

**MORAL DISENGAGEMENT OF HOTEL GUEST NEGATIVE WOM:  
Moral Identity Centrality, Moral Awareness, and Anger**

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**Abstract**

Adopting a moral identity perspective, this research examines the moral judgment of hotel guests' vindictive negative word of mouth (WOM) toward hotel service failure. This research finds that people with higher moral identity centrality are less prone to moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM, especially when their moral awareness of the behavior is higher. However, even these individuals may engage in moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM, if they have higher anger toward the service failure, and when their moral awareness is lower. These findings highlight the significant roles of moral identity centrality, moral awareness, and moral emotion for people's moral judgment. Practically, this research suggests hotels may manage customer vindictive negative WOM by raising moral awareness and appeasing anger.

**Key words:** Moral identity; service failure; moral disengagement; moral awareness; anger; consumer revenge

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“Anger is a wind which blows out the lamp of the mind.”  
Robert Green Ingersoll

“Morality is based on a consideration of circumstances - not principles.”  
Anonymous

### INTRODUCTION

It is arguable that service failure and consequently displeased customers have always been endemic to the hospitality and tourism sectors (Lewis & McCann; 2004; Sánchez-García & Currás-Pérez, 2011). Customer revenge is an increasingly prevalent type of consumer misbehavior in response to hotel service failure (Gelbrich, 2010; Sánchez-García & Currás-Pérez, 2011), and is a growing research issue in tourism and service management (e.g., Bougie, Pieters & Zeelenberg 2003; Gelbrich, 2010; Grégoire, Tripp & Legaux, 2009). In particular, the opportunity for disgruntled tourists to communicate their displeasure to more than a handful of friends and family has been facilitated by recent increases in the availability and usage of the internet and social media (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011; Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008). The potential damage that this type of communication can cause to a service provider’s reputation and business viability (de Matos and Rossi 2008; Harris & Dumas, 2009; Reynolds & Harris, 2009) underscores the need to determine what factors contribute to this type of consumer behaviour and which management practices will minimise its occurrence (Gelbrich, 2010; Grégoire et al., 2009).

Negative word of mouth (WOM) – communicating negative information or experiences about goods or services – is particularly prevalent in the hospitality sector (Gelbrich, 2010; Kim, Kim & Kim, 2009; Sánchez-García & Currás-Pérez, 2011). Negative WOM may take two forms based on the intended motives. Vindictive negative WOM refers to unfavorable communication with the purpose of denigrating a company. It contrasts with support-seeking negative WOM that

involves seeking empathy and understanding (Grégoire, Laufer & Tripp, 2010). In general, vindictive negative WOM has a more explicit motive of retaliating to service provision than support-seeking negative WOM and hence involves stronger moral implications (Grégoire et al., 2010).

Prior research has examined the impacts of a number of factors, such as attribution (Hess, Ganesan & Klein, 2007; Laczniak, DeCarlo & Ramaswami, 2001), perceived justice (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011; Grégoire and Fisher, 2008; Kim et al., 2009), social comparison (Bonifield & Cole, 2007), consumer power (Grégoire et al., 2010), and emotional reactions (Gelbrich, 2010; Sánchez-García & Currás-Pérez, 2011), on consumer reactions toward service failure. Although such insights are valuable, prior research often fails to acknowledge individual differences of consumer morality.

Consequently, the current study aims to understand the moral identity mechanisms of moral judgment (specifically, moral disengagement) of consumer negative WOM. As noted earlier, vindictive negative WOM can be seen as a morally relevant issue that involves moral judgment. One important psychological mechanism that promotes unethical decision making is moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). Moral disengagement refers to the cognitive deactivation of moral self-regulatory processes in decision making. In such circumstances, unethical decisions can be made without individuals feeling apparent guilt or self-censure, which increases the likelihood that unethical behaviors will be undertaken (Bandura, 1999). One way people may justify their unethical behaviors is to compare them selectively with the behaviors of others and conclude that their own behaviors are relatively harmless and appropriate (Bandura, 1999). For example, a hotel guest may justify their vindictive negative WOM by comparing the consequence of this behavior with the harm that has been caused by the hotel's service failure.

Moral identity constitutes an important identity-related psychological mechanism that

inhibits moral disengagement (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim & Felps, 2009; Detert, Treviño & Sweitzer, 2008). It refers to a self-schema organized around a set of moral trait associations, including caring, compassion, fairness, friendliness, generosity, helpfulness, hardworking, honesty, and kindness (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Moral identity centrality refers to the extent to which moral identity is pivotal to a person's self-concept or becomes relevant when processing social information that is pertinent to moral behaviors. As such, moral identity has a regulating function on both moral judgment and behaviors (Reed, Aquino & Levy, 2007; Shao, Aquino & Freeman, 2008; Winterich, Mittal & Ross, 2009).

Although moral disengagement has been studied as a cognitive mechanism to justify specific unethical behaviors (e.g., Aquino, Reed, Thau & Freeman, 2007), no prior research has examined the role of moral identity centrality in the moral disengagement of specific unethical behaviors. In addition, prior research suggests that the regulatory function of moral identity centrality may be conditional on both cognitive and emotional factors. From a social cognitive perspective, the regulatory power of moral identity centrality depends on both the behaviors in question (Reed et al., 2007) and the situational factors (Aquino et al., 2007). Moreover, recent research suggests that emotions play a significant role (especially moderating role) on the regulatory function of moral self-concept (e.g., moral identity), as well as the process of moral cognition (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Huebner, Dwyer & Hauser, 2009; Greene & Haidt, 2002).

Through two studies, this research examines three conditions influencing the effect of moral identity on the moral disengagement of negative WOM: the motive of the negative WOM, moral awareness of the negative WOM, and the emotional reaction (i.e. degree of anger) toward the service failure. On the cognitive side, this research tests whether people with higher moral identity centrality are less prone to moral disengagement of negative WOM with an unethical motive; and for people with higher moral awareness of the negative WOM. Further, on the

emotional side, this research examines whether and how anger negatively relates to disengagement and interacts with moral identity centrality in predicting moral disengagement.

