to customer service (0.266). A positive correlation arose between desire for reconciliation and educational calling (0.308). Regarding desire for revenge, we confirmed the correlations that we observed in Studies 1 and 2, as well as a negative correlation with desire for reconciliation (-0.369) and no significant correlation with intentions to complain privately to customer service.

To test H5–H7, we conducted a regression analysis with the PROCESS macro (v.4.0, model 81; Hayes, 2017). We coded the manipulation with one dummy variable (number of deviations). The number of deviations negatively influenced intentions to complain on a brand's social media page, through desire for reconciliation and educational calling (β = -0.04; BootSE = 0.02; 95% CI = [-0.096;-0.004]), in support of H5. However, it did not significantly influence intentions to complain publicly through desire for revenge (95% CI = [0.00;0.31]), so we cannot confirm H6. The results (Tables 6 and 7) indicated a supportive route to private complaining through educational calling; the number of deviations negatively influenced the desire for reconciliation, such that it was higher in cases of single deviation than in cases of double deviation, which positively influenced educational calling, which in turn positively influenced intentions to complain privately to customer service (β = -0.08; BootSE = 0.04; 95% CI = [-0.17;-0.02]). These findings confirmed

H7.

5.3. Discussion

Study 3 emphasizes that the manifestation of educational calling is not confined to public channels. By highlighting the indirect positive link between desire for reconciliation and intention to complain privately, through educational calling, we confirm the relevance of educational calling in traditional complaint contexts. Our findings verify the existence of this benevolent approach to educating brands in both public and private contexts, so brand education seemingly can take place in different spaces and through different levers (i.e., presence of other consumers in public or personal dialogue in private), as well as in relation to services.

6. Study 4

To further our understanding of educational calling, we developed a fourth experiment to test for the benevolent motivations of public complainers. In this effort, we investigate the effectiveness of common recovery strategies, targeted toward consumers with an educational calling. In line with these customers' desire to help brands, we expect PRC is more appropriate than apologies and that compensation does not improve these customers' post-recovery satisfaction.

6.1. Research methodology

6.1.1. Research design and participants

In a scenario-based experiment, we applied a 3-level (recovery: apologies vs. process improvement communication vs. process improvement communication with compensation) between-subjects design. The scenario described an urgent book purchase, required for the participants' professional activity. Reflecting our findings from Studies 1–3, the scenario described strong consumer–brand ties, double deviation (Time 1), and a desire to educate the brand, followed by a recovery attempt after an online public complaint (Time 2). We were inspired by a scenario used by Van Vaerenbergh et al. (2012) (see Appendix D). Specifically, respondents read that after visiting a bookstore they liked and visited regularly, they found the book they wanted was not available, so on the advice of the salesperson, they placed an order and were told that the book would arrive before the end of the week. The following week, having heard nothing, they called the bookshop and learned the book had been in stock for several days. The salesperson with whom they spoke told them he was unaware that he was supposed to inform them and there was little he could do. He invited them to come and collect the book. Following this description, the scenario indicated that they decided to post a review on the bookshop's social media accounts to point out the shop's failure to deliver on its commitment and the damage caused by this lack of responsiveness. They also gave the bookshop advice on several issues, such as having an online tracking system that enables consumers who have ordered books to follow their order status in real time. Respondents in the apology condition read that

Table 5

Study 3: descriptive statistics, average variance extracted (AVE) and Pearson correlations between constructs.

Variables	Mean	SD	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Desire for reconciliation	4.68	1.21	0.71	1							
2. Educational calling	5.28	1.11	0.69	0.308*	1						
3. Desire for revenge	2.11	1.14	0.68	−0.369**	−0.196**	1					
4. Intention to make a private complaint to customer service	3.26	2.04	–	−0.116	0.266**	0.099	1				
5. Intention to complain on a brand's social media	3.19	1.96	–	−0.219**	0.089	0.333**	0.266**	1			
6. Age	33.65	14.57	–	−0.014	0.062	−0.114	0.148*	−0.066	1		
7. Propensity to complain	3.61	1.19	–	0.107	−0.174*	0.091	−0.179*	0.038	−0.266**	1	
8. Habits regarding online reviews	5.15	1.31	–	0.095	0.190**	0.081	0.080	0.236**	−0.337**	0.102	1

*$p <$.05, **$p <$.01, ns = not significant.

