

# SOME CONSUMPTION ORIENTATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH PROPENSITY TO COMPLAIN

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## ABSTRACT

Consumers' propensity to complain is investigated in relation to psychographic, demographic and personality variables, based on data from an exploratory survey. Results tend to confirm propositions previously advanced in the literature suggesting sensitivity to potential monetary and (especially) non-monetary costs as a major deterrent to complaining. Implications for research and marketing practice are considered.

## INTRODUCTION

There is now a substantial literature on consumers' complaining behavior (cf. a comprehensive review of the empirical research, provided by Andreasen 1988, and a recent conceptual scheme offered by Blodgett and Granbois 1992). Although much of the research concerned with identifying characteristics of complainers has focused on demographics, a number of studies have also shed light on complainers' psychographic and value orientations (cf. Morganosky and Buckley 1987).

Different forms of complaining have been recognized, including seeking redress from the seller, engaging in informal negative word-of-mouth communications, and formally directing one's complaint to a third party (Singh 1988). The fact that a relatively small percentage of dissatisfied consumers actually seek redress has been explained as a function of the perception (among many consumers) that the monetary and non-monetary costs of taking any action (beyond informal griping) will often exceed the likely benefits (Bearden and Mason 1984; Day 1984; Richins 1980). Collectively, these propositions have been described as the "cost-benefit model" of consumer complaining behavior, (Andreasen 1988).

Although the hypothesized inverse relationship between consumer complaining behavior (hereafter CCB) and the perceived costs of complaining has often been proposed, it has rarely been examined

empirically. Moreover, existing research on the topic is equivocal. For example, Richins (1987) found this relationship to hold for a Dutch sample, but not for a comparable U.S. sample, and could find no explanation for the discrepancy.

Marketing practice and research in recent years have experienced a shift in focus, from consideration of consumers in the aggregate, to consideration of segments of consumers as an appropriate unit of analysis. The relationship between CCB and perceived costs may be clarified by investigating the possibility that segments of consumers differ in their sensitivities to these potential costs, and are therefore more or less likely to complain.

## CONSUMER COST-SENSITIVITIES

The present paper reports some findings related to consumers' propensity to complain (as a means of seeking redress) based on a study of "cost-orientations" with respect to monetary and non-monetary costs associated with consumption. The underlying concept of consumer cost-orientations was based on a number of streams of research recognizing that consumers seeking any given benefit may be sensitive to a variety of non-monetary costs (in addition to monetary costs such as purchase price) and that such sensitivities can extend beyond product acquisition to concern for costs incurred during consumption and even disposal. Parker and Funkhouser (1987) had summarized this literature in a conceptual matrix that considered the various types of costs (e.g. time, effort) as well as the various aspects of consumption (e.g. acquisition, usage, storage, disposition).

Subsequent empirical research by the present authors involved developing questionnaire items tapping the cells implied by the Parker/Funkhouser matrix, and utilizing the resulting instrument to identify differential sensitivities to the cost areas mentioned above (as a first step toward identifying costsensitivity segments). A previous report of this research presented eleven scales inductively

derived from exploratory empirical analysis of responses of a convenience sample of 311 adults in a major U.S. metropolitan area to a battery of attitudinal items. That paper also discussed relationships between those scales and a number of demographic variables. (For more details of this study see Parker, Funkhouser and Chatterjee 1993.) The scales and the items comprising them are shown in Table 1. They were interpreted as follows:

**Table 1**  
**Consumer Cost-Orientation Scales**

	Item-Scale Correlation (n = 301)
<b>PROCUREMENT INTENSITY (PI)</b>	
1. I go out of my way to get a better price on something I want to buy.	.65
22. Before I buy something expensive, I find out everything I can about it.	.71
33. I talk with people a lot about things I am thinking about buying.	.52
45. I am likely to complain to the seller if something I bought turns out to be less than was promised.	.71
50. If dissatisfied I take advantage of "money back guarantees."	.70
<b>QUALITY/STYLE CONSCIOUSNESS (QC)</b>	
10. I'm always very confident of my taste in clothing.	.63
21. It's important for me to be in style.	.66
38. I put in the effort to take proper care of things so that they will last longer.	.60
51. I think of expensive purchases as investments.	.68
<b>HOUSEHOLD FRUGALITY (HF)</b>	
26. I am very efficient about the routes I use when I go shopping.	.69
39. I save money by buying a lot of something at once and then using it up over a period of time.	.74
40. It's worth it to me to use coupons, rebates and refund offers.	.75
<b>PRICE NO OBJECT (PN)</b>	
47. It's worth it to me to pay a little more and not run the risk of being unhappy with what I buy.	.64
48. I spend a lot more money than I really ought to.	.80
53. I buy whatever I have to without worrying too much about the money.	.74
<b>SAVE TIME NOT MONEY (ST)</b>	
6. I don't mind spending a little extra money to save a little time.	.71
11. I prefer to use convenience foods even when they are more expensive.	.75
15. I buy clothes in stores that are easy to get to, even if the clothes are more expensive.	.68
52. Convenience foods and ready-to-eat foods are to me well worth their higher prices.	.79
<b>HOUSEHOLD PROMOTION (HP)</b>	
9. I have difficulty getting members of my household to eat food that is served to them.	.62
14. There isn't enough storage space in my kitchen.	.72
20. It often takes some convincing to get people in my household to use things I buy for them.	.54
55. A lot of what I buy is for the use of other people in my household.	.64
<b>SHOPPING PLEASURE (SP)</b>	
2. I think shopping is an enjoyable way to spend my time.	.81
(3. I prefer to go to one place and get my shopping all done at once.	-.72)
(42. I find shopping to be a stressful activity.	-.75)
<b>CREDIT BUYING (CB)</b>	
18. I don't pay much attention to interest payments when I buy things on credit.	.65
19. Credit cards are a great convenience for me.	.82
25. It doesn't bother me to buy things with credit cards.	.72
58. I buy on credit whenever I need something and can pay it off over time.	.72
<b>POSITIVE ON HOUSEWORK (PH)</b>	
4. I enjoy cooking meals from scratch.	.83
(12. I don't have a lot of confidence in my cooking ability.	-.74)
41. For me, cooking, gardening and housework are good ways to unwind.	.77
<b>FI#iNDS-ON (HO)</b>	
5. I enjoy assembling toys and other items that I and others in my family buy.	.89
8. I enjoy "do-it-yourself" projects.	.88
<b>BUYING ANXIETY (BA)</b>	
23. I worry about whether or not I am buying the righting.	.84
24. I worry about whether I spend too much for an item.	.80
27. I worry that others won't like gifts and other things I buy for them.	.69

**Procurement Intensity (PI):** These items indicate a willingness to expend time and effort to maximize value. This is similar to a "purchasing involvement" scale developed by Slama and Tashchian (1985), but that construct includes many more items, some of which would be conceptually related to our other scales.

**Quality/Style Consciousness (QC):** Strong scores reflect an interest in achieving and maintaining levels of quality and style. Given perceived correlations between price and both style and quality, monetary expenditures are viewed as investments toward these objectives.

**Household Frugality (HF):** These items pertain to behaviors aimed at achieving economy in operating a household.

**Price No Object (PN):** This scale indicates relative insensitivity to price as compared to other costs.

**Save Time Not Money (ST):** Respondents strongly defined by this scale would be more sensitive to expenditures of time, to the extent that they would make sacrifices of money or even quality (e.g. use of convenience foods) in order to save it.

**Household Promotion (HP):** Persons who buy for others' consumption, such as homemakers, must often do a "selling job" to get others to consume. They may thus be sensitive to the "promotional" effort required of them by certain purchases.

**Shopping Pleasure (SP):** Shopping can be experienced as a form of recreation or a source of ego-gratification, rather than a cost in the procurement process (Bellenger and Korgaonkar 1980; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Schindler 1989).

**Credit Buying (CB):** A propensity to use credit and credit cards. Stronger scores suggest insensitivity to financing costs.

**Positive on Housework (PH):** Like shopping, household duties can be perceived in negative terms as costs, in positive terms as important responsibilities or forms of recreation, or in neutral terms as things that simply have to be done.

**Hands-On (HO):** Household processing or assembly projects can be motivated by money-saving or recreational interests. Weaker scores here indicate greater sensitivity to time and

effort involved in such activities.

**Buying Anxiety (BA):** Buying can involve social-psychological risks and costs. Consumers with strong scores on this scale might be willing to trade off other types of costs (e.g. money, effort) in order to reduce their worries.