#### MORAL IDENTITY CENTRALITY AND MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

##### *Moral disengagement*

Moral disengagement is a cognitive mechanism leading to immoral conduct (Bandura, 2002; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1986). Past research has found that people with higher moral disengagement propensity are more likely to be aggressive (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli & Regalia, 2001), be in favor of violence against animals (Vollum, Buffington-Vollum & Longmire, 2004), and support military force (Aquino et al., 2007; McAlister, Bandura & Owen, 2006). Moreover, moral disengagement has been related to organizational corruption (Moore, 2008), workplace harassment (Claybourn, 2011), and violations of civic duties (Caprara et al., 2009). As such, moral disengagement can also serve as a means to justify dishonest acts (Shu, Gino & Bazerman, 2011). However, to date, little research has examined more morally-ambiguous behaviors that are difficult to be classified as either purely evil or purely good (such as consumer negative WOM).

Advantageous comparison refers to comparing selectively the focal behavior of interest with another behavior (mainly the cause of that behavior) so that the behavior can be justified and viewed as righteous (Bandura, 1999). As such, advantageous comparison is a particularly salient form of moral disengagement in the case of consumer revenge (Aquino et al., 2007). Bandura et al. (1996, p. 365) argue that “by exploiting *advantageous comparison* with more reprehensible activities, injurious conduct can be rendered benign or made to appear to be of little consequence”. As such, Bandura (1999) argues that advantageous comparison is one of the most powerful psychological mechanisms of disengaging moral control. As service failure can cause significant inconvenience to consumers (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008), advantageous comparison can provide a

cognitive mechanism for consumers to rationalize their revenge behaviors.

### *Moral identity centrality*

Given that moral disengagement involves the deactivation of moral self-regulation, its immediate natural antecedent may be the centrality of moral identity to an individual's overall self-concept (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Monin, Pizarro & Beer, 2007). Moral identity centrality refers to the degree to which the moral traits are central to self-conception (Aquino & Reed, 2002) and has been found to be a primary antecedent of ethical and unethical behaviors (Aquino et al., 2007; McFerran, Aquino & Duffy, 2010).

The effect of moral identity centrality on moral disengagement accords with the general identity-based motivation model (Shavitt, Torelli & Wong, 2009; Oyserman, 2009). This model synthesizes the various findings of a range of earlier consumer research that examines how consumer identities affect behaviors. First, a salient identity activates relevant meanings and elicits mindsets that are conducive to meeting identity goals (Shavitt et al., 2009). Second, a mindset that is activated by a certain identity acts as the filter of information processing and encourages identity-congruent behavior. Third, the key psychological mechanism of identity-based motivation is self-consistency; and people are motivated to preserve and stabilize their self-view by guiding their thoughts and behaviors with their self-conceptions (Swann, Griffin, Predmore & Gaines, 1987).

Regarding the general regulatory function of moral identity centrality on morally relevant behaviors (Hardy & Carlo, 2005); a wide range of evidence has emerged. For example, people with higher moral identity centrality are more likely to engage in social volunteering (Aquino & Reed, 2002), charitable donation (Aquino et al., 2009), organizational citizenship behaviors (McFerran et al., 2010), and general ethical behavior (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007). They are also

less likely to cheat (Reynolds and Ceranic 2007) and lie (Aquino et al., 2009). People with stronger moral identity centrality tend to hold stronger moral principles and are therefore less prone to disengage themselves in evaluating morally relevant acts (Shu et al., 2011). Prior research has demonstrated empirically that moral identity centrality negatively relates to moral disengagement. For example, Detert et al. (2008) find a negative correlation between moral identity centrality and general moral disengagement tendency. However, no prior research has examined the relationship between moral identity centrality and moral disengagement of *specific* morally-ambiguous behaviors, such as consumers' negative actions towards a firm after service failure. The present research intends to address this issue.

#### STUDY 1: MOTIVES, MORAL AWARENESS, AND MORAL IDENTITY CENTRALITY

##### *Motives of negative WOM*

While moral identity centrality generally negatively relates to general moral disengagement tendency (Detert et al., 2008), it does not necessarily negatively relate to moral disengagement of all specific negative responses towards service failure. This is because deleterious acts by consumers do not *necessarily* involve immorality. For example, punishing actors of transgressions may be seen as a desirable act in the name of justice (Skarlicki & Rupp, 2010; Skarlicki, Van Jaarsveld & Walker, 2008). Prior research has supported the view that motives of behaviors can directly influence the evaluation of those (intentional) behaviors (Malle, 1999).

Potential motives for negative WOM after service failure could be vengeful in the form of vindictive negative WOM or non-vengeful in the form of support-seeking negative WOM (Gelbrich, 2010). This classification is consistent with Reeder, Kumar and Hesson-McInnis' (2002) observation that people respond more aggressively to provocation with a motive of revenge. Accordingly, negative WOM can be distinguished in terms of motives: vindictive

(retaliatory) negative WOM versus support-seeking negative WOM (see Gelbrich, 2010; Grégoire and Fisher, 2008; Grégoire et al., 2010; Grégoire et al., 2009). This is consistent with the dispositional attribution perspective and the social cognitive model suggesting that moral identity centrality tends to relate negatively to moral disengagement when the focal behavior of interest has a vindictive motive.

