The Boundary Role of the Type of Revenge Behaviors: Longitudinal and Experimental Approaches

Denis Larocque, HEC Montreal, Canada
Fateme Ghadami, HEC Montreal, Canada
Sandra Laporte, HEC Montreal, Canada
Sylvain Sénécal, HEC Montreal, Canada
Yany Grégoire, HEC Montreal, Canada

By studying the boundary role of revenge behaviors, we show that engaging in direct revenge behaviors quenches customers’ desire for revenge. However, engaging in indirect revenge behaviors sustain customers’ desire for revenge. We also show that not engaging in revenge behaviors is as effective as engaging in direct revenge behaviors.

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Fateme Ghadami, HEC Montreal, Canada
Yany Grégoire, HEC Montreal, Canada
Sandra Laporte, HEC Montreal, Canada
Denis Larocque, HEC Montreal, Canada
Sylvain Sénécal, HEC Montreal, Canada

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The intra-personal function of revenge ─ diminishing the avenger’s internal negative emotions (Gollwitzer 2009) ─ has received mixed support. On the one hand, there is a popular adage that says “revenge is sweet.” Despite its costs, customers could see value in revenge because it provides them with an emotional satisfaction that compensates in part for their objective loss (Bechwat and Morrin 2003). On the other hand, confirming Walter Weckler’s statement that “revenge has no more quenching effect on emotions than salted water has on thirst,” several studies in social psychology have found that although people initially believe that revenge would make them feel better, they actually feel worse after enacting revenge (Carlsmith, Wilson, and Gilbert 2008; Yoshimura 2007) but in at least some instances, revenge has hedonic consequences that are precisely opposite to those that people expect. Three studies showed that: (a)

Pointing out these inconclusive findings, this study investigates which logic prevails after initial revenge behaviors (RBs): the quenching (sweet revenge) or the amplifying (salted water) effect? We assert the evolution of desire for revenge depends on the form of RB, direct or indirect, that is enacted against the firm. Direct RBs (i.e., marketplace aggression and vindictive complaining) (Grégoire, Lafer, and Tripp 2010) against a firm diminish customers’ future desire for revenge (i.e., H1), because they create the impression that the firm has received what it deserves (Gollwitzer and Bushman 2012) and customers have reached their revenge-related goals (Gollwitzer and Denzler 2009). Here, a desire for revenge is defined as a felt urge to punish a firm because of what it has done (Grégoire and Fisher 2006). In this instance, revenge becomes “sweet.”

However, indirect RBs (i.e., spreading negative word-of-mouth (Grégoire et al. 2010) and complaining to third party for legal resources - as a customer’s effort to use online resources to get access to legal expertise and advice) have the opposite effect; they amplify future desire for revenge (i.e., H2), resembling the metaphor of salted water. Indirect RBs neither offer the opportunity to achieve the typical outcomes associated with direct RBs, nor provide a chance to settle the score with a firm. Therefore, customers experience an increasing desire for revenge. Reconciling these two rival explanations constitutes the key contribution of this research.

Two studies, one longitudinal and one scenario-based experiment, were employed to test the hypotheses.

Study 1
Participants in the study were real online complainers on two third-party websites. The study consisted of four series of questionnaires sent to participants every two weeks. RBs were measured at time one, and customers’ desire for revenge was repeatedly measured in times one to four. Overall, 166 respondents (56.0% female, M_age = 46.46, SD = 12.58) completed all waves of questionnaires. We tested H1 and H2 by examining the effects of customers’ initial RBs at time one on their subsequent desire for revenge at times one, two, three and four. Therefore, an alternative model growth approach was selected to explore the data. More precisely, we used mixed linear models fitted with the MIXED procedure in SAS (table 1). To illustrate the results, the levels of desire for revenge were plotted by substituting the low and high values (M ± 1 SD) of each RB in the equation, for each time period (Figure 1).

Confirming H1, the interaction effects of direct RBs with time are significant (Marketplace aggression: $\beta_{Marketplace\text{ aggression } \times Time} = -0.16, p < .05$; Vindictive complaining: $\beta_{Vindictive\text{ Complaining } \times Time} = -0.11, p < .01$), meaning that desire for revenge of customers in high-marketplace aggression and high-vindictive complaining groups decreases more rapidly compared to that of low-marketplace aggression and low-vindictive complaining customers (Figures 1a and 1b).

We tested H2 by examining the interaction effects of indirect RBs with time in models three and four. Both terms failed to achieve significance (Negative WOM: $\beta = .83$; Complaining to third party for legal resources: $\beta = .98$), implying that the decay in desire for revenge is the same for both ─ high and low ─ indirect RBs groups (figures 1c and 1d). Although the results do not fully support H2 as initially stated, they imply that indirect RBs lead to a sustained higher desire for revenge over time ($\beta_{Negative\text{ WOM } \times Time} = -0.27, p < .001$; $\beta_{complaining\text{ to third party for legal resources } \times Time} = .17, p < .01$) (Figures 1c and 1d).

Study 2
Study 2 was designed to replicate the findings of study 1 using a scenario-based experiment where the participant were randomly assigned to different RB conditions, hence controlling for individual differences. Since, cross-sectional approach captures data in one shot; we speculate that customers who engage in direct RBs feel less desire for revenge compared to those who engage in indirect RBs (i.e., H3). The experimental approach made it also possible to hypothesize customers who do not engage in RBs feel less desire for revenge compared to those who engage in indirect RBs. The scenario described a service failure that happened in a truck rental firm. The truck was reserved in advance for moving but the firm changed the picking-up location to a distant new location in the very last minute. Stuck in this situation, 171 participants (i.e., Mturk workers) read one of five scenarios (i.e., four RBs and control group).

Due to non-normality, a series of Mann-Whitney tests were performed to tests H3 and H4 (table 2). Supporting H3, consumers who engaged in direct RBs ($M_{Marketplace\text{ Aggression}} = 4.27$ and $M_{Vindictive\text{ Complaining}} = 4.27$) experienced significantly less desire for revenge compared to those who engaged in indirect RBs ($M_{Negative\text{ WOM}} = 5.02$ and $M_{Negative\text{ WOM} \times Time}$ $\beta_{complaining\text{ to third party for legal resources} \times Time} = 5.00$). To test H4, control group was tested against all RBs groups ($M_{Control} = 3.86$). Supporting H4, participants in control group had significantly less desire for revenge compared to those in indirect RBs groups. However, in contrast to H4, the participants in control group did not experience significantly less desire for revenge from those in direct RBs groups.

Overall, this study suggests an approach to reconcile two seemingly opposite schools of thought. In a word, it proposes that future desire for revenge is dependent on the way one enact revenge. According to our study those customers who do not engage in RBs at all, or engage in direct RBs experience a weaker desire for revenge compared to those who engage in indirect RBs.
Our research is limited by predicting future desire for revenge from past behaviors. Future work should also take into account personality traits (e.g., revengefulness), among factors affecting one’s future desire for revenge.

REFERENCES