(With regard to reliability, Cronbach's alpha for these scales ranged from .55 to .75. Although this is considered satisfactory for newly-developed scales in the early stages of research [Nunnally 1978; Peter 1979], it clearly suggests a need for continued scale development as this project moves beyond the exploratory stage.)

Subsequently, a second wave of questionnaires was administered in the same manner to another convenience sample of 315 adults. The second questionnaire was similar to the first except that personality items were substituted for the original demographic items. Preliminary analysis of the second data set (not yet reported) revealed a high degree of consistency with the prior wave, and a number of suggestive relationships between these scales and personality variables.

One of the scales relating significantly to both demographic and personality variables was Procurement Intensity (PI) which, as mentioned earlier, was a kind of "consumption involvement" measure. One of the most important items in this scale was the statement (to which responses were made on a five-point Likert type scale) "I am likely to complain to the seller if something I bought turns out to be less than was promised." For the purposes of the present paper, that item was removed from the PI scale and treated as a dependent variable. (The limitations of a single-item measure of the dependent variable could not be overcome, given the current instrument. Although some previous research has shown that multiple-item measures do not necessarily outperform single-item measures in this context [cf. Day, Lee and Johnson 1985], it was expected that any tentative findings from this phase of the study could be confirmed with an improved measure in future research.)

The working hypothesis of this phase of the study was that propensity to complain (hereafter PTC) would be positively related to those scales indicating greater willingness to expend non-monetary resources in consumption (which would be consistent with propositions to that effect

made in the literature cited above). Conversely, it was expected that scales suggesting convenience orientations inconsistent with time and effort expenditures would be inversely related to PTC.

### COSTS AND PROPENSITY TO COMPLAIN

Relationships identified in the current phase of this project appear to confirm the hypothesis that consumer orientations to non-monetary costs of complaining behavior, notably to time and effort expenditures, influence the propensity to complain. Table 2 indicates that four of our scales show strongly significant relationships to PTC in both of our samples, and three other scales are significantly related to it in one wave. Not surprisingly, the PTC item is most strongly related to the PI scale, from which it was extracted. The items in this scale reflect an involved shopper, willing to invest time and effort in search, acquisition, and seeking redress. Similarly, the positively related Household Frugality (HF) scale contains items suggesting a willingness to expend time and effort, especially as a means of reducing monetary expenditures. The positively related Quality/Style Consciousness (QC) scale suggests that PTC is not just a matter of money, but a critical reaction to the failure of a market offering to achieve expected levels of quality and/or style. Association with the Hands-On (HO) scale reflects the pleasure experienced by high scorers on that scale from expenditures of time and effort during the consumption process. Personal satisfaction from time and effort expenditures also characterize high scorers on the positively related Positive on Housework (PH) scale.

*Inverse* relationships between PTC and the Save Time Not Money (ST) and Credit Buying (CB) scales are also consistent with our working hypothesis. High scorers on ST will sacrifice money and even product quality in order to save time and effort. Those most fond of CB also appear to have a convenience orientation incompatible with investments of time and effort. Persons with these orientations may at times be dissatisfied with unsatisfactory products, but be unwilling to expend the nonmonetary resources required to obtain redress. Stated differently, CCB requires doing some work, which only certain consumers are willing to do. Thus the inverse

relationship between perceived costs and complaining will have quite a different slope for different segments of consumers. (PTC will also vary by product importance [cf. Richins 1980, 1985], a topic not addressed in the present study.)

**Table 2**  
**Cost-Orientation and Personality Correlates of Propensity to Complain**

Scale	Wave I (n=311)	Wave II (n=315)
Procurement Intensity (PI)	.47 <sup>1</sup>	.39
Quality/Style Consciousness (QC)	.19	.20
Household Frugality (HF)	.23	.30
Save Time Not Money (ST)	-.17	n.s.
Credit Buying (CB)	-.12*	n.s.
Positive on Housework (PH)	.12*	n.s.
Hands-On (HO)	.31	.16
Serious-Minded (vs. Carefree)	n.a.	18

<sup>1</sup> Pearsonian correlation coefficients, all significant at  $p=.01$ , except those marked with an asterisk (\*), which are significant at  $p=.05$

Other scales primarily tapping social-psychological costs of consumption (e.g. Buying Anxiety) were not significantly related to PTC. Moreover, of sixteen personality traits (adapted from Cattell's 16 Personality Factor scheme) explored in relation to consumption orientations in Wave 2, only one, the trait of being serious-minded (as opposed to carefree) related significantly to PTC. This suggests that PTC is primarily a rational, resource allocation issue, rather than a matter of personality.