Although the above discussion supports the view that the motive of negative WOM itself may influence moral disengagement, it also has implications for how moral identity centrality relates to moral disengagement of negative WOM with different motives. People use motives as informational input for evaluating others' behaviors and attribute responsibilities (Reeder et al., 2002; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli & Bozok, 2006). From a social cognitive perspective of moral judgment (Aquino et al., 2009; Bandura et al., 2001), people possess multiple identities with a *working self-concept* which tends to motivate thinking and action (Markus, 1977; Markus & Kunda, 1986). Whether an identity becomes the working self-concept depends on two strongly related conditions: accessibility and diagnosticity (Cohen & Reed, 2006; Feldman & Lynch, 1988; Lynch et al., 1988). Accessibility refers to the retrieval of certain information from consumer memory, while diagnosticity refers to the relevance of certain information for the evaluation task (Feldman & Lynch, 1988; Lynch et al., 1988). Situational strengthening of the accessibility and diagnosticity of identity-related information activates the regulatory power of the focal identity (Skitka, 2003). The presence of an explicit retaliatory motive (as compared to a support-seeking motive) for negative WOM clearly makes the focal issue more morally relevant, which activates moral identity centrality to take effect. As vindictive negative WOM is explicitly driven by revenge, whilst support-seeking negative WOM is not, we expect that moral identity becomes more salient information for people to evaluate vindictive negative WOM and has a negative relationship with moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM only. In addition, because



the support-seeking motive, as compared to the vindictive motive, of negative WOM itself is associated with lower levels of moral relevance, moral disengagement may become absent for support-seeking negative WOM. Therefore moral identity centrality becomes an irrelevant predictor of support-seeking negative WOM. Thus,

- H1.** Individuals with higher moral identity centrality will exhibit less moral disengagement than individuals with lower moral identity centrality for vindictive negative WOM.

*Moral awareness of vindictive negative WOM*

Vindictive negative WOM does not necessarily have the same moral implications for all consumers. We expect that the extent to which moral identity reduces the moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM depends on the level of moral awareness of the behaviors. Moral awareness refers to a “person’s determination that a situation contains moral content and legitimately can be considered from a moral point of view” (Reynolds, 2006, p. 233). Thus, we expect that moral awareness enhances the negative relationship of moral identity centrality with moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM.

According to the salience-diagnostics perspective of information processing, a piece of information is more likely to be processed for judgment when the information is relevant to the evaluation task (Ahluwalia & Gurhan-Canli, 2000). Moral identity, as a self-schema organized around a set of moral trait associations, is a potential piece of information for moral judgment (Aquino & Reed, 2002), such as evaluating consumer vindictive negative WOM. People with higher moral awareness are more likely to retrieve and rely on the information stored in their moral identity to evaluate vindictive negative WOM. This is because moral identity-related information is not only more accessible but also more diagnostic for the moral judgment task for people with higher awareness of the moral relevance of the behavior.

In general, moral identity-related knowledge is more accessible and diagnostic for people

with higher moral identity centrality (Aquino & Reed, 2002). When people are more aware of the moral relevance of the situation, the moral identity-related knowledge becomes even more diagnostic (Aquino et al., 2009). Hence, moral identity centrality tends to have a stronger negative relationship with moral disengagement for consumers with higher moral awareness of vindictive negative WOM. Given that moral identity centrality does not relate to support-seeking negative WOM and that moral relevance of support-seeking negative WOM would be low, we build the subsequent formal hypotheses for vindictive negative WOM only.

**H2:** Individuals with higher moral identity centrality will exhibit less moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM than individuals with lower moral identity centrality, especially when they also have higher moral awareness of the vindictive negative WOM.

### *Sample and procedure*

128 adults (with 125 usable responses) were recruited by street-incepts in public places (Mean<sub>age</sub> = 34.26, sd =12.83; 65 females). Vignette development follows the conventional approach of presenting scenarios of consumer experience of service failure (e.g., Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007). This approach has also been adopted by prior moral disengagement studies (e.g., Aquino et al., 2007; Shu et al., 2011). We chose hotel noise as a service failure that disrupts hotel guests' sleep (e.g., Gelbrich, 2010). Sleep has been argued as one of the most important aspect in the hospitality sector (Valtonen & Veijola, 2011). We referred to Gelbrich (2010) and Grégoire et al. (2009) for the wording of vindictive vs. support-seeking negative WOM. Vindictive vs. support-seeking negative WOM was distinguished through between-subject manipulation.

As the perception of the hotel's responsibility for causing the noise may affect moral disengagement (Paharia, Kassam, Greene & Bazeman, 2009), we controlled for the effect of hotel

responsibility. To obtain high variance of hotel responsibility, we created two versions of the vignette, based on whether the noise is caused by the hotel directly or indirectly. Accordingly, we created four vignettes based on hotel responsibility and the motive of negative WOM. Sample sizes for all cells are: vindictive negative WOM with direct responsibility (n=32), vindictive negative WOM with indirect responsibility (n=31), support-seeking negative WOM with direct responsibility (n=31), support-seeking negative WOM with indirect responsibility (n=31)

The hypothetical scenarios describe a story of a job seeker who stayed in a hotel the night before an important job interview the following morning. Due to hotel noise during the night, the job seeker did not sleep well, which subsequently affected his interview performance. Thereafter the job seeker commits negative WOM against the hotel for the purpose of either vengeance toward the hotel or seeking emotional support. For manipulation of vindictive negative WOM, we wrote “in order to get revenge on the hotel, John exaggerated the poor quality of the hotel and ‘badmouthed’ the hotel to his friends and even posted very negative (and somewhat exaggerated) reviews about the hotel at various hotel review websites.” For support-seeking negative WOM, we wrote “...in order to feel better, get some comfort, reduce negative feeling, and share his/her feelings with others, John talked to other people about the negative experience.” For manipulation of hotel responsibility, we wrote “...because of this constant and loud traffic noise” as indirect agency and “...due to constant loud noises, which John later found out was caused by the hotel kitchen preparing for breakfast.”

