The impact of customer relationship quality, perceived injustice and betrayal on consumer revenge

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Is it a thin line between love and hate?
The impact of customer relationship quality, perceived injustice and betrayal on consumer revenge.

In the literature on consumer revenge there is still a debate on how the quality of the relationship between a customer and a company affects the customer’s vindictive behavior after a service failure of the company. Some studies support a “love is blind” hypothesis—loyal customers are less likely to retaliate against a firm after a service failure (Hess, Ganesan, & Klein, 2003)—, whereas others support a “love becomes hate” hypothesis—loyal customers are more likely to retaliate (Gregoire & Fisher, 2006, 2008). With the present research we aim to contribute to this debate by examining the impact of customer relationship quality, perceived injustice and betrayal on consumer revenge and thereby advancing a better understanding of consumer revenge.

A total of 166 respondents from different European countries took part in an online study and were asked to recall an event that led them to display vengeful behavior towards a company. Subsequently, they answered questions that assessed: (1) relationship quality with the company, (2) appraised injustice of the event, (3) feelings of betrayal, (4) direct revenge behaviors (market place aggression, vindictive complaining), and (5) indirect revenge behaviors (negative word-of-mouth, third-party complaining, patronage reduction).

Overall, results supported a “loves becomes hate” hypothesis. More specifically, results showed that customers with a better relationship with the company were more likely to take revenge after a service failure, especially when the service failure was appraised as very unfair. Moreover, results indicated that these effects were—at least in part—mediated by feelings of betrayal. That is, loyal customers felt more betrayed by the company and these feelings, in turn, motivated their revenge behaviors. These findings add importantly to our understanding of consumer revenge and underline the importance of relationship quality in customers’ reactions to a service failure.