

The Benefit of Becoming Friends: Complaining After Service Failures Leads Customers with Strong Ties to Increase Loyalty

Service firms spend considerable resources soliciting complaints to initiate recovery efforts and improve their offerings. However, managers may be overlooking the fact that complaints serve an equally important role in engendering loyalty. The authors demonstrate that the strength of social ties between customers and service providers influences the degree to which complaining drives loyalty. Paradoxically, while strongly tied customers fear that complaining threatens their ties with the provider, when they are encouraged to complain, their loyalty increases because offering feedback serves as an effective way to preserve social ties. Conversely, for weakly tied customers, complaining has no effect on loyalty. Furthermore, complaints are more effective in driving loyalty for strongly tied customers when the feedback is directed toward the provider who failed, rather than to an entity external to the failure. Finally, when providers signal an authentic openness to feedback, strongly tied customers are more loyal after complaining, whereas authenticity does little to engender loyalty for weakly tied customers who complain. The value of complaints in driving loyalty is promising both for customers who perceive a strong tie to a particular provider within the firm and, more generally, in service industries wherein strong ties naturally occur.

Keywords: tie strength, relationship marketing, service failure, complaining, loyalty

Many firms subscribe to the idea that customer complaints play two important roles: to initiate service recovery and to inform future service offerings. As Bill Gates suggests, “[A firm’s] most unhappy customers are [its] greatest source of learning.”¹ Firms such as JetBlue, Starbucks, and T-Mobile rely heavily on social media platforms to solicit and respond to customers after a service failure to implement recovery efforts and learn why failures have occurred (Helmrich 2014). We confirm this perspective in interviews with eleven managers and nine service providers who described their perceptions of what role customer complaints play in service provision. The interviewees revealed that their companies track and review negative feedback so that managers can use the

feedback as a source of information about how to rectify and improve service processes.

Contrary to standard practice, we suggest that treating customer feedback solely as a vehicle for rectifying or improving service provision overlooks the other important ways that complaining behavior can enhance relationships between customers and service providers. Specifically, service firms are missing an important opportunity to utilize complaints to strengthen providers’ relationships with customers. Indeed, our interviews revealed that, unfortunately, few managers or service providers had any insight into how complaining could create loyal relationships, nor had they ever received formal instruction about how to solicit complaints effectively after a failure had occurred.

We use the relationship marketing framework (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994; Palmatier, Dant, and Grewal 2007; Palmatier et al. 2006) to explore how various managerial levers may be manipulated to strengthen social ties with customers after a service failure. We focus on the role of tie strength, or the potency of the bond between relational partners (Brown and Reingen 1987; Granovetter 1973; Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare 2008; Rindfleisch and Moorman 2001), as a construct that plays a critical role in defining the practical parameters that enable customer complaints to drive future loyalty. Specifically, we emphasize the importance of social ties between customers and service providers, which may be established briefly during an initial service encounter (Jiang et al. 2010) or may result from repeated interactions. Prior research (e.g., Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare 2008) has shown that customers who feel a strong tie to a service provider are *less* likely to complain after a service

¹See <https://www.upcounsel.com/blog/your-greatest-source-of-learning>.

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failure, due to fears of damaging the tie. However, past research has stopped short of illuminating the relational implications of complaining when strongly tied customers *do* voice negative feedback. In response to this gap, we add to past work on tie strength by revealing its paradoxical role in customer-provider relationships: while strongly tied customers are often reticent to complain, their loyalty is enhanced when they decide, or are encouraged, to do so.

We provide substantive contributions by recommending that managers inculcate the interpersonal communication approach of “authentic openness to negative feedback” in their employees. We define this idea as both providers’ sincere openness to hearing negative feedback and their signaling a genuine willingness to integrate this feedback into their service provision. When service providers signal an authentic openness to feedback, strongly tied customers who complain about a service failure are more loyal after doing so. In contrast, when weakly tied customers complain, the authenticity of providers’ openness to feedback does little to engender loyalty. Furthermore, while customers may want to vent their dissatisfaction externally (to other customers, friends, competitors), we show that complaints are more effective in increasing loyalty when strongly tied customers direct their feedback toward the provider who failed.

We demonstrate that the value of customer complaints in driving loyalty is promising both for customers who perceive a strong tie to a particular service provider within the firm and, more generally, in service industries wherein close connections between customers and providers naturally occur (e.g., personal services, hospitality, beauty industries). These findings have implications for which relationships and industry contexts managers should target when determining whether to expend resources on generating complaints from dissatisfied customers.

Finally, we demonstrate these effects using a variety of data sources, including controlled scenario-based experiments, behavioral studies with real service interactions, secondary survey data from a large service firm, and field data from Yelp.com. Across contexts and data sources, we consistently find that complaining (vs. withholding negative feedback) after a service failure engenders greater loyalty from customers with strong ties to a service provider, especially if the feedback is solicited in an authentically open and direct manner. Notably, we show that these findings hold in the context of both newly formed social ties and relationships resulting from repeated interactions. However, we do not find evidence of similar benefits of complaining for customers with weak social ties. In what follows, we establish our conceptualization and confirm our predictions in a set of six studies. We conclude with a discussion of the implications and limitations of this work, as well as ideas for future research.

Theory and Hypotheses

Conceptual Relevance of the Relationship Marketing Framework

Although service providers strive to please customers, failures inevitably occur, and the question of whether a customer will be loyal after such an event transpires becomes a concern for managers. We draw from the relationship marketing (RM)

framework (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994; Palmatier, Dant, and Grewal 2007) to understand how service relationships may continue to thrive even after a service failure has occurred. The RM model, which incorporates several theoretical components—trust, dependence, relational norms, and commitment—describes how customer relationships are maintained in a service context (Berry 1983). The basic contention of the framework is that the trust between customers and providers, customers’ feelings of dependence on providers, and both parties’ observation of relational norms work in concert to create a service atmosphere in which customers feel a strong commitment to the providers.

We interpret this framework in situations in which a service failure has occurred and examine the role of complaining in maintaining strongly tied relationships after such an event. We do not directly examine the effect of customer complaining on service recovery efforts, which has been studied extensively in the prior literature (e.g., Voorhees et al. 2006). Rather, we contribute to the existing literature by revealing that the act of complaining alone buttresses customers’ relationships with providers even without the explicit promise of rectifying the failed service.

We suggest that complaining functions like other relationship-preservation strategies (e.g., honesty and investing time and energy), and may act as a signal sent by a customer indicating his/her interest in repairing the threatened social tie and remaining loyal to the provider. While prior research has looked at each of these variables separately, the intersection between all three substantive areas—tie strength, complaining, and loyalty—has not been examined, as we illustrate in Table 1. We address this gap by examining how the strength of the social tie between customers and service providers, whether established in an initial service encounter or cultivated over repeated interactions, influences the degree to which complaining after a service failure increases customer loyalty.

Tie Strength, Complaining, and Loyalty

Despite the positive outcomes of complaining (Nyer 2000), offering negative feedback is both time consuming and potentially threatening to the customer-provider relationship. A question arises: Which types of customers (e.g., strongly or weakly tied) are most likely to voice dissatisfaction after a service failure? The RM model indicates that individuals who are “dependent” on their service providers perceive that the providers offer “valued resources for which there are few alternative[s]” (Dwyer 1984). In other words, when the connection between the provider and customer is unique and difficult to replace, the customer is likely to feel a greater stake in the relationship.

To capture the construct of dependence, we consider the role of tie strength in voicing complaints. Tie strength exists as an element of the broader theoretical framework of social belongingness, which is a fundamental human motivation involving the need to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Social ties may form in mere minutes, resulting from a strong feeling of similarity or emotional connection between individuals. For instance, customers may encounter several providers when

TABLE 1
Review of Literature on Complaints, Tie Strength, and Loyalty

Study	Data Sources	Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Findings	Tie Strength Studied? At What Level?	Complaining Studied?	Loyalty Studied?
Deutsch (1969)	Theoretical model	Relationship outcome	Prior relationship, nature of conflict, individual characteristics, estimation of success, third parties	Whether conflict results in positive or negative outcome depends on how "productive" the conflict is in creating a resolution between the two individuals.	Yes, at the firm level	Yes	No
Fornell and Westbrook (1984)	Survey data	Consumer complaints	Active participation of consumer affairs department in firm decisions	The more consumer complaints a firm receives, the more isolated its complaint handling becomes from management decision making, which then causes complaints to increase.	No	Yes	No
Fornell and Wernerfelt (1987)	Theoretical model	Customer retention	Investment in encouraging complaints	Whenever revenue loss is greater than the cost of dealing with the complaints, complaints should be encouraged and the issues voiced should be corrected.	No	Yes	Yes
Fornell and Wernerfelt (1988)	Theoretical model	Loyalty	Investment in facilitating complaints to resolve customer concerns	Dissatisfied customers do not necessarily plan to desert the firm. Furthermore, effective complaint management systems offer an opportunity to resolve customers' grievances.	No	Yes	Yes
Stephens and Gwinner (1998)	In-depth interviews with customers	Coping response (e.g., complaining)	Coping style	Appraisal process and/or elicited emotion from a bad experience leads customers to problem-focused, emotion-focused, or avoidance coping styles. Problem-focused coping may lead to complaining.	No	Yes	No

TABLE 1
Continued

Study	Data Sources	Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Findings	Tie Strength Studied? At What Level?	Complaining Studied?	Loyalty Studied?
Blodgett and Anderson (2000)	Secondary data	Redress seeking, repatronage, intended word of mouth	Attitude toward complaining, store loyalty, success likelihood, stability/ controllability, perceived justice	Most noncomplainers do not plan to defect but intend to limit their purchases. Study shows support for “service recovery paradox”: a formerly dissatisfied customer may end up being more loyal because of successful complaint handling.	No	Yes	Yes
Mittal and Kamakura (2001)	Secondary data	Repurchase	Satisfaction	Satisfaction ratings and repurchase behavior predict each other, depending on other consumer characteristics (e.g., age, gender).	No	No	Yes
Homburg and Fürst (2005)	Survey data and interviews	Customer justice, satisfaction, evaluations, loyalty	Firm response to consumer complaints (mechanistic vs. organic)	Both mechanistic and organic approaches to complaints significantly influence customers' assessments, although the mechanistic approach has a stronger impact on the dependent measures.	No	Yes	Yes
Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare (2008)	Experimental data	Complaining (intention and behavior)	Tie strength, information control, need for cognition, satisfaction, relationship duration	Complaining is more likely when tendency for information control is stronger and ties between provider and customer are weaker.	Yes, at the individual-relationship level	Yes	No
Dunn and Dahl (2012)	Experimental	Attitude toward product, brand, and threat purchase	Complaining behavior, self-	When the firm is responsible for the failure, consumers feel better after complaining about it. When consumers are to blame, complaining has a detrimental effect on product reactions.	No	Yes	No

