



The impact of cyberostracism on online complaint handling

Is “automatic reply” any better than “no reply”?

The impact of
cyberostracism

45

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Abstract

Purpose – This research aims to examine how consumers react to being ignored by a company once they have complained about an online service failure. The authors seek to propose that automatic reply e-mails to customer complaints are considered a form of cyberostracism, thus having equally harmful effects on customer perceptions as a mere no reply.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors first conducted a qualitative study to ensure that consumers feel ignored when companies fail to respond to their e-mails. This was followed by an experimental study that tested the research propositions. The experimental design was a 3 (ostracism) × 2 (severity of failure) factorial between-subjects design.

Findings – The results indicated that consumers did not perceive any significant difference between an automatic reply e-mail and no reply at all and perceived both to be a form of cyberostracism. It was also found that cyberostracism led to higher levels of negative emotions, lower levels of satisfaction, and higher levels of negative behavioural outcomes. The prediction that these impacts would be moderated by failure severity was partially supported.

Practical implications – These findings should alert retailers to the fact that when an online failure occurs, proactive and personalised recovery efforts are necessary to maintain customer loyalty and mitigate negative behavioural outcomes.

Originality/value – The authors extend the online failure literature by showing that automatic reply e-mail responses are perceived as cyberostracism and have an equally negative impact on consumer perceptions and post-failure behaviours as a mere no reply.

Keywords Customer complaining behaviour, Cyberostracism, Service failures, Failure severity, Customer services quality, Complaints

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

Online shopping is here to stay (ACNielsen, 2005). According to Forrester's (Johnson and Tesch, 2005), in the US, online retail sales will grow from \$172 billion in 2005 to

\$329 billion in 2010. Given the rapid acceptance of this evolving marketing channel, there is an urgent need to understand how consumers react to the online shopping environment (Lee and Lin, 2005; Park and Kim, 2003) and technology-based failures (Holloway and Beatty, 2008; Ballantine, 2005). In case of service failures, most consumers prefer to contact the online retailer by email due to the easiness and speed of this form of communication (Holloway and Beatty, 2003). Yet research on customer complaining behaviours and service recovery with technology-related failures is scant (for notable exceptions see Harris, Grewal, Mohr and Berhardt, 2006; Harris, Mohr and Bernhardt, 2006; Holloway and Beatty, 2003; Demangeot and Broderick, 2006). Previous work suggests that effective service recovery is hard, especially with technology-related failures (Meuter *et al.*, 2000). The fact that 20 out of 25 customers are dissatisfied with the online firm's recovery effort (Holloway and Beatty, 2003) shows that these firms struggle to make effective service recovery. Technology-related failures often induce negative reactions from the customer (e.g. switching service providers, reverting to the interpersonal delivery mode or simply deciding not to use the online service). However, there is little guidance for online retailers as to how to effectively handle online complaints, resulting in high dissatisfaction caused by inappropriate recovery approaches such as generic or impersonal responses. Generic recoveries (e.g. automatic e-mail replies), lengthy delays, poor customer support, poor communication, and feelings of injustice are common problems with online complaint handling processes (Holloway and Beatty, 2003).

The purpose of the present study is to understand the negative consequences of being ignored by the service provider after an online service failure has occurred. More specifically, this study focuses on company responses (or lack thereof) to customers' e-mail complaints and compares the effects of generic auto-replies to no reply situations. Research in psychology clearly shows that social ostracism or the act of ignoring is hurtful, since belonging is one of the basic human needs (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Recent research demonstrates that ostracism is not limited to social interactions. Williams *et al.* (2000) coined the term cyberostracism to refer to perceptions of being ignored over the internet and discovered that cyberostracism leads to negative reactions. However, when applied to the e-commerce settings, the extent of cyberostracism is not clearly identified. Is receiving an automatic reply perceived as being ignored by the company? Is sending an automatic reply to consumers any better than not responding to consumers' online complaints? This study focuses on a particular aspect of cyberostracism in the e-commerce setting – namely, a situation in which the consumer feels ignored by the retailer through internet communication – and aims to examine whether an automatic reply is perceived by customers as a form of cyberostracism similar to receiving no reply at all. In addition, this study examines how failure severity moderates the effects of cyberostracism. Prior research in service recovery suggests that individual customers perceive failures in different light (e.g. Kelley and Davis, 1994; Mattila, 2004) and that perceived severity of failure influences their reactions to service failures (Smith and Bolton, 1998; Weun *et al.*, 1998). Therefore, the authors also wanted to investigate how the magnitude of failure or problem severity might influence reactions to being ignored over the Internet. This study carries important managerial implications, as companies currently employing automatic reply emails may think they are meeting the customer's needs. A deeper understanding of consumer responses to personal reply, autoreply, and no reply