Table 6
Study 3: First mediation test.

	M1 (Desire for reconciliation)				M2 (Desire for revenge)				M3 (Educational calling)				Y (Intention to complain on a brand's social media)			
	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p >.05)	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/p >.05)	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/p >.05)	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p >.05)
Direct effects																
X (Number of deviations)	−0.4213	0.1557	0.0073	[−0.7281;−0.1145]	0.2970	0.1496	0.0482	[0.0023;0.5917]	0.3154	0.0563	0.0000	[0.2044;0.4263]	−0.2853	0.1113	0.0110	[−0.5046;−0.0660]
M1 (Desire for reconciliation)													0.4356	0.1113	0.0001	[0.2164;0.6549]
M2 (Desire for revenge)													0.2918	0.1135	0.0108	[0.0681;0.5155]
M3 (Educational calling)																
R²	0.0622				0.0525				0.1930				0.1923			

Indirect effects

	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p <.05)
X → M1 → M3 → Y	−0.0388	0.0238	[−0.0965;−0.0044]
X → M2 → Y	0.1294	0.0810	[−0.0020;0.3152]

Control variables: Age, Gender, Propensity to complain, Habits regarding online reviews.

Table 7
Study 3: Second mediation test.

	M1 (Desire for reconciliation)				M2 (Desire for revenge)				M3 (Educational calling)				Y (Intention to make a private complaint to customer service)			
	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p >.05)	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/p >.05)	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/p >.05)	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	p	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p >.05)
Direct effects																
X (Number of deviations)	−0.4213	0.1557	0.0073	[−0.7281;−0.1145]	0.2970	0.1496	0.0482	[0.0023;0.5917]	0.3154	0.0563	0.0000	[0.2044;0.4263]	−0.2696	0.1187	0.0241	[−0.5035;−0.0357]
M1 (Desire for reconciliation)													0.2562	0.1187	0.0320	[0.0223;0.4901]
M2 (Desire for revenge)													0.6311	0.1211	0.0000	[0.3925;0.8697]
M3 (Educational calling)																
R²	0.0622				0.0525				0.1930				0.1711			

Indirect effects

	Coeff (β)	SE (δ)	CI (bootstrap 5000/ p <.05)
X → M1 → M3 → Y	−0.0838	0.0384	[−0.1686; −0.0210]
X → M2 → Y	0.0761	0.0646	[−0.0124;0.2287]

Control variables: Age, Gender, Propensity to complain, Habits regarding online reviews.

they received a message from the bookshop apologizing for the inconvenience caused. Respondents in the process improvement communication (PIC) condition received a message from the bookstore apologizing and indicating that it had made changes to the order management process as a result of the review. Finally, respondents in the process improvement communication with compensation (PICC) condition received the same message, along with an added promise that the bookstore would refund the delivery charge in full. We randomly assigned participants to the three conditions. All respondents then encountered a series of questions that measured their levels of satisfaction and engagement. We collected data from a sample of 280 consumers in France, through a French panel. After we deleted 37 cases as the result of quality and attention checks, our sample contained 243 participants (60.1% women; M_{Age} = 48.65 years, SD = 13.96).