TABLE 1
Continued

Study	Data Sources	Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Findings	Tie Strength Studied? At What Level?	Complaining Studied?	Loyalty Studied?
Zhang, Feick, and Mittal (2014)	Experimental data	Negative word of mouth (NWOM) transmission likelihood	Tie strength, image impairment, concern for self vs. others, concern prime	For women, the effect of image impairment concern on NWOM transmission is stronger for weak (vs. strong) ties. For men, there is no relationship. When consumers have high (vs. low) concern for others, the effect of image-impairment concern is stronger for weak ties.	Yes, at the individual-relationship level.	No	No
Dunn and Dahl (2012)	Experimental	Attitude toward product, brand, and purchase	Complaining behavior, self-threat	When the firm is responsible for the failure, consumers feel better after complaining. When consumers are to blame, complaining is detrimental to reactions to the product.	No	Yes	No
This article	Survey, experimental, behavioral, field data	Loyalty (behavioral, attitudinal, intended, probable, actual)	Tie strength, complaining, providers' authentic openness to feedback	Although customers with strong ties are less likely to complain, when they do, they are more loyal than those with weak ties, because providing feedback serves as a way to preserve the tie. The effect is strengthened when providers are authentically open to feedback.	Yes, at both the individual-relationship and industry levels	Yes	Yes

choosing a masseuse, manicurist, or aesthetician but may be able to quickly determine whether they relate more strongly to one of the individuals. Furthermore, some social ties can be developed over repeated interactions, resulting in long-standing close relationships. However, repeated interaction is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to ensure strong ties between customers and providers. For example, it is plausible that a customer could use the same financial advisor for years without feeling a strong social tie to him/her. Given the many ways that strongly tied relationships emerge, we test our predictions under conditions in which the relational ties were formed in a single interaction and under conditions in which ties have been created over multiple interactions. We show that our predicted effects are robust across both contexts.

Although under most conditions, individuals who have strong social ties (vs. weak ties) engage in more communication with one another, in the context of a service failure, the feeling of dependence on and irreplaceability of the relationship lowers the likelihood that a customer will offer negative feedback due to fears of threatening an important relationship (Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare 2008). However, we expect that despite their reluctance, when strongly tied customers are encouraged to complain, their social ties can, in fact, be strengthened. Specifically, we predict that when a relationship is at risk (e.g., after a disagreement has occurred), individuals with strong ties will use “tie-strength preservation” strategies (e.g., directing their time and attention toward the relationship) to signal their interest in repairing and protecting the ties. In the context of service failures, we suggest that offering diagnostic (negative) feedback is one way to signal the importance of a service relationship.

According to the RM model, this investment of personal resources in a relationship leads customers to escalate their commitment. We conceptualize commitment as the belief of an exchange partner (in our model, the customer) that an ongoing relationship with another entity (in our model, the service provider) is so important that s/he is willing to devote effort toward maintaining it to ensure future interaction (Morgan and Hunt 1994). We use customers’ loyalty as a proxy for the construct of commitment described in the RM framework. Although strongly tied customers are less likely to complain, we predict that when they do, offering such feedback will help preserve their relational ties to the provider, and as a result, they will be more inclined to increase their loyalty to the provider. In contrast, for weakly tied customers, complaining is unlikely to influence subsequent loyalty because there is no relational tie to preserve by offering honest feedback after something has gone wrong. Thus, we hypothesize that tie strength will positively moderate the effect of complaining on loyalty because complaining acts as a relational preservation mechanism for customers with strong ties, but not for those with weak ties. More formally:

H_1 : Strongly tied customers who complain (vs. withhold feedback) after a service failure will increase their loyalty. In contrast, for weakly tied customers, complaining has no effect on loyalty.

H_2 : Tie-strength preservation resulting from customers’ complaining behavior mediates the relationship between tie strength and loyalty.

Authentic Openness to Feedback, Tie Strength, Complaining, and Loyalty

Given that customers are wary of threatening social ties by offering negative feedback (Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare 2008) but that complaining is beneficial to service relationships, managers are faced with the predicament of how to encourage strongly tied customers to offer this feedback. Drawing from prior research, we predict that the presence of trust between customers and service providers is likely to ameliorate the threat of complaining and enable customers to voice their feelings of dissatisfaction. In our studies, we operationalize customers’ trust by manipulating the authenticity of providers’ openness to feedback, and we corroborate the prediction of the RM framework by showing that if providers signal that they can be trusted (vis-à-vis authentic expressions of openness), the tie between the provider and customer is more likely to be preserved after a service failure.

The first dimension of authentic openness to feedback is the degree to which service providers use open communication techniques. These techniques are characterized by supportiveness and empathy; they encourage “candid disclosure of feelings” (Redding 1972, p. 30) to appear more approachable and receptive to negative feedback. A second dimension is the degree to which the provider validates the complaint and the importance of the relationship by signaling that the feedback will help inform future service provision (for a review of the related literature, see Blodgett and Anderson 2000; Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987, 1988; Fornell and Westbrook 1984; Homburg and Fürst 2005). Thus, we propose that service providers’ authentic openness to negative feedback possesses two distinct components: (1) appearing authentically receptive to feedback and (2) signaling the genuine intention to use the feedback to inform future service provision.

Although managers often teach their service providers to use communication techniques that encourage open dialogue between themselves and customers (e.g., smiling, projecting a friendly demeanor), these formalized communication processes may be perceived by customers as inauthentic, forced, or robotic. Indeed, prior research has shown that authenticity enhances customers’ reactions to service encounters, while inauthentic communication styles undermine service interactions (Grandey et al. 2005). In the context of our research, we predict that after a service failure, strongly tied customers who complain (vs. withhold feedback) will be more loyal to providers who authentically express an openness to feedback. Indeed, if both parties engage in authentic, open interactions, the relational norms of reciprocity will be realized, such that both individuals are investing effort into the relationship (Palmatier, Dant, and Grewal 2007; Umashankar, Srinivasan, and Parker 2016). On the other hand, if the service provider appears inauthentic or robotic, complaining is unlikely to result in greater commitment to the relationship by the customer, despite his/her strong social tie to the provider. In this case, the provider has not upheld the norms of the relationship, and the customer is thus unlikely to increase his/her loyalty after complaining.

In the case of weakly tied customers, we predict that irrespective of whether they complain, service providers’ authentic openness to feedback is unlikely to influence their loyalty. Since weakly tied customers are less inclined to remain connected to the provider, the precondition of a strong tie does not exist, and

therefore, complaining will not function to preserve the social tie. Consequently, providers' authentic openness to feedback will not enable or codify the relational connection, and the interaction will be null. In simple terms, we hypothesize the following three-way interaction:

- H_{3a}: For strongly tied customers, when the service provider is perceived as authentically open to feedback, complaining (vs. withholding feedback) after a service failure leads to an increase in loyalty. In contrast, when the provider is perceived as inauthentic, complaining has no impact on customers' loyalty.
- H_{3b}: For weakly tied customers, service providers' authentic openness to feedback has no effect on the relationship between complaining and loyalty.

Overview of Studies

We investigate these hypotheses in six studies using multiple measures of our key constructs of tie strength, complaining, and loyalty. In Study 1, we use secondary survey data to confirm H₁ and show the positive moderating effect of tie strength on the relationship between complaining on loyalty (both attitudinal and behavioral). In Study 2, we test H₁ in a controlled setting and show that when strongly tied customers complain after a service failure, they increase their loyalty intentions toward the service provider. In contrast, for weakly tied customers, complaining has no effect on intended loyalty. This finding demonstrates the need for managers to encourage negative feedback from strongly tied customers after a service failure has occurred. In Study 3, a behavioral study with real service interactions, we reveal the process underlying the positive moderating effect of tie strength on the relationship between complaining and loyalty. We show support for H₂ and find that customers with strong ties have higher loyalty intentions after complaining (vs. withholding feedback) because voicing negative feedback serves as a mechanism for maintaining relational ties, that is, "tie-strength preservation." Studies 4a and 4b use a combination of scenario-based and behavioral data to show that when strongly tied customers perceive the provider as authentically open to feedback, complaining after a service failure leads them to increase their loyalty. However, when the provider is perceived as inauthentic, complaining has no impact on loyalty (H_{3a}). For weakly tied customers, complaining has no impact on loyalty, irrespective of the authenticity of the service provider's openness to feedback (H_{3b}). Finally, we broaden the context in Study 5 and operationalize tie strength at the industry level, using field data from Yelp.com. Again, we find support for H₁ in a managerially relevant setting and demonstrate that generating complaints from dissatisfied customers in service industries in which customers and providers naturally forge strong ties is particularly effective in driving both probable and actual loyalty. Conversely, in industries in which weak ties are more common, complaining is not an effective mechanism for driving loyalty.

