Consumer complaining to firms: The determinants of channel choice

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Introduction

Previous research has linked consumer dissatisfaction to an increased tendency for consumers to complain (Bearden and Teel, 1983; Oliver, 1987; Westbrook, 1987). More specifically, the antecedents of consumer complaining behavior (CCB) reflect problem-specific issues (e.g., intensity of dissatisfaction, controllability of problem (Blodgett and Granbois, 1992)), customer-specific issues (attitudes, emotions, perceived justice (Blodgett et al., 1997)), seller reputation and environmental issues (legal climate, norms regarding complaining (Zaltman et al., 1978)). In addition, some studies have examined how firms’ actions influence customers’ post-complaint behaviors (e.g., Blodgett et al., 1993). While there is ample research on the antecedents of negative word-of-mouth, consumers’ propensity to directly complain to sellers or service providers has received scant attention (Best and Andreasen, 1977; Graeter et al., 1979). Previous work on CCB has identified redress seeking (e.g., Blodgett et al., 1997) and venting of frustration (e.g., Nyer, 1997a,b) as two main motivators for consumer actions, yet no prior study has examined how consumers (once having decided on direct complaining) choose between available channels of complaints (e.g., face-to-face or e-mail). To close that gap, the primary goal of this study is to investigate how consumer goals or motivations influence their choice of complaining media. To gain further insight into channel selection, we also seek to understand how the consumer’s propensity to feel shame interacts with their motivations, to determine their channel choice. We focus on shame proneness because this negative emotional state is commonly associated with dissatisfying consumption experiences (Menon and Dube, 1999; Stephens and Gwinner, 1998).

Literature review and hypotheses

Day and Landon (1977) proposed a two-level hierarchical classification schema of CCB. The first level separates behavioral (action) and non-
behavioral responses (no action), while the second level distinguishes between private actions (e.g. WOM) and public actions (e.g. complaining to a consumer advocate group). As an extension of the basic model, Day (1980) proposed that complaint intentions (redress seeking, complaining and personal boycott) provide an alternative typology. Richins (1983) recognized that complaining behaviors involve at least three activities: switching, making a complaint to the seller, and telling others about the purchase/consumption experience. Finally, Singh (1990a) categorized complainers into four types:
(1) Passives – people who take little or no action.
(2) Voicers – people who complain actively to the service provider/seller.
(3) Irates – people who opt for private responses.
(4) Activists – people who engage in formal third party complaining.

Although previous research has established that consumer dissatisfaction leads to several types of consumer actions, the existing frameworks fail to consider the determinants of channel choice.

Channel type and consumer goals
We expand Day and Landon’s (1977) work by incorporating channel choice into the model (see Figure 1). In the proposed 4th level of the model, having decided to undertake a formal complaint action, the consumer can choose between a complaint medium based on the degree of interaction associated with that particular channel. Direct face-to-face or phone complaining are examples of interactive channels, whereas written communication, such as posted letters or electronic messages can be considered as remote communication.

Lazarus and his colleagues postulate that all emotions are a result of primary and secondary cognitive appraisals (e.g. Lazarus, 1991). While primary appraisal is focused on goal conflicts, secondary appraisal assesses an individual’s coping strategies. Negative emotions, commonly encountered with service failures in a services context, signal a strong need for coping strategies. Folkman and Lazarus (1988) suggest that there are two basic coping strategies: problem-based coping and emotion-based coping. The former involves direct actions to resolve the situation, while the latter involves indirect actions to minimize emotions (e.g. removing oneself from a stressful situation or blaming someone else for a personal failure). Consumers’ complaining processes, such as examined in this study, tend to involve problem-focused coping strategies. Prior research has

Figure 1 Day and Landon’s (1977) classification of consumer complaining behavior (extension)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st level: Behavioral vs Non Behavioral Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd level: Private vs Public Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd level: Specific actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th level: Tendency toward Interactive or Remote channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th level: Channel of Communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dissatisfaction Incident

