2003 American Marketing Association Marketing and Public Policy Conference,
Washington DC, May 29-31 2003

Complaining: A Function of Attitude, Personality, and Situation

John Thøgersen,^{a)1} Hans Jørn Juhl^{a)} & Carsten Stig Poulsen^{a)}

a) Aarhus School of Business, Denmark, b) Aalborg University, Denmark

Keywords: Complaint, dissatisfaction, attitude, situation.

¹ Corresponding author. Aarhus School of Business, Department of Marketing, Haslegaardsvej 10, 8210 Aarhus V, Denmark. Tel +45 8948 6440. Fax +45 8615 3988. E-mail John.Thogersen@asb.dk

Complaining: A Function of Attitude, Personality, and Situation

Abstract

Consumers experience dissatisfaction when they encounter product or service performance below expectations (Oliver, 1997). A category of particular practical interest is situations where an acquired product or service contains a defect or deficiency. Because such events occur more or less randomly they are difficult to study, and consumer behavior becomes difficult to predict (and influence). The random nature of such events also means that consumers usually have no experience with seeking redress (i.e., complaining), or their experience may be from totally different situations. Because of this, most people have not formed a clear attitude about how to behave in situations like this and they may also be uncertain about social norms for proper behavior. Hence, it is likely that situation-specific factors exert a large influence on behavior. This study indeed finds that the likelihood that consumers complain over defects and deficiencies depends a lot on the situation, related to the size of the perceived loss. If companies and institutions can count on consumers complaining over serious defects and deficiencies, it is hardly a big problem if they refrain from doing so in less important cases. However, some individuals may refrain from complaining even in cases they perceive as serious. This study shows that complaining depends on the person's attitude towards complaining and on personality traits (negative affectivity). The two latter variables reinforce one another.

Introduction

Why do people complain over products or services? Because they are dissatisfied, of course, but it is well documented that this is not the full answer (Morel, Poiesz, & Wilke, 1997; Singh & Wilkes, 1996; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998). In fact, research shows that a large majority of consumers refrains from seeking redress when they are dissatisfied by encounters in the market place (East, 2000). In this paper, we refer to "seeking redress directly from business" when we speak about, "consumer complaint behavior" or "complaining." In this respect, we follow the advise of Singh (Singh, 1988) and others to analyze different consumer responses to dissatisfaction separately, but we deviate from research aiming to map the full range of behavioral responses to consumer dissatisfaction (including, for example, airing one's dissatisfaction to other consumers or deciding not to buy from that producer, dealer, or service-provider in the future). A focused approach is suggested by empirical evidence documenting that the different types of behavioral responses are conceptually distinct and may have different antecedents (e.g., Singh, 1988) and by the practical interest by actors in and around the market place in engineering behavioral responses to dissatisfaction in general and redress seeking in particular.

Consumers become dissatisfied when they experience product or service performance below expectations (Oliver, 1997). A category of particular practical interest is situations

where an acquired product or service contains a defect or deficiency. In such cases, sellers and service-providers can benefit from direct complaints from consumers because it provides valuable feedback to the organization, may reduce the amount of bad-mouthing, and may reduce the risk that they will take their business somewhere else in the future. However, because defects and deficiencies (hopefully) occur more or less randomly they are difficult to study, and consumer behavior becomes difficult to predict (and influence). Still, because knowledge about regularities in consumer complaint behavior is useful for consumer education purposes and may also produce guidance for companies and institutions wanting to facilitate complaints there is a rather voluminous research in the area (Andreasen, 1988; Oliver, 1997).

The random occurrence of defects and deficiencies means that consumers usually have no experience with complaining, or their experience may be from totally different situations. Because of lack of experience, most people have not formed a clear attitude about how to behave and they may also be uncertain about social norms for proper behavior in situations like this. Hence, it is likely that situation-specific factors exert a large influence on behavior (Fazio, 1986).