Study 1: Examining Tie Strength, Complaining, and Loyalty Using Secondary Survey Data

To investigate our hypothesis that customers with strong (vs. weak) ties to service providers are more loyal after complaining

following a service failure, we obtained secondary survey data from a national fitness company. The company, which has 82 fitness locations across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, offers high-end personal training, fitness classes, and spa facilities. We obtained survey data culled from all its facilities from October 2014 to September 2015. The data contain survey responses from 1,911 customers about their most recent fitness experiences, including whether they had a personal training session. Further, the surveyed customers were asked to indicate whether they faced a problem (1) or not (0) during their most recent visit. Given the focus in this article on interpersonal social ties and failures, we reduced the data set to one that only included the 280 cases in which a customer experienced a service failure caused by a personal trainer. The survey gave customers the opportunity to provide a written description (i.e., a complaint) of the service failure and explain what could have been done differently. We created a "Complain" measure that was coded as 1 if the customer complained and 0 if s/he chose not to complain. Of the 280 personal trainer-related service failures, 185 customers filed a formal complaint, whereas 95 customers chose not to complain.

To capture tie strength (for a complete description of the focal measures used in each study, see Table 2), we used the measure of personal trainer friendliness (Likert scale from 1 to 10, where 10 = "very friendly") as a corollary. This is supported by prior research, which has established that in business relationships, service providers' perceived "friendliness" is one of the key preconditions for bonding and is predictive of tie strength (Witkowsky and Thibodeau 1999). The survey also measured two dimensions of loyalty (Umashankar, Bhagwat, and Kumar 2016): customers' Behavioral Loyalty (intention to remain a member of the gym for the next 6 months) and Attitudinal Loyalty (likelihood to recommend the gym to others; Likert scale from 1 to 10, where 10 = "very likely"). We tested these two outcome measures separately to see whether the effects of tie strength and complaining differed. The survey also included measures of how long the customer had been a member of the gym ("Tenure"; translated into days from the customer's start date) and his/her regularity of using the facility ("Usage Frequency"; Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 5 = "very frequent").

Estimation

We estimated two regression models of the effects of tie strength and complaining, each with a different measure of loyalty (behavioral and attitudinal). Specifically, we included the main effects of tie strength and complain, their interaction, and the control variables of tenure and usage frequency. The model of loyalty m (where m is either behavioral or attitudinal loyalty) for customer i was estimated as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Loyalty}_{mi} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Tie Strength}_i + \beta_2 \text{Complain}_i + \\ & \beta_3 (\text{Tie Strength} \times \text{Complain})_i + \beta_4 \text{Tenure}_i + \\ & \beta_5 \text{Usage Frequency}_i + \varepsilon_{mi}. \end{aligned}$$

Results

The descriptive statistics and correlations (within acceptable limits; $r < .46$) are presented in Table 3. The results of both

TABLE 2
Variables, Data Sources, and Measures Across Studies

Variable and Study	Data Source	Operationalization	Measure
Tie Strength			
Study 1	Survey	Measured the perceived friendliness of the service provider.	"How friendly did you feel the personal trainer was?" (Likert scale from 1 to 10; 10 = "very friendly")
Study 2	Scenario experiment	Manipulated the personal nature of the conversation between the respondent and service provider.	"I liked the service provider"; "I felt connected to the provider"; "I felt chemistry with the service provider"; (Likert scale from 1 to 7; 7 = "strongly agree")
Studies 3, 4a, and 4b	Scenario and behavioral experiments	Manipulated incidental similarity between the respondent and service provider. In Study 4, strong ties were established with all respondents using incidental similarity.	"I liked the service provider"; "I felt connected to the provider"; "I felt chemistry with the service provider"; (Likert scale from 1 to 7; 7 = "strongly agree")
Study 5	Yelp data	Measured whether the industry in which the customer complained is a strong-tie (hair styling) or weak-tie (plumbing) industry.	Hair styling = strong tie = 1; plumbing = weak tie = 0
Complaining Behavior			
Study 1	Survey	Measured whether the customer complained after experiencing a service failure.	Chose to complain = 1; chose not to complain = 0
Studies 2, 4a, and 4b	Scenario and behavioral experiments	Manipulated complaining behavior.	Complained = 1; did not complain = 0
Study 3	Behavioral experiment	Manipulated the recipient of the complaint.	Complained to the service provider = 1; complained to a third party = 0
Study 5	Yelp data	Measured the extent of complaining.	Number of words in the Yelp complaint
Loyalty			
Study 1	Survey	Measured customers' intentions to recommend (attitudinal loyalty) and return to the gym (behavioral loyalty).	Attitudinal loyalty: "How likely are you to recommend the gym?"; Behavioral loyalty: "How likely are you to be a member of this gym in 6 months?" (Likert scale from 1 to 10; 10 = "very likely")
Studies 2, 3, 4a, and 4b	Scenario and behavioral experiments	Measured the respondents' intentions to use the same service provider again.	"It is very likely that I would schedule my next session with this service provider"; "I would be loyal to this service provider in the future"; "I would consider trying a new service provider next time" (reverse-coded); (Likert scale from 1 to 7; 7 = "strongly agree")
Study 5	Yelp data	Coded the likelihood of customers returning after a failure from Yelp reviews (probable loyalty) and directly asked them whether they returned (actual loyalty).	Probable loyalty: likely to return = 1; unlikely = 0. Actual loyalty: did return = 1; did not return = 0
Tie-Strength Preservation			
Study 3	Behavioral experiment	Measured perceptions about the extent to which act of complaining helps preserve social ties.	"My feedback..." "...shows that I care"; "...is an investment in the relationship"; "...is a display of effort"; (Likert scale from 1 to 7; 7 = "strongly agree")
Authentic Openness to Feedback			
Studies 4a-b	Behavioral experiment	Measured perceptions of the authenticity of the service provider's openness to feedback.	"The service provider seemed open to my feedback"; "She uses customer feedback to improve her performance."

estimations are shown in Table 4. The results of the control variables were in the expected directions. The results show that as the tie strength between the customers and personal trainers increased, both customers' behavioral ($b = .180$, $t = 3.40$, $p < .001$) and attitudinal ($b = .246$, $t = 5.30$, $p < .001$) loyalty increased. The main effect of complaining was nonsignificant in both models (behavioral loyalty: $b = .182$, $t = .45$, $p = .66$; attitudinal loyalty: $b = .058$, $t = .16$, $p = .87$). The marginally significant interaction effects show that for customers who complained after a service failure, increasing tie strength led customers to become more behaviorally ($b = .053$, $t = 1.66$, $p = .09$) and attitudinally ($b = .041$, $t = 1.71$, $p = .08$) loyal, providing preliminary support for H_1 . Compared with a main-effects model, the incremental variance explained by the interaction was 4% ($p < .05$).

Discussion

This study provides initial evidence that increasing tie strength between customers and service providers positively influences the extent to which complaining after a service failure generates both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. However, we recognize that the effects are only marginally significant, and we seek to replicate this finding in a more controlled setting in Study 2.

Study 2: Examining Tie Strength, Complaining, and Loyalty in a Controlled Setting

In this study, we observe whether tie strength moderates the effect of complaining behavior on loyalty intentions (H_1) in a controlled setting. Participants read a scenario in which they imagined a training session with a personal trainer that did not go well. They were instructed to either complain or write about another topic.² Subsequently, we measured their loyalty intentions.

Study Design

Participants were 192 individuals from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (hereinafter, MTurk) who took part in a 2 (tie strength: strong vs. weak) \times 2 (manipulated feedback: complain vs. do not complain) study in exchange for \$.50. To determine the robustness of our tie-strength measure, we manipulated this variable by varying the degree to which the topics discussed by the customer and provider were personal in nature (Cavanaugh, Bettman, and Luce 2015). Participants read, "Imagine you are at the gym to meet with a personal trainer." They were then assigned to one of the following conditions.

Strong tie strength. "After meeting her, you immediately feel a connection. During your workout, you and your trainer discuss your day, things that are going on in your life, and other common interests. You find yourself talking to the trainer as you would a close friend."

²We manipulate (rather than measure) complaining behavior to avoid concerns of endogeneity associated with measuring complaining and subsequently using this measure to predict loyalty. To capture the more realistic effect of elective (as opposed to manipulated) complaining behavior on loyalty, we measure actual complaining behavior in Studies 1 and 5.

Weak tie strength. "You and the trainer do not talk much and you find that you do not have many common interests. You don't feel much chemistry with the trainer."

Service failure. Prior research has established that customers feel that one of the most frustrating service experiences is being ignored or deprioritized by a distracted service provider (Winsted 2000). Thus, we created a service failure using the following description: "During the workout, you notice that the trainer is distracted and the workout is repetitive and boring. The trainer keeps checking her phone and you have to wait several times for the trainer to think of the next exercise. Overall, you feel the trainer did a poor job."

After reading the scenario, participants were randomly assigned to a "complain" or "no-complain" condition. In the complain condition, they provided some feedback about the training session and described anything that went wrong using an online form we created. In the no-complain (control) condition, participants described their fitness goals. Next, participants indicated their intended loyalty using three measures (see Table 2) cited in prior literature (e.g., Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner 1998; Umashankar, Bhagwat, and Kumar 2016). The measures were strongly correlated ($\alpha = .93$), and thus we collapsed them into a single variable of intended loyalty by averaging the items. To confirm that we successfully manipulated tie strength, we asked the participants to indicate the degree to which they perceived that a social tie had been created (Table 2). We collapsed the multi-item scales of tie strength ($\alpha = .91$). Finally, we measured whether the respondents perceived that a failure had occurred by asking them to rate the degree to which they perceived that "something had gone wrong during the service encounter."

Results

We confirmed that the tie-strength manipulation was successful. Participants in the strong-tie condition perceived a stronger tie to the trainer than those in the weak-tie condition ($M_{Strong\ Tie} = 4.18$, $M_{Weak\ Tie} = 1.84$; $t(190) = 8.69$, $p < .001$). Further, participants indeed experienced a service failure ($M_{Service\ Failure} = 4.9$, $M_{Midpoint} = 4.0$; $t(191) = 3.07$, $p < .01$).

