Stop Complaining

A Quantitative Study on How to Deter Illegitimate Complaining

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Abstract

The objective of the study at hand was to examine what influence threatening with deterrence tactics has on the level of cognitive dissonance and the intention to complain illegitimately. Two deterrence tactics have been included; a high probability of getting caught and severe punishments. This study is aimed to clarify exactly how effective each tactic is in deterring deviant consumer behavior, since contradictory findings regarding the effectiveness of both tactics can be found in prior research. On the basis of a scenario-based experiment with 130 valid responses it was then investigated whether there are significant effects. Results from the experiment show that both deterrence tactics lead to a decrease in the intention to complain illegitimately. This relationship was found to be fully mediated by cognitive dissonance. Based on these results managers are recommended to apply either of the two deterrence tactics in their complaint policies, depending on which tactic is more applicable to the industry that the firm is operating in. By doing so it is expected that illegitimate complaining behavior by greedy customers will be deterred as the level of cognitive dissonance that they experience is increased.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In the process of providing services or products, things can unpack differently than expected. Think for instance of product malfunctions or service failures. Such errors are inevitable (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002) and have an influence on customer satisfaction. Dissatisfied customers might decide to cut ties with the firm, as service failure is found to be a key determinant of customer switching behavior (Roos, 1999; Berry & Yadav, 2000). Customer switching is something that firms want to prevent at all times, as it implies that the firm loses potential customers and retention of these customers is necessary for firm profitability (Stauss & Friege, 1999). Moreover, dissatisfied customers are more likely to spread negative messages (Lewis, 1983), which are found to be more influential than positive messages (Bone, 1995).

In order to restore satisfaction, the firm can choose to execute a service recovery (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1987), which implies a response of the firm in the direction of the customer. During the recovery process, customers are more emotionally involved than they were in the routine service (Bitner, Booms & Tetreault, 1990) and successful recovery has the potential to reinforce customer loyalty towards the firm (Smith, Bolton & Wagner, 1999). Therefore, it is of big importance that the firm handles this task seriously. By looking at customer feedback in the form of complaints, firms can track down customer issues and resolve them (Sanes, 1993).

Unfortunately for firms, not all product and service complaints are legitimate, as some customers do not complain with the generally expected norms in the consumption context (Arora & Chakraborty, 2020). They tend to exaggerate their complaints or come up with complaints that are completely fake. These customers take advantage of the service recovery policies of the firm with the intention to obtain certain benefits (Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Baker, Magnini & Perdue, 2012). These benefits can range from simple monetary refunds, to more complicated service returns, such as offering the customer extra items or an apology. The National Retail Federation (2018) estimated a total worth of these accumulated service returns of 24 billion US dollars in 2018. Besides, online commerce company Alibaba alone, reports more than 200.000 illegitimate complaints (Yin, 2017). In addition, the size of the problem is increasing (Harris, 2008). For instance, companies such as L.L.Bean observe a remarkable increase in illegitimate product returns (Hagenbuch, 2018). These observations prove that the philosophy of “the customer is always right” does not hold, as was also

mentioned by Huang et al. (2014). Firms have to come up with new strategies that prevent these illegitimate complaints from happening.

Early studies in the field mainly explain why illegitimate complaining takes place. These studies have found that customers make cost and benefit trade-offs. Based on these trade-offs they decide whether or not they should engage in deviant behavior (Becker, 1968). Moreover, it is found that cognitive dissonance plays a role in this decision making process. In his cognitive dissonance theory, Festinger (1957) explains how individuals experience a gap between their attitude and their behavior. This gap is also expected to be present in the context of illegitimate complaining. Customers are aware that complaining illegitimately is not in line with established organizational policies (Dootson et al., 2017), but they do so nevertheless. Joosten (2022) has investigated that customers make use of neutralization techniques that justify illegitimate complaining behavior. Justification of this behavior reduces the level of experienced cognitive dissonance. Based on the neutralizations that customers use, he has composed an illegitimate complainer typology. The “greedy customer” type was found to be most harmful for the firm, which is why this study will target this illegitimate complainer type in particular.

An attempt is made to uncover how illegitimate complaining can be deterred. In particular, it will be examined how customers will behave differently when threatened with two deterrence tactics; a high probability of getting caught and a severe punishment. Dootson, et al. (2017; 2018) expect that both variables will reduce deviant consumer behavior. However, contradictory findings regarding the effectiveness of the deterrence tactics have been found (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999; Falk & Kosfeld, 2006; Gamliel & Peer, 2013). On the basis of a scenario-based experiment, this study will empirically investigate the effectiveness of the deterrence tactics to clarify the theoretical discrepancy in the field. Caution will be taken as illegitimate complaining can be regarded as a sensitive topic (Lee & Renzetti, 1990). Illegitimate complaining is an illegal practice and customers that are being studied might feel too threatened to truthfully talk about the topic, as doing so could lead to discovery and sanctions.

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1.2 Research aim

The purpose of this study is to examine different tactics that will deter illegitimate complaining behavior under greedy customers. In particular, it will be investigated whether illegitimate complaining behavior will be deterred once customers are threatened with a high probability of getting caught and with severe punishments. This relationship is expected to be mediated by the level of cognitive dissonance that customers experience. Thus, the research question that will guide this study will be as follows:

To what extent can threatening with a deterrence tactic ("a high probability of getting caught" and "a severe punishment") decrease greedy customers' intention to complain illegitimately, and to what extent is this relationship mediated by cognitive dissonance?

1.3 Relevance

Literature research within the area of illegitimate complaints is scarce (Arora & Chakraborty, 2020). However, some research into the topic has been executed over the past two decades. Huang & Miao (2013) advised to look further into the interaction between firms and illegitimate complainers. That is exactly what Dootson et al. (2017; 2018) have done in their studies. They investigated customers' motivations for filing illegitimate complaints and found that customers justify their illegitimate complaining behavior. Joosten (2022) also refers to these justifications in his categorization of four illegitimate complainer types. This study will partially build on his research by focussing on one of the illegitimate complainer types, the "greedy customer". More specifically, it will be investigated whether firms can deter this greedy behavior by threatening customers with a high probability of getting caught and with severe punishments. The effectiveness of such deterrence tactics on deviant consumer behavior has been described in the past, but the effectiveness on illegitimate complaining behavior has not been tested specifically. Prior studies gathered contradictory findings regarding a probability of getting caught. Some studies suggest that a high probability of getting caught will not affect deviant behavior (Gamliel & Peer, 2013), whereas other studies did find significant effects (Mazar, Amir & Ariely, 2008, Thielmann & Hilbig, 2018). Similarly, threatening customers with severe punishments is found to have an impact on deviant behavior by some (Akers & Sellers, 2004; Mazar et al., 2008), but this effect is not supported by all (Falk & Kosfeld, 2006; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999). This study will hopefully put an end to the ongoing discussion on the effectiveness of these tactics by

investigating the effects of both on the intention to complain illegitimately. This expands knowledge gathered by Dootson et al. (2017; 2018) and Joosten (2022).

Findings of this study will aid management in the minimization of negative effects of illegitimate complaining on the firm (Arora & Chakraborty, 2020). First, managers have to identify whether their firm is targeted by greedy customers and if losses incurred by this group have significantly negative effects on the firm, its consumers, or the market as a whole. Next, managers can select a strategy from this paper, in order to deter the illegitimate complainers. Lastly, the company can apply this tactic, which will result in a reduction of illegitimate complaining. All this, while keeping the service recovery policy available for legitimate customer complaints. This, because of the importance of helping legally dissatisfied customers.

1.4 Thesis outline

The topic of this paper, illegitimate complaining, has been introduced in the first chapter. In chapter two the theoretical background of illegitimate complaining will be provided. On the basis of this background, an appropriate method will be selected in chapter three. This will be used to study the hypotheses. Results of this study will be provided in chapter four. Lastly, chapter five will consist of an elaborative discussion regarding the results that have been found.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Introduction

The second chapter of this paper consists of an extensive literature review. First, a clear definition of what illegitimate complaints entail will be given. Next, it will be explained why customers engage in this form of deviant behavior in the first place. On the basis of this reasoning two tactics will be introduced that are meant to put a stop to illegitimate complaining. Then it will be discussed that customers do not feel at ease when complaining illegitimately and that they are found to use neutralization techniques that justify this behavior. Based on these neutralizations a categorization of the illegitimate complainer types is put forward. Lastly, the mediating role of cognitive dissonance will be highlighted and the conceptual framework that will be investigated in the remainder of this paper will be displayed.

2.2 Illegitimate complaints

Dissatisfied customers can initiate contact with the firm in which they express their dissatisfaction. Such a non-transactional event is referred to as a customer complaint (Landon, 1980). Complaints have the potential to bring added value to both customers and the firm. Customers have the possibility to voice their dissatisfaction, and the firm has the possibility to gain strategic information from its customers (Slack, et al., 1998). If understood correctly this information can lead to competitive success for the firm (Johnston, 2001). However, many firms fail to use customer complaint information successfully (Homburg & Fürst, 2007). What makes customer complaint handling even more complicated, is an increase in illegitimate complaints (Kim & Baker, 2019). Illegitimate complaints are complaints that are filed in absence of customer dissatisfaction or service failure (Prim & Pras, 1999) and can therefore be categorized as a form of deviant consumer behavior (Reynolds & Harris, 2005). Customers can shape illegitimate complaints in several ways; they can either exaggerate their complaints, come up with fake complaints or wrongfully blame the firm (Joosten, 2022). This behavior brings regulatory, financial and social costs to the firm (Reynolds & Harris, 2005; Dootson et al., 2018) as firms might not be able to distinguish between legitimate and illigitimate complaints. This makes it harder to obtain strategic information and eventually competitive success from these (possibly illegitimate) complaints. In order to withhold customers from engaging in deviant behavior it is necessary to first understand the underlying motivation of their engagement.