situations will enable managers to better serve the needs of their customers in the event of a service failure.

In the next section, the authors draw on existing social psychology and service recovery literature to describe hypotheses to be tested in this study. The second section explains the methodology used in the study. This is followed by the third section, which summarises the results in light of the hypotheses advanced earlier. The fourth section discusses the findings, whereas the concluding section highlights some practical implications of this research.

2. Background literature

2.1 *Ostracism and cyberostracism*

Social ostracism can be defined as ignoring and excluding one or more individuals (Williams, 2001). Ostracism is a powerful phenomenon (Gruter and Masters, 1986; Williams, 1997; for an overview see Williams *et al.*, 2005). All social animals, including humans, are excellent detectors of ostracism because it threatens survival (Gruter and Masters, 1986). Simply being ignored reduces one's sense of belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), perceived control (Seligman, 1975), self-esteem (Tesser, 1998) and meaningful existence (Greenberg *et al.*, 1992). Social ostracism or being ignored or excluded in the presence of others has been shown to lead to depressed mood, loneliness, anxiety, frustration and helplessness (Geller *et al.*, 1974; Leary, 1990; Williams and Sommer, 1997).

Recent research suggests that social presence is not necessary for the harmful effects to take place. Feeling ignored can also be applied to an online setting and perceptions of exclusion and ignoring can also occur in virtual reality. For example, Williams *et al.* (2000) demonstrate the effects in the context of a virtual ball game and Smith and Williams (2004) replicate such consequences in the context of text messaging. Although it seems reasonable to argue that consumers could easily attribute lack of feedback over the internet to technological difficulties, this potential ambiguity doesn't seem to reduce people's feelings of being ignored (e.g. Smith and Williams, 2004).

2.2 *Effects of cyberostracism on consumer behaviour*

Prior research has shown that ostracism leads to anger and frustration (Geller *et al.*, 1974; Williams *et al.*, 2000; Williams *et al.*, 2002). These negative feelings, in turn, often result in antisocial behaviours (e.g. Buckley *et al.*, 2004; Chow *et al.*, 2008; Twenge and Baumeister, 2005; Van Beest and Williams, 2006). Anger typically energizes people to act (Shaver *et al.*, 1987). For example, anger is associated with negative behaviours towards others, such as desire to move against another person or engage in fighting or other harmful behaviours (Frijda *et al.*, 1989; Rosenman *et al.*, 1994; Averill, 1982; Berkowitz, 1999). In a similar vein, Yi and Baumgartner (2004) demonstrate that purchase-related anger leads to confrontive coping, such as face-to-face complaining and negative WOM.

Based on this previous literature, the authors propose in this study that being ignored by the retailer – a form of cyberostracism – will induce negative emotions such as anger and frustration. The authors consider an automatic reply as another form of ostracism, as prior research shows that such responses induce anger and frustration from the consumer's part (Holloway and Beatty, 2003). Negative feelings

are likely to lead to retaliation-type behaviours such as face-to-face complaints, spreading negative WOM, switching to another service provider, or bad-mouthing the company on the internet (e-WOM). The authors include the latter type of WOM as a type of complaining response that is particularly relevant in the context of online failures (Holloway and Beatty, 2003). E-WOM poses a serious threat to service providers since a single negative online comment can seriously influence the company's image and reputation (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Hung and Li, 2007).