Among situational characteristics, the most important ones are those that influence the size of the perceived loss produced by the defect or deficiency. It is well documented that the probability that consumers will seek redress (i.e., complain) in the case of defective or deficient products or services depends on the perceived loss produced by the defect or deficiency (Andreasen, 1988; Kolodinsky, 1995). However, there is also lots of evidence that individuals differ in their propensity to complain in similar situations.

Dissatisfaction is the mental reaction to a perceived negative gap between what a person expects from a product or service and what he or she experiences to get. Both expectations and experience are subjective perceptions, which varies from person to person. Hence, it is also likely that the resulting inner state, the level of dissatisfaction, vary between individuals experiencing exactly the same defect or deficiency. To complain is an action-oriented response to a state of dissatisfaction, and individuals also differ in their propensity to respond in an action-oriented way. Among others, Kowalski (Kowalski, 1996) has suggested that we distinguish between individuals' propensity to experience dissatisfaction and their propensity to express dissatisfaction. Both propensities seem to be linked to certain, but different, personality traits. Research has found, that the propensity to experience dissatisfaction is related to personality traits such as negative affectivity (NA)² and agreeableness, while the propensity to express dissatisfaction is related to personality traits such as extraversion and to self-presentational concerns. Others have based their predictions about individuals' propensity to complain on more domain specific dispositions, such as relevant attitudes, social norms, and perceived control (East, 2000; Riley, Burns, East, & Lomax, 2000). We find convincing evidence backing both the personality and the attitudinal explanation of

² Negative affectivity is a personality trait, which makes some people "particularly sensitive to the minor failures, frustrations, and irritations of daily life" (Watson & Clark, 1984, p. 465). We find the evidence backing the claim that this trait influences dissatisfaction particularly convincing and therefore often refer specifically to this trait rather than to personality traits behind dissatisfaction in general.

variations in complaining. However, we want to suggest that attitudinal variables and personality traits might be interacting, rather than independent, determinants of complaint behavior. For instance, it seems more likely that complaining behavior depends on personality traits if the individual have only contemplated little about the issue on beforehand and therefore holds a weak attitude and subjective norm about complaining. Also, consumers who are particularly sensitive to defects and deficiencies in products and services (i.e., who are characterized by a high NA) are more likely to experience strong emotions in the situation (Kowalski, 1996). Strong emotions may cloud considerations about the possible outcomes of the behavior or about the appropriateness of a particular cause of action (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998).

Based on the reviewed literature, we formulated the following hypotheses to be tested in our study:

H1: Consumers are more likely to become dissatisfied and to complain the bigger the loss they perceive to suffer due to a defective or deficient product or service.

H2: Consumers who have a positive attitude towards complaining, and/or perceive that complaining is socially encouraged are more likely to complain in the case of defective or deficient products or services.

H3: Consumers who have complaining experience and/or are knowledgeable about complaining options are less likely to refrain from actively complaining.

H4: Some consumers are particularly sensitive to defects and deficiencies in products and services (e.g., because they are characterized by a high NA). These consumers are more likely to complain in the case of defective or deficient products or services.

H5: Experienced and/or knowledgeable consumers hold stronger attitudes and/or norms about complaining, meaning that their attitudes and/or norms in this area are more predictive of behavior.

H6: Consumers who are particularly sensitive to defects and deficiencies tend to be overwhelmed by their emotions when they experience defects and deficiencies in products and services. Therefore, their attitudes and/or norms in this area are less predictive of behavior.

Method

Data

We tested our hypotheses by means of survey data. A random sample of 1202 Danish adults was contacted in April 2002 for a short interview where they were asked to participate in a postal survey. Those who agreed (85%) received a questionnaire and a stamped return envelope. After one reminder, a total of 684 questionnaires were returned. Fifty-one questionnaires could not be used in the following analyses due to item non-response, which reduced the sample size to 635. Because of the obvious risk of non-

response bias we control for a large number of demographic variables in the following analyses.