Take Action

Take No Action

Private Action

Public Action

Boycott Brand/Product

Negative WOM

Seek Redress Directly

Legal Action

Complain to Agencies/Govt

Interactive

Remote

Face-to-face

Phone

Letter

Email

Note: The 4th and 5th levels are our proposed classification and seek to expand voicing behavior to look at how complainers select complaint channels

Source: Adapted from Day and Landon (1977) two-level hierarchical schema on CCB
identified redress seeking and venting of frustration as two main reasons why people complain (e.g. Blodgett et al., 1997). Redress seeking refers to the remedy and rectification of a problem, or "righting a wrong". In a redress-seeking situation, the consumer is seeking restitution in an amount equivalent to the imbalance that they attached to the dissatisfactory situation (Adams, 1965; Deutsch, 1975). In the context of this study, redress seeking is the initiation of a complaint action on the aggrieved consumer's part, to rectify a problem. The consumer is seeking a replacement, a refund (full or partial), or a repair depending on the exchange context.

Since the redress-seeker is looking to obtain a form of compensation to correct the dissatisfactory situation (Deutsch, 1975), this type of complainer is hypothesized to choose interactive channels to voice their complaint. The real-time interaction allows the complainant to clarify matters, explain in detail, observe the other party's body language and even show actions (such as anger, frustration, and urgency) that may lead to a faster resolution of the problem (Kauffman, 1999).

H1. For redress-seeking, complainants are more likely to use interactive than remote channels.

Venting is defined as "to give outlet and expression to" (Chambers 20th Century Dictionary). Otherwise known as catharsis in CCB literature, venting of frustration allows for a release of stress due to feelings of distress experienced in dissatisfying experiences (Stiles, 1987).

The goal is to release frustration and unhappiness so as to feel better (Stiles, 1987; Kolodinski and Aleong, 1990; Kowalski, 1996; Richins, 1980). Allicke et al. (1992) reported that the desire to vent frustration is the most common motivation (about 50 percent) of all complaints. Nyers (1997a, 1999, 2000) found that venting initially increased dissatisfaction, but subsequently led to increased levels of satisfaction.

Since venting is a "fire-and-forget" situation, where no reply from the firm is expected or desired, the complainer may want to remain anonymous or at least "invisible/faceless" to reduce embarrassment and/or avoid a potentially ugly confrontation with the firm's frontline staff. Consequently, we propose the following.

H2. For venting, complainants are more likely to use remote than interactive channels.

**Methodology**

**Research design**

A 4 (channel choice: shop, phone, letter, e-mail) × 2 (redress seeking versus venting) design was used to test the hypotheses. Shame proneness was examined using a quasi-experimental design. A mobile phone service was chosen as the research context, as many consumers have a reasonably high involvement with this service, and it is widely used. To avoid a potentially biasing impact of prior attitudes towards any particular mobile provider, a fictitious mobile service provider with a neutral name – BrightSpark Mobile – was used in the scenarios. Consumer complaining goals were manipulated via scenario description (see Table 1). In the redress seeking condition, the consumer was overcharged by $10. Conversely, in the venting condition, the respondent was faced with a scenario involving a long queue and poor service while the subscriber tried to change his/her mobile plan. Shame proneness as an individual level factor was measured rather than manipulated.

**Sample**

Data was collected via a self-administered questionnaire. Survey participants were screened...
Table 1  Manipulation of motivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Redress – billing error scenario</th>
<th>Venting – queue and poor service scenario</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You have just subscribed for a</td>
<td>You have just subscribed for a mobile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mobile phone account with</td>
<td>phone account with BrightSpark Mobile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BrightSpark Mobile. The mobile</td>
<td>The mobile call rates are competitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>call rates are competitive and</td>
<td>and the service standards are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the service standards are</td>
<td>reasonable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the first month of use,</td>
<td>After the first month of use, you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you receive the phone bills.</td>
<td>decide that you want to have a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You realize that even though</td>
<td>change of mobile plans to better suit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you were supposed to be billed</td>
<td>your needs. Upon entering the shop,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25, you were charged $35. Thus,</td>
<td>you were made to wait one hour in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you have been overcharged by $10.</td>
<td>queue. When it was your turn, the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Later, you decide to make a</td>
<td>staff was rude and had a poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complaint to get your money</td>
<td>attitude, adding to your frustration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>back.</td>
<td>Later, you decide to make a complaint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to show your displeasure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

for their eligibility, where they had to be current users of mobile phones and were personally responsible for their mobile phone bill payments. Of the 240 questionnaires distributed, a total of 212 questionnaires were returned – a response rate of 88.3 percent. Among the returned questionnaires, 12 were rendered unusable due to inconsistent or incomplete answers, thus leaving us with a final sample size of 200.