Williams *et al.* (2000) examined the impact of varying quantities of ostracism on participants by identifying four different levels of cyberostracism – over inclusion, inclusion, partial ostracism, and complete ostracism. Through experimental studies, they discovered that greater amounts of ostracism lead to stronger adverse reactions. Applied to the e-commerce service failure context, however, it is difficult to identify the extent of cyberostracism. Not responding to a consumer complaint email may be categorised as complete ostracism. However, can automatic reply be considered as partial ostracism, thus generating less adverse reaction than would no reply? Williams *et al.* (2000) argue that the adverse impact increases as ostracism became more complete. However, this study challenges that concept when the ostracism is occurring in a cyber context. We propose that receiving an auto reply clearly generated by a computer, with no human involvement, will be perceived as the same level of complete ostracism as not receiving a reply at all. Customers are not simply looking for acknowledgement, as in an automatic reply, but rather they are looking for a personalised communication that helps them to resolve the problem (Holloway and Beatty, 2003; Goodwin and Ross, 1992). Moreover, these auto-replies convey a message that nobody is dealing with the problem, thus inducing feelings of being ignored by the company. For these reasons, we propose that an automatic reply can lead to the same reactions of anger and frustration as no reply at all. In this study, the authors want to show that “no reply” and “automatic bounce-back reply” are equally detrimental to the company. Hence, we predict that:

- H1. There will be no significant difference in emotional response, satisfaction level, and behavioural responses between the no reply and automatic reply conditions.
- H2. Cyberostracism (no reply or an automatic bounce-back message) will result in higher levels of negative emotional response, lower levels of satisfaction, and higher levels of negative behavioural responses than will a personalized response.

2.3 Perceived failure severity

The authors further argue that perceived severity of failure will moderate the impact of cyberostracism on customers' emotional responses and thus influence their coping behaviours.

Prior research demonstrates that the perceived magnitude of a service failure can vary depending on an individual (Kelley and Davis, 1994; Mattila, 2004). There is ample evidence to suggest that it might be harder for service organisations to execute an effective recovery when the failure is perceived as serious rather than minor by the consumer (Darida *et al.*, 1996; Smith and Bolton, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 1999; Levesque and

McDougall, 2000; Tax *et al.*, 1998). Equity theory provides a plausible theoretical explanation for this effect. Consistent with social exchange theory (e.g. Walster *et al.*, 1973), any failed consumption experience can be considered as an exchange in which the customer experiences a loss. According to equity theory, as the size of the loss gets larger, the customer is likely to be less satisfied (Levesque and McDougall, 2000; Smith *et al.*, 1999). This is similar to Zemke and Schaaf's (1989) notion of annoyance and victimization. Annoyance refers to a minor feeling of irritation after service failure while victimization reflects a major feeling of frustration from the customer's perspective. According to Zemke and Schaaf (1989), more extensive service recovery efforts are needed to correct victimization than annoyance. Unlike prior studies in which the magnitude of failure has been experimentally manipulated (see Weun *et al.*, 2004), the authors suggest that customers' perceptions of the seriousness of failure are individually-based and this perceived severity will influence customer reactions to post-complaint communication efforts.

H3. Perceived severity of failure moderates the impact of cyberostracism on customers' emotional responses, satisfaction, and behavioural responses.

3. Methodology

The authors first conducted a qualitative study to ensure that consumers feel ignored when companies fail to respond to their e-mails. This was followed by an experimental study that tested the research propositions. The participants for both studies were composed of a sample of undergraduate students at a large university in the Northeastern US. Given that the topic of this study was centred around online shopping behaviour, this population was chosen specifically, as 18-34 year olds are the heaviest users of the internet in the population and are commonly used for research concerning online behaviours (Li *et al.*, 2007). Respondents were primed to think about a company that they frequently purchased items from and then imagine that they contacted the company via mail. This procedure was deemed necessary in order to tease out the effects of cyberostracism in a situation where consumers are highly familiar with the retailer.

3.1 Qualitative study

To make sure that consumers indeed react negatively to cyberostracism, the authors conducted a small qualitative study. The sample population was college students in a large state-affiliated university in the Northeast US. An e-mail with a link to the online survey was sent out to potential participants, along with a letter inviting them to participate. Respondents were not compensated or offered extra credit for their participation. Out of the 120 respondents, 37 had encountered an online service failure and therefore qualified for the study. Respondents were asked to recall an incident when a company failed to respond to their e-mail or sent a generic auto-reply, and asked them to describe the incident. The authors also asked them why they think the company did not get back to their e-mail.