### *Measures*

All variables were measured by seven-point Likert-type scales (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Both seven-point and five-point Likert scales are very popular in survey research (Colman, Morris & Preston, 1997; Dawes, 2008). We used seven-point Likert scales as they, unlike five-

point scales, increase the reliability of the measures due to a positive correlation between the number of scale points and measure reliability (Churchill & Peter, 1984). In addition, all measures have been used and validated with seven-point Likert scales in the literature, including moral awareness (Reynolds, 2006), moral disengagement (Aquino et al., 2007), and moral identity centrality (Aquino et al., 2009). Using the same scale point helps the results from different studies to be more comparable. We tested the internal reliability of our measures with Cronbach's alpha scores. Like all previous studies using these measures, their scores are above the .70 threshold (Nunnally, 1978).

Moral identity centrality was measured, in consistence with prior literature (Aquino et al., 2009), via an established five-item moral identity internalization subscale of the self-importance of moral identity scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002) ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Studies have consistently found that moral identity centrality is a stronger indicator of self-importance of moral identity and a stronger predictor for moral judgement than moral identity symbolization (Aquino et al., 2009; Detert et al., 2008; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum & Kuenzi, 2012; Reed et al., 2007). Indeed, recent studies, including those of the original authors, have chosen to use only the moral identity internalization subscale to represent moral identity centrality (e.g., Aquino et al., 2007; Aquino et al., 2009; Winterich et al., 2009; Detert et al., 2008). This research followed this practice and equates moral identity centrality with moral identity internalization. The scale was measured prior to the presentation of the scenario and followed by some ostensibly unrelated questions. Other variables were measured after the scenario.

Moral awareness ( $r = .54$ ,  $\alpha = .70$ ) was measured by two items borrowed from Reynolds (2006): 'There are very important ethical and moral aspects to this situation'; 'This matter clearly does not involve ethics or moral issues' (reverse coding). Moral disengagement was measured by using the four items of advantageous comparison mechanism of moral disengagement (Aquino et

al., 2007) ( $\alpha = .79$ ). We followed the practice of Aquino et al. (2007) by adapting the items to fit the specific context. The four items are: “Compared to what the hotel has done to John, John’s negative word of mouth was very mild”; “John’s negative word of mouth is no big deal, considering what the hotel has done to John”; “John’s negative word of mouth was not that extreme”; “John’s negative word of mouth was not serious”.

### *Manipulation check*

We used two items to measure the perceived responsibility of causing the hotel noise to check the significant difference in perceived hotel responsibility across the two versions of vignettes based on the cause of the hotel noise (directly caused by the hotel or indirectly). The two items are ( $r = .79$ ;  $\alpha = .83$ ): “Do you agree that the Hotel should be directly responsible for causing the noise?”; “Do you agree that the Hotel should be blamed for the noise?” We also used the hotel responsibility measure as a control variable for subsequent analyses. The result shows that perceived hotel responsibility is significantly higher under the vignette which says that the hotel noise is caused directly by the hotel ( $M_{\text{indirect}} = 3.3$  vs.  $M_{\text{direct}} = 5.2$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We used the measure of perceived hotel responsibility as a control variable for later regression analyses.

Moral identity centrality does not differ significantly across groups:  $F = .03$ ,  $p = .87$  between direct and indirect hotel responsibility;  $F = 1.67$ ,  $p = .20$  between vindictive negative WOM and support-seeking negative WOM; and  $F = .18$ ,  $p = .67$  for their interaction. Moral awareness is not influenced by moral identity centrality for both vindictive negative WOM and support-seeking negative WOM groups ( $R^2 = .00$ ,  $p = .90$ ; and  $R^2 = .01$ ,  $p = .56$  respectively). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics.

**Insert Table 1 about here.**

### *Results*

The covariance equality check between direct and indirect hotel responsibility groups (with hotel responsibility, moral identity centrality, moral awareness, and moral disengagement) produces an insignificant result: Box's  $M = 3.57$  ( $df = 10, F = .33, p = .97$ ) for vindictive negative WOM and Box's  $M = 9.46$  ( $df = 10, F = .88, p = .56$ ) for support-seeking negative WOM. No significant interaction was found between direct vs. indirect hotel responsibility groups and all the independent variables and their interactions. Therefore we collapsed the two groups. The dataset was also checked against Mahalanobis-Distance critical value (Fidell & Tabachnick, 2003). Table 2 presents the regression results for Study 1 for both vindictive negative WOM sample ( $n=63$ ) and support-seeking negative WOM sample ( $n=62$ ). We standardized the continuous independent variables before generating the interaction term (Aiken and West 1991).

**Insert Table 2 about here.**

First, Study 1 supports H1 in that moral identity centrality negatively relates to moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM ( $\beta = -.47, p < .001$ ). H2 predicts that moral identity has a stronger negative relationship with moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM when perceived moral awareness is high. H2 is supported for vindictive negative WOM ( $\beta = -.26, p < .05$ ), as shown by Figure 1. We plotted this graph based on standard procedure (one standard deviation above or below the mean as higher or lower score for the moderator) and tested the significance of the simple slope (Aiken & West, 1991). When moral awareness is lower, moral disengagement is 3.1 vs. 2.8 when moral identity centrality is lower vs. higher. When moral awareness is higher, moral disengagement is 3.9 vs. 2.6 when moral identity centrality is lower vs. higher. Thus, moral identity centrality has a stronger negative relationship with moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM when moral awareness is higher (which is one standard deviation above the mean) than when moral awareness is lower (one standard deviation above the mean). As expected, moral identity centrality is not significantly related to moral

disengagement of support-seeking negative WOM.