The gender split was nearly equal, with slightly more females (52.5 percent). The majority of the respondents were between 18 and 34 years of age (69.5 percent). The professional/managers/executives category accounted for 43 percent of the sample, followed by students with 18.5 percent, and skilled white-collar workers with 11.5 percent.

**Measures**

**Channel choice**

To prevent subjects from being constrained by pre-conceived notions that certain channels are unavailable, the questionnaire stated that there were four ways of complaining, namely:

1. Go to shop to make a complaint (face-to-face).
2. Make a phone call.
3. Write a letter.
4. Send an e-mail.

The respondents were also told that all information required for using those channels (e.g. location of store, hotline number, mailing address, and e-mail address) were available. Each respondent was asked to indicate, on a five-point Likert scale, the likelihood of using the abovementioned four channels. The scale was adapted from William et al.’s (1993) complaint activity measure.

**Shame proneness**

The questions for shame proneness were adapted from the test of self-conscious affect for adults (TOSCA) (Tangney et al., 1989). The measurement instrument listed ten negative and five positive scenarios, and participants were asked to rate, on a five-point Likert-type scale, the likelihood of reacting in the manner indicated. For example, a scenario read as followed: “you break something at work and then hide it”. Participants were then asked to rate the likelihood that they would think about quitting. The participants were categorized into groups of high and low shame proneness based on the median on the adapted TOSCA scale. The Cronbach alpha value for this scale was 0.75, thus suggesting adequate internal reliability.

**Data analysis**

**Pre-test**

A pre-test was conducted with 60 respondents to verify that the two instructional manipulations resulted in similar levels of dissatisfaction. A single item, six-point Likert-type scale (anchored by endpoints absolutely furious/not at all dissatisfied) was employed to capture respondents’ reactions to service failures described in the two scenarios. As intended, there were no significant differences in dissatisfaction among our different conditions at the 0.10 level. Hence, we are able to proceed with the rest of the analysis without needing to control for dissatisfaction levels.

**Hypotheses testing**

A MANOVA analysis was conducted, using the four channel choices as dependent variables, to test the hypotheses. The MANOVA results are shown in Table II, and the mean ratings by experimental conditions for all four dependent measures are presented in Table III. As expected, there was a significant main effect for motivation to complain (Wilks'lambda = 0.59; $F = 35.2, p < 0.001$), indicating that redress seeking and venting result in different channel choices. Similarly, there was a significant main effect for shame proneness (Wilks'lambda = 0.86; $F = 6.3, p < 0.001$). The interaction between motivation to complain and shame proneness was insignificant.

The univariate $F$-ratios for motivation to complain were significant for all four dependent variables (face-to-face: $F = 48.8, p < 0.001$; phone: $F = 50.1, p < 0.001$; letter: $F = 92.3, p < 0.001$; e-mail: $F = 56.1, p < 0.001$), thus
Table II Effects of motivation to complain and shame proneness on channel choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Multivariate Wilks' Lambda</th>
<th>Degrees of freedom</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multivariate results</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation to complain</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame proneness</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction effect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation × shame proneness</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Univariate results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation to complain</th>
<th>NA</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>48.8</th>
<th>&lt; 0.001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shame proneness</th>
<th>NA</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>17.2</th>
<th>&lt; 0.001</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** All other univariate results were not significant, at p = 0.05

Table III Means for experimental conditions for dependent variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Face-to-face</th>
<th>Phone</th>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>E-mail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Redress seeking</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venting</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low shame proneness</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High shame proneness</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** All items were measured using Likert-type scales ranging from "1" = very unlikely, to "5" = very likely

further implying that the goal of complaining influences consumers’ channel choices. As shown in Table III, subjects with the motivation to seek redress were more likely to choose interactive complaints channels (face-to-face: m = 3.88; phone: m = 4.17) than remote channels (letter: m = 2.20; e-mail: m = 2.95). Thus, H1 was supported. Conversely, subjects with a venting goal were more likely to choose remote (letter: m = 3.56; e-mail: m = 4.00) than interactive channels (face-to-face: m = 2.97; phone: m = 3.22), thus supporting H2.