Two research assistants examined the data to find themes or categories that describe the respondents' feelings and reactions to online ostracism. The coding of the responses indicates that subjects felt annoyed and angry when their e-mails were either ignored or when they received an automatic, generic reply from the company. Feelings of powerlessness and lack of control also surfaced as a response category. These

emotions are congruent with prior research in online failures. Subjects blamed the company for the failure to respond and only a small proportion thought that technology was to be blamed. An examination of the subjects' attributional thoughts indicates that subjects felt that cyberostracism was caused by the company's lack of concern for customers or by the fact that the company was overburdened by the volume of e-mail requests. These results were fairly uniform across the response types (no reply or automatic reply), thus supporting the logic for considering both responses as a form of cyberostracism.

3.2 Experimental design and sample

The experimental design was a 3 (ostracism) × 2 (severity of failure) factorial between-subjects design. Ostracism was manipulated at three levels:

- (1) no response from the service provider;
- (2) a generic auto-reply; and
- (3) a personal e-mail response.

None of these scenarios included any service recovery effort. A clothing brand served as the context of this study. This setting was chosen for several reasons. First, delivery mistakes are a common source of dissatisfaction with online retailers (Holloway and Beatty, 2008). Second, young consumers frequently use the Internet to buy trendy apparel (Case and King, 2003; Seock and Norton, 2007). Research in psychology suggests that mental simulation is an internally valid methodology when the context involves realistic situations that are frequently experienced in real-life (Schmitt *et al.*, 1992; Thaler, 1985; Maute and Dube, 1999). Faulty delivery (wrong colour of the ordered merchandise) was chosen as service failure and this was held constant across the experimental conditions. Unlike prior studies in which magnitude of failure has been experimentally manipulated, in this study subjects were categorized into low and high failure groups based on the median rating of the seriousness of failure scale. Prior research indicates that perceived losses arising from service failures will be weighed heavily by customers with high prior cumulative satisfaction (Smith and Bolton, 1998; Bitner *et al.*, 1990) and by customers with high affective commitment (Mattila, 2004). Moreover, brand equity has been shown to mitigate the effects of service failures (Brady *et al.*, 2008). For these reasons, prior attitudes toward the brand were measured and included as a covariate in the data analysis. A total of 198 undergraduate students participated in the study. A total 60 per cent of participants were female and the average age was 20. Over 40 per cent of the subjects had ordered clothes online more than three times during the past 12 months.

To induce mundane realism to the task and to control for prior offline brand image effects (Kwon and Lennon, 2009a, 2009b), subjects were asked to think about a clothing store that they frequently patronize. They were asked to write down the name of the store and to indicate their purchase habits (e.g. date of last visit, frequency of items ordered online during the past month). Next, subjects were asked to complete a pre-failure attitude measure reflecting their impressions of the store and to respond to the rest of questions focusing on that particular store. Specifically, they were asked to imagine that the following incident happened to them during their next purchase from the store that they previously identified:

You order a new, trendy sweater from the store's web-site. A week later the sweater arrives but it is not the right colour. The company policy is to make customers pay any shipping charges for returned merchandise. You send an e-mail to the company to find out about the situation.

This description was followed by one of the reply conditions. For example, the response in the automatic reply condition read as followed:

Thank you for contacting X.com support. We have received your question and a member of our support staff will get back to you shortly. This is an automated e-mail message; please do not reply to this message.

The corresponding manipulation for the no reply condition stated that after a week of waiting, the company had yet to get back to you. In the personal reply condition, the company representative stated that the order was not available in the requested colour. Post-failure attitude measure included the same items as were used for pre-attitude scale.