Besides demographic descriptors and items not used for the present purpose, the questionnaire contained questions about the individual's general attitude and subjective norm regarding complaining, as well as questions regarding previous complaining experience and knowledge about public and private complaint boards (used as an indicator for knowledge about complaining procedures). The intention to complain (i.e., seek redress) when experiencing products with defects or deficiencies – our behavioral indicator – was measured on a dichotomous scale with reference to six hypothetical situations (the purchase of honey, cheap socks, cheap trousers and sweater, a carpet, a fridge, a bookcase). The hypothetical situations were sparsely described (see the full description in the lower part of Table 1), the main objective being to be able to study how complaining depends on the loss suffered by the consumer due to the defect or deficiency. An index formed by summing the number of complaints in the six situations is used as an indicator of the individual's general "propensity to complain." The level of the person's dissatisfaction with regard to the same six hypothetical situations was measured on a four-point scale. We used the mean score on the six dissatisfaction items as an indicator for the person's sensitivity to defects and deficiencies in products and services and the normalized individual item scores (normalized by calculating deviations from the person's mean dissatisfaction score) as indicators for the (relative) perceived loss due to the specific defect or deficiency. The translated items, mean values, and standard deviations, as well as Cronbach's alpha for aggregate constructs, are shown in Table 1 below. The alphas suggest acceptable reliability.

Data analysis

Table 1 shows that, in the analyzed sample, there is a slightly positive attitude towards complaining and social norms are perceived to be slightly supportive as well. However, respondents have little personal experience with complaining and their knowledge about official complaint bodies is scant. The level of dissatisfaction obviously differs between the hypothetical situations ($F_{\text{repeated_measures}} = 367.22$ (5), $p < .001$). Although it may not be the full explanation, there is obviously a tendency for the level of dissatisfaction to be higher the more expensive the product with the defect or deficiency is, that is, the bigger the loss that the consumer suffers.

The proportion of respondents who would complain in each of the six hypothetical situations is shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 around here

Table 2 shows that the likelihood that consumers will complain over defects and deficiencies depends on the situation (Cochran's $Q = 1311.76$ (5), $p < .001$). Further, the rank order of the likelihood of complaining across situations is the exact same as that of the level of dissatisfaction. Hence, it seems that also the likelihood of complaining depends on how expensive the product with the defect or deficiency is, that is, on the size of the loss that the consumer suffers.

Our formal hypothesis test proceeds in two steps. First, we investigate how the likelihood of complaining in specific situations depends on the perceived loss due to the specific defect or deficiency (a situation-specific factor), while also controlling for a general, trans-situational propensity to complain. This is how we test Hypothesis 1, which focuses on situation-specific antecedents. Hypotheses 2 to 6 focus on individual-specific antecedents. They are tested in the second step, where we investigate the personality and dispositional roots of the general, trans-situational propensity to complain.

Since complaining in a specific situation is measured on a dichotomous scale, we use logistic regression analysis in the first step. In order to study the relationship between situation-specific perceptions and behavioral responses we need to pool the situations. Hence, we use Latent GOLD version 2.0 (Vermunt & Magidson, 2000), which incorporates a logistic regression model for the analysis of correlated data (Hosmer & Lemshow, 2000). The results of this analysis are shown in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 around here

Table 3 shows that both predictors are highly significant. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, complaining is strongly related to the perceived loss (as reflected in the normalized specific dissatisfaction). Trans-situational personality traits and dispositions are also important, as indicated by the positive and highly significant parameter of the general propensity to complain. The relative size of the odds ratios (Exp(b)) indicates that situation-specific factors have a considerably stronger influence on complaining than general personality traits and dispositions, however.

In the next step we investigate personality and dispositional sources of the general propensity to complain. The dependent variable is now an index counting the number of times the respondent would complain in the six hypothetical situations. Because such an index has ordinal properties, we use ordinal regression (SPSS version 11) for this analysis. Ordinal regression in SPSS is based on the proportional odds model, which is both relatively easy to interpret and the most frequently used one in practice (Hosmer & Lemshow, 2000). Besides all variables referred to in our hypotheses we controlled for the influence of demographic variables that correlate with complaining in one or more of the hypothetical situations (in order to correct for possible non-response bias).³ However, in order to conserve degrees of freedom and not clutter the picture unnecessarily we removed non-significant predictors one by one and re-ran the analysis. Table 4 reports the results of the final regression analysis where only variables producing a significant direct effect or a significant interaction effect with a variable producing a significant direct effect are included.