Shame proneness influenced consumers’ preference for interactive channels (face-to-face: F = 17.2, p < 0.01 and phone: F = 10.5, p < 0.01). As indicated in Table III, shame proneness seems to have a negative impact on consumers’ preference for interactive complaint channels, with high shame prone consumers being less likely to choose interactive channels (face-to-face: m = 3.17; phone: m = 3.50) than low shame prone consumers (face-to-face: m = 3.66; phone: m = 3.87). Consequently, H3 is supported.

Finally, the univariate F-test for the two way interaction was significant for the face-to-face channel, (F = 6.17, p < 0.05). This interaction is visualized in Figure 2. With venting goals, consumers low in shame proneness were more likely to choose face-to-face channels than their counterparts with higher levels of shame proneness. The differences between the two groups were less pronounced when the motivation to complain involved redress seeking.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Prior research has established that consumers have three basic options when faced with a dissatisfying
consumption experience (Day and Landon, 1977; Singh, 1988). First, customers can take private action by disassociating themselves with a service provider and by engaging in bad-mouthing. Second, dissatisfied customers can take indirect action by complaining to a third party. Third, consumers can take direct action by lodging a complaint with the service provider. The present investigation focuses on the latter i.e. direct customer to company complaining. Despite its managerial importance, channel choice has received scant attention in scholarly research. To close that gap, we incorporated channel choice into Day and Landon’s taxonomy of consumer responses. This study had two main objectives: (1) To understand the impact of consumer goals in channel choice. (2) To examine the role of individual consumer characteristics (shame proneness) in modifying the consumers’ channel choice processes.

Service failures result in negative disconfirmation of consumer expectations, and as such tend to induce negative emotional responses towards the service provider (e.g. Smith et al., 1998; Smith and Bolton, 2002). These negative emotions associated with service failures create a need for coping strategies. Problem-based coping, in which the consumer engages in direct actions to resolve the situation (Folkman and Lazarus, 1988), seems to be particularly applicable to consumer complaining processes. Prior research has established that complaining consumers engage in two types of coping strategies: redress seeking and venting of frustration (e.g. Blodgett et al., 1997; Nyer, 1997a,b). Popular wisdom suggests that venting one’s anger will help people feel better (e.g. Bushman et al., 2001). The findings of this study indicate that consumers with a redress-seeking goal opted for interactive (face-to-face and phone) rather than remote channels (letter and e-mail). In other words, customers looking for a tangible compensation might perceive face-to-face or phone channels to be more effective due to the real-time interaction with a service provider. Conversely, when customers wanted to vent their frustration, they leaned more towards remote channels such as written letters or e-mail messages.

Our findings further suggest that individual differences in shame proneness might interact with channel choice. The impact of shame proneness was particularly salient when the motivation to complain involved venting. Under those conditions, an increase in shame proneness resulted in a decreased preference for face-to-face or phone channels. It might well be that shame-prone consumers wish to avoid human interaction when venting their frustrations after a service failure. Conversely, in a redress seeking situation consumers’ propensity to feel shame seems to have minimal impact on their channel choice. In other words, the need to obtain compensation may supersede the general feelings of shame that might characterize the individual in other situations.

Managerial implications
Recognizing that complaint channel choice is dependent on customers’ complaining motivations, firms should strive to make available both interactive and remote complaint channels. The goal should be to maximize the capture of all possible consumer complaints before they are manifested in negative behaviors such as bad-mouthing, complaints to third-parties, boycott, and exit (Day, 1980, Singh, 1990a,b). For example, Internet-based video chats allow the complaining customer to interact one-on-one with a company representative (e.g. Harrison-Walker, 2001). Moreover, by leveraging on emerging Internet-based cash and coupon transfer technologies (Turban et al., 2000), compensation can be given immediately. On the other hand, shame prone customers are likely to prefer more remote channels when venting their emotions. Consequently, offering alternative complaining channels that maximize anonymity (e.g. feedback cards that may be submitted anonymously) is needed to effectively handle complaints lodged by certain customer groups.