3.3 Measures

Negative emotions measures were adapted from Van Beest and Williams (2006). The emotions inventory was composed of the following items: angry, sad, frustrated, and furious (1 = would not feel like this at all, 7 = would feel like this very strongly). Cronbach alpha for this scale was 0.75. Satisfaction with problem handling was captured via a two item scale adapted from Smith *et al.* 1999, $r = 0.67$. Behavioural measures were adapted from Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) and Singh (1990). Respondents were asked to indicate their likelihood of doing the following:

- speak to your friends and relatives about your bad experience (WOM1);
- discourage others to patronize this store (WOM2);
- decide not to buy from this store (SWITCH1);
- switch to a competing store for your clothing needs (SWITCH2);
- take no action (INERTIA1);
- forget the incident and do nothing (INERTIA2);
- complain to the local store about the incident (COMPLAIN1); and
- request to see the manager at a local store and lodge a complaint (COMPLAIN2).

Given the growing importance of online reviews on consumer choices (e.g. Park and Lee, 2009), a three-item scale was included to measure the likelihood of posting negative reviews on the web:

- (1) let others know through the internet about the poor service;
- (2) post negative comments on the internet about the company; and
- (3) warn others through the internet not to purchase from this company.

A principal component factor analysis with Varimax rotation resulted in a three-factor solution with switching and WOM items loading on one factor while complaining and inertia items loaded on their own factors (total variance explained = 67 per cent). Consistent with prior research (e.g. Singh, 1990), the first factor was named private response.

Pre-failure and post-failure attitude was measured via a five-item, semantic differential scale (good/bad; nice/awful; attractive/unattractive; desirable/undesirable and likeable/unlikeable; Cronbach alpha = 0.87). Scenario realism was captured via a seven-point scale (1 = highly unrealistic, 7 = highly realistic). The mean rating was 4.99, thus suggesting that the scenarios were perceived as realistic. To make sure that subjects perceived the three reply conditions as intended, they were asked to what extent they felt that the company did not care about them and how they felt about the length of the time required to solve the problem. As expected, no reply and automatic reply conditions were rated significantly higher in terms of the company not caring about them than the personal e-mail communication condition, $M = 4.94$, $M = 5.01$ and $M = 4.42$, respectively, $t = 2.5$ for the planned comparison, $p < 0.05$. Finally, the personal e-mail condition reduced the perception of time required to solve the problem, $M = 3.81$ for personal reply, $M = 5.16$ for no reply and $M = 5.69$ for generic reply, $t = 7.13$ for the planned comparison.

4. Results

4.1 Negative emotions, satisfaction with problem handling, and attitude change

Pre-failure attitude and online buying frequency were used as covariates in the data analyses. As expected, the results from an ANCOVA table for negative emotions indicate a significant interaction between reply type and perceived severity of the failure ($F = 3.12$, $p < 0.05$). The cell means by experimental condition are shown in Table I and the two-way interaction is visualized in Figure 1. An examination of the

Table I.
Mean scores and standard deviation of negative emotions and satisfaction

	High severity				Low severity			
	Emotions		Satisfaction		Emotions		Satisfaction	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
No reply	5.05	1.23	1.90	0.98	3.78	1.32	2.81	1.12
Auto-reply	5.32	0.84	2.00	1.35	3.79	0.96	3.20	1.06
Personal reply	4.65	1.08	2.76	1.33	4.07	1.08	3.20	1.25

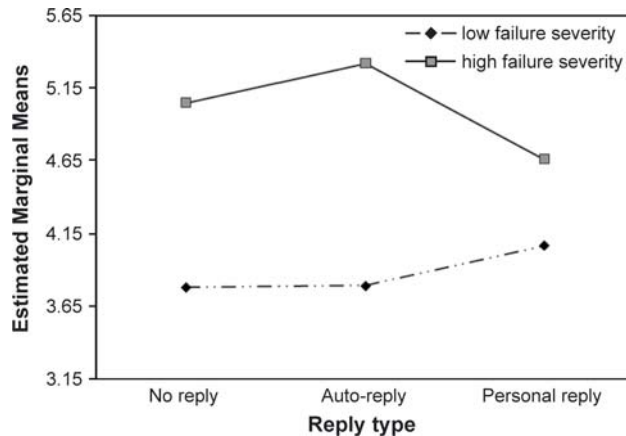


Figure 1.
Estimated marginal means of negative emotions scale

cell means shows that reply type had a minimal impact among subjects in the low severity group and that their level of negative emotions was relatively low (range from 3.78 to 4.07). Conversely, reply type resulted in differential levels of negative emotions when perceived severity was high. The results from a planned contrast indicate that a personal reply reduced the level of negative emotions to 4.65 from 5.05 (no reply) and 5.32 (auto-reply), $t = -2.48, p < 0.05$. There was no statistical difference between the two cyberostracism conditions. These results are consistent with *H1*, *H2* and *H3*.