**Insert Figure 1 about here.**

### *Discussion for Study 1*

Study 1 supports the view that the relationship between moral identity centrality and negative WOM depends on the motives of the negative WOM. In addition, Study 1 finds moral identity centrality has a stronger negative relationship with moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM for people who are more aware of the moral issue involved with the behavior. This finding supports the view that both objective moral relevance of the behavior (i.e. motives) and subjective moral awareness of the moral issue are important conditions for people's moral identity centrality to regulate moral judgment (moral disengagement in this case) of morally-ambiguous behavior. This result offers important additional evidence on the recently proposed social-cognitive model of moral identity-based motivation (Aquino et al., 2009) in the context of consumer negative WOM due to service failure. While Study 1 supports our predictions, the social-cognitive model largely fails to address the potentially important role of emotions. Research on moral psychology suggests that emotions may exert both direct and moderating effects on moral judgment (Greene, 2009). Study 2 aims to integrate moral emotions into the social-cognitive model.

## STUDY 2: ANGER AND MORAL IDENTITY CENTRALITY

### *Anger toward service failure*

Emotions have been paid increasing attention in research on moral judgment (e.g., Bartels, 2008; Haidt, 2001; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley & Cohen, 2001; Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek, 2007). Indeed, the impact of emotion is particularly salient in the context of service

failure in the hotel sector (Gelbrich, 2010; Sánchez-García & Currás-Pérez, 2011; Menon & Dubé, 2004; Smith & Bolton, 2002) and tourist experiences in general (del Bosque & Martín, 2008).

Anger is a common and morally relevant emotional reaction to a service failure (e.g., Bonifield & Cole, 2007; 2008; Gelbrich, 2010; Gino & Schweitzer, 2008; Sánchez-García & Currás-Pérez, 2011). Indeed, a certain emotion is more likely to influence judgment when the emotional feeling is salient, representative for the target, and relevant to the evaluation task (Adaval, 2001; Greifeneder, Bless & Pham, 2011; Pham, 1998). Anger represents such an emotion in the context of service failure.

The process of moral disengagement requires processing relevant information; information that could be both cognitive and emotional (Greene, 2009). Emotion may act as information input (i.e. affect heuristic) for judgment and evaluation (Pham & Avnet, 2009). Indeed, Haidt (2001) notes that moral judgment may be a result of quick and automatic evaluations that may directly stem from immediate emotional reactions, instead of moral reasoning. Greene et al. (2001) provide evidence from functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies that the emotional engagement with moral dilemma influences moral judgment.

Anger serves “moral functions in that it can motivate ‘third-party’ bystanders to take action in order to remedy observed injustices” (Tangney et al., 2007, p. 361). In this sense, anger may motivate ‘third-parties’ to rationalize the ‘victim’s’ revenge behavior (i.e., vindictive negative WOM) to the company causing the service failure. Anger has the attribute of ‘approach’ motivation (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Harmon-Jones, Schmeichel, Mennitt & Harmon-Jones, 2011). For example, it has been found that anger reduces risk estimation of actions and enhances risk taking behaviors (Fessler, Pillsworth & Flamson, 2004; Han, Lerner & Keltner, 2007; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small & Fischhoff, 2003; Lerner & Keltner, 2001), which suggests that anger supports vengeful actions, such as vindictive negative WOM. Thus, prior research



indicates that anger predicts vindictive negative WOM (e.g., Gelbrich, 2010).

So far, we have established that anger may directly relate to moral disengagement. However, emotions tend to directly shape (acting as information) judgment and decision making when cognitive resource is low; and the direct effect of emotions may disappear when cognitive resource is high (Forgas, 1995; Forgas & George, 2001; Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999; 2002). The presence of moral awareness indicates that cognitive resources are available to support the moral evaluation of a situation (Reynolds, 2006). Therefore when moral awareness is low, anger is more likely to act as an affect heuristic to directly shape moral disengagement of the act of vindictive negative WOM. Thus we expect that the relationship between anger and moral disengagement exists only when moral awareness is lower.

**H3.** Individuals with higher anger toward service failure will exhibit more moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM than individuals with lower anger, only for those with lower moral awareness of the vindictive negative WOM.

Emotion may also influence people's reasoning process (Pham, 2007), such as the evaluative weight given to certain information (Adaval, 2001). Prior studies support the view that emotions may moderate the relationship between certain moral information and moral judgment by activating the salience of that moral information (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Baumeister et al., 2007; Huebner et al., 2009; Malhotra & Kuo, 2009). As noted by Algoe and Haidt (2009, p. 22), "...emotions may not lead to immediate behavior ...; rather, they change people's cognitions and motivations in ways that make it easier for them to build relationships and skills, especially if such opportunities present themselves in the environment".

There has been evidence suggesting that negative emotion tends to inhibit information accessibility and/or invalidate accessible cognitions (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007). For example,

Tiedens and Linton (2001) finds that anger would result in simple and shallow heuristic processing, which suggests that anger may inhibit the regulatory function of moral identity centrality on moral disengagement. This is because anger may negatively affect how people retrieve and rely on the information stored in moral identity to evaluate vindictive negative WOM. Indeed, a recent study finds that anger toward the events of Hurricane Katrina facilitated heuristic evaluation processes (i.e. less reliance on cognitive knowledge) in blame attribution (Malhotra & Kuo, 2009). Gino and Schweitzer (2008) find that people who feel anger are less likely to be receptive to advice. Since moral identity centrality is a type of cognitive knowledge (self-schema) that is relevant to moral judgment (Aquino & Reed, 2002), people with higher level of anger toward the service failure are less likely to retrieve and activate this cognitive knowledge associated with moral identity centrality to inform their moral judgment of vindictive negative WOM. Thus,

- H4.** Individuals with higher moral identity centrality will exhibit less moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM than individuals with lower moral identity centrality, especially when they also have lower anger toward service failure.

We have argued that anger tends to shape moral judgment when moral awareness is lower, whilst moral identity centrality tends to have a stronger negative relationship with moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM when moral awareness is higher. We have also argued that anger and moral identity centrality are two competing forces for moral judgment, in that anger may undermine the regulatory role of moral identity centrality on moral judgment. Thus, we expect that the attenuating effect of anger on the effect of moral identity centrality will exist only when moral awareness is lower. As noted earlier, anger may result in heuristic processing and may undermine the effect of moral identity centrality (Tiedens & Linton, 2001).