6.1.2. Measurements

After reading the scenario, participants responded to questions about the dependent variable and mediator. They also completed the manipulation and attention checks. We measured all variables using scales from previous work, adapted to our research context and rated on 7-point Likert scales (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). We measured educational calling using the scale from our previous studies. For tie strength, we used two items from Umashankar et al.'s (2017) tie-strength scale: "You like the brand you buy from" and "You feel a certain chemistry between you and this brand." With regard to recovery response, we used two items to check compensation: "The brand offered me free shipping on my order" and "The brand offered me compensation" (α = 0.920). Three items measured improvement: "The brand took the necessary precautions to ensure that this problem would not occur in the future," "The brand communicated that it was taking the necessary steps to ensure that the same situation would not occur in the future," and "I am confident that this problem will not occur in the future" (α = 0.936). The manipulation was successful, in that respondents in the apologies and PIC conditions reported lower average compensation than respondents in the PICC condition ($M_{apologies}$ = 3.54, M_{PIC} = 3.69, M_{PICC} = 5.14, p <.01). Respondents in the apologies condition reported lower average improvement than those in the PIC and PICC conditions ($M_{apologies}$ = 4.30, M_{PIC} = 5.35, M_{PICC} = 5.25, p <.01). Again, respondents perceived the experiment as realistic regardless of their condition ("The situation described is realistic" and "This situation could happen in real life"; M = 5.91; p =.442). We measured satisfaction with service recovery using a scale from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002): "In my opinion, the brand has satisfactorily resolved my problem," "I am not satisfied with the way the brand handled this particular problem," and "For this particular event (the incident I experienced), I am satisfied with the brand" (α = 0.878).

6.2. Results

To compare the effect of the three conditions of the independent variable, we performed an analysis of variance with satisfaction with service recovery as the dependent variable. This model revealed a significant effect ($F_{(2, 241)}$ = 12.212, p <.001). A post hoc analysis revealed a significant difference in means between the apologies (M = 4.43) and PIC (M = 5.11) conditions (p <.01) and between the apologies and PICC (M = 5.42) conditions (p <.01). However, we found no significant difference between PIC and PICC (p =.308). These combined findings support both predictions of H8: The absence, versus the presence, of promised improvements in brand responses influences satisfaction with the service recovery, rather than compensation. This finding aligns with our prediction that online complainers who seek to educate brands take selfless, benevolent approaches.

6.3. Discussion

Study 4 highlights the benevolent approach of complainers with an

educational calling by showing that adding financial compensation to a recovery response that already demonstrates a brand's ability to improve is superfluous. It also establishes the effectiveness of a response that emphasizes taking the advice of public complainers into account, as opposed to merely apologizing for the failure. The former response is more likely to generate consumer satisfaction than the latter and therefore is preferable.

7. Conclusion

Public complaining is a form of negative WOM (Grégoire, Legoux, et al. 2018), motivated by desire for revenge (Grégoire, Ghadami, et al., 2018); we expand the scope of research into the motivations of public complainers, as they relate to brand relationships. With four studies, we demonstrate the relevance of more benevolent motivations for public complaining and thereby affirm findings that reconciliation-oriented consumers are less likely to complain following service failures (Mittal et al., 2008) (especially online, because they fear damaging the brand image; Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). But we also reveal that desire for reconciliation promotes educational calling, such that complainants want to help brands move forward. Finally, we identify the coexistence of a benevolent route with the malevolent route.

7.1. Theoretical implications

7.1.1. A counterintuitive, supportive motivation for public complaining

Although prior literature highlights consumers' motivations to protect others (e.g., Schaefers & Schamari, 2016), it prioritizes brand-related motivations that imply patterns of revenge or reparation (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). Extant literature also suggests two key influences on public complaining behavior: desire for revenge that encourages complaining or desire for reconciliation that discourages retaliatory behaviors (Joireman et al., 2013). We provide a novel insight, by showing that public complaining can be a consequence of motivations, such as a desire for reconciliation, that *favor* brands. That is, consumers who complain online may be driven by their desire for reconciliation; their public complaints are benevolent, constructive, non-aggressive responses to perceived injustice (Aquino et al., 2006; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; McCullough et al., 1998).

7.1.2. Educational calling as an explanation for public complaining

A desire for reconciliation might inhibit public complaining behavior, which can be perceived as a form of aggression and is incompatible with the desire to preserve relationships (Ahluwalia, 2002; Mittal et al., 2008). However, we add the new insight that, when mediated by educational calling, this relationship between desire for reconciliation and intention to complain publicly actually is positive. Reconciliation leads to education, which favors public complaining. As we demonstrate, educational calling thus functions as a supportive motivation for complaining. In line with Weitzl and Einwiller's (2019) identification of constructive complainers, we find that consumers may be willing to help brands by complaining publicly in digital contexts.