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a positive effect of tie strength on intended loyalty ($F(1, 188) = 4.37$, $p < .05$) and a nonsignificant main effect of complaining ($F(1, 188) = .57$, $p = .45$). In support of H_1 , we found a significant two-way interaction between tie strength and complaining on participants' intended loyalty ($F(1, 188) = 8.32$, $p < .01$; incremental adjusted $R^2 = 8\%$, $p < .01$). Planned follow-up contrasts (see Figure 1) showed that for participants with strong ties to the trainer, complaining (vs. not) led to higher loyalty intentions ($M_{Complained} = 3.35$, $M_{Did\ Not\ Complain} = 2.28$; $t(92) = 2.57$, $p < .05$). In contrast, for those with weak ties, complaining had no impact on loyalty intentions ($M_{Complained} = 1.99$, $M_{Did\ Not\ Complain} = 1.95$; $t(96) = .02$, $p = .67$).

Discussion

The results of this study confirm H_1 : tie strength moderates the influence of complaining on loyalty. Specifically, when customers who feel a strong tie to the service provider complain, they are subsequently more willing to return to the provider after a failure. However, when customers who have weak ties

TABLE 3
Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix (Study 1)

Variable	Measure	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Behavioral Loyalty	1–10	7.27 (3.03)	1.000					
2. Attitudinal Loyalty	1–10	6.87 (2.74)	.731**	1.000				
3. Tie Strength	1–10	7.75 (3.16)	.307**	.395**	1.000			
4. Complain	0/1	66%	.056	.021	−.174**	1.000		
5. Tenure	Days	1,382 (1,052)	.167**	.202**	.168**	−.052	1.000	
6. Usage Frequency	1–5	3.63 (1.16)	.242**	.209**	.147*	−.022	.193**	1.000

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

complain, there is no effect on their loyalty intentions. Furthermore, the fact that the results of this study are realized after only a single interaction between a customer and a service provider underscores both how quickly ties can emerge and how powerful they can be in creating loyalty. Next, we observe to what extent it is important that the customer complains directly to the service provider rather than a third party. Although complaining to another person or entity is less threatening to the customer's relationship tie with the provider, it might fail to preserve the relational connection between them.

Study 3: Examining “Tie-Strength Preservation” as an Underlying Process Using Behavioral Data

In Study 3, we test the contention that the way in which a customer offers his/her negative feedback affects downstream loyalty intentions. Using a behavioral-study format in which real social ties are created between participants and a personal trainer (a hired actor who was trained to look, dress, and behave like a trainer), we test whether tie-strength preservation explains the interactive effect of tie strength and complaining on intended loyalty (H_2). We manipulated to whom participants complained: a third party or the service provider who caused the failure. We predict that complaining to the service provider will engender tie-strength preservation, because the customer is actively investing in the tie, as opposed to complaining anonymously and indirectly, which, while cathartic, is unlikely to strengthen a social tie.

TABLE 4
Regression Analysis of Effects of Tie Strength and Complaining on Loyalty (Study 1)

Variable	Behavioral Loyalty Model	Attitudinal Loyalty Model
Tie Strength	.180 (.053)***	.246 (.046)***
Complain	.182 (.408)	.058 (.360)
Tie Strength \times Complain	.053 (.032)*	.041 (.024)*
Tenure	.0002 (.0015)*	.0003 (.0001)**
Usage Frequency	.380 (.138)***	.225 (.112)*

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

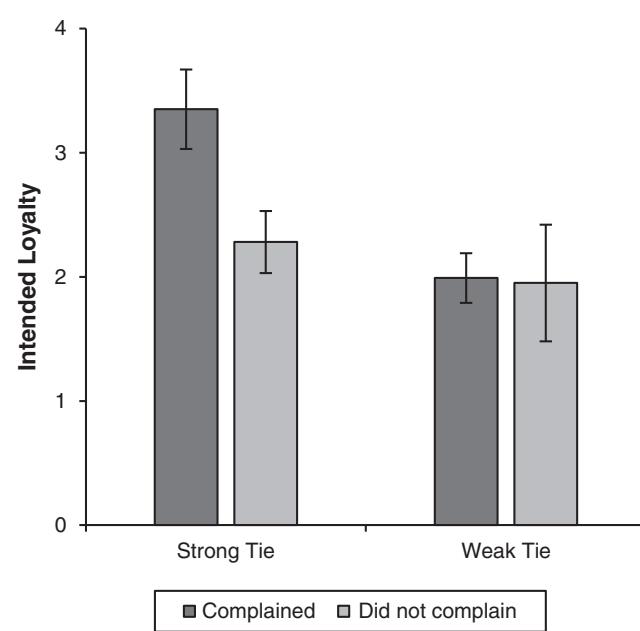
Notes: Parameter estimates are reported, with standard errors in parentheses.

Study Design

Participants were 146 individuals at a southeastern university who participated in a 2 (tie strength: strong vs. weak) \times 2 (complaint recipient: service provider vs. third party) between-subjects behavioral study for a payment of \$10. Participants were unaware that they were participating in a marketing study and were told the following cover story: “The citywide Fitness Association is trying to improve its fitness programs for university students. They are asking students to sign up for a 15-minute fitness survey for a payment of \$10.”

The study was conducted one participant at a time, and each participant was allotted a 20-minute time slot. When each participant entered the research setting, the actor (who was playing the role of a personal trainer) greeted him/her. The actor was trained by an author of this article in how to behave in each of four conditions, but she had no knowledge of the hypotheses. In the strong-tie condition, the actor created some incidental

FIGURE 1
The Moderating Effect of Tie Strength on the Relationship Between Complaining and Intended Loyalty (Study 2)



similarities between the participant and herself using a “getting to know you” exercise designed to foster a social tie between the individuals (Jiang et al. 2010). Specifically, the actor tailored her conversations with participants such that her interests and experiences matched the information that participants revealed about themselves. Below is an example of a conversation:

Actor: Before we begin, let’s take a few minutes to get to know one another. Tell me a little bit about yourself. What year are you and what is your major?

Participant: I am a sophomore and I’m a chemistry major.

Actor: Oh, that was my major too! I also did my undergrad here and majored in that as well. So, where are you from?

Participant: I’m from San Diego, California.

Actor: I love that area. I have visited a few times. I have friends in the area. So, tell me, what you do for fun?

Participant: I like to go out with my friends and socialize. I also travel a lot and I like to hike and do water sports in the summer.

(The actor nods her head in agreement and smiles.)

Actor: I love doing a lot of the same things! It has been great getting to know you. It sounds like we actually have a lot in common! Now let’s move on to a few additional questions about your fitness goals.

In the weak-tie condition, the actor asked the participant about his/her background but showed no evidence of incidental similarity. The actor then moved on to a fitness assessment, which was ostensibly the focus of the study. The assessment was conducted on a laptop and consisted of questions pertaining to fitness (e.g., medical history, past injuries, fitness goals). The participant first entered his/her demographic and background information to create a temporal separation between the social-tie manipulation and the upcoming service failure. Next, the actor began a series of questions and entered participants’ answers into an online form, thus allowing her to manage the service interaction.

To create a service failure, after two or three minutes of working on the fitness questions, the actor started to appear visibly distracted by her phone. Next, she stopped the assessment to text a friend and then continued to text and laugh at the responses she received from the friend, while ignoring the participant. When she returned to the focal task, she asked the participant (in a rude tone) to repeat him/herself and then appeared disinterested when the participant complied. Finally, after a few more minutes, she told the participant to continue the assessment by him/herself while she took a phone call from a friend. She stepped away from the table and took the call while the participant finished the assessment unaided. When the participant completed the assessment, the actor completed her phone call and told the participant to follow the instructions on the laptop. The actor then left the room.

Participants were directed to provide feedback about their experience with the trainer. The recipient of the complaint was manipulated such that participants either provided written (nonanonymous) feedback for the trainer to read after the session using a standard feedback form, or posted a comment on a third-party website that houses reviews of personal trainers. The feedback form in the trainer-complaint condition asked participants to describe the service experience and whether anything went wrong, and to give their full name (indicating that

the feedback was not anonymous). In the third-party-complaint condition, we created a mock website in which the participants complained anonymously and were reminded that the provider had no access to the sentiments they expressed. Thus, participants had no way of remaining connected to the provider vis-à-vis their feedback. A graduate research assistant (GRA) read the complaints to confirm that in both conditions, participants mentioned some aspect of having experienced bad service (i.e., everyone actually complained).

After filling out their complaints, participants answered questions pertaining to our dependent measures of intended loyalty from prior studies, which were collapsed into a multi-item measure of intended loyalty ($\alpha = .85$). In addition, participants answered questions about how important giving feedback is to “preserving a social tie” (see Table 2; $\alpha = .93$), what their perceived tie to the trainer was (Table 2; $\alpha = .94$), and whether a failure had occurred.

Moderated Mediation Analysis to Determine Underlying Process

We first confirmed that our manipulations were successful. Specifically, we found a significant difference in participants’ perceived tie strength to the trainer by condition ($M_{\text{Strong Tie}} = 4.45$, $M_{\text{Weak Tie}} = 2.96$; $t(145) = 5.22$, $p < .001$) and confirmed that participants felt they had experienced a service failure ($M_{\text{Service Failure}} = 4.97$, $M_{\text{Midpoint}} = 4.00$; $t(145) = 2.98$, $p < .01$). To test H_2 , we examined whether the moderating effect of tie strength on the relationship between complaint recipient and intended loyalty is mediated by perceptions of tie-strength preservation, using the PROCESS mediation macro in SPSS (Model 8 in Hayes 2013). First, we found the interaction between tie strength (strong tie = 1; weak tie = 0) and complaint recipient (service provider = 1; third party = 0) on intended loyalty to be significant ($b = .46$, $t = 2.67$, $p < .01$; incremental adjusted $R^2 = 4.8\%$, $p < .05$). Second, to test whether this interaction is mediated by tie-strength preservation, we tested the interaction effect between tie strength and complaint recipient on tie-strength preservation and found it to be significant ($b = .35$, $t = 2.78$, $p < .01$; incremental adjusted $R^2 = 5\%$, $p < .05$). A breakdown of this interaction (see Figure 2) shows that when participants with a strong tie to the trainer complained directly to the trainer (vs. anonymously on the website), they perceived the act of complaining as more important in preserving the social tie ($M_{\text{Complained to Trainer}} = 5.29$, $M_{\text{Complained on Website}} = 3.93$; $t(70) = 2.65$, $p < .01$). Conversely, when those with weak ties complained, the recipient of the complaint (trainer vs. anonymous website) had no effect on their perceptions of tie-strength preservation ($M_{\text{Complained to Trainer}} = 3.15$, $M_{\text{Complained on Website}} = 3.62$; $t(72) = -1.02$, $p = .31$). Third, we found that increases in perceived tie-strength preservation from complaining led to increased loyalty intentions ($b = .40$, $t = 3.21$, $p < .01$). Finally, in the presence of tie-strength preservation, the interaction effect between tie strength and complaint recipient on intended loyalty dropped in significance ($b = .20$, $t = 1.71$, $p < .10$), although it did not become nonsignificant. A bootstrapping analysis with 10,000 samples confirmed that the indirect path of tie-strength preservation was significant, according to a model of tie strength \times complaint recipient \rightarrow tie-strength-preservation \rightarrow intended loyalty (95% confidence

interval: [.04, .55]). Thus, we conclude that tie-strength preservation at least partially mediates the moderating effect of tie strength on the relationship between complaint recipient and intended loyalty (see Figure 3).