2.3 Utility-based model

Prior studies in the field of economics have found that customers engage in deviant behavior based on a utility-based model (Becker, 1968; Allingham & Sandmo, 1972). This model explains how individuals make trade-offs between the external rewards and the conjoined costs of engaging in such behavior. People in general, have a desire to comply with societal values (Fisher, 1993), as they appreciate approval of others (King & Bruner, 2000). However, their behavior does not always portray this desire. Only, when the costs of engagement in deviant behavior surpass the rewards, then will consumers act honestly (Lewicki, 1984; Hechter, 1990). On the contrary, when the benefits of engagement in deviant behavior exceed the costs, customers are likely to act dishonestly. Mazar et al. (2008) mention three external factors that are considered in benefit and cost trade-offs; (1) the magnitude of the reward, (2) the probability of getting caught, and (3) the magnitude of punishment if caught. They also hypothesize that the frequency of dishonest behavior is highest when the external reward is high, the probability of getting caught is low, and the severity of punishment is low.

Illegitimate complaining can be considered as a form of deviant behavior, as was already mentioned in the previous section. Therefore, the utility-based model is also applicable in the context of illegitimate complaints and alterations in the costs and benefits of filing such complaints might influence consumer behavior The first factor mentioned by Mazar et al. (2008) which focuses on the magnitude of the reward is not feasible to adjust in the context of this study, as rewarding customers for not filing illegitimate complaints is rather meaningless. Besides, customers that would not complain in the first place could also claim a reward if such a reward system was implemented. Reducing the rewards for complaining is also not feasible as this would mean that complaint policies have to be adjusted. This is disadvantageous for consumers with honest complaints, since they can no longer make righteous claims and get rewarded appropriately. It is also disadvantageous for the firm, as successfully assisting these consumers can increase customer loyalty towards the firm (Smith et al., 1999).

The second factor that was mentioned by Mazar et al. (2008) emphasizes on the probability of getting caught and focuses on the cost-side of the trade-off. Early studies in the field of crime and delinquency have found that thieves are deterred from engaging in deviant behavior due to a fear of getting caught (Shover, 1996). In addition, these criminals are more likely to select a target containing a lower risk of getting caught in case that they do decide to pursue their deviant activities (Shover, 1996; Piquero & Rengert 1999). This can best be explained with the help of the utility-based model. By emphasizing a high risk of getting

caught, individuals experience higher costs for deviant activities. The costs will then surpass the expected rewards, which results in deterrence of deviant behavior, such as complaining illegitimately. Adjusting the probability of getting caught in the context of illegitimate complaints is relevant as a probability of getting caught is also present in the real world (Thielmann & Hilbig, 2018). Firms could threaten customers with a high probability of getting caught. By doing so, a reduction in the intention to complain illegitimately is expected. This is in line with the findings by Thielmann & Hilbig (2018). They measured a reduction in deviant behavior due to the introduction of a high probability of getting caught. However, not all studies agree with their findings. Gamliel & Peer (2013) for instance, did not measure a significant reduction in cheating behavior, due to the introduction of explicit risk of getting caught. They acknowledge that they acquired low statistical power and that only a low probability of getting caught was applied. Therefore, different results might have been yielded if the percentage of getting caught that they used was higher. This is supported by Cole (1989) and Hunjan (2016), as their articles state that a low probability of getting caught increases consumers' tendency to engage in deviant behavior. For these reasons, a high probability of getting caught will be used as a first deterrence tactic that is meant to reduce customers' intention to complain illegitimately. The hypothesized effect is as follows:

H1: Consumers that are threatened with a high probability of getting caught will show a lower intention to complain illegitimately than consumers that are not threatened with this probability of getting caught when complaining illegitimately.

The third and last factor considered in the benefit and cost trade-off named by Mazar et al. (2008) is the magnitude of punishments. Similarly to the probability of getting caught, this factor emphasizes the cost side of the trade-off. Prior studies have found that severe and swift punishments are particularly effective in deterrence of deviant behavior (Grasmick & Green, 1980; Akers & Sellers, 2004; Thielmann & Hilbig 2018). Rauhut & Junker (2009) add that this is the case, since individuals are only bounded rational. This implies that even if customers could get away with their illegitimate complaints, they would not take the risk of getting punished for filing one. The increased perception of the costs makes it so that customers withhold from complaining illegitimately as the benefits do no longer outweigh the costs. Hence, it is expected that severe punishments will contribute to a lower intention to complain illegitimately. This expectation, however, is not in line with all findings in the field. Some studies even discourage the use of punishments (Cialdini, 1996; Tenbrunsel &

Messick 1999; Falk & Kosfeld, 2006). One reason that is given is that lying can be associated with sensation seeking which can be increased by imposing punishments (DeAndrea et al., 2009; McTernan et al., 2014). Nevertheless, it is believed that punishments will shift the cost and benefit trade-off in favor of firms that threaten their customers with severe punishments. This is expected to result in a lower intention to complain illegitimately, as is hypothesized below:

H2: Consumers that are threatened with a severe punishment will show a lower intention to complain illegitimately than consumers that are not threatened with this punishment when complaining illegitimately

2.4 Cognitive dissonance

The utility-based model fails to answer one important question, as the model assumes constant motivations across the population (Taylor et al., 1973). This means that all people are equally inclined to complain illegitimately when the cost and benefit trade-off is in favor of doing so. However, why do some individuals engage in this behavior while others withhold under similar circumstances?

This can be explained by the fact that the model mostly focuses on external costs and benefits. However, individuals' internal reward systems also come into play. Behavior is influenced by external as well as internal reward systems (Mazar et al., 2008). The internal reward system deals with the way in which customers perceive themselves. This view of oneself is referred to in several papers as the self-concept (Aronson, 1969; Bem, 1972; Baumeister, 1998). People have a tendency to maintain a positive self-concept. Therefore, they behave in ways that are aligned with their internal standards, such as being moral. Behavior that is not aligned with one's internal standards, requires a negative update of one's self-concept, which is usually avoided (Greenwald 1980; Sanitioso, Kunda & Fong 1990; Griffin & Ross 1991; Josephson Institute of Ethics 2006; Mazar et al., 2008), even if that implies sacrificing financial benefits (Sullivan 1953; Aronson & Carlsmith 1962; Harris, Mussen & Rutherford 1976, Gino, Ayal & Ariely, 2009; Gino, Norton & Ariely, 2010; Zhong, Bohns & Gino, 2010) that could have been gained by engaging in deviant behavior. The point at which this adaptation takes place is called the deviance threshold (Dootson, 2017). This threshold lies at different levels for different people, since not everyone possesses equal internal standards. This explains why some people engage in deviant behavior and some do not, as it would exceed their personal deviance threshold. Despite the strong

unwillingness of updating one's own self-concept, consumers tend to behave in ways that force them to alter it nevertheless. When people engage in behavior that is not within their deviance threshold they experience cognitive dissonance, a gap between their attitude and their actual behavior (Festinger, 1957). This brings a feeling of discomfort that is not wished for and for that reason people try to get rid of it.

2.5 Neutralization techniques

One way of reducing cognitive dissonance is by shifting one's deviance threshold. This can be achieved with the help of neutralization techniques (Dootson et al., 2018). Such techniques are used by individuals in order to justify their deviant behavior. Justification of this behavior then leads to a shift in their deviance threshold, as the connection between one's behavior and the corresponding consequences is broken (Bandura, 1999). This implies that people using these neutralizations are more likely to display deviant behavior. Customers that complain illegitimately also use neutralizations in the justification of their behavior. This was established by Joosten (2022) as he made an interesting categorization based on these neutralizations. The neutralizations that he has used in his study are explained in Table 1. His categorization differs from other categorizations in the field that have taken all illegitimate complainers together (Jacoby & Jaccard, 1981) or have only focused on the frequency of illegitimate complaining (Reynolds & Harris, 2005; Huang & Miao, 2013). The categorization by Joosten distinguishes between four illegitimate complainer types. These are defined according to two criteria; whether the customer blames himself or the firm and (2) whether their behavior was intended or not. This categorization is partially flawed, as it does not precisely follow the conceptualization of what an illegitimate complaint entails. The conceptualization of illegitimate complaints reads that illegitimate complaints are filed in absence of dissatisfaction or service failure (Prim & Pras, 1999). Nevertheless, two of the proposed types - the immoral firm type (type 1) and the failing firm type (type 2) - complain illegitimately due to wrongdoing by the firm. For that reason the relationship with the firm is also affected, as satisfaction, loyalty, commitment, trust, and positive word of mouth are all negatively influenced (Joosten, 2022).

Type 3 complainers (greedy customer type), on the other hand, have not experienced any wrongdoing by the firm. Customers that belong to this type are most harmful to the firm, as they complain out of pure greed. These customers are aware that they, themselves, are the culprit in the situation, but will complain nevertheless. They do so with the help of two neutralization techniques; "claim of normalcy" and "claim of entitlement". They justify their

own behavior by looking at other customers. The relationship with the firm is not affected by their behavior, since these customers are more than willing to interact with the firm again, as the firm has done nothing wrong. The fourth and last type of illegitimate complainer (opportunistic customer type) also has not perceived any service failures by the firm. However, here the situation is the culprit, rather than the customer. Customers that belong to this complainer type use the following neutralization techniques to justify their behavior; "justification by postponement" and "other people do worse things". The firm has done nothing wrong in the eyes of the customer, hence the relationship with the firm is not directly affected.