Since moral awareness itself is not a main factor on moral judgment, it is not of a focal concern to examine the main or conditional effect of moral awareness on moral disengagement. Instead, it is theoretically sounder and more parsimonious to treat moral awareness as a moderator of how anger and moral identity centrality interact to influence moral disengagement. Thus, moral awareness may enhance the negative relationship between moral identity centrality and moral disengagement (H2), while moral awareness also reduces the salience of anger for moral disengagement (H3). Hence when moral awareness is higher, anger is less likely to be a salient factor on not only moral disengagement, but also on anger's moderating role in the relationship between moral identity centrality and moral disengagement. Accordingly, we expect the negative effect of moral identity centrality on moral disengagement will be stronger, regardless of anger, when moral awareness is higher. Conversely, when moral awareness is lower (meaning a lack of cognitive knowledge of the moral relevance of the issue); people are likely to rely on their emotions to intervene the process of moral judgment. Moreover, given that one way how anger intervenes the process of moral judgment is (according to H4) through reducing the effect of moral identity centrality on moral disengagement, we expect that anger will moderate the negative relationship between moral identity centrality and moral disengagement, mainly when moral awareness is lower. Thus,

**H5.** When moral awareness of the vindictive negative WOM is lower, individuals with higher moral identity centrality will exhibit less moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM than individuals with lower moral identity centrality, only when they also have lower anger toward service failure. When moral awareness of the vindictive negative WOM is higher, individuals with higher moral identity centrality will exhibit less moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM than individuals with lower moral identity centrality regardless of anger.

### *Sample and procedure*

The convenience sample consists of 203 (198 usable) students recruited on campus ( $M_{\text{age}} = 20.73$ ,  $sd = 2.74$ ; 101 females). Procedure and scenarios are similar to Study 1. Although Study 1 supports that moral identity centrality only affect moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM, in Study 2, we still added a sample for the support-seeking negative WOM to further confirm this effect. We obtained 97 for vindictive negative WOM and 101 for support-seeking negative WOM. Sample sizes for all cells are: vindictive negative WOM with direct responsibility ( $n=45$ ), vindictive negative WOM with indirect responsibility ( $n=52$ ), support-seeking negative WOM with direct responsibility ( $n=51$ ), support-seeking negative WOM with indirect responsibility ( $n=50$ ).

### *Measures and manipulation check*

Anger toward the hotel was measured by two items on seven-point Likert scales borrowed from Gelbrich (2010): angry and mad ( $r = .85$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ ). We asked the participants to imagine that they were the hotel guest and to what extent they would feel angry (mad) with the hotel. The mean of anger and standard deviation in our study for vindictive negative WOM group is 4.3 (1-7 point scale) and 1.1 respectively, and for support-seeking negative WOM is 4.1 and 1.3 respectively. This pattern is similar to other measures in the study, suggesting that anger was simulated successfully (Aquino et al. 2007; Gelbrich, 2010). All other measures were the same as those in Study 2. All variables' internal reliabilities are adequate. As expected, perceived hotel responsibility is significantly higher under the vignette which says that the hotel noise is caused directly by the hotel ( $M_{\text{indirect}} = 3.2$  vs.  $M_{\text{direct}} = 4.7$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Like Study 1, we used the measure of perceived hotel responsibility as a control variable for later regression analyses. There is no significant difference in moral identity centrality across groups:  $F = 2.37$ ,  $p = .13$  between direct

and indirect hotel responsibility;  $F = .28, p = .60$  between vindictive negative WOM and support-seeking negative WOM; and  $F = .14, p = .71$  for their interaction. Anger is not influenced by moral identity centrality for both vindictive negative WOM and support-seeking negative WOM groups ( $R^2 = .00, p = .95$ ; and  $R^2 = .01, p = .34$  respectively). Moral awareness is also not influenced by moral identity centrality for both groups ( $R^2 = .00, p = .69$ ; and  $R^2 = .00, p = .63$  respectively). The dataset was also checked against Mahalanobis-Distance critical value (Fidell & Tabachnick, 2003). Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of Study 2.

**Insert Table 3 about here.**

### *Results of Study 2*

Covariance equality checks between direct and indirect hotel responsibility groups show no significant difference in covariance of focal variables (that is, with hotel responsibility, MI centrality, moral awareness, moral disengagement, and anger): Box's  $M = 17.62$  ( $df = 15, F = 1.11, p = .34$ ) for vindictive negative WOM and Box's  $M = 20.04$  ( $df = 15, F = 1.26, p = .22$ ) for support-seeking negative WOM. No significant interaction was found between direct vs. indirect hotel responsibility groups and all the independent variables and their interactions. Therefore we collapsed the two groups. Table 4 presents the results of the regression models.

**Insert Table 4 about here.**

Step 1 tests the main effects. It shows that moral identity centrality has a significant negative relationship with moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM ( $n = 96; \beta = -.24, p < .05$ ), which supports H1. Step 2 tests the two-way interactive effects involving moral identity centrality, moral awareness, and anger. The results show that moral awareness significantly enhances the negative relationship between moral identity centrality and moral disengagement ( $\beta = -.43, p < .001$ ). When moral awareness is lower, moral disengagement is 3.6 vs. 4.0 when moral identity centrality is lower vs. higher. When moral awareness is higher, moral disengagement is

4.4 vs. 3.1 when moral identity centrality is lower vs. higher. Clearly, Figure 2 shows that when moral awareness is higher (lower), moral identity centrality has a stronger (weaker) negative relationship with moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM, which supports H2.