Insert Table 4 around here

³ The following demographic variables correlate significantly with complaining in at least one of the hypothetical situations: Age, gender, income, education, marital status, and membership of humanitarian or environmental organizations. However, only the first of these give a significant contribution to the prediction of complaining when the rest of the predictors are included

Consistent with Hypothesis 2 respondents have a higher propensity to complain the more positive attitude they hold about complaining. And consistent with Hypothesis 4 they have a higher propensity to complain the more sensitivity they are to defects and deficiencies in products and services (i.e., the higher their average dissatisfaction score). Contrary to our expectations, and to Hypothesis 3, there is no direct influence of previous experience on the propensity to complain. Subjective social norms and knowledge about complaining bodies were left out of the final model because they apparently play no role in the present case.

Hypothesis 5 predicts that attitudes about complaining are more predictive of behavior among experienced than among inexperienced consumers. Table 4 confirms that the consumer's complaining experience acts as a moderator for the relationship between attitude and behavior. However, contrary to our expectations, the relationship between complaining attitudes and behavior is stronger among inexperienced than among experienced consumers.

Finally, Hypothesis 6 predicts that, because consumers who are particularly sensitive to defects and deficiencies tend to be overwhelmed by their emotions when they experience defects and deficiencies in products and services, their attitudes in this area are less predictive of behavior. Again, as expected we find a significant interaction between the attitude and general dissatisfaction. However, the positive sign of the interaction term shows that the more sensitive consumers are to defects and deficiencies, the stronger is the relationship between complaining attitudes and behavior. Hence, Hypothesis 6 is also rejected.

Finally, Table 4 shows that older consumers have a higher propensity to complain than younger. A number of other studies have reported this finding as well (Kowalsky, 1996).

Discussion

Complaints from customers can be irritating, time-consuming, costly, and if the press becomes interested in the causes of the complaints the company or institution's reputation may suffer. On the other hand, reactions from dissatisfied customers give the company or the institution a chance to learn from and to correct mistakes and errors. In this way, customer dissatisfaction can be eliminated or at least reduced, and so can the risk of future disappointments. In this study, we created situational variation by manipulating the size of the loss suffered due to a defect or deficiency and we found that the likelihood that consumers complain over defects and deficiencies depends a lot on the situation. That the perceived loss seems to explain the lion's share of the variation in complaining is, in fact, good news. If companies and institutions can count on consumers complaining over serious defects and deficiencies, it is hardly a big problem if they refrain from doing so in less important cases. However, some individuals may refrain from complaining even in cases they perceive as serious. This is the most important group of people to target in an effort to stimulate complaint behavior. This study shows that complaining depends on the person's attitude towards complaining and on his or her personality. Contrary to our expectations the impacts of positive attitudes towards complaining and personality traits such as negative affectivity seem to be mutually reinforcing, rather than

competitors. Also much to our surprise, the impact of the attitude towards complaining seems to be weakened (rather than strengthened) by experience. None of these interaction effects have been reported by others and until that happens they should be interpreted with caution.

Companies and institutions that want to encourage customers to contact them when they have something to complain about should in particular focus on building a positive attitude towards complaining. Positive attitudes can be built by means of information encouraging customers to report any dissatisfaction to the company or store and by rewarding such feedback from customers. These ideas, of course, are not new. They are already widely implemented. Our research gives further support to such endeavors.