Study limitations and suggestions for future research
This research is limited to direct complaints, thus ignoring third-party complaints such as word-of-mouth or bad-mouthing that occurs in Internet chat rooms. Future research is needed to examine how people use different communication channels to generate word-of-mouth. For example, is negative word-of-mouth (e.g. complaints of unpleasant experiences, warnings against sellers/manufacturers and gossip) boosted by the anonymity found in Internet chat-rooms and bulletin boards, and the convenience of mass forwarding of e-mails?

In this study, we controlled for the failure type. Existing literature on services show that CCB responses are expected to not only to vary with the importance of the problem (Hirschman, 1970; Richins, 1983, 1987), but also with whether the problem is straightforward (Levesque and McDougall, 1996). Consequently, future work could further investigate the influence of the nature of the problem (easily detected versus judgmental) on customer complaining processes.

Because this was an exploratory study into whether individual traits played a role in channel
selection, only shame proneness was tested. Future studies could delve deeper into the role of emotions and other personality traits of interest to consumer behaviorists and psychologists, such as pride, aggression, and shyness, on complaint channel selection. Finally, cross-cultural differences in personality traits such as shame proneness warrant future research.

References


Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

Interactive and remote ways of making a complaint

Dissatisfied customers are, according to previous research, increasingly likely to complain. Some may simply dissociate themselves from the service provider and criticise it to family and friends. Others may complain to a third party such as a customer-advocate group or a newspaper. And a third group may decide to complain directly to the service provider. Mattila and Wirtz examine how this last group of dissatisfied customers decide between two interactive ways of making a complaint -- face to face or over the telephone; and two "remote" ways -- by letter or e-mail.

Customers who seek redress

Previous research has established that the two main motivations for dissatisfied customers to complain are to seek redress and to vent their frustration. Redress seekers aim to "right the wrong" through a replacement, a refund or a repair. Mattila and Wirtz demonstrate that this type of complainer is likely to voice his or her complaint face to face or over the telephone, perhaps because this type of real-time interaction enables the complainer to clarify matters, explain in detail, observe the other party's body language and even show anger, frustration and urgency that may lead to faster resolution of the problem.

Customers who seek to vent their frustration

In contrast, aggrieved customers whose main aim is to vent their frustration -- to release their stress and unhappiness so as to feel better -- neither expect nor desire a reply from the firm. Venting is a "fire and forget" situation, where the complainer may want to remain anonymous, or at least invisible and faceless, to reduce embarrassment and avoid a potentially ugly confrontation with the firm's front-line staff. Mattila and Wirtz demonstrate that this type of complainer is more likely to use remote channels such as letter or e-mail.

Further reading

Customers who feel shame
Mattila and Wirtz also seek to understand how the dissatisfied customer's propensity to feel shame interacts with his or her motivations, to determine which channel he or she will use to make a complaint. Shame is a self-conscious negative emotion resulting from a negative evaluation of one's global self. Since shame affects one's core identity, it may lead to a desire to escape or hide from others. Individuals who are prone to shame may therefore tend to shy away from interactive channels.

The authors reveal that the impact of shame proneness is particularly salient when the motivation to complain involves venting. Under these conditions, an increase in shame proneness results in a decreased preference for complaining face to face or over the telephone. However, in a redress-seeking situation, customers' propensity to feel shame seems to have minimal impact on their channel choice. In other words, the need to obtain compensation may supersede the general feelings of shame that might characterize the individual in other situations.

How managers should react
The authors recommend firms to make available both interactive and remote complaint channels. The goal should be to maximize the capture of all possible customer complaints before they are manifested in, for example, bad word of mouth, complaints to third parties, boycott and exit.

(A précis of the article "Consumer complaining to firms: the determinants of channel choice". Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)