**Insert Figure 2 about here.**

H3 predicts that moral awareness moderates the effect of anger on moral disengagement in that anger positively relates to moral disengagement when moral awareness is lower. Although the direct main effect of anger is not significant, the interaction between anger and moral awareness is significant ( $\beta = -.24, p < .05$ ). We plotted the pattern of this effect in Figure 3, which indicates that anger positively relates to moral disengagement ( $\beta = .36, p < .01$ ) when moral awareness is lower (with moral disengagement being 3.4 vs. 4.1 when anger is lower vs. higher), but not so when moral awareness is median or high. Thus H3 is supported.

**Insert Figure 3 about here.**

H4 argues that anger negatively moderates the relationship between moral identity centrality and moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM. Step 2 shows that the interaction between anger and moral identity centrality is significant ( $\beta = .17, p < .05$ ), suggesting that, in general, anger reduces the negative relationship between moral identity centrality and moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM. When anger is lower, the coefficient of the effect of moral identity centrality is  $-.41$ , with moral disengagement being 4.0 vs. 3.2 when moral identity centrality is lower vs. higher. When moral awareness is higher, the coefficient of the effect of moral identity centrality is  $-.07$ , with moral disengagement being 4.0 vs. 3.8 when moral identity centrality is lower vs. higher. Figure 4 shows that when anger is higher (lower), the negative relationship between moral identity centrality and vindictive negative WOM is weaker (stronger). Thus H4 is supported.

**Insert Figure 4 about here.**

H5 contends that anger negatively moderates the negative relationship between moral identity centrality and moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM, especially when moral awareness is lower. Step 3 adds the three-way interaction among them ( $\beta = -.43, p < .01$ ). Figure 5 illustrates this three-interaction effect by plotting the relationship between moral identity centrality and vindictive negative WOM when both anger and moral awareness are higher and lower (one standard deviation above and below the mean) (Dawson & Richter, 2006). When moral awareness is lower (slope 2 and 4), anger significantly negatively moderates the negative relationship between moral identity centrality and moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM ( $p < .001$  between slope 2 and 4). Specifically, under a lower moral awareness condition, when anger is lower, moral disengagement is 4.2 vs. 3.2 when moral identity centrality is lower vs. higher; while when anger is higher, moral disengagement is 3.2 vs. 4.9 when moral identity centrality is lower vs. higher. Thus moral identity centrality has a negative relationship with moral disengagement only when anger is lower for those whose moral awareness is lower. However, when moral awareness is higher (slope 1 and 3), anger does not moderate the effect of moral identity centrality ( $p = .19$  between slope 1 and 3), meaning that moral identity centrality has a negative relationship with moral disengagement regardless of anger. Specifically, under a higher moral awareness condition, whether anger is lower or higher, moral disengagement is higher (lower) when moral identity centrality is lower (higher), with moral disengagement being 4.1 vs. 3.6 (when anger is lower) or 4.2 vs. 3.2 (when anger is higher). Thus H5 is supported. None of these effects is significant for support-seeking negative WOM.

**Insert Figure 5 about here.**

#### *Discussion of Study 2*

Study 2 successfully replicated the results of Study 1 regarding hypotheses 1 and 2. In this regard, people with higher moral identity centrality are less likely to be morally disengaged from

vindictive negative WOM, especially for people with higher moral awareness of the behavior. Moreover, Study 2 further finds that anger (moral emotion) plays an important role in people's moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM in that anger not only has a positive relationship with moral disengagement when moral awareness is lower, but also attenuates the negative relationship between moral identity centrality and moral disengagement especially when moral awareness is lower. Study 2 contributes to this research by extending Study 1 through incorporating the role of moral emotion (anger) in the relationship between moral identity centrality and moral disengagement.

## CONCLUSION

### *Theoretical implications*

This research finds that moral identity centrality has a negative relationship with the moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM; and that this relationship tends to be stronger for people with higher moral awareness of the vindictive negative WOM and less anger towards the service failure. This research advances the literature on consumer responses to service failure, particularly in the hospitality and tourism sector. Prior research on this area mainly focuses on the cognitive processes, such as attribution (Hess et al., 2007), perceived justice (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008), and consumer power (Grégoire et al., 2010). Although the factors relating to emotional reactions have received increasing attention (e.g. Gelbrich, 2010), previous studies primarily focus on the independent effects of cognitive and emotional factors. This study provides a novel integral angle of examining this issue through incorporating moral identity (a social identity angle), moral cognition, and moral emotion (i.e., anger). In this respect, the research extends beyond the traditional focus on the separate effects of cognition and emotion to revealing the identity-based motivation mechanisms and how identity-based motivation is conditional on cognitive factors (e.g. motives and issue awareness) and emotional factors (e.g. anger).



With regard to the moral identity literature, this research not only supports the negative relationship of moral identity centrality with moral disengagement, but also extends our knowledge on moral identity's regulatory function of moral cognition by identifying its cognitive and affective conditions. First, this research offers an additional test, in a different context, of the recent social-cognitive model of moral identity motivation (Aquino et al., 2009) by identifying motives of moral acts as a key condition of moral identity regulation. Moral identity regulates behaviors only when the behaviors involve morally relevant motives. Thus, moral identity regulates behaviors of those who have higher moral awareness of the issue involved. Second, this research provides very important initial evidence on the moderating role of emotions on moral identity's regulatory function. We find that anger (as a negative emotion) toward the cause of unethical behaviors (i.e., consumer revenge stemming from service failure) not only has a main positive relationship on moral disengagement, but also undermines the effect of moral identity centrality on moral disengagement. Further, both effects exist particularly when moral awareness is low. In this respect, this study represents a pioneering effort on integrating moral cognition, moral emotions, and moral identity in explaining moral judgment.

In terms of the moral disengagement literature, this research offers important initial evidence on an identity-based perspective of moral disengagement of specific morally-relevant behaviors. Although recent research has found that moral identity centrality (in general) negatively relates to a broad moral disengagement tendency (Detert et al., 2008), little evidence exists on whether (and how) moral identity centrality regulates moral disengagement of specific behaviors. The findings of the current study offer strong evidence on an identity-based motivation of moral disengagement.