For satisfaction, the main effect for reply type and perceived severity was significant, $F = 5.24$ and $F = 21.00$, respectively, $p < 0.05$ for both. No reply ($M = 2.27$) and automatic reply ($M = 2.45$) resulted in lower satisfaction than personal reply ($M = 2.96$), $t = -3.34, p < 0.05$, thus supporting *H2*. As predicted in *H1*, there was no difference among the two cyberostracism conditions. Satisfaction was lower among the high severity group ($M = 2.20$) than among subjects in the low severity condition ($M = 3.07$). However, the interaction effect is insignificant and hence *H3* is not supported.

4.2 Behavioural responses

The mean values for the behavioural scales are shown in Table II. Both main effects were significant for the three behavioural response variables. The reply type had a significant impact on private response ($F = 4.97$), complaint intent ($F = 3.15$) and inertia ($F = 3.00$), $p < 0.05$ for all. Cyberostracism induced higher levels of private response (combined mean of 4.20 for cyberostracism vs $M = 3.38$ for personal reply, $t = 3.69$) and likelihood of lodging a complaint at a local store (combined mean of 3.08 for cyberostracism vs $M = 2.41$ for personal reply, $t = 2.63$), both planned comparisons significant at $p < 0.05$ level. Moreover, personal reply had a positive effect on inertia (combined mean of 3.19 for cyberostracism vs $M = 3.86$ for personal reply, $t = 2.84, p < 0.05$). The differences between the two cyberostracism conditions were not significant for any of these three dependent variables. Taken together, these results are largely consistent with *H1* and *H2*.

In terms of severity of failure main effects, high severity induced private responses and complaint intent ($F = 14.79$, and $F = 4.99, p < 0.05$ for both). As expected, high perceived severity led to a heightened tendency to engage in private responses ($M = 4.31$) and direct complaint intent ($M = 3.09$) than did lower perceived severity ($M = 3.37$ and $M = 2.53$, respectively). Finally, high perceived severity reduced the likelihood that the consumer would not do anything about the incident ($M = 3.06$ and $M = 3.94$ for high and low severity respectively). However, the interaction hypothesis was not supported.

	Low severity						High severity					
	Private response		Direct complaint		Inertia		Private response		Direct complaint		Inertia	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
No reply	3.78	1.37	2.94	1.32	3.68	1.57	4.62	1.75	3.06	1.93	2.89	1.53
Auto-reply	3.22	1.17	2.46	1.27	3.79	1.36	4.68	1.62	3.57	1.71	2.80	1.46
Personal reply	3.13	1.53	2.25	1.22	4.26	1.42	3.59	1.53	2.54	1.31	3.52	1.50

Table II.
Mean scores and standard deviation of behavioural responses

5. Discussion

As the internet continues to grow in importance as a retail channel, an understanding of the way in which customers perceive and react to online failures grows ever more imperative (Holloway and Beatty, 2008; Harris, Mohr and Bernhardt, 2006). Service recovery, particularly with regard to technology-related failures, is difficult (Meuter *et al.*, 2000), and yet such recoveries will only become more commonplace as the popularity of online shopping continues to spread. While consumer-service provider interaction over the internet in many ways mirrors a face-to-face transaction, understanding and responding to the specifics of online service failures will allow retailers to better serve their online customers. The authors rely on the social ostracism literature to provide a theoretical framework for these findings.

Ample evidence exists to show that social ostracism or the act of ignoring is hurtful since belonging is one of the fundamental human needs (e.g. Molden *et al.*, 2009). Recent research suggests that ostracism is not limited to an interpersonal context. Williams *et al.* (2000) coined the term cyberostracism to refer to perceptions of being ignored over the internet. As mentioned earlier, cyberostracism has been shown to lead to feelings of anger and antisocial behaviours in various contexts (Williams *et al.*, 2000; Smith and Williams, 2004).