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) find that consumers are willing to help brands, by sharing positive WOM. As a third contribution, we show that public complaining also can be a form of brand-helping behavior, in a context marked by consumer dissatisfaction. Even when companies fail, some consumers want to help them, and they provide this help through education. Such benevolence is a bright side of public complaining. With this insight, we establish two routes to public complaining: one that favors brands through educational calling and one that disfavors brands through a desire for revenge. These two desires co-occur and interact. We thus identify another explanation for public complaining that goes beyond extant literature and its focus on the desires for revenge or reparation (Grégoire, Legoux, et al. 2018).

7.1.3. Conditions that favor supportive motivations for complaining

As a fourth research contribution, we reveal conditions that favor supportive motivations for public complaining. Unlike previous work that indicates that strong brand ties protect brands from complaints (Mittal et al., 2008), we find, in line with Umashankar et al. (2017), that consumers with strong ties likely approach the complaint process constructively. In particular, compared with consumers with weak ties, they are more likely to sense an educational calling and publicly complain on social networks. Strong ties promote educational calling as a way to maintain links with brands.

This study also provides a contribution to research into the influence of deviation contexts on complaining behavior (Basso & Pizzutti, 2016; Grégoire et al., 2009; Joireman et al., 2013). Deviation contexts influence the relationship between educational calling and intentions to complain publicly, such that an educational calling tends to translate into public complaining when an initial attempt to resolve problems fails. This contextual element reveals why some unhappy consumers take the extreme step of jeopardizing the images of brands to which they are strongly attached.

7.1.4. Educational calling as an explanation for private complaining

A desire for reconciliation informs private complaining (Joireman et al., 2013, 2016); we show that including educational calling provides an even clearer understanding of this effect. Specifically, desire for reconciliation has a direct negative influence on intentions to complain privately, but this influence becomes positive when it is mediated by educational calling. Similar to the process observed in the context of public complaining, reconciliation that leads to education also favors private complaining. As another contribution, we demonstrate the role of educational calling for both public and private complaining.

7.1.5. Recovery strategies

As a seventh contribution, we identify actions that companies can take to satisfy complainers motivated by their educational calling. Study 4 suggests that the most effective strategy is for brands to inform complainers of the actions they have taken, showing that they have learned from their mistakes and will avoid repeating them. Such responses are more effective than simple apologies for restoring satisfaction. Compensation is ineffective for educationally oriented consumers; it does not significantly increase their post-recovery satisfaction beyond the level reached by communicating that they have learned from their mistakes. This result confirms the selfless nature of an educational calling and the notion that these complainers conceive of public complaining as a vehicle for education rather than a means of obtaining compensation.

7.2. Practical implications

7.2.1. Constructive perspective on public complaining

Many companies still consider private complaints "bad news" and public complaints as even worse, such that management teams try to suppress negative comments or close down spaces in which they can be posted (Gotter, 2019; Skoogman, 2014). But in addition to patterns of revenge and reparation (e.g., Beverland et al., 2010; Grégoire, Legoux, et al. 2018; Grégoire et al., 2009; Joireman et al., 2013; Walster et al., 1973), a relational pattern can describe public complaining, because dissatisfied consumers may regard their service problems as opportunities for improvement. To leverage this constructive perspective on public complaining, firms might adopt two approaches. First, they can dissuade management teams from ignoring complaints (Homburg & Fürst, 2007) and instead encourage them to recognize the intentions of complainers who propose opportunities for improvement. Because relatively few consumers complain after service failures, managers should pay attention to those who do and facilitate their efforts. Second, firms can encourage consumers to make constructive complaints by asking complainers to offer advice, as part of the overall process of

encouraging consumers to speak up when they are dissatisfied. Such encouragement can evoke an educational calling in complaint management contexts, which might lead consumers to participate in the service recovery (Dong et al., 2008), establish a good resolution, and strengthen consumer–brand relationships. Including consumers in service recovery processes likely improves post-recovery evaluations, because consumers appreciate such inclusion (Roggeveen et al., 2012).