Finally, for the consumer emotions literature, we provide important evidence on the prior (but poorly evidenced) claim that emotions do not necessarily only have main effects on thinking

and doing, but also may activate or deactivate other morally relevant information input (e.g., moral identity centrality) (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Baumeister et al., 2007; Huebner et al., 2009). This research provides empirical evidence supporting that emotions act not only as important information *input* for moral judgment, but also as affective *context* for information processing. Specifically this research finds that anger constrains the regulatory function of moral identity centrality with regard to moral judgment of vindictive negative WOM derived from service failure, when moral cognition is low. In this sense, consumers get blinded by anger in their moral cognition and moral judgment, which echoes a recent research finding that employees get “blinded” by anger in moral judgment (Gino & Schweitzer, 2008). More importantly, this research provides evidence on the notion that social cognition can neutralize the undermining effect of negative emotion (i.e. anger in this research) on identity-based regulation on social judgment.

### *Managerial implications*

This research offers service firms a number of mechanisms of preventing moral disengagement. As moral identity centrality in general tends to be more stable and therefore less likely to be manageable for a specific consumer, companies can manage consumers’ moral awareness of retaliatory misbehavior (e.g., vindictive negative WOM) and anger toward service failure. First, service providers can leverage consumer moral awareness. Our research finds that moral identity centrality inhibits moral disengagement of vindictive negative WOM especially when moral awareness of the behavior is higher. Hotels can, for example, promote the moral relevance of retaliatory misbehavior on their websites or other media tools that may communicate to consumers effectively. For example, hotel personnel could engage with peer-to-peer hotel review websites; where appropriately, apologizing, explaining, appeasing, and if needed

appealing for equity and thus evoking moral engagement. While such reactions to negative WOM might be seen by some as manipulative or even controlling, astute intervention are likely to prove more beneficial than harmful. Future research is needed to explore how such pre-emptive or reactive tactics can be effectively managed.

Second, another way to help hotels to prevent retaliatory consumer misbehavior is to manage consumer anger. While the advice to ‘manage anger’ is far from new, our study suggests that managing anger has a hitherto unacknowledged benefit with regard to moral identity regulation. This is because this research finds that customers with lower anger are more likely to regulate their moral disengagement by their moral identity centrality. Hotels and their employees dealing with service failure should be trained to recognize, control, and (where appropriate) appease customer anger during service failure. Through highlighting the efforts of the service provider to prevent, solve, or recompense service failure *and* when appeasing disgruntled customers, service personnel should stress the efforts the firm has taken in order to provoke customer moral engagement or reengagement and thus reduce the possibility of future ethically questionable acts such as vindictive negative WOM. In this regard we suggest that hotels should proactively encourage customers to contact them directly and immediately after service failure, so that customer anger can be managed (cathartically) before it leads to other potentially damaging behavior, such as so many of the peer-to-peer customer reviews found on hotel review websites.

Third, the research finds that moral awareness may neutralize the main effect and undermine the effect of anger on moral identity-based self-regulation. When customers become angry, without astute management, they are likely to engage in vindictive negative WOM, even if they hold higher moral identity centrality. One way to minimize these potential harmful acts of angry customers is through a two-part strategy. First, anger should be alleviated to a sufficient degree so that cognitive resource is made available. Second, the moral relevance of the potential

vindictive negative WOM toward the firm should be raised. Doing so will discourage angry customers from engaging in vindictive negative WOM, and enable them to have stronger self-control by their moral identity. For example, when hotel guests check out, receptionists can ask the service experience of the guests. If the guests immediately expressed dissatisfaction, the receptionists can appease, apologize, or justify as necessary. Where guests express satisfaction, records can be made and service personnel rewarded accordingly. Such systems would enable the subsequent identification of areas of high customer satisfaction and equally importantly areas where satisfaction is not high.

#### *Limitations and future research*

First, we use hotel noise as an example for service failure. Although unwanted noise is an issue in service provision in many contexts, service failure can also arise from other issues. Future study should test our theoretical framework for other types of service failures. Second, we demonstrate that emotional reactions may moderate the effect of moral identity by using anger as an example. Future research can examine other types of emotions, especially positive emotions, and investigate whether positive emotions (e.g., happiness) would enhance, instead of undermine, the effect of moral identity. Third, regarding the moderating effect of moral awareness, although this is an important cognitive moderator for moral identity regulation on moral disengagement, there are other cognitive or cognitive-situational factors that may moderate the effect of moral identity. Thus, for example, future research can examine whether monetary compensation interacts with moral identity in affecting moral disengagement of retaliatory consumer misbehavior. Justice or injustice may be another important factor that may interact with moral identity in affecting moral disengagement.

Fourth, this research focuses on one type of customer revenge behaviors (vindictive

negative WOM). Future research can also examine other types of customer revenge behaviors, such as retaliatory complaints and psychological harmful conduct, instead of negative WOM.

Fifth, this research concentrates on one pivotal mechanism of moral disengagement (advantageous comparison), future research can examine whether and how moral identity affects other types of moral disengagement, such as moral justification or distortion of consequence. Sixth, both of our studies reported in this paper are based on vignettes. Vignette research design is a popular method in studying similar research issue (Aquino et al. 2007; Shu et al. 2011). However it has relatively lower external validity, partly due to the compressed nature of the time frame between service failure, emotional response and vindictive act in the vignette. In addition, anger produced with vignettes is more like a cognitive representation of anger (hypothetical anger based on the evaluation of a situation). It may differ from anger in real life particularly in terms of intensity.

We encourage future research to use a mixed method including both vignette design and experience recall design. Moreover, due to the cross-sectional nature of our data, the effects found in this research should not be interpreted as causal effects, but as relational effects. Finally, future research can explore the merit of applying the mindfulness-based therapy (Piet & Hougaard, 2011) to angry customers, so that the potential harming effects of customer anger can be minimized.

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