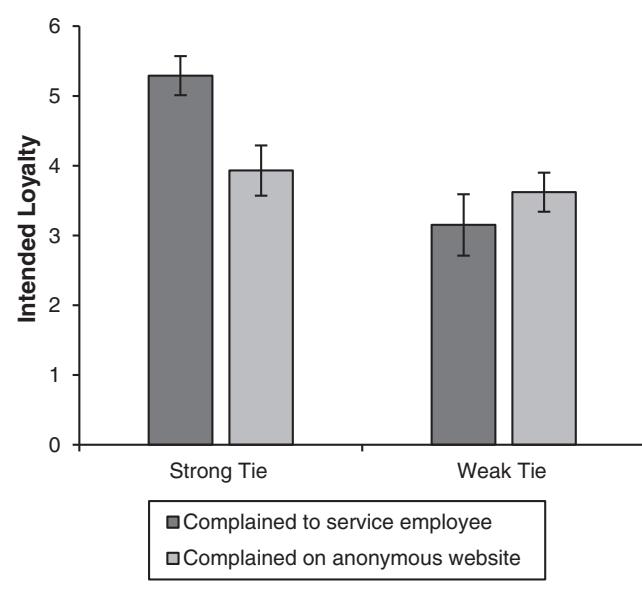
Discussion

The results of this study reveal the importance of directing strongly tied customers to complain directly to the service provider who provided the unsatisfactory service, rather than to externalize their disappointment anonymously to an indirect outlet. Voicing one's feelings directly to the provider enables the customer to preserve the social tie (H_2) by taking responsibility for the complaint and investing in a particular tie. Next, we consider communication strategies that service providers can use to fortify the effect of complaining after a service failure on loyalty.

Study 4a/4b: Examining Tie Strength, Authentic Openness to Feedback, Complaining, and Loyalty Using Scenario-Based and Behavioral Data

In Studies 4a and 4b, we examine the strategic importance of service providers' orientation toward negative feedback (H_{3a-b}). We examine the three-way interaction of complaining, tie strength, and the authenticity of providers' openness to feedback on intended loyalty in a controlled setting (Study 4a). Then, we narrow our focus to strongly tied customers and examine the interaction effect of providers' authentic openness to feedback and complaining in a behavioral study with real interpersonal interactions (Study 4b).

FIGURE 2
The Moderating Effect of Tie Strength on the Relationship Between Complaint Recipient and Tie-Strength Preservation (Study 3)



Study 4a

Study design. Participants were 312 individuals from MTurk who took part in a 2 (tie strength: strong vs. weak) \times 2 (service provider feedback orientation: authentic vs. inauthentic) \times 2 (manipulated feedback: complain vs. do not complain) between-subjects study for a payment of \$.50. Participants read a scenario about a failure that occurred with a personal trainer with whom they felt either a strong tie or a weak tie (using verbiage similar to the stimuli in Study 3). The scenario then manipulated the authenticity of the trainer's openness to feedback by either indicating that the trainer was authentically open to feedback or simply following a feedback protocol required by management.³ Participants gave feedback either about the quality of the trainer's service (complain condition) or about their own fitness goals (control [i.e., no-complain] condition). The following text was shown in the complain condition [no-complain condition]:

Authentic openness to feedback: "I would like to ask for your feedback on today's workout [what your fitness goals are for the next year]. While we are required by regulation to ask for your feedback on today's session [information on your fitness goals], we are very open to your comments and take your feedback [your fitness goals] very seriously to help us improve our services. Please take a few minutes to fill out this questionnaire on how things went today and whether anything went wrong or wasn't to your satisfaction [what your fitness goals are]. Again, I appreciate you taking the time to give us feedback on today's service [on what your fitness plans are in the next year]."

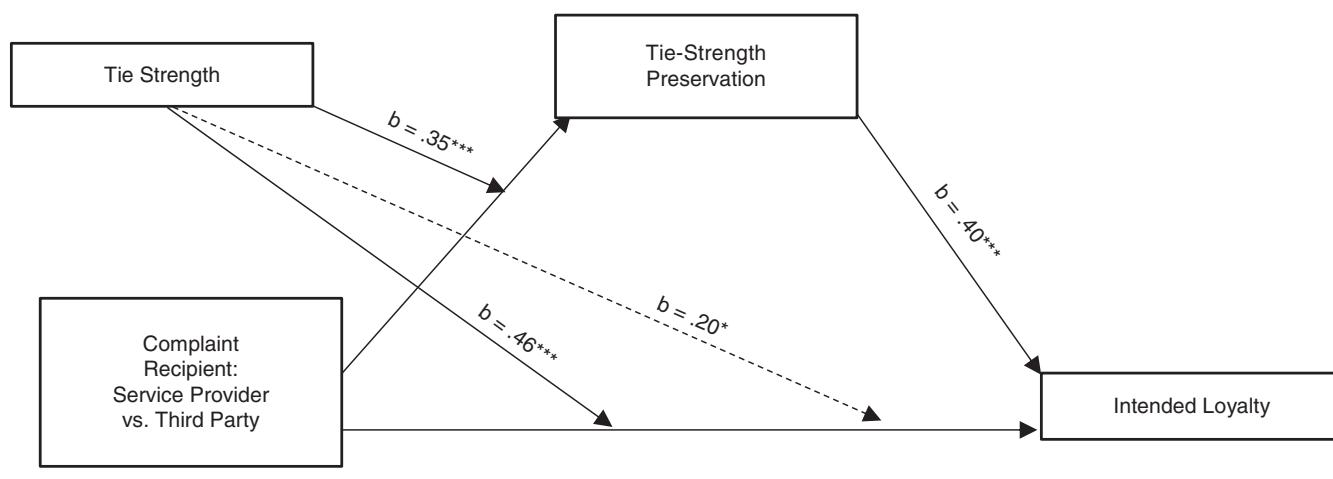
Inauthentic openness to feedback: "I would like to ask for your feedback on today's workout [what your fitness goals are for the next year]. We are required by regulation to ask you for your feedback on today's fitness assessment [your fitness goals for the next year]. So, please take a few minutes to fill out this questionnaire."

Next, participants in the complain condition were instructed to describe the service encounter and anything that went wrong, while those in the no-complain condition were asked to describe their fitness goals. Then, participants answered questions pertaining to our dependent measures of loyalty ($\alpha = .85$) and manipulation-check questions about perceived tie strength ($\alpha = .92$) and how open the trainer was to feedback (see Table 2; $r = .91$). Finally, they indicated whether something went wrong during the service encounter.

Results. We first confirmed that participants in the strong-tie condition perceived stronger ties to the trainer than those in

³To validate that participants discerned the difference between a provider who portrays an authentic openness to feedback and one who is simply executing a required protocol, we conducted a posttest with 102 participants from MTurk in return for a payment of \$.50. Participants read the manipulation used in the main study and subsequently indicated how authentic or inauthentic the provider was in her request for feedback. Using measures adapted from prior research (Grandey et al. 2005), we confirmed that in the authentic condition, participants thought that the provider was more genuine ($M_{Authentic} = 4.81$, $M_{Inauthentic} = 3.85$; $t(101) = 3.2$, $p < .002$), personally curious about the feedback (vs. fulfilling a professional obligation) ($M_{Authentic} = 3.47$, $M_{Inauthentic} = 2.34$; $t(101) = 3.3$, $p < .002$), and personally motivated (vs. required) to ask for feedback ($M_{Authentic} = 5.96$, $M_{Inauthentic} = 5.18$; $t(101) = 2.5$, $p < .01$).

FIGURE 3
Moderated Mediation Analysis of Tie-Strength Preservation (Study 3)



* $p < .10$.

*** $p < .01$.

Notes: Arrows indicate the interaction effect between tie strength and complaint recipient on intended loyalty in the presence of the mediator, tie-strength preservation.

the weak-tie condition ($M_{Strong\ Tie} = 5.27$, $M_{Weak\ Tie} = 2.26$; $t(311) = 7.16$, $p < .001$) and that those in the authentic condition felt that the trainer was more open to feedback than those in the inauthentic condition ($M_{Authentic} = 5.11$, $M_{Inauthentic} = 3.36$; $t(311) = 5.22$, $p < .001$). We also confirmed that the participants experienced a service failure across all conditions ($M_{Service\ Failure} = 5.65$, $M_{Midpoint} = 4.00$; $t(311) = 4.88$, $p < .001$).