Out of the latter two illegitimate complainer types, the greedy customer was found to bring the most detrimental effects to the fim. Therefore, the decision is made to focus on this specific illegitimate complainer type in the remainder of this paper. As stated before, greedy customers rely mainly on two neutralizations, namely, the "claim of normalcy" and "claim of entitlement". The first of these explains how other consumers perform similar behavior (Hinduja, 2007), the latter is characterized by self appropriation of a windfall (McGregor, 2008). Joosten (2022) matched both neutralizations to one illegitimate complainer type, the greedy customer. However, the use of neutralizations is not said to be mutually exclusive (Dootson et al., 2017; Dootson et al, 2018; Joosten, 2022), which indicates that greedy customers could make use of other neutralizations than the ones that were mentioned. The categorization of Joosten (2022) was based on survey results. In order to verify his results it will be empirically tested whether the claim of normalcy and claim of entitlement neutralizations are actually used by greedy customers. Hence, the third hypothesis will be as follows;

H3: Greedy customers rely more on the "claim of normalcy" and "claim of entitlement" neutralizations, than they rely on other neutralizations when complaining illegitimately.

Table 1. Neutralizations used by Joosten (2022)

Neutralization	*Explanation*
Appeal to higher loyalties	"*The degree to which an individual states that he didn't do it for himself, but on principle, or for others*" (p. 30)
Claim of entitlement	"*The extent to which an individual justifies his own illegitimate complaining behavior by perceiving that he has the right to claim something - because he deserves a windfall*" (p. 30)

Claim of normalcy	"*The degree to which an individual justifies illegitimate complaining behavior by saying that everybody engages in such behavior once in a while*" (p. 30)
Claim of relative acceptability	"*The extent to which an individual minimizes his guilt by comparing themselves to others who even perform more questionable behavior*" (p. 31)
Condemning the condemners	"*The degree to which an individual thinks that the company is also not always honest towards their customer*" (p. 31)
Defense of necessity	"*The degree to which an individual feels that his behavior was necessary, and therefore not wrong in the abstract*" (p. 31)
Denial of injury	"*The degree to which an individual thinks his behavior will not cause serious damage to the company*" (p. 31)
Denial of negative intent	"*The extent to which an individual diminishes guilt by believing that it was not his/her intention to cause harm*" (p. 32)
Denial of responsibility	"*The extent to which an individual puts the blame on others than oneself*" (p. 32)
Denial of victim	"*The degree to which an individual perceives that the firm deserves what they get*" (p. 32)
Justification by postponement	"*The extent to which an individual reduces guilt by not thinking about the consequences of bad behavior*" (p. 32)
Metaphor of the ledger	"*The degree to which an individual minimizes his illegitimate complaining behavior, by saying that all of his good behaviors performed in the past make up for this one time the behavior is aberrant*" (p. 32)

2.6 Mediating role of cognitive dissonance

It has now been established that customers experience cognitive dissonance when complaining illegitimately. The level of cognitive dissonance they experience varies and so does the use of neutralizations for distinctive illegitimate complainer types. Greedy customers in particular are hypothesized to rely mostly on two neutralizations. Dootson et al. (2018) state that the effectiveness of neutralization techniques can be affected by the use of deterrence tactics, such as the ones introduced in this paper - a high probability of getting caught and a severe punishment. By exposing illegitimate complainers to such deterrence tactics, their deviance threshold is shifted (Dootson et al., 2017; 2018). This results in reintroduction of cognitive dissonance, which was previously lost by the use of the neutralizations. Dootson et al. (2018) add that sanctions such as a high probability of getting

caught and a severe punishment are particularly effective against the denial of punishment neutralization technique. This neutralization is not directly linked to the greedy customer type. However, neutralizations are not mutually exclusive. Hence, it will be investigated whether the level of cognitive dissonance that customer experience will be higher, once these customers are exposed to the proposed deterrence tactics. The matching hypotheses are as follow:

H4: Consumers that are threatened with a high probability of getting caught will experience more cognitive dissonance than consumers that are not threatened with this probability of getting caught when complaining illegitimately.

H5: Consumers that are threatened with a severe punishment will experience more cognitive dissonance than consumers that are not threatened with this punishment when complaining illegitimately.

Festinger (1962) was the one that put forward the theory of cognitive dissonance. He also hypothesized that people could get rid of cognitive dissonance in two ways. One of which is by reducing the perceived level of cognitive dissonance. This is actually what is happening when customers make use of neutralization techniques. Using these techniques makes it so that these individuals can still engage in deviant behavior while they do not experience cognitive dissonance (Dootson et al., 2017; Dootson et al., 2018). The second way of getting rid of inner disharmony is by avoiding a situation that would lead to higher levels of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). Cognitive dissonance is something that individuals experience internally and is also something that individuals take into account when considering the benefit and cost trade-off by Becker (1968). In this trade-off the increased level of cognitive dissonance adds to the cost side. Hence, individuals are more likely to estimate the costs of engagement in deviant behavior to be higher than the benefits. Restraining oneself from engagement in this behavior would get one out of a situation that would result in the experience of cognitive dissonance. In the context of illegitimate complaints this would mean that customers keep away from engagement in such behavior. Hence, the hypothesized effect is as follows:

H6: Customers that experience a high level of cognitive dissonance will show a lower intention to complain illegitimately than consumers that experience a lower level of cognitive dissonance.

2.7 Conceptual framework

The aforementioned hypotheses lead to the formation of the following conceptual model (Figure 1). The model shows a direct relationship between the deterrence tactics and the intention to complain illegitimately, following the utility-based model. Besides, it can be observed that cognitive dissonance is expected to (partially) mediate the effectiveness of the deterrence tactics on the intention to complain illegitimately. The neutralization techniques are not hypothesized to have a direct effect on the other variables. Hence, a dotted line is used to indicate that there is a connection between these variables.

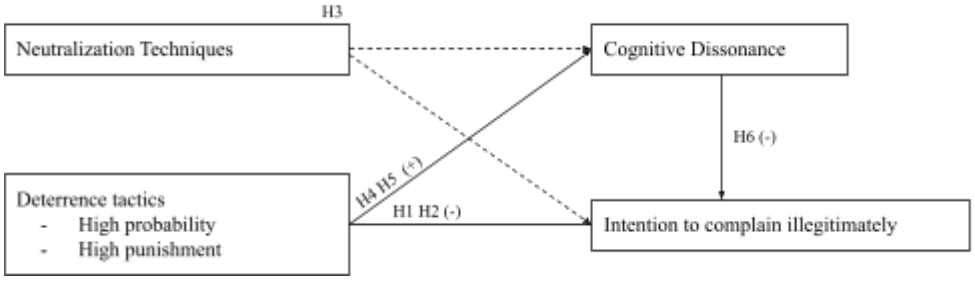

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

2.8 Chapter summary

Chapter two of this thesis focused mainly on the theory behind illegitimate complaining. First, the term is conceptualized. Then, it is explained how customers justify their illegitimate behavior by means of specific neutralization techniques. These neutralization techniques were then linked to four distinctive illegitimate complainer types. The greedy customer was found to be most problematic for the firm, which is why this customer type will be targeted in the remainder of this paper. Lastly, seven hypotheses have been formed. Chapter three will elaborate on the method that will be used to investigate these hypotheses.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

Whether the previously hypothesized deterrence tactics actually have an influence on the intention to complain illegitimately and whether this relationship is mediated by cognitive dissonance, was tested by means of a quantitative online scenario-based experiment. This study is aimed at identification of causality. Hence the decision for an experiment could be justified, since experiments enable such identification (Charness, Gneezy & Kuhn, 2012; Kim & Jang, 2014). The experiment was carried out online. In an online context, it is expected that participants will more openly express their actual intentions. This is different from prior research in the field of deviant consumer behavior. Most studies in this field have performed offline experiments. However, the context in those studies was rather different as they focused on deviant behavior in general, whereas this study focuses on illegitimate complaining in particular (Mazar & Ariely, 2008; Gino et al., 2009; Zhong et al. 2010; Gamliel & Peer, 2013). In addition, this online experiment was scenario-based. The most important reason for choosing a scenario-based experiment rather than a normal experiment was that participants might not be willing to honestly talk about their engagement in illegitimate complaining behavior, as it is a rather sensitive topic (Lee & Renzetti, 1990). By placing these participants in a scenario, they were expected to more openly express their opinion regarding the issue. Scenario-based experiments have been validated in prior studies (Bateson & Hui, 1992) and Smith & Bolton (1998) give three reasons for the use of scenario-based experiments. First, they mention that scenario-based experiments are rather time-saving and cheap to execute. Second, scenario-based experiments avoid undesirable response biases. Lastly, scenario-based experiments can yield greater variation in responses.

Scenario-based experiments cannot measure actual behavior. Nevertheless, they are found to be a good predictor of how participants would behave in the real-world (Weyrich et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant as this study aims to reduce illegitimate complaining intentions. A scenario was composed that put the participants in the shoes of a greedy customer. After participants had read this scenario they were shown a message from the firm where the complaint was lodged. This message was not the same for all participants and this is where a differentiation was made between the three experimental groups. One group was threatened with a high probability of getting caught, one group with a severe punishment and one group got a message that did not include either of the deterrence tactics. Participants were only exposed to one of the messages, making this a between-subjects design, which has also been used for other studies in the field of deviant behavior (Gamliel & Peer, 2013).

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3.2 Sample

For the online scenario-based experiment, convenience sampling was used. This, since quite a large number of respondents had to be collected and convenience sampling allows for easy collection of these respondents. The experiment was conducted in Dutch, which means that participation was limited for Dutch speaking participants only. Besides, participants were preferred to be 18 years or older. This, since these participants are able to buy most products themselves, whereas younger consumers are limited in their consumption.