It is probably not possible to influence consumers' sensitivity to defects and deficiencies in products and services. It is generally perceived as irrational and as leading to less than optimal results for the individual if they get carried away by strong emotions. However, there may be instances where this is not true. Defects and deficiencies in products and services are sometimes the result of carelessness or dishonesty. Producers or service-providers are not always driven by good faith; some are driven by laziness and the desire for an easy take. Such individuals and organizations will typically not be especially forthcoming towards a customer who complains either. If the complainant – by reacting strongly emotional – produces the expectation that he or she will carry a complaint case further than what is economically rational, it could change the counterpart's attitude towards corrective action, because he/she senses that the nuisance, costs, and risk of bad publicity produced by the case will become larger than originally expected. Hence, as argued by Frank (Frank, 1988), it can sometimes be individually adaptive to react emotionally when facing offense. If the expectation that some consumers "overreact" has a disciplining effect and leads to a reduction of the number of defects and deficiencies, it also benefits society as a whole.

References

- Andreasen, A. R. (1988). Consumer complaints and redress: What we know and what we don't know. In E. S. Maynes (Ed.), *The frontier of research in the consumer interest*. Columbia MO: Americal Council on Consumer Interest.
- East, R. (2000). Complaining as planned behavior. *Psychology and Marketing*, 17, 1077-1095.
- Fazio, R. H. (1986). How do attitudes guide behavior? In R. M. Sorrentino & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *The handbook of motivation and cognition: Foundations of social behavior* (pp. 204-243). New York: Guilford Press.
- Frank, R. H. (1988). *Passions within reasons: The strategic role of the emotions*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Hosmer, D. W., & Lemshow, S. (2000). *Applied logistic regression* (2nd ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Kolodinsky, J. (1995). The usefulness of economics in explaining consumer complaints. *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 29(1), 29-54.
- Kowalski, R. M. (1996). Complaints and complaining: Functions, antecedents, and consequences. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119, 179-196.

- Morel, K. P. N., Poiesz, T. B. C., & Wilke, H. A. M. (1997). Motivation, capacity and opportunity to complain: Towards a comprehensive model of consumer complaint behavior. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 24, 464-469.
- Oliver, R. L. (1997). *Satisfaction. A behavioral perspective on the consumer*. Boston: Irwin/McGraw-Hill.
- Riley, F. D. O., Burns, A., East, R., & Lomax, W. (2000). *Redress seeking as planned behaviour for goods purchased via the World Wide Web*. Paper presented at the 29 th. EMAC Conference: Markting in the new millennium, Erasmus University Rotterdam.
- Singh, J. (1988). Consumer complaint intentions and behavior: Definitional and taxonomical issues. *Journal of Marketing*, 52, 93-107.
- Singh, J., & Wilkes, R. E. (1996). When consumers complain: A path analysis of the key antecedents of consumer complaint response estimates. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 24(4), 350-365.
- Stephens, N., & Gwinner, K. P. (1998). Why don't some people complain? A cognitive-emotive process model of consumer complaint behavior. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 26(3), 172-189.
- Vermunt, J. K., & Magidson, J. (2000). *Latent GOLD 2.0 user's guide*. Belmont, MA: Statistical Innovations Inc.
- Watson, D., & Clark, L. A. (1984). Negative affectivity: The disposition to experience aversive emotional states. *Psychological Bulletin*, 96, 465-490.

Table 1: Possible determinants of the individual's propensity to complain. N = 635