The results support H_{3a-b} . Specifically, an ANOVA revealed a significant three-way interaction among providers' authentic openness, tie strength, and complaining ($F(1, 308) = 4.82$, $p < .05$; incremental adjusted $R^2 = 7\%$, $p < .01$). A breakdown of this three-way interaction shows a significant two-way interaction between providers' expression of openness and complaining behavior on intended loyalty for strongly tied customers (H_{3a} ; $F(1, 150) = 5.66$, $p < .05$; incremental adjusted $R^2 = 5\%$, $p < .01$). Specifically, strongly tied participants were more likely to become loyal after complaining (vs. not complaining) to an authentically open trainer ($M_{Complained} = 4.79$, $M_{Did\ Not\ Complain} = 3.96$; $t(76) = 2.64$, $p < .01$). However, they showed no difference in intended loyalty after complaining (vs. not complaining) to an inauthentically open trainer ($M_{Complained} = 3.53$, $M_{Did\ Not\ Complain} = 3.85$; $t(74) = -.63$, $p = .54$). Further, and consistent with H_{3b} , the two-way interaction for weakly tied customers was nonsignificant ($F(1, 158) = 1.23$, $p = .19$; incremental adjusted $R^2 = -1.7\%$, $p > .10$). Thus, for participants with weak social ties, the trainer's authenticity had no effect on intended loyalty irrespective of whether they complained.

Study 4b

From Study 4a, it is clear that the impact of service providers' authentic openness to negative feedback emerges in strong-tie (H_{3a}) but not weak-tie relationships (H_{3b}). Next, we conducted a behavioral study to test H_{3a} in a more externally valid service setting with actual interactions with a service provider.

Study design. Participants were 96 individuals who took part in a 2 (service provider feedback orientation: authentic vs. inauthentic) \times 2 (manipulated feedback: complain vs. do not complain) between-subjects behavioral study in return for a payment of \$5. A hired actor played the role of a personal trainer. The trainer conducted a fitness assessment, one at a time, on each of the 96 participants. Given the results of Study 4a, we ensured that the actor created strong social ties with all the participants by using a scripted conversation incorporating incidental similarity, similar to the one used in Study 3. Then, during the fitness assessment, the actor created a service failure by appearing distracted and rude. After the assessment was completed, the actor varied her openness to feedback about the quality of her service (vs. the participant's fitness goals), using a manipulation identical to that of Study 4a.

The actor then provided the participant with a feedback form and left the room. The participants in the complain condition filled out a form requesting that they describe the service encounter and anything that went wrong. Those in the no-complain condition filled out a form requesting that they describe their fitness goals. After the participants completed the feedback forms, they exited the room and were greeted by a GRA who provided them with an exit survey. In the survey, participants answered questions pertaining to our dependent measures of intended loyalty ($\alpha = .88$). Finally, they answered manipulation-check questions about how open the trainer was to feedback ($r = .91$), the extent to which they perceived strong ties to the trainer ($\alpha = .83$), and whether they thought something had gone wrong during the fitness assessment.

Results. We first confirmed that participants in the authentic condition felt that the trainer was more open to feedback than those in the inauthentic condition ($M_{Authentic} = 4.81$, $M_{Inauthentic} = 3.16$; $t(94) = 5.53$, $p < .001$). Further, we confirmed that participants perceived strong social ties to the trainer ($M_{Strong\ Tie} = 5.86$, $M_{Midpoint} = 4.00$; $t(95) = 4.91$, $p < .001$) and

experienced a service failure ($M_{\text{Service Failure}} = 5.27$, $M_{\text{Midpoint}} = 4.00$; $t(95) = 4.52$, $p < .001$).

An ANOVA revealed that in the context of strong-tie relationships, providers' authentic openness to negative feedback ($F(1, 92) = 4.21$, $p < .05$) had a positive effect on intended loyalty, whereas the main effect of complaining was nonsignificant ($F(1, 92) = 1.56$, $p = .17$). A test of H_{3a} revealed a significant two-way interaction ($F(1, 92) = 5.66$, $p < .05$; incremental adjusted $R^2 = 5.5\%$, $p < .05$). Specifically, participants indicated higher loyalty after complaining (vs. not) when the trainer was authentically open to feedback ($M_{\text{Complained}} = 4.84$, $M_{\text{Did Not Complain}} = 4.17$; $t(76) = 2.54$, $p < .05$). Conversely, they showed no difference in intended loyalty after complaining (vs. not) when the trainer was perceived as inauthentic ($M_{\text{Complained}} = 3.95$, $M_{\text{Did Not Complain}} = 4.01$; $t(74) = -.06$, $p = .95$; see Figure 4).

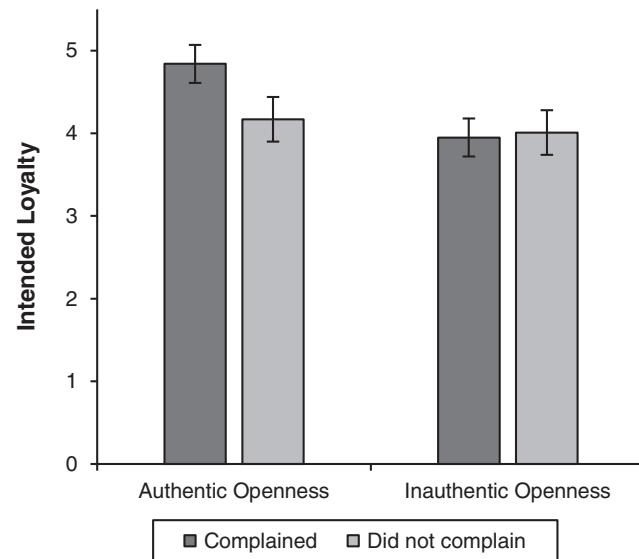
Discussion. The results of Studies 4a and 4b support H_{3a-b} and demonstrate the important role that service providers' authentic (vs. inauthentic) openness to feedback plays in engendering loyalty intentions when customers with strong ties complain, but not when customers with weak ties complain.

To validate the need for providers both to appear authentically open to feedback *and* to signal the intention to use that feedback, we ran a study to distinguish these two components. Participants were 140 individuals from MTurk who participated in a study for a payment of \$.50. In this study, we manipulated authenticity differently than in Studies 4a–b, by removing the statement "I will use your feedback to improve my service." Thus, the authenticity construct made no mention of using the feedback to improve the service provision. The interaction between simply appearing open and customers' complaining behavior on their intended loyalty was nonsignificant ($F(1, 136) = .46$, $p = .45$) and, thus, differed from the significant result found when we used both components of authenticity. These findings underscore the importance of training service providers to authentically signal both their openness to feedback from strongly tied customers and their intention to use the feedback to improve their future service provision.

Study 5: Operationalizing Tie Strength at the Industry Level Using Field Data

In the previous studies, we tested tie strength within a given customer–service provider relationship; however, we contend that at an aggregate level, service industries differ in the extent to which customers and providers naturally forge strongly tied relationships. Indeed, in certain industries, service providers and customers are more likely to engage in interpersonal interactions (Anderson and Narus 1991). Strong-tie service industries, which are characterized by naturally occurring relational ties between customers and providers (e.g., personal care, beauty, and hospitality services), are generally perceived as higher-touch contexts. In these industries, providers "co-create" experiences with customers and are frequently informal sources of social support (Cipolla and Manzini 2009). Further, firms in strong-tie industries allow customers to define or express themselves, and, in the process of receiving the service,

FIGURE 4
The Moderating Effect of Providers' Authentic Openness to Feedback on the Relationship Between Complaining and Intended Loyalty, for Customers with Strong Ties (Study 4b)



customers tend to require interpersonal interactions with their providers (Yim, Tse, and Chan 2008).

In contrast, industries characterized by weak social ties (e.g., administrative, maintenance, repair services) are more functional in nature and likely to produce quid-pro-quo (rather than communal) relationships between providers and customers. In such industries, the outcome is deemed more important than the process. Relationships between providers and customers in weak-tie industries exist primarily to facilitate exchange and not relationships (Zhang et al. 2016).

Past research in the RM domain (e.g., Palmatier et al. 2006) has argued that in relational service contexts, factors related to the relationship have a strong impact on loyalty, whereas in transactional service exchanges, the relationship between buyers and sellers has little influence on loyalty. We use a related line of reasoning to propose that in industries naturally amenable to strong social ties, complaining is more likely to preserve the ties between customers and providers than it is in weak-tie industries, wherein relational connections are less likely to form and consequently less likely to be preserved by offering diagnostic feedback. However, for customers who withhold feedback, the industry context is less important in facilitating loyalty because the customer has neither adhered to relational norms of open communication nor put forth the effort to preserve the social tie.

Thus, we expect that the effects hypothesized in H_1 will extend beyond specific service relationships to entire service industries. We test this notion using data collected from Yelp.com (hereafter, Yelp). Yelp is one of the most popular review websites for service industries (with over a hundred million reviews) and is widely considered by service providers to be a good source of feedback from their clients. "Yelpers," individuals who log in to offer their feedback on businesses they have used, post their

reviews nonanonymously (e.g., all Yelpers have their first name and initial of their last name explicitly listed on their profile and most include a picture). Indeed, many firms look at Yelp reviews directed at their business on a daily or weekly basis and respond directly to customers via the Yelp interface.

Study Design

Pretest. In the main study, the type of service industry in which the service interaction takes place behaves as a proxy for the tie strength that exists between the customers and service providers. To identify service industries that are generally characterized by strong versus weak ties, we ran a pretest with 102 participants from MTurk who participated for a payment of \$.50. We presented the participants with six professions and asked them to judge (on a Likert scale from 1 to 7) the degree to which each profession could be characterized by strong-tie attributes (connectedness, relational, interpersonal) and weak-tie attributes (transactional, outcome-driven, nonconversational) (Cipolla and Manzini 2009; Zhang et al. 2016; see Table 2). A priori, we classified the professions of bartender, hair stylist, and personal trainer as belonging to strong-tie industries and the professions of electrician, plumber, and mechanic as belonging to weak-tie industries. Our goal in the pretest was to verify empirically these classifications, and we were able to do so.