Hair et al. (2018) advise selection of at least 100 respondents in order to obtain enough statistical power to acquire significant results. However, an attempt was being made to collect 50 respondents per experimental condition, since this would increase the statistical power of the experiment. This adds up to a desired sample of 150 respondents. Respondents were collected together with two other Master students. These students investigated similar effects on the intention to complain illegitimately, only for other deterrence tactics. This implies that the same control group would suffice for all three studies and that less respondents had to be collected in total.

Convenience sampling is non-random, therefore, it does not foster external validity of the experiment (Sedgwick, 2013). The respondents were randomly assigned to one of the three scenarios, which increases the external validity.

3.3 Procedure

Every person that participated in the experiment was exposed to the same scenario. In this scenario, respondents were placed in the shoes of a greedy customer that intends to complain illegitimately. The scenario read as follows;

"Imagine, you are in the following situation. You haven't had a holiday in 2 years, but now that traveling abroad is again possible, you plan to rent a car and drive across Spain. While you discuss your travel plans with friends they tell you that they rented a car last year from a company in Barcelona to travel across Spain for two weeks. They tell you that on one occasion - while they were parked near a gas station - the engine of the car failed to start. They found a driver, however, of another car rental company who was knowledgeable about car engines and was willing to help. He re-fastened the battery terminals with a wrench and the engine started again. Your friends also tell you that - after their trip - they complained to the rental agency and received a partial refund of the rental costs - no questions asked. You look for information about that rental agency on review websites on the internet (like

Tripadvisor.com) and you find many reviews suggesting that this rental agency is indeed very lenient with customer complaints.

While in Spain, you decide to rent a car with the same rental company in Barcelona and - like your friends - try to get a (partial) refund of your rental costs. You completely make up the complaint. You plan to tell them tomorrow - when you return the car - that the engine refused to start several times during the trip and you yourself had to fix it. Then you would ask for a partial refund."

After respondents read the scenario, they were asked to answer some questions. After these questions were answered, they would be exposed to one of the three messages. The manipulation of the experiment is that participants got to see a different message. First, the control group was exposed to a message that did not include any deterrence tactic. This message looked as follows; (1)

"Right before you file your complaint with the rental company, you see the following message. Dear customer, do not forget to leave behind the rental car's keys and insurance papers in the dashboard compartment. Without those things we cannot lend out the car to the next customer. Thank you!"

A second group of participants was exposed to a message that contains the first deterrence tactic, a high probability of getting caught. Prior studies in the field of deviant behavior attempted to deter deviant behavior by mentioning the specific odds of getting caught (Gamliel & Peer, 2013; Thielmann & Hilbig, 2018). This is less useful in the case of illegitimate complaints, as customers are aware that firms are not able to distinguish all illegitimate complaints. However, firms could threaten customers with a high probability of getting caught without mentioning the specific odds. By doing so, a reduction in the intention to complain illegitimately is expected. The message that these participants were exposed to looked as follows; (2)

"Right before you file your complaint with the rental company, you see the following message. Dear customer, keep in mind that all customer complaints will be thoroughly investigated. Our experienced complaints department is specialized in detecting illegitimate complaints and will tackle attempted fraud."

A last group of participants was exposed to another message with the second deterrence tactic, a severe punishment. When it comes to punishments, there are different forms. The experimental study by Thielmann & Hilbig (2018), for instance, focused on monetary sanctions. Such sanctions can be portrayed by getting fined by the police in a real scenario. Other studies have focused more on moral sanctions. Békir et al. (2015) for instance, remincded participants in Tunesia of moral muslim rules, and they found a connection between moral sanctions and a decreased intention to cheat. This is expected to be a little less relevant for the current study, as it does not take place in northern Africa where a larger part of the population is Muslim. Nevertheless, it might be relevant to include more than just monetary sanctions, as a combination of sanction systems is found to be more effective, compared to the use of only one sanction (Noussair & Tucker, 2007). Therefore, a combination of a monetary and a social sanction (community service) was used. The message that these participants were exposed to looked as follows; (3)

"*Right before you file your complaint with the rental company, you see the following message. Dear customer, keep in mind that illegitimate complaints will be reported to the police. Such complaints will be penalized with a €500 fine or community service.*

Once all participants were exposed to either of the three manipulations, they were asked to answer a couple more questions. Which will be elaborated on in the next section of this paper

3.4 Measurement

This study followed a scenario-based experiment, hence it was decided to include a realism check to ensure that the scenario was correctly understood by the participants. This was done on the basis of three questions adapted from Goodwin & Ross (1992) and Maxham (2001) that could be answered on a 5-point likert scale ranging from very likely (score of 5) to not likely at all (score of 1). These questions can be found in question 10 of Appendix A.

In order to assess whether the manipulations were correctly implemented it was decided to include two manipulation checks. These questions were placed at the end of the survey, as they could influence the results of the study. Gamliel & Peer (2013) highlight that it is important that participants are not aware of the aim of the experiment as this might result in an increase of cheating behavior. This, since participants cheat more if they feel like it is expected from them. First, three self-made questions asked participants about the extent to which their complaint was exaggerated, made-up and pre-planned (question 8 of Appendix

A). Participants could answer these questions on a 5-point likert scale ranging from very much so (score of 5) to not at all (score of 1). Next, participants had to answer a multiple choice question about the message that they had received after they read the scenario. This question can be found in question 9 of Appendix A and was included to ensure that participants had paid attention to the message, since this could have an influence on the effectiveness of the deterrence tactics.

In order to test the third hypothesis, participants were asked about which neutralizations would justify illegitimate complaining behavior. The same four neutralizations were shown to all participants and they got to rank order these neutralizations from most applicable (rank 1) to least applicable (rank 4). This question can be found in question 4 of Appendix A and the neutralizations that were used in this question were taken from Joosten (2022). “claim of normalcy” and “claim of entitlement” were included as these are hypothesized to be most applicable to the greedy customer type. Two other neutralizations that were included were selected at random and those were “denial of victim” and “denial of injury”.

In order to test hypotheses 1, 2 and 6 it was necessary to measure participants' intention to complain illegitimately. A measure with three items was composed that asked participants whether their intention to complain illegitimately had changed after exposure to one of the three messages (question 6 of Appendix A). These questions could be answered on a 5-point likert scale ranging from increased (score of 5) to decreased (score of 1). The mean group scores for this measure could later be compared via the analysis.

Testing of hypotheses 4, 5 and 6 required measurements of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance was measured with the help of six items that are derived from Elliot & Devine (1994). Items 1 through 3 measured discomfort, item 4 measured negative self image, and items 5 and 6 measured embarrassment. These items can be found in questions 5 of Appendix A. A similar 5-point likert scale ranging from increased (score of 5) to decreased (score of 1) was used. Similarly to the intention to complain measure, it would later be possible to compare the mean group scores through an analysis.

Lastly, some questions about participants’ demographics were included in the survey. These questions asked participants about their gender, age, and education level. These were included at the very end of the experiment, in question 11, 12 & 13 of Appendix A, as participants were believed to be more likely to drop out of the experiment if demographic questions would be included in the beginning.

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3.5 Data analysis

As the scenario-based experiment mentioned above was quantitative, data could be transported into SPSS. In SPSS the realism and manipulation questions were addressed first. Shortly after, the third hypothesis could be tested with the help of Kendall's W. This statistical method measures whether agreement exists between the rankings of the neutralizations (Grothe & Schmid, 2011). Next, the main analysis could be performed; a multiple linear regression. This analysis was selected, as such process models can discover relationships between several independent variables and one dependent variable. It is also possible to test whether a mediating relationship is present in the model. Results from the multiple linear regression could give an answer to the research question and hypotheses of this study. From these answers, conclusions and recommendations for future research were drawn.

3.6 Research ethics

This research study conformed to the general research ethics. Participation was voluntary and participants were able to opt out of the experiment at any given moment. Besides, findings of the experiment would only be applied to the current study and anonymity of respondents was guaranteed. Illegitimate complaining can be regarded as a sensitive topic. Therefore, it was important that data could be collected without harming participants (Decker et al., 2011). Thankfully, most participants do not feel any distress when participating in research that asks about sensitive topics (Ruzek & Zatzick, 2000; Kassam-Adams & Newman, 2005). Nevertheless, participants could always get in contact via email to address any possible issues.

3.7 Pre-test

Once the scenario-based experiment was finalized it was first sent to 30 participants. These participants were asked to point out any mistakes or unclearities that they came across. Some minor adjustments were made, based on their feedback. The final questionnaire was distributed after.

4. Analysis and Results

4.1 Missing data

Before any analysis could be performed, the collected responses had to be analyzed. A total of 365 participants took part in the online scenario-based experiment. However, only 214 participants filled in all relevant questions for the analysis - up until the demographic questions. This means that 151 participants did not manage to fill in the whole questionnaire correctly. Hair et al. (2018) mention a limit to the percentage of missing data of 10%. In this experiment around 40% of the participants quit early due to unforeseen circumstances, which means that these cases had to be deleted. Next, participants that had been exposed to conditions from either of the other two Master's students had to be filtered out. Eventually, 130 responses remained. These participants had filled in all relevant questions of the analysis - including the demographic questions - and were divided over the conditions reasonably evenly. The control group consisted of 39 participants, the group that was threatened with a high probability of getting caught consisted of 47 participants, and the group that was threatened with a severe punishment consisted of 44 participants. These sample sizes are in line with the minimally required size of 30 responses per experimental group (Hair et al., 2018). Table 2 represents the demographics of the total sample and also of the separate experimental groups.