Williams *et al.* (2000) argue that the adverse impact increases as ostracism became more complete. However, this study challenges that concept when the ostracism is occurring in a cyber context. In *H1*, we proposed that receiving an auto reply would be perceived as the same level of complete ostracism as not receiving a reply at all. Our results support this prediction. Participants demonstrated no significant difference in terms of emotional response, satisfaction, attitude, or behavioural responses, whether they had received an automatic reply or no reply at all. These results suggest that, at least in an online context, customers do not perceived a difference in levels of ostracism between these two conditions.

We also predicted that the conditions of auto reply and no reply would result in higher levels of negative emotional response, lower levels of satisfaction, and higher levels of negative behavioural responses than will a personalised response. This hypothesis was also supported. Customers experiencing cyberostracism, in the form of auto reply and no reply, were less satisfied with the company's handling of the situation, expressed more negative emotions, and manifested negative behavioural responses, such as complaining and spreading negative word of mouth. These results are not surprising, and our qualitative data suggest that these responses are the result of customers feeling that the company does not care about them or their needs.

H3 predicted that perceived severity of failure moderates the impact of cyberostracism on customers' emotional responses, satisfaction, and behavioural responses. This prediction was only partially supported. Perceived severity of the failure did indeed moderate the impact of cyberostracism on consumers' emotional responses. When perceived severity was low, then reply type had a minimal impact on negative emotions. Conversely, being ignored (no reply or an automatic reply) led to higher levels of negative emotions than a personalized e-mail communication when the failure severity was high. However, the same results did not hold true for consumers' satisfaction or behavioural responses. One possible explanation for this is that respondents in this study were asked to think about a real company with which they had done business, and therefore their satisfaction evaluations might have been

influenced by their cumulative experiences with the company. Additionally, it is possible that their prior relationship with the company could have influenced their intentions to engage in negative behavioural responses based only on this one incident.

6. Implications

A key finding of this study was that customers appear to perceive no significant difference between receiving no reply and receiving a generic auto-reply in response to an online complaint. This is valuable information for retailers who may currently believe that they are serving the customer's needs with auto-reply e-mails. Another important finding is that when customers feel ostracized online, the greater the impact on the negative emotions, attitude toward the brand, satisfaction, and intention to engage in negative behaviours. This finding should alert retailers to the fact that when an online failure occurs, proactive, personalised recovery efforts are necessary to maintain customer loyalty and mitigate negative outcomes.

The qualitative responses provided an interesting source of information for retailers, as well. In many cases, customers seemed to blame the company when they did not receive a personalised response, and they attributed this to a lack of concern or lack of caring on the part of the company. For companies that spend a great deal of money and time in marketing efforts to create the perception that they do care about their customers and desire a personal relationship with them, it is important to note that their lack of reply in this context may be counterproductive to these relationship building efforts.

7. Limitations and future research

As with any study, this study has several limitations. First, the study used hypothetical scenarios as stimuli. Future research, using field studies or experimental manipulations, would be warranted to strengthen the findings of this study. Second, the sample was composed of college students. Although young consumers frequently use the internet to buy clothes, college students may not fully represent the population of online retail customers. The mean age of this sample was 20 years old, but future research is needed to examine the perceptions of cyberostracism on populations in various age groups or those who are less familiar with online communication and purchasing.

Additionally, the usable data from the qualitative portion of this study were extremely limited. Participants were asked how they felt when ignored by the company, and most replied with only one word (e.g. "angry" or "frustrated.") When asked why they thought the company did not respond to their complaint with a personal email, most used only a phrase or short sentence, such as "They don't care about me." This limited data is interesting, and suggests an area for future research. Qualitative methods, such as focus groups or interviews, could be employed in future research in order to more fully understand the emotional responses and attributions that consumer have when companies ostracize them.

In this study, the authors specifically examined the moderating impact of failure severity in this context, but future studies could investigate a variety of other potential moderators and individual-level traits that may influence customers' response to cyberostracism. Finally, the qualitative results point to a number of avenues for future research. In response to being ostracized, customers related feelings of powerlessness, anger, frustration, and lack of control, all of which would provide rich material for future studies.

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