Specifically, the strong-tie professions were judged as more connected ($M_{\text{Strong Tie}} = 4.40$, $M_{\text{Weak Tie}} = 2.32$; $t(100) = 14.35$, $p < .001$), relational ($M_{\text{Strong Tie}} = 4.97$, $M_{\text{Weak Tie}} = 2.67$; $t(100) = 12.96$, $p < .001$), and interpersonal ($M_{\text{Strong Tie}} = 4.96$, $M_{\text{Weak Tie}} = 2.97$; $t(100) = 9.74$, $p < .001$) than the weak-tie professions. Similarly, the weak-tie professions were judged as more transactional ($M_{\text{Weak Tie}} = 5.86$, $M_{\text{Strong Tie}} = 3.95$; $t(100) = 9.13$, $p < .001$), outcome-oriented ($M_{\text{Weak Tie}} = 6.12$, $M_{\text{Strong Tie}} = 4.97$; $t(100) = 4.96$, $p < .001$), and nonconversational ($M_{\text{Weak Tie}} = 4.11$, $M_{\text{Strong Tie}} = 2.14$; $t(100) = 8.74$, $p < .001$) than the strong-tie professions. We did not find any differences within the strong-tie and weak-tie industry classifications. Participants judged bartending, hairstyling, and personal training to be equally connected ($M_{\text{Hair Stylist}} = 4.45$, $M_{\text{Personal Trainer}} = 4.65$, $M_{\text{Bartender}} = 4.38$; $F(2, 48) = .89$, $p = .42$), relational ($M_{\text{Hair Stylist}} = 5.03$, $M_{\text{Personal Trainer}} = 5.14$, $M_{\text{Bartender}} = 4.98$; $F(2, 48) = .43$, $p = .65$), and interpersonal ($M_{\text{Hair Stylist}} = 5.37$, $M_{\text{Personal Trainer}} = 5.64$, $M_{\text{Bartender}} = 5.46$; $F(2, 48) = .36$, $p = .77$). Likewise, participants judged the professions of electrician, plumber, and mechanic to be equally transactional ($M_{\text{Electrician}} = 5.81$, $M_{\text{Plumber}} = 6.02$, $M_{\text{Mechanic}} = 5.81$; $F(2, 46) = .43$, $p = .65$), outcome-driven ($M_{\text{Electrician}} = 6.18$, $M_{\text{Plumber}} = 6.15$, $M_{\text{Mechanic}} = 6.00$; $F(2, 46) = .59$, $p = .56$), and nonconversational ($M_{\text{Electrician}} = 4.91$, $M_{\text{Plumber}} = 4.83$, $M_{\text{Mechanic}} = 4.94$; $F(2, 46) = .63$, $p = .60$). Thus, we determined that tie strength can be operationalized at the industry level. Given the scope of the data collection required for the Yelp reviews, we chose to focus on two particular industries in the main study: hair styling (strong ties) and plumbing (weak ties).

Main study. The feedback offered by Yelpers is relevant to this study insofar as it corresponds closely to the constructs we are examining. First, contributors give feedback about service experiences across many industry contexts, and, as confirmed in

the pretest, service industry type can serve as a proxy for tie strength. Second, using complaints culled from Yelp, we can operationalize complaining behavior according to the length of the complaint. Specifically, the number of words in the complaint can serve as a proxy for the degree to which the customer offers his/her negative feedback (short vs. long complaints). Thus, we can capture both of our key independent measures from Yelp reviews. We restricted our sample to hair salons and plumbers in seven major cities: Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, San Diego, Austin, and New York. We further restricted our sample to more recent reviews (within the past 12 months) to assess our loyalty measures (described in the “Dependent Variables” section). We needed to identify service failures in general, and in particular, those that were due to the action of a service provider (hair stylist or plumber) and not another cause (e.g., price, poor ambiance, lack of parking). Consistent with past research (e.g., Ho-Dac, Carson, and Moore 2013), we identified whether a service failure had occurred using the reviews’ star ratings (one-, two-, and three-star reviews [out of five] were indicative of a failure). Then, we combed through the content of the reviews to ensure that those with low star ratings were indeed complaints; we kept only those that pertained to provider-related failures. This process culminated in 301 reviews from an original sample of 3,000 reviews.

Independent variables. Consistent with the results of our pretest, we operationalized *tie strength* at the industry-level by coding reviews that pertained to hair stylists as strong-tie encounters (1) and those that pertained to plumbers as weak-tie encounters (0). In our previous studies, our measure of complaining behavior included customers who complained after a service failure and those who did not complain. In the case of Yelp reviews, anyone who has experienced a service failure (1, 2, and 3 stars) has invariably complained, by virtue of posting a Yelp review with a low star rating. Therefore, we were unable to capture customers who experienced a failure but chose not to complain. Instead, we measured the *extent of complaining* as a proxy for complaining behavior by counting the number of words in the complaint.

Control variables. We controlled for several variables at the Yelp review, Yelper, and firm levels using data available on Yelp. At the level of the Yelp review, we controlled for *failure severity* using the star rating of the review (reverse coded: 1 star = less severe, 2 stars = moderate severity, and 3 stars = severe failure). At the level of the Yelper, we controlled for his/her *average ratings*, *number of friends*, *tenure* at Yelp (in years), and *gender* (1 = female, 0 = male). Lastly, we controlled for differences in the type of firm by including the firm’s *overall rating* (1–5 stars) and its *total number of reviews*.

Dependent variables. Since Yelp reviews do not provide any loyalty information (i.e., there is no explicit indication of whether one would return or has returned to a business), we assessed loyalty in two ways: *probable loyalty* and *actual loyalty*. To assess probable loyalty, we hired two GRAs to analyze the reviews in our sample and code whether the Yelper was likely to return (1) or not (0). For some of the reviews, probable loyalty could not be assessed because the review failed

to hint at any sense of loyalty or disloyalty; as a result, these reviews were dropped from the sample. Examples of Yelpers indicating a willingness to try the service again included, “Overall this place seems like it could be good for a lot of people, but if you do go here, make sure you are clear on what you want and make sure you feel like it will hold through your event,” “I’m not sure if I will be returning although my hair cut came out really nice hence the 3 stars” and “I’ve had a bit of an up and down experience with this place, but overall they’re informative, efficient, and priced for what they are and where they are. If you want the convenience of a trustworthy auto shop in the middle of the city, then this is your best bet.” Examples of Yelpers indicating that they would not return to the service provider included, “I suppose I will have to go elsewhere,” “I walked out frustrated, upset and will never be back. Unbelievable...if you have a lot of hair, I do not recommend,” and “Do not go here unless you for some reason desire to pay someone to waste your time.” The two raters had very similar ratings ($r = .92$). Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion with one of the authors. This process culminated in a data set of 206 Yelp reviews (104 about hair stylists and 102 about plumbers) with probable loyalty coded from the reviews.

To assess actual loyalty, the GRAs personally messaged the 206 Yelpers for which we had measures of probable loyalty, using a Yelper-to-Yelper messaging function in which anyone with a Yelp account can send a personal message to another Yelper. We messaged the Yelpers in our sample with the following message, “Hello, we found your review of [firm name] very helpful. Did you ever go back or would you go back in the future?” We received 67 responses from Yelpers (34 who reviewed a hair stylist and 33 who reviewed a plumber) who indicated whether they returned to the business or intended to in the near future (coded as 1) or never did or would not return (coded as 0).

Model Estimation

We ran two logistic regression models, one with probable loyalty and one with actual loyalty as the dependent variable. The independent and control variables were identical in both models: tie strength, extent of complaining, their interaction, and the controls. The m (probable or actual) loyalty models for Yelper i at firm j were estimated as follows:

$$\frac{\text{Prob}(\text{Loyalty}_{mij} = 1)}{1 - \text{Prob}(\text{Loyalty}_{mij} = 1)} = \frac{\exp(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Industry Tie Strength}_i + \beta_2 \text{Review Extent of Complaining}_i + \beta_3 (\text{Industry Tie Strength}_i \times \text{Review Extent of Complaining})_i + \beta_4 \text{Review Failure Severity}_i + \beta_5 \text{Yelper Average Rating}_i + \beta_6 \text{Yelper No. of Friends}_i + \beta_7 \text{Yelper Tenure}_i + \beta_8 \text{Yelper Gender}_i + \beta_9 \text{Firm Overall Rating}_j + \beta_{10} \text{Firm Total Reviews}_j + \varepsilon_{mij})}{1}$$

Results

The descriptive statistics and correlation matrix ($r < .50$) are reported in Table 5. From the descriptive statistics of both

probable and actual loyalty, it is evident that around half of the Yelpers are, to some extent, willing to give a business another try after a failure. The average complaint was 219 words, with length varying dramatically (range: 13–950 words).

The logistic regression results (see Table 6) revealed that industry tie strength has a positive effect on probable loyalty ($b = .004$, $\text{Wald} = 8.87, p < .01$) but not on actual loyalty ($b = .002$, $\text{Wald} = 1.39, p = .24$). While the effects are slightly different, this difference is not germane to the central thesis of this article. Furthermore, the extent of complaining alone does not directly impact probable ($b = -.379$, $\text{Wald} = 1.22, p = .27$) or actual ($b = -.405$, $\text{Wald} = .49, p = .48$) loyalty. With respect to the hypothesized interaction effect of tie strength and extent of complaining on loyalty, we find support for H_1 . Specifically, for customers in strong-tie (vs. weak-tie) industries, longer complaints result in higher probable ($b = .002$, $\text{Wald} = 3.97, p = .06$; incremental adjusted $R^2 = 5\%, p < .05$) and actual ($b = .005$, $\text{Wald} = 4.93, p < .05$; incremental adjusted $R^2 = 7\%, p < .01$) loyalty.

Discussion

We establish that in strong-tie industries—characterized by connectedness, rapport, and close interpersonal relationships—the positive effect of complaining manifests more than in weak-tie industries. Thus, the effect hypothesized in H_1 generalizes beyond individual relationships to entire service industries. Yelpers who complained to a greater extent about failures in strong-tie (vs. weak-tie) industries both expressed intentions to return and actually returned to the providers who had failed them. This further supports our contention that more involved disclosure of dissatisfaction behaves as a mechanism for keeping strongly tied customers connected after a failure.

General Discussion

We demonstrate the value of customer complaints beyond simply being a source of information guiding managers whether to initiate service recovery efforts or how to improve their future offerings. We contend that complaints also serve as a relationship-building tool for customers who have formed strong ties to the firm’s service providers, but not for those for whom these ties do not exist. Specifically, we show that the act of complaining may drive strongly tied customers to become loyal toward the very providers who failed them. Our findings generate several theoretical and managerial implications, as well as directions for future research.