### SELF-CATEGORIZATIONS AND PROPENSITY TO COMPLAIN

One of the other items in the first-wave questionnaire was designed to allow respondents to characterize their overall self-conception with respect to their consuming style. Respondents were asked which of several statements would be most appropriate for their "consumer tee-shirts." This was based on the expectation that consumers would be familiar with the common practice of using objects such as tee-shirts and bumper stickers to make "self-statements" (Stern and Solomon 1992).

Designed as a form of self-selection segmentation technique, this item was expected to coincide with scores on the scales described in Table 1. For the purposes of the present paper, mean scores on PTC were computed for persons choosing each self-statement.

**Table 3**  
**"Tee-shirt" Self-Statements Related to**  
**Propensity to Complain<sup>1</sup>**  
 (n=310)

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Mean Score</u>
Born to Spend	3.41 <sup>2</sup>
Anything for a Bargain	2.80
Careful Planner	2.69
Just Drop it on the Doorstep and Don't Make Me Worry About It	3.49
As Tight as the Bark on a Tree	2.75
Efficiency Expert	2.63

#### Summary

Higher PTC: Efficiency Expert  
 Careful Planner  
 As Tight as the Bark on a Tree  
 Anything for a Bargain

Lower PTC: Just Drop it on the Doorstep and  
 Don't Make Me Worry About It  
 Born to Spend

<sup>1</sup> F-ratio significant at  $p=.0001$ , one-way analysis of variance.

<sup>2</sup> In this table, the lower the score, the greater the respondent's identification with the items.

As can be seen from Table 3, higher scores on PTC were associated with selection of the self-statements "Efficiency Expert," "Careful Planner," "As Tight as the Bark on a Tree," and "Anything for a Bargain." Again, these statements tend to suggest a high level of involvement in consumption, and a tendency to be cautious about one's resources. Lowest scores on PTC were associated with selection of the statement "Just Drop it on the Doorstep and Don't Make Me Worry About It," which suggests a low level of involvement in consumption, and a relatively

higher sensitivity to expenditures of non-monetary resources. The "Born to Spend" group also scored quite low on PTC, suggesting the kind of person whose response to dissatisfaction with a product is simply to throw it away and buy a different one.

#### **GENDER AND STATED PROPENSITY TO COMPLAIN**

The first-wave questionnaire included demographic variables of gender, age, income, education and employment status. Although many of these were statistically related to the original scales, most showed weak and statistically insignificant relationships to PTC, possibly because the sample contained relatively few people at the extremes of any item (e.g. there were no extremely poor, young, or uneducated respondents). The only demographic variable significantly related to our PTC measure was gender, with men having disproportionately higher scores. This was unexpected, because nothing in the literature pointed clearly to men doing objectively more complaining than women. For example, Strahle and Day (1985) found generally weak relationships between gender and various responses to dissatisfaction, and the relationship between gender and "contacting the store or manufacturer to complain" (the item most comparable to our dependent variable) was not statistically significant. Moreover, a more recent study by Strahle, Hernandez, Garcia and Sorensen (1992) found women more likely to take comparable action as a response to dissatisfaction.

The current result may warrant renewed investigation of the possibility that men are more likely to complain, or it may actually reflect an inherent limitation of such self-report measures of behavioral tendencies. In this case, some men may have felt obligated (by "macho" expectations) to portray themselves as more likely to take action as a response to dissatisfaction than they actually are. That is, admitting to not taking action in the context of a grievance might be perceived as weak or "unmanly." Future research on this matter should anticipate such a response bias and attempt to design items not subject to it.

## DISCUSSION

The profile of the consumer with a propensity to complain (as a means of seeking redress) that emerges from the present study is of someone "conscientious" about consumption, willing to expend non-monetary resources such as time and effort in obtaining both products and redress. Given the exploratory nature of the study, this profile should be viewed as tentative, pending refinements in the instrument