7.2.2. Service recovery and educational calling

Managers should identify supportive motivations for public complaining by paying attention to what complainers actually say. Consumers who adopt an educational calling perspective tend to provide explicit advice. Certain conditions are conducive to the appearance of such motivations. In particular, double deviations tend to lead consumers who are attached to brands to speak up publicly. Therefore, management teams should find ways to identify the authors of public complaints, such as according to their expressed tie strength and deviation contexts, to identify those who tend to embrace educational motivations.

Service firms also can address an educational calling by gaining a clearer understanding of consumers' expectations. Managers should contact complainers directly. By recognizing that consumers with strong ties are more likely than those with weak ties to adopt an educational calling perspective, firms also might prevent a "love becomes hate" situation and devise recovery procedures designed specifically to satisfy their needs (Grégoire et al., 2009). That is, managers should view public complaining as a relational opportunity and train employees accordingly.

Finally, PRC should inform service recovery efforts. Relatively few consumers complain following service failures (Voorhees et al., 2006) and thus remain dissatisfied following service recoveries (Michel et al., 2009), but communication can attenuate detrimental outcomes (Van Vaerenberg et al., 2012). Because educational calling has a public dimension, managers should not limit their PCR to complainers; they should account for its effects on other consumers in the digital service environment (Colm et al., 2017). Then firms can exploit the beneficial aspects of transparency and the virtual presence of others, by publicly displaying their consumer orientation (Hogreve et al., 2019).

7.3. Limitations and further research

Several limitations of this study present opportunities for ongoing research. First, rather than exploring all motivations associated with the educational calling process, we focus on motivations related to the brand relationship (benevolent or malevolent). Other motivations might be relevant, such as altruistic efforts to protect other consumers (Ward & Ostrom, 2006) versus egoistic desires to gain popularity and influence (Mathwick & Mosteller, 2017). Second, we purposely focus on social media, because dissatisfied consumers who use these communication channels, to tag brands or post comments directly on their pages, likely are aware that they are both appealing to brands and addressing large audiences. Other online spaces (e.g., brand websites, opinion platforms) are limited in terms of traffic or external to brands (e.g., price comparison websites, consumer forums), so consumers cannot be sure their comments will reach managers. We hope researchers pursue more insights into public complaints disseminated through these other channels. Third, we study public complaining only in digital dimensions. Offline forms of public complaining, such as public protest or displaying dissatisfaction in front of other consumers in a store, could be the subject of additional research. Fourth, we show that public complaining can result from benevolent motivations, and more research is needed to optimize the management of such complaining. One fruitful effort would be to determine how to make the educational calling process more favorable to brands, in line with consumer empowerment and participation literature (Auh et al., 2019). Researchers also might identify the efficiency of public complaining service recovery strategies from a

bystander perspective (Hogreve et al., 2019). Continued research into the educational calling process might address its influence on consumers' choice of channels; social media are not be the only format that can exert pressure on firms and help educate them.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Iris Siret: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **William Sabadie:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A. Study 1

Scenario

We suggest that you imagine yourself as a consumer in the following situation:

As the first autumn chill approaches and after having looked through your wardrobe, you have decided to buy a new sweater. Naturally you turn to one of your favorite brands. You own several garments made by this company, which is well-known for the high quality of its products. You go to one of the brand's stores, where you know the atmosphere is relaxed with staff who are readily available and generally very attentive to consumers' needs.

After a few minutes looking around the store, you decide on a model worth 100€. You try it on, and immediately decide to buy it. You ask the salesman for advice on the washing instructions for the sweater, but he gets annoyed and tells you that he knows nothing about that. Somewhat taken aback by his reaction, you look for information on the brand's website and finally find the answer to your question. When it's time to pay for your purchase, you go to the check-out. The salesperson, clearly absorbed in a phone conversation, is in no hurry whatsoever to deal with you. After keeping you waiting for some time at the check-out, he grudgingly ends up by finalizing the sale, then turns his back on you and walks off.