	Mean	Std. dev.	Cronbach's Alpha
<i>Attitude toward complaining</i>			0.77
It reduces my frustration over an unsatisfactory product if I complain	2.24	1.20	
I am probably more inclined to return an unsatisfactory product than most others	3.33	1.10	
It irritates me if I refrain from complaining over an unsatisfactory product or service	2.52	1.24	
I feel it is my duty to complain if I am dissatisfied with a product or service	2.59	1.18	
By complaining I can avoid that others experience the same disappointment	2.04	1.06	
<i>Subjective norm concerning complaining</i>			0.69
Most people whose opinion matters to me expect that I complain when I am dissatisfied with a product or service	2.68	1.18	
Most people whose opinion matters to me would complain if they were dissatisfied with a product or service	2.55	0.97	
<i>Knowledge about complaint bodies</i>			
Heard about the body (of 12 mentioned bodies)	4.12	2.58	
Knows which types of cases the body deals with (of 12 mentioned bodies)	3.47	2.88	
<i>Experience with complaining</i>			
In buying situations (of 7 mentioned)	0.58	0.87	
<i>Experienced dissatisfaction in case of defects or deficiencies</i>	2.97	0.46	0.61
You bought three pairs of socks labeled 'Grade B'. After a month, you realize that two of the pairs have a hole on the heel even though each of the pairs has been worn for less than a week.	2.32	0.87	
You have bought a glass of honey labeled 'genuine bee honey' in a supermarket. The product is correctly labeled in any way. However, you don't think the honey tastes like genuine bee honey.	2.45	0.92	
In a shop, you bought a cheap black sweater and a pair of cheap trousers that you intend to use together. First time you wear the sweater and trouser it shows up that the color of the sweater comes strongly off on the trousers	2.86	0.82	
About half a year ago, you bought a carpet with a rubber padding, which you mounted yourself. Now you realize that the rubber padding sticks to the floor.	3.18	0.83	
You bought a reduced bookcase on a sale. The shop delivers the bookcase to your home unassembled. When you start to assemble it in the evening, you discover a number of large scratches in the tree that you did not notice in the store.	3.32	0.70	
You bought a new refrigerator from a dealer, who installs it for you. After the installation, you discover a two-inch scratch in the paint on the fridge's front door.	3.71	0.53	

Note: Questions about attitudes, norms, and perceived control are measured on a 5-point scale where 1 is "completely agree", 3 is "neither agree nor disagree", and 5 is "completely disagree". In the introduction to questions about dissatisfaction the respondent is asked to imagine that he/she is in the described situation and how satisfied or perhaps rather dissatisfied he/she would be in the described situation. The answers were registered on a 4-point scale with 1 = "almost indifferent", 2 = "slightly dissatisfied", 3 = "dissatisfied", and 4 = "very dissatisfied".

Table 2: Intention to complain in six hypothetical situations, pct. N= 635

Would you complain to the shop?	Socks	Glass of honey	Sweater and trousers	Carpet	Bookcase	Fridge
Yes	21,7	32,0	55,7	81,3	90,7	98,0
No	78,3	68,0	44,3	18,7	9,3	2,0

Table 3: General disposition and specific dissatisfaction as courses of complaining in hypothetical situations; logistic regression analysis with correlated data. N= 635. Observations per individual = 6.¹

	B	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
General propensity to complain ²	1.710	57.438	0.000	5.530
Normalized specific dissatisfaction	3.748	84.083	0.000	42.436
Const.	-2.593	- 43.813	0.000	0,075

¹ -2 log likelihood = 1915.843, p < 0.001. The dependent variable is coded 1 for “yes” and 0 for “no” to complaining.

² The number of times the person would complain in six hypothetical situations.

Table 4: Determinants of the general propensity to complain in hypothetical situations; ordinal regression analysis. N= 635

	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.
Attitude towards complaining	1.103	0.122	81.383	0.000
General dissatisfaction	1.816	0.220	68.318	0.000
Experience with complaining (dichotomized)	0.236	0.156	2.277	0.131
Age	0.014	0.005	8.676	0.003
Attitude x General dissatisfaction	0.396	0.178	4.913	0.027
Attitude x Experience	-0.634	0.202	9.880	0.002
Experience x General dissatisfaction	1.071	0.369	8.413	0.004
<i>Thresholds</i>				
[General propensity to complain= 0]	-5.934	0.747	63.132	0.000
[General propensity to complain= 1]	-3.666	0.352	108.726	0.000
[General propensity to complain= 2]	-1.587	0.272	33.998	0.000
[General propensity to complain= 3]	0.323	0.261	1.531	0.216
[General propensity to complain= 4]	2.227	0.276	65.251	0.000
[General propensity to complain= 5]	4.098	0.317	166.635	0.000

-2 Log Likelihood = 1691.65. Model chi-square = 317.328 (7). $p < 0.001$. Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.41$.