Table 2. Demographics; gender, age, educational level, and sample size

		Control group	Probability group	Punishment group	Total
Gender	Female	26 (66.7%)	30 (63.8%)	36 (81.8%)	92 (70.8%)
	Male	13 (33.3%)	17 (36.2%)	8 (18.2%)	38 (29.2%)
Age	22 and younger	11 (28.2%)	8 (17%)	12 (27.3%)	31 (23.8%)
	23-27	10 (25.6%)	15 (31.9%)	10 (22.7%)	35 (26.9%)
	28-56	10 (25.6%)	12 (25.5%)	12 (27.3%)	34 (26.2%)
	57 and older	8 (20.5%)	12 (25.5%)	10 (22.7%)	30 (23.1%)
Education level					
	Secondary education	2 (5.1%)	3 (6.4%)	4 (9.1%)	9 (6.9%)
	MBO	4 (10.3%)	9 (19.1%)	6 (13.6%)	19 (14.6%)
	HBO	21 (53.8%)	22 (46.8%)	17 (38.6%)	60 (46.2%)
	WO	12 (30.8%)	13 (27.7%)	17 (38.6%)	42 (32.2%)
Sample size		N = 39	N = 47	N = 44	N = 130

[1]**:**Continuous variable "Age" recoded into categorical variable on the basis of visual bins with equal percentiles of the total sample and with three cutpoints

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4.2 Realism check

After all missing values had been filtered out of the data set, it was checked whether or not participants could imagine being in the proposed scenario. This was executed on the basis of a realism check. Three questions (question 10 of Appendix A) adjusted from prior studies were found to have a Cronbach's alpha of .672. This is a little below the preferred value of .70 but still significant following Hair et al. (2018). Besides, deletion of either of the three items did not result in a higher Cronbach's alpha. An average value for the realism variable was calculated by taking the average scores of the three 5-point Likert scale questions. The mean value of this variable was rather low with a value of 2.28. A lot of people could envision other people acting out of greed. However, the low mean score for the realism measure shows that participants had a somewhat difficult time imagining themselves acting in such a way, which is explainable with such a heavy loaded topic.

4.3 Manipulation check

In order to test whether participants understood that the complaint in the proposed scenario was filed illegitimately, they were asked three questions (question 8 of Appendix A) about the extent to which the complaint was made-up, exaggerated and pre-planned. All three items had been answered on a 5-point likert scale and for each item a mean value was composed. The mean values of all items are depicted in Table 3. All scores were close to a value of 4, indicating that participants understood that the complaint was filed illegitimately.

Table 3. Mean scores for the manipulation check items

Item	*Mean score*
Made-up	4.42
Exaggerated	4.30
Pre-planned	3.96

Next, the manipulation question that asked participants about the message they had received from the firm was taken into consideration (question 9 of Appendix A). This question was asked with the intention to discover whether participants paid attention to the message that they had received in the experiment. 16 participants gave an incorrect answer to this particular question, which means that they indicated that they had received another message from the firm. For instance, some participants that were threatened with a high probability of

getting caught, answered to be threatened with a severe punishment instead. Therefore, these answers are less reliable. However, it was decided not to drop these cases. This, since Aronow, Baron & Pinson (2019) state that deleting such responses may lead to biases, even if they are distributed evenly over the experimental conditions. Besides, reducing the sample size would have an effect on the statistical power of this research (Baguley, 2004).

4.4 Neutralization use

Participants that took part in the scenario-based experiment were meant to be placed in the shoes of a greedy customer. As mentioned before, this illegitimate complainer type can be characterized by prominent use of two neutralizations; "claim of normalcy" and "claim of entitlement" (Joosten, 2022). Participants were asked to rank order four different neutralizations on the basis of applicability to the greedy customer scenario (a ranking of 1 means that a neutralization is most applicable). With the help of Kendall's W it was tested whether agreement exists between the rankings of the participants (Grothe & Schmid, 2011). Results show that there exists consistency in the manner in which participants rate the neutralizations that are most applicable to them ($\chi 2 = 107.70$, $p < .001$). In total, 27.6% ($\eta_p^2 = .276$) of the variability in the ranks has been accounted for by the type of neutralization that has been used. This simultaneously means that 72.4% of the variability in the ranking is not accounted for. This can partially be explained by the fact that greedy customers tend to use "claim of normalcy" and "claim of entitlement" equally as much. Besides, the use of neutralizations is not necessarily mutually exclusive, which means that customers can take several of them into account. This can also be observed in Table 4 where the mean rank of each neutralization is depicted. As can be observed, "claim of normalcy" and "claim of entitlement" are indeed most applicable, supporting hypothesis 3. "Denial of injury" has a rather low mean score too, indicating that it is frequently used. This is remarkable, since this neutralization was not necessarily linked to the greedy customer type by Joosten (2022). A little less remarkable is that "denial of victim" is the least applicable neutralization used by the greedy customers in this experiment, since greedy customers are aware of their own misconduct.

Table 4. Mean scores for the neutralizations used by participants

Neutralization	*Mean score*
Claim of normalcy	1.98
Claim of entitlement	2.02
Denial of injury	2.58
Denial of victim	3.43

4.5 Reliability and factor analysis

For the cognitive dissonance measure (question 5 of Appendix A), prior scales had been used. Hence, only a reliability analysis had to be performed for this measure. A reliability analysis with six items was performed. Cronbach's alpha equaled .955, which indicates that all six items are highly correlated with one another (Hair et al., 2018). Once reliability was established all six items were combined into a single cognitive dissonance measure by taking the average values. The mean value for this measure in the total sample equals 3.63 on a 5-point likert scale. Indicating that cognitive dissonance in the total sample had increased due to exposure to the manipulations.

The measure for intention to complain was specifically designed for this study, hence, an exploratory factor analysis was performed to test whether the three questions (question 6 of Appendix A) did indeed measure the same construct. A principal component analysis (PCA) was performed, as only one factor was expected to come out of the analysis and PCA is most useful in summarizing data in a minimum number of factors (Kim, 2008). First, the assumptions of the factor analysis were checked. Bartlett's test of sphericity showed a significant value of .000 which lies below the alpha level of .05. This indicated that the three measured variables are correlated. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure indicated a value of .749. This is higher than the minimum threshold of .50. This tells that the sample adequately represents the population (Hair et al., 2018). As expected, only one factor was extracted from the factor analysis. For this reason rotation was not possible. The extracted factor showed an eigenvalue of 2.855 and an explained variance of 95.16%. The corresponding factor loadings are depicted in Table 5. All items have a loading that exceeds .70. This indicates that a well-defined significant structure exists between the items and the intention to complain variable (Hair et al., 2018).

Table 5. Factor loadings for the intention to complain measure

Component Matrix	
Item	*Loading*
Confirmed	.986
Assured	.973
Convinced	.967

A reliability analysis on the intention to complain measure with three items, yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .975 for the intention to complain variable. This value lies above a widely used threshold of .70 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011; Hair et al, 2018) and indicates sufficient reliability for the item. No items had to be deleted. The mean value was found to be 2.20 on a 5-point likert scale, indicating that the intention to complain in the total sample had decreased as its value lies below 2.50.

4.6 Assumptions

Before a multiple linear regression could be performed, the assumptions for the analysis had to be met. Hair et al. (2018) state that multivariate analyses require testing of assumptions for the separate variables as well as for the multivariate model. First the assumptions for the separate variables were tested.

The first assumption that had to be tested was whether the dependent variables were normally distributed. This assumption is believed to be most fundamental as normality is required in order to use the t and F statistics (Hair et al., 2018). This was tested by looking at the skewness and kurtosis values of both cognitive dissonance and the intention to complain illegitimately. These descriptives showed acceptable values that lie between -3 and 3 for both variables, as can be observed in Table 6. Hence, normality of the dependent measures had been established.

Table 6. Normality measures for cognitive dissonance and the intention to complain

	Skewness	*Kurtosis*
Cognitive dissonance (CD2)	.504	-.684
Intention to complain (ITC2)	.109	-.810

The second assumption that was tested is the assumption of homogeneity. Here it is tested whether the (co)variances are equal for all experimental groups. The Box's M test was performed and showed that there exists a difference in the (co)variance of the experimental groups ($F = 2.289$, $p = .021$). This highlights that heterogeneity exists in the sample which is usually not preferred. However, when groups have approximately equal sizes it is less harmful (Hair et al., 2018). Dividing the largest group (47) in the sample by the smallest group (39) gives a value of 1.21. This value lies below 1.5, hence, heterogeneity within the sample is less of a problem.

The third assumption that had to be tested was whether there existed a linear relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable. For the deterrence tactics this is the case, as dummy-coded variables that only have a value of 0 and 1 will always show a linear relationship. For cognitive dissonance and the intention to complain illegitimately a scatter plot was created. From the scatter plot (see Figure 2 of Appendix B) a linear relationship can be observed as a straight line is drawn through the data points.

The last assumption mentioned by Hair et al. (2018) is the absence of correlated errors. There is not a single test which detects all forms of dependence in a sample. Nevertheless, steps should be taken in order to increase independence. In this study participants were exposed to three distinctive messages. These messages were randomized, giving each participant an equal chance of exposure to one of the three messages. Moreover, a between-subjects design had been applied, ensuring even more independence within the sampled data.

After the regression model had been estimated, the assumptions of the variate were tested. First the predicted values and the residuals were plotted against each other as can be observed in Figure 3 of Appendix B. The residuals seemed to fall randomly with equal dispersion. No curvilinear pattern was displayed in the plot, which indicates that linearity of the phenomenon exists (Hair et al., 2018).