Appendix B. Study 2

Scenario

We suggest that you imagine yourself as a consumer in the following situation:

As the first autumn chill approaches and after having looked through your wardrobe, you have decided to buy a new sweater.

Weak-tie condition	Strong-tie condition
You have chosen a brand that offers a wide selection of sweaters. You've never bought clothes from this brand, so you don't have much of an opinion about it, but it is known for its quality items.	Naturally you turn to one of your favorite brands, known for its quality clothing and offering a wide choice of sweaters. As a strong supporter of this brand, you recognize it as a brand in phase with your values, able to respond to your needs and to listen to your expectations. When the opportunity arises, you do not hesitate to recommend it to your friends and family, as you are delighted with it.

After a few minutes in the store, you decide on a model. When you try it on, the saleswoman emphasizes the aesthetics and the solidity of the material used. Your choice is made.

However, as soon as you wash it for the second time, and despite the fact that you have taken care to follow the instructions carefully, you notice signs of wear. The sweater has lost its shape, the color has already changed, and some seams are coming apart.

You decide to return to the store during your lunch break to voice your displeasure. The saleswoman tells you, without apologizing, that there are no manufacturing defects. The brand cannot do anything for you.

You are very upset about this inconvenience, but you have to hurry back to work as you have little time left.

Appendix C. Study 3

Scenario

We suggest that you imagine yourself as a consumer in the following situation:

In the morning, you decide to book a table for lunch. You choose your favorite restaurant in the neighborhood. You go there very regularly.

You make your reservation online. You choose to book a table for 12:30 but you are in a hurry that day because later on you have an important work appointment. As it is not possible to specify a departure time on this reservation platform, you indicate in the comments that you will have to leave the restaurant at 1:30 pm. You receive a confirmation email a few seconds after your validation.

When you arrive, you are reassured to see that you are among the first consumers. A waiter comes to take your order and you choose to have the day's special that you particularly enjoy in this restaurant. You tell the waiter that you are in a hurry, and he is reassuring.

However, after half an hour of waiting, your order has still not been served and the restaurant is filling up. You start to get impatient and try to call out to the waiter who is taking orders from other consumers. He tells you that he has not forgotten you. However, you notice after a few minutes that some consumers who arrived after you have already been served and are eating the dish of the day. The dish eventually arrives but, despite your efforts to hurry, it is 1:45 pm by the end of the meal.

Single-deviation condition	Double-deviation condition
You are particularly upset by this inconvenience. You pay the bill and rush back to work because you are very late for your appointment.	At the time of payment, you express your dissatisfaction to the waiter. The waiter replies without apologizing that he was not warned because the validation of the order on the Internet is automatic, and the comments are not always read. He tells you curtly that you should have arrived earlier because of the time needed for the service at a very busy time. You are particularly upset by this inconvenience. You pay the bill and hurry back to work because you are very late for your appointment.

Appendix D. Study 4

Scenario

We suggest that you imagine yourself as a consumer in the following situation:

As part of your professional activity, you needed to buy a book. In order to do so, you recently went to a bookstore that you like and where you regularly buy books. The book was not in stock, so the salesperson suggested that you order it. You hesitated because you needed the book urgently. The salesman convinced you to order it by assuring you that the book would arrive before the end of the week and that he would contact you as soon as it was delivered so that you could come and pick it up quickly.

The following week, not having been contacted, you call the bookstore to see if the book is available. You then learn that the book has indeed been in stock for a few days, even though you had not been informed. The person you are talking to says that she doesn't know who was supposed to call you and that there is not much she can do. They invite you to pick up your book at the bookstore.

Dissatisfied, you decide to post a review on the store's social media page. You explain the reason for your dissatisfaction. You underline the failure of the store to fulfill its commitment and the damage caused by this lack of reactivity. You find this kind of incident very damaging to the reputation of a bookstore that you like. As far as you are concerned, the damage is done, but you want to make sure that it does not happen again. You advise the bookstore to implement an online tracking system that enables consumers who have put in an order to follow its status in real time. You explain that a notification sent to the consumer as soon as the book arrives at the bookstore would prevent similar problems in the future.

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