Theoretical Implications

Much of the past work on complaining has focused on what drives customers to complain (e.g., Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare 2008; Mittal and Kamakura 2001; Stephens and Gwinner 1998; Zhang, Feick, and Mittal 2014) and how firms should manage complaints (e.g., Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987; 1988; Fornell and Westbrook 1984). However, little research has focused on how the mere act of complaining can affect loyalty. We show that complaining may not have a direct effect on loyalty but that its influence is contingent on the strength of the social tie between the customer and service provider. Further, we

TABLE 5
Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics (Study 5)

Variable	Measure	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Probable Loyalty	0 = not likely to return; 1 = likely to return	.53 (.50)	1.000										
2. Actual Loyalty	0 = did not return; 1 = returned	.51 (.50)	.426**	1.000									
3. Industry Tie Strength	0 = weak tie; 1 = strong tie	.53 (1.00)	.052	.036	1.000								
4. Review Extent of Complaining	13–950 words	.219 (172)	-.185*	-.209	-.017	1.000							
5. Review Failure Severity	1–3 stars (reverse-coded, where 1 star = severe failure and 3 stars = minor failure)	2.3 (.87)	-.470**	-.274*	-.181*	-.094	1.000						
6. Yelper Average Rating	1–5 stars	3.3 (.83)	.183*	.138	-.154*	.036	.237**	1.000					
7. Yelper No. of Friends	0–5,000	74 (375)	.105	-.154	.029	.079	.093	.062	1.000				
8. Yelper Tenure	1–11 years	4.99 (2.66)	.171*	-.091	-.301**	.173*	.136	.274**	.186**	1.000			
9. Yelper Gender	0 = male; 1 = female	.73 (.44)	-.004	-.194	.007	-.095	-.022	.061	-.073	1.000			
10. Firm Overall Rating	1–5 stars	4.13 (.80)	-.005	-.016	.550**	-.048	-.062	-.094	.028	-.197**	.270**	1.000	
11. Firm Total Reviews	2–1,441 reviews	183.46 (198.97)	.152*	.041	.250**	.052	.038	-.075	.126	-.036	.179*	.153*	1.000

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

TABLE 6
Logistic Regression Results of Industry Tie Strength and Extent of Complaining Using Yelp Data (Study 5)

Variable	Probable Loyalty Model	Actual Loyalty Model
Industry Tie Strength	.004 (.001)***	.002 (.002)
Review Extent of Complaining	-.379 (.343)	-.405 (.577)
Industry Tie Strength \times Review Extent of Complaining	.002 (.001)*	.005 (.002)**
Review Failure Severity	-1.566 (.276)***	-.883 (.423)**
Yelper Average Rating	.233 (.236)	.551 (.535)
Yelper No. of Friends	.003 (.002)*	-.005 (.006)
Yelper Tenure	.1 (.074)	-.085 (.135)
Yelper Gender	-.02 (.244)	-.739 (.416)*
Firm Overall Rating	-.015 (.268)	-.746 (.634)
Firm Total Reviews	.002 (.001)	0 (.001)

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

Notes: Parameter estimates are reported, with standard errors in parentheses.

demonstrate the contingent value of complaining at both the level of a single relationship and the level of an entire industry.

We respond to a gap in the literature by showing that, despite strongly tied customers' reluctance to complain (Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare 2008), when they do so, they are more loyal (vs. weakly tied customers) to the very service provider who failed. Further, we demonstrate a novel underlying process driving the moderating effect of tie strength on the relationship between complaining and loyalty: tie-strength preservation. That is, by investing in the relationship (by offering negative feedback), customers with strong ties preserve, or enhance, their social ties to the provider and, as a result, are subsequently more loyal. However, for weakly tied customers, because there is no social tie to preserve, complaining cannot act as a preservation mechanism and therefore fails to positively influence loyalty. Thus, we add to past work on tie strength by showing its paradoxical role in both dissuading customers from complaining and also enhancing their loyalty when they are encouraged to do it.

We operationalize tie strength at both the individual-relationship and industry levels and show that our predictions are robust across types of social ties. Testing newly formed social ties in initial service encounters is a particularly conservative test of our theory, as the interaction is so brief that there is little time for a customer and service provider to form a meaningful relationship. Given these consistent findings, we suggest that in future work, researchers expand their understanding of when and how social ties develop to include brief encounters, shared social connections, perceptions of incidental similarity, and an overall "vibe" between individuals, in addition to the more long-standing relational characteristics (e.g., tenure, frequency of purchasing, number of ties) used to define social ties in past research (e.g., Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare, 2008; Rindfleisch and Moorman 2001; Zhang, Feick, and Mittal 2014).

Managerial Implications

Service firms are increasing their focus on customer complaints (Michel, Bowen, and Johnston 2008), but they may not be effectively leveraging all the value embedded in feedback

systems and, therefore, may be missing opportunities to convert service failure experiences into customer loyalty. Further, we conclude that service providers are not being trained to use complaints to facilitate strong ties. Anecdotally, we found that none of the managers we interviewed viewed customer complaints as a way to maintain relationships with customers. Instead, managers focus heavily on the content of customers' complaints to identify problems with current service offerings. We urge managers to recontextualize negative feedback and view complaints as a tool to strengthen relationships that may be at risk.

Across our studies, our key moderator was the degree to which customers felt a strong tie to service providers, either within or across service contexts. Although strongly tied relationships are usually the product of multiple interactions between two individuals (which we test in Studies 1 and 5), we also show evidence that providers can create social ties in a matter of minutes using simple rapport-building techniques. While social ties are often assumed to arise organically, we have identified several techniques that service providers can use to propel these relationships. For instance, by identifying similarities between themselves and the customers, or sharing small bits of personal information about themselves, providers can create a multidimensional identity that customers can connect to emotionally.

We demonstrate to managers that collecting negative feedback is a process that requires a relatively specific protocol to achieve maximal effectiveness. Given that customers who have suffered a service failure may want to externalize their dissatisfaction to other potential customers or peers, the results indicate that providers should concentrate their complaint solicitation efforts on strongly tied customers. By engaging customers in an online forum that the provider is known to read, sending nonanonymous follow-up surveys, or engaging in a casual discussion after the service is rendered, providers may avoid situations in which the customer complains to a third party rather than directly to them. This is relevant given that complaints are effective in increasing loyalty more so when they are directed to the firm, and specifically to the individual who failed.

Furthermore, when providers solicit negative feedback with an authentically open demeanor—demonstrating a true interest in hearing negative feedback *and* a willingness to integrate the feedback into their service provision—strongly tied customers feel more inclined to remain loyal after complaining. While this result may seem intuitive, service providers often do not display consistent openness and come across as inauthentic. This could be because they do not believe that management is open to employee input, so they, in turn, are less open to customer feedback. Likewise, service providers who are not trained to deal effectively with negative feedback may find it threatening to receive, and thus avoid soliciting feedback in a sincere manner. We advocate that managers consider providers' natural interpersonal skills when making hiring decisions. The ability to solicit feedback in an authentic way is difficult to teach but a powerful aid in creating loyalty among customers with whom providers share strong ties.

Managers should be cognizant of the industry within which they operate when training service personnel. We show evidence that the positive effect of complaining holds in strong-tie industries (e.g., high-touch contexts such as personal care, beauty, therapeutic, and design services) in which customers naturally create social ties with providers. On the other hand, in weak-tie industries (e.g., low-touch administrative and transaction-oriented industries such as maintenance, administrative, and repair), negative feedback is largely ineffective in facilitating loyalty. Given this differential result, we suggest that service providers customize the kind of feedback they solicit depending on the context in which they work. In strong-tie industries, we suggest that managers strongly incentivize providers to garner direct negative feedback using an open demeanor if a service failure has occurred. In contrast, in weak-tie industries, perhaps service providers should elicit “suggestions for improvement” rather than negative feedback after a service failure.

Overall, we urge managers to rethink the way they view customer complaints. In many firms, complaint management is relegated to the customer service department, a cost center. Often, the solicitation for feedback is an automated component of customer relationship management systems, making the process impersonal and unlikely to increase customer loyalty. This work indicates that customer complaints would be better viewed as a means by which customers engage with service providers, rather than as a way by which they vent or demand

compensation from a firm. By changing managers' perspective on negative feedback, we think that service failures will be viewed as an opportunity to grow and nurture relationships rather than as a source of defection.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In this package of studies, we focus on situations in which the service provider caused the service failure. While we think this makes the failure more interpersonally relevant, it would be informative to examine failures caused by the firm (rather than an individual). For instance, it would be interesting to see how customers attribute the failure to an entity (vs. a person) and how an indirect failure by the firm would affect an interpersonal tie with the service provider. Furthermore, although we confirm that the predicted effects are robust across both process and outcome failure types, future research might benefit from examining other aspects of failure (e.g., controllability, attribution) to see whether the tested relationships change.

Due to its natural connection to tie strength and relationship marketing, we chose to focus on tie-strength preservation as the underlying process of interest. However, to delve deeper into additional underlying processes, we urge researchers to examine the roles of accountability and guilt, both of which might influence the degree to which strong-tie customers are willing to commit to the relationship after complaining. Furthermore, we did not directly examine the effect of complaining on providers' service recovery efforts. Instead, we focused on how the simple act of voicing negative feedback may increase customers' loyalty, even without the explicit promise of rectifying the failed service. We urge researchers to continue this line of research by examining how service recovery efforts may moderate the relationship between complaining and loyalty in strong-tie relationships.

Finally, we recommend that customers with strong ties provide feedback directly to the provider, rather than externalize their frustration to a friend or complain anonymously (Study 3). If complaints cannot be directed at the provider, then non-anonymous third-party complaints (Yelp data; Study 5) are still valuable in that the degree of engagement, via the extent complaining, in these forums is still meaningful and informative to managers. Still, we urge researchers to collect data on face-to-face complaints, which we believe will be even more powerful in preserving social ties, ultimately leading to loyalty.

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