When the residuals were plotted against the three experimental groups (control, probability and punishment) it could be observed that no clear pattern exists (see Figure 4 of Appendix B). Positive and negative residuals could be observed for all three groups. Besides, most residuals were found to lie around zero for all three groups. This cleared the assumption of independence of the error terms.

Normality of residuals could also be established as the points in the scatter plot follow the predicted line. This could be observed from Figure 5 of Appendix B.

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The only assumption that remained was the constant variance of the error terms. This assumption is most commonly violated (Hair et al.,2018) and was also most questionable in this study. The scatter plot of the residuals and predicted values (see Figure 3 of Appendix B) seemed to display a diamond-shaped pattern. However, the shape is stretched out pretty much. Hence, heteroscedasticity is not strongly present and no remedy was used to overcome it.

4.7 Multiple linear regression

Once all assumptions of the separate variables had been tested the multiple linear regression analyses could be performed. A dummy was created for each of the experimental groups and the control group was used as a reference category. Then the other two dummies were used in the linear regression as independent variables. The intention to complain illegitimately was used as a dependent variable. The model showed an adjusted R square of .063 indicating that 6.3% of the variation in the intention to complain illegitimately was explained by the independent variable. This model was found to be significant and the output of the regression is shown in Table 7. From this table it can be observed that both deterrence tactics have a significant negative effect on the intention to complain illegitimately ($p < .05$). This is in support of hypotheses 1 and 2.

Table 7. Coefficients of the first bivariate regression with intention to complain illegitimately as dependent variable

	B	*Std. Error*	*t*	*Sig*
Constant	2.607	.151	17.313	.000
Probability	-.557	.204	-2.726	.007
Punishment	-.614	.207	-2.971	.004

Next the direct effect of the deterrence tactics on cognitive dissonance was examined by performing a bivariate regression. The adjusted R square indicated a value of .129, which means that 12.9% of the variation in cognitive dissonance was explained by the deterrence tactics. This model was also found to be significant and the output is shown in Table 8. From this output it can be established that both deterrence tactics have significant positive effects on cognitive dissonance ($p < .05$). This supports hypotheses 4 and 5.

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Table 8. Coefficients of the second bivariate regression with cognitive dissonance as dependent variable

	B	*Std. Error*	*t*	*Sig*
Constant	3.129	.120	26.689	.000
Probability	.520	.162	3.217	.002
Punishment	.740	.164	4.501	.001

Lastly, the multiple regression was performed with the intention to complain as a dependent variable and both the deterrence tactics and cognitive dissonance as independent variables. This model had a rather high adjusted r square of .447. This indicates that 44.7% of the variation in the intention to complain illegitimately was accounted for by the model. The model was found to be significant ($p = .000$, $F = 35.690$). The results are displayed in table 9. From this table it can be observed that cognitive dissonance does have a negative significant influence on the intention to complain illegitimately ($p < .05$). This is in line with hypothesis 6. It can also be observed that the effects of both deterrence tactics have been reduced. The effect of a high probability of getting caught has been reduced from -.557 to -.136, this equals to a percentile reduction of 75.6%. For a severe punishment this reduction is even higher, equalling 97.6%. With p-values above .05 ($p = .406$ for a high probability of getting caught and $p = .929$ for a severe punishment) the effects are no longer significant. This indicates that the relationship between the deterrence tactics and the intention to complain illegitimately is fully mediated by cognitive dissonance.

Table 9. Coefficients of the multiple linear regression with intention to complain illegitimately as dependent variable

	B	*Std. Error*	*t*	*Sig*
Constant	5.193	.297	17.457	.000
Probability	-.136	.163	-.833	.406
Punishment	-.015	.171	-.090	.929
Cognitive dissonance	-.810	.086	-9.436	.000

That full mediation has taken place is confirmed with the help of bootstrapping. On the basis of 1000 bootstraps a bias corrected accelerated confidence interval was calculated for the

deterrence tactics as well as for cognitive dissonance. The results of this bootstrap are showcased in Table 10. Besides the overall model, the cognitive dissonance measure is the only variable that does not include the value of 0 in its confidence interval. This validates the prior statement that the relationship between the deterrence tactics and the intention to complain illegitimately, is fully mediated by cognitive dissonance.

Table 10. Bootstrapping results with the intention to complain illegitimately as dependent variable

	B	*Std. Error*	*Sig (2-tailed)*	*95% Confidence interval*	
Constant	5.177	.309	.000	4.476	5.879
Probability	-.120	-.009	.433	-.423	.182
Punishment	.015	-.001	.929	-.323	.354
Cognitive dissonance	-.810	.086	.000	-.980	-.640

Lastly, an extra bivariate analysis was performed with the probability of getting caught dummy as a reference. This allowed for differentiation between the deterrence tactics. The results of this analysis were non-significant with a p-value of .772. This displays that there is no preference for either of the tactics when it comes to the effect they have on the intention to complain illegitimately. With this last finding it can be concluded that all proposed hypotheses are supported.

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5. Conclusion and discussion

5.1 Conclusion

It is evident that complaint policies are necessary and beneficial for firms and customers. Via complaints, customers can voice their dissatisfaction with the firm. Meanwhile, firms can use these complaints to gather feedback about their products and services. Unfortunately, customers take advantage of these policies, on a regular basis, by means of illegitimate complaints. These false complaints bring extra costs to the firm and are becoming a more apparent problem each day. Hence, it is in the interest of firms to come up with tactics, the so-called deterrence tactics, that can reduce illegitimate complaining behavior. In this paper, two deterrence tactics have been introduced; threatening with a high probability of getting caught and with a severe punishment. It was found that both of these tactics have the ability to decrease greedy customers' intention to complain. However, this relationship was found to be fully mediated by cognitive dissonance. The mechanism at work is as follows; the use of deterrence tactics results in a higher level of perceived cognitive dissonance, which in turn reduces the intention to complain illegitimately. With these findings the problem statement of this study is answered and with that, a step is taken in the fight against illegitimate complaints.

5.2 Discussion

In the scenario-based experiment, a situation was created in which participants were placed in the shoes of a greedy customer. A relatively low mean score of 2.28 (5-point likert scale) was obtained for the realism check. This can be due to a couple of reasons. First and foremost it has to be mentioned that some people may never complain illegitimately in their day-to-day lives. For these people it might be more difficult to imagine a greedy customer situation, as such a situation is completely foreign to them. This could explain the low obtained score for the realism check. Besides, not every illegitimate complainer belongs to the greedy customer type. Customers that have complained in the past might have done so because of failures by the firm (type 1), mistreatment by the firm (type 2) or just because a situation arised that allowed for illegitimate complaining (type 4). These customers would potentially not complain in a situation out of pure greed (type 3), which was portrayed in the scenario.

From the manipulation check that was performed next, it could be concluded that participants were aware of the extent to which the complaint was exaggerated, made-up and pre-planned, which can be concluded from the high average mean values for all three items. This means that the manipulations were executed successfully.

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Results show that greedy customers do indeed rely mostly on the "claim of normalcy" and "claim of entitlement" neutralizations. This is in line with hypothesis 3 and the findings of Joosten (2022). Interestingly enough it can be observed that the mean difference between both lies at .04, indicating that overall participants rely equally on both neutralizations and that one is not necessarily preferred over the other.

Significant results for hypothesis 1 and 2 indicate that the inclusion of the deterrence tactics has a negative effect on customers' intention to complain illegitimately. This is an interesting finding, since contradicting findings had been done prior to this study. Gamliel & Peer (2013) for instance, did not measure a reduction in cheating behavior when they threatened participants with a probability of getting caught. This study, however, differs from their study on a few aspects. First, we look at the intention to complain rather than at cheating behavior in general. Second, in their study they mentioned a specific odd of being caught that equaled a 3% chance. This percentage is rather low and is also not realistic to include for illegitimate complaints, since it is pretty hard to specifically track down which complaints are illegitimate and which are honest. Therefore, a more general message was used, that highlights the expertise of the complaints department. Thielmann & Hilbig (2018) used higher odds of getting caught of 16.7% and 50%. Findings of this study are in line with their findings, in the sense that they measured a decrease in the willingness to lie, due to an increase in the probability of getting caught. Customers that complain illegitimately basically lie, hence, Dootson et al. (2017) specifically expected a similar decrease in illegitimate complaining behavior.

However, this study has included cognitive dissonance as an extra variable in the conceptual model and significant results regarding this variable have been found. With these findings hypotheses 4, 5 and 6 could all be supported. With the help of a multiple linear regression and a bootstrap it could be concluded that the relationship between the deterrence tactics and the intention to complain illegitimately is fully mediated by the cognitive dissonance variable. Consequently, customers that are threatened with the deterrence tactics experience more cognitive dissonance, as was proposed in hypotheses 4 and 5. This increased level of cognitive dissonance then has a negative effect on the intention to complain illegitimately, as stated in hypothesis 6. These findings highlight the importance of customers' internal reward systems in the context of illegitimate complaints.

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5.3 Theoretical implications

This study builds on the small amount of research in the area of illegitimate customer complaints, as was advised by Huang & Miao (2013). It extends research by Joosten (2022) by means of focusing on one of his proposed illegitimate complainer types, the greedy customer. Two deterrence tactics have been investigated and it was researched whether they influence greedy customers' intention to complain illegitimately, directly or through cognitive dissonance. This is the first study that empirically investigates this relationship upon recommendation of Dootson et al. (2017; 2018). In line with prior studies (Akers & Sellers, 2004; Mazar et al., 2008, Thielmann & Hilbig, 2018) it was found that illegitimate complaining intentions can be reduced with the use of deterrence tactics. Dootson et al. (2018) proposed that cognitive dissonance plays a role in this process. This has been confirmed in the current study, as cognitive dissonance was found to fully mediate the relationship between the deterrence tactics and the intention to complain illegitimately. The significant results gathered will put an end to the discussion about the effectiveness of the deterrence tactics, at least in the illegitimate complaining context.

5.4 Managerial implications

Results of this study can guide managers in the design of their customer complaint policies. Customers often take advantage of current policies, by complaining illegitimately, at the cost of the firm. This article offers two tactics that managers can apply in order to reduce the amount of illegitimate complaints. These tactics are particularly efficient in reducing greedy complaining intentions. So firms that deal with a large number of these complaints should adopt either of the two deterrence tactics. Depending on the industry that a firm is in, managers can decide which tactic suits their firm best. In some industries it might be harder to track down illegitimate complaints, as there might not be as much physical proof to back up complaints. Think for instance of firms in the service industry. When guests in a restaurant complain about their food for instance, it might be more difficult to assess the validity of the complaint as when a complaint is filed regarding a broken product. Customers can reason this themselves and this might diminish the effectiveness of threatening with a high probability of getting caught. Threatening with severe punishments if caught might, therefore be more suitable. On the other hand, there are also managers that operate in industries where fake complaints are more easily detectable. They would benefit more by threatening customers with a high probability of getting caught. Since none of the two strategies was found to be

more efficient than the other, it is up to management to determine the most applicable tactic. A message that combines both tactics might also be preferred by some.

5.5 Limitations and suggestions for future research

An important limitation of the current study is that the experiment was scenario-based and that actual behavior was not measured. This means that all sorts of customers were included in the sample, including customers that do not belong to the greedy customer type. This partly explains the low score obtained for the realism check in which it was measured whether participants could imagine themselves in the scenario. This low score makes the results of this study a little less reliable. Future studies should measure the effectiveness of deterrence tactics on customers that actually belong to the greedy customer type. First it should be assessed whether customers complain illegitimately. Next it can be checked whether these customers use the "claim of normalcy" or the "claim of entitlement" neutralizations. If they do, they can be included in the sample.

More than 40% of the participants in the sample did not completely fill in the questionnaire. Such a high number is remarkable and there might be some underlying reasons that could explain this high percentage. For the cognitive dissonance measure, participants had to answer six questions. The reliability of this measure lies above .90. Tavakol & Dennick (2011) explain that a maximum should be placed at a Cronbach's alpha of .90. Measures that exceed this threshold potentially consist of too many items. Exclusion of some questions is advised in such cases, as participants might feel like answering the same question over and over again. With fewer questions participants are expected to be less likely to drop out of the experiment.

This study was limited to the extent that it was only measured how deterrence tactics directly influence cognitive dissonance and the intention to complain illegitimately. It was not measured whether implementation of these tactics has other influences. Using punishments as a deterrence tactic has an added benefit of making other customers think twice about engaging in similar deviant behavior (Bandura, 1977), since they, themselves, do not want to be punished. Besides, the goodhearted customers that only complain legitimately are not considered in the current study. When these customers are threatened with a message that warns them that they might get caught, they might feel distrusted by the firm. Distrust is found to have negative effects on economic transactions (Bigley & Pearce, 1998), and can have a detrimental impact on a business' success (McKnight, Choudhury & Kacmar, 2002). Therefore, firms should avoid that honest customers experience a feeling of distrust. Future

studies should investigate whether deterrence tactics have an impact on the customer-firm relationship.

Findings of the current study enable much more research in the area of illegitimate customer complaints. In future studies the other illegitimate complainer types by Joosten (2022) should be addressed. The last type that he proposes, the opportunistic complainer, is particularly relevant as complaining by this type we found to be almost as bad as complaining by greedy customers. The same two deterrence tactics that have been applied in this study, could also yield significant results for the other illegitimate complainers. Besides, Dootson et al. (2018) combine neutralization use with specific deterrence tactics. They advise future studies to empirically test these tactics. One of these tactics is to humanize the organization. By doing so, the "denial of victim" neutralization is targeted. This neutralization is mostly used by the immoral firm type (type 1) and could reduce illegitimate complaining behavior by this specific group. It could also be tested whether a combination of deterrence tactics will yield significant results

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Appendix A. Questions of the scenario-based experiment

Q1. Hoe zou u zich voelen als u om korting zou vragen naar aanleiding van een verzonnen klacht?

Helemaal oneens Neutraal Helemaal eens

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Ik zou me ongemakkelijk voelen als ik om een terugbetaling zou vragen					
2. Ik zou me bezwaard voelen als ik om terugbetaling zou vragen					
3. Ik zou er moeite mee hebben om geld terug te vragen					
4. Ik zou me ergeren aan mezelf als ik om terugbetaling zou vragen					
5. Ik zou me schamen als ik om een terugbetaling zou vragen					
6. Ik zou me generen als ik geld terug zou vragen					

Q2. Hoe zeker bent u ervan dat u de claim door gaat zetten en daadwerkelijk indient?

Helemaal oneens Neutraal Helemaal eens

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Ik ga deze klacht zeker indienen					
2. Ik ben ervan overtuigd dat ik deze klacht ga indienen					
3. Het staat vast voor mij dat ik deze klacht ga indienen					

Q3. Hoe hoog is het kortingspercentage dat u gaat vragen van de autoverhuurder? Geef een percentage van de auto huurkosten door een getal in te vullen.

Q4. Veel mensen proberen hun gedrag voor zichzelf en anderen te rechtvaardigen. Welke rechtvaardiging is het meest op u van toepassing in het eerder genoemde scenario waarin u een klacht gaat indienen?

Zet de rechtvaardigingen in volgorde van belang, waarbij 1 = meest van toepassing en 4 = minst van toepassing. (Iedereen overdrijft wel eens - Het autoverhuurbedrijf ondervindt geen

schade door mijn claim - Het autoverhuurbedrijf verdient het door wat ze gedaan hebben - Ik mag ook wel eens een meevallertje hebben)

Q5.Hoe zou u zich na het zien van de extra boodschap (ten opzichte van hiervoor) voelen als u om korting zou vragen naar aanleiding van een verzonnen klacht?

	Veel minder		Gelijk		Veel meer
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Ik zou me ongemakkelijk voelen als ik om een terugbetaling zou vragen					
2. Ik zou me bezwaard voelen als ik om terugbetaling zou vragen					
3. Ik zou er moeite mee hebben om geld terug te vragen					
4. Ik zou me ergeren aan mezelf als ik om terugbetaling zou vragen					
5. Ik zou me schamen als ik om een terugbetaling zou vragen					
6. Ik zou me generen als ik geld terug zou vragen					

Q6. Hoe zeker bent u er na het zien van de extra boodschap (ten opzichte van hiervoor) van dat u de claim door gaat zetten en daadwerkelijk indient?

	Veel minder		Gelijk		Veel meer
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Ik ga deze klacht zeker indienen					
2. Ik ben ervan overtuigd dat ik deze klacht ga indienen					
3. Het staat vast voor mij dat ik deze klacht ga indienen					

Q7. Hoe hoog is het kortingspercentage dat u gaat vragen van de autoverhuurder? Geef een percentage van de auto huurkosten door een getal in te vullen.

.

Q8. Vragen over het beschreven scenario

Helemaal niet Neutraal Helemaal wel

	1	2	3	4	5
1. In hoeverre is uw klacht overdreven					
2. In hoeverre heeft u de klacht verzonnen?					
3. In hoeverre was de klacht van tevoren gepland?					

Q9. Weet u nog waarover het bericht ging dat u las voordat u een claim indiende?

- Het bericht vroeg de klant om sleutels en papieren in het dashboard achter te laten.
- Het bericht wees erop dat de kans om betrapt te worden groot is omdat alle klachten grondig onderzocht worden.
- Het bericht wees erop dat klanten die betrapt worden op onterecht klagen een hoge straf krijgen
- Het bericht wees erop dat klachten alleen kunnen worden ingediend via de telefoon
- Het bericht wees erop dat klachten alleen kunnen worden ingediend via email

Q10. Hoe realistisch was dit scenario? Kunt u zich voorstellen dat u zich in zo'n situatie bevindt?

Zeer onwaarschijnlijk Neutraal Zeer waarschijnlijk

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Ik denk dat mij iets soortgelijks kan gebeuren					
2.					
3. In hoeverre was de klacht van tevoren gepland?					

Q11. Wat is uw leeftijd?

Q12. Wat is uw geslacht?

Q13. Wat is uw hoogst genoten opleiding? (met of zonder diploma)

Appendix B. Plots of the multiple linear regression

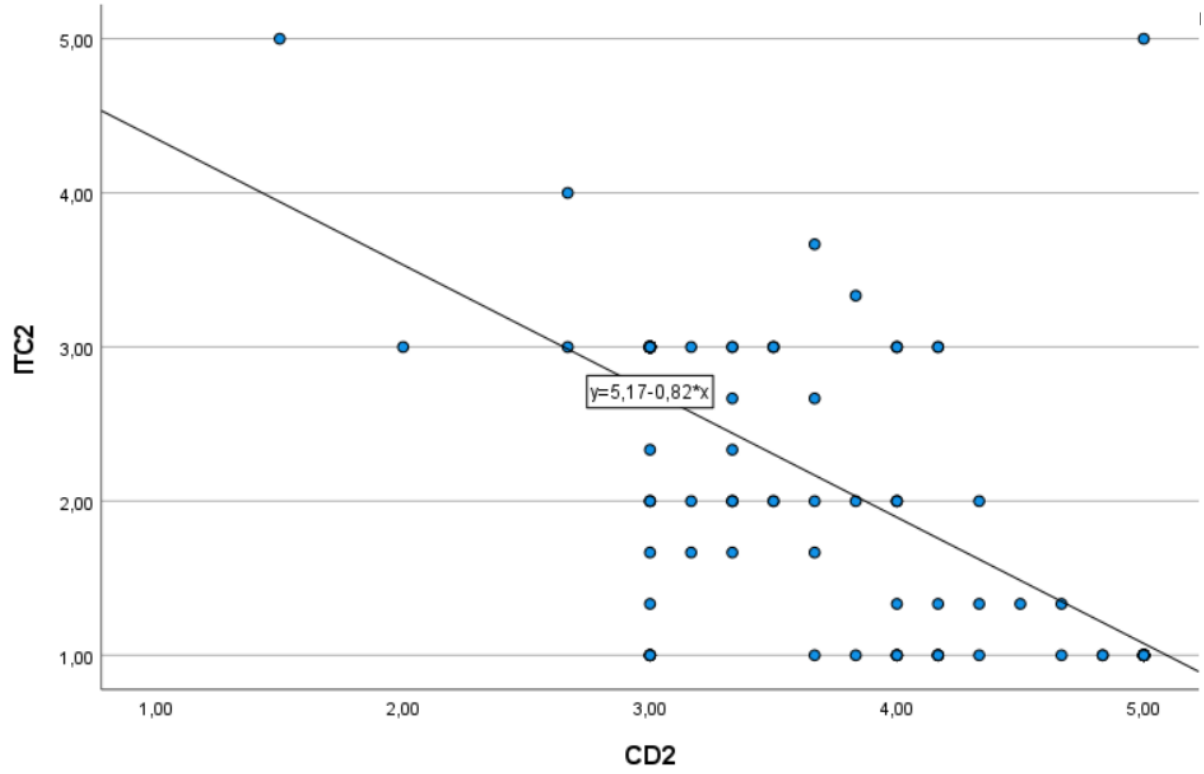

Figure 2. Scatter plot of cognitive dissonance and the intention to complain illegitimately

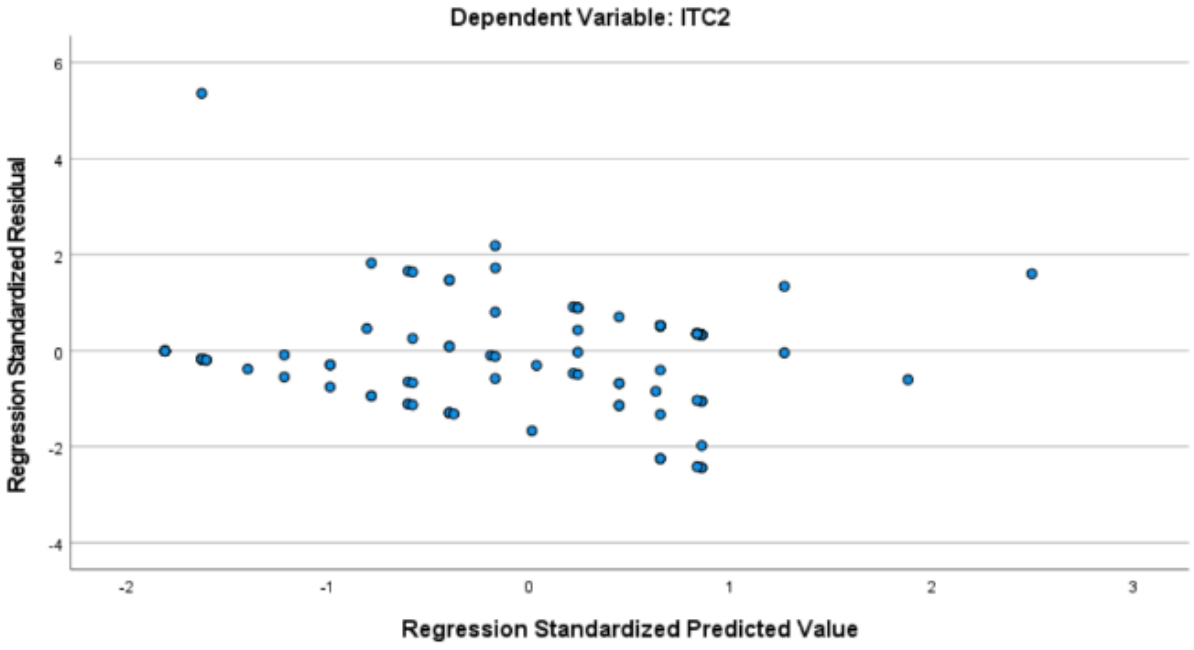

Figure 3. Scatter plot of the predicted values and the residuals

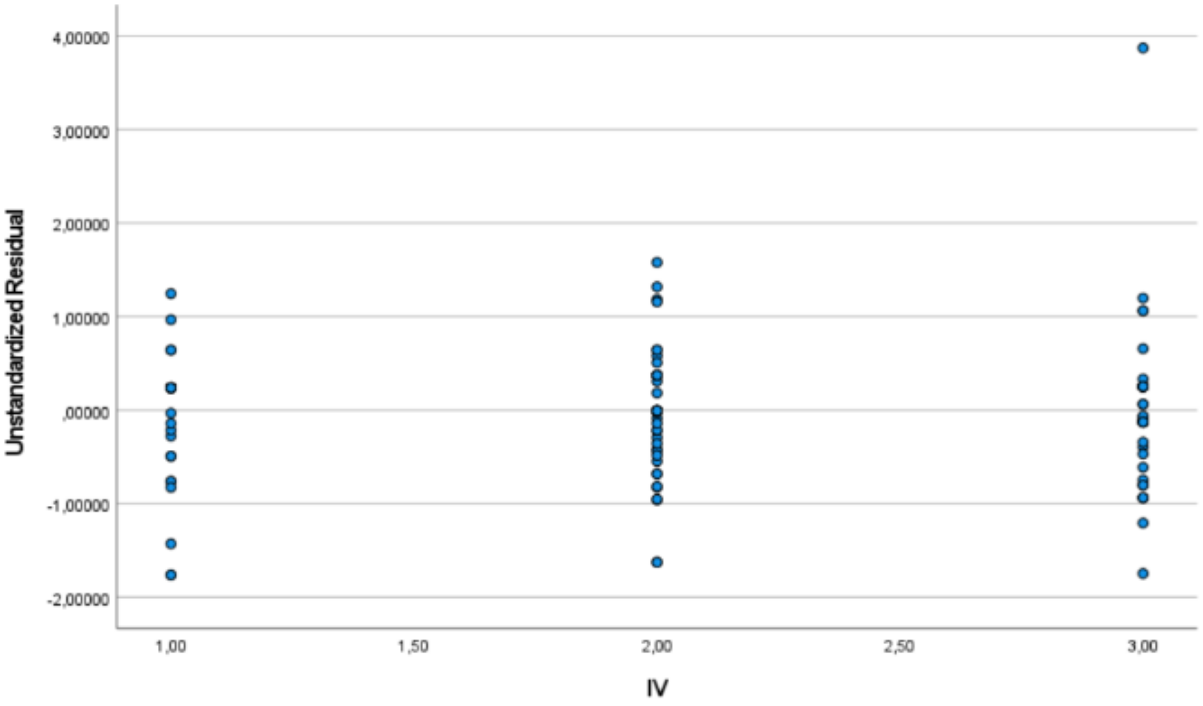

Figure 4. Residuals plotted against the three experimental groups

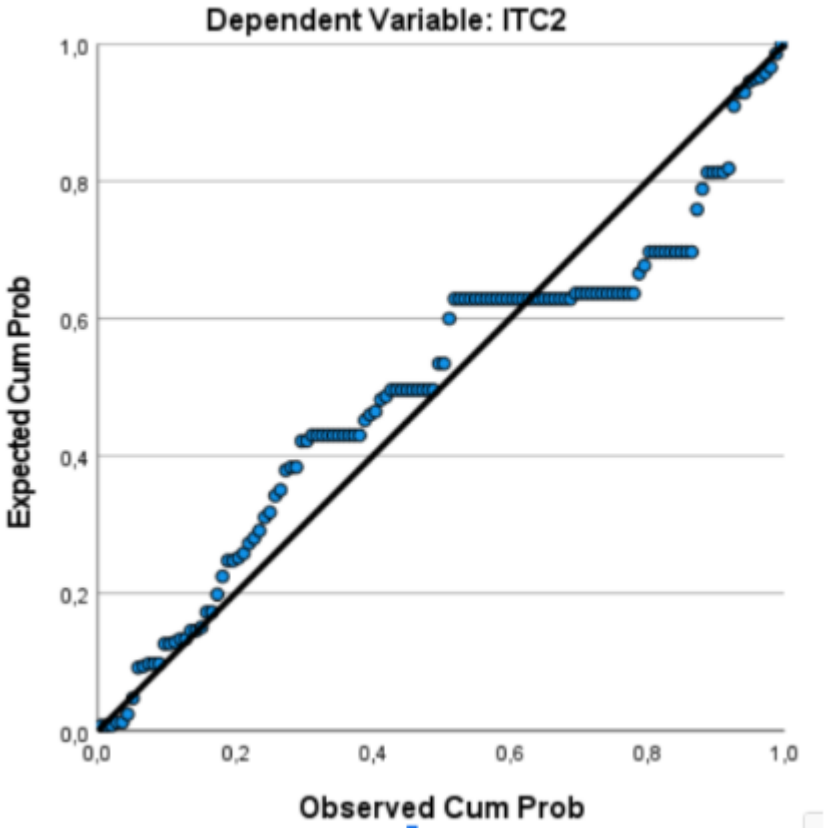

Figure 5. Plot of the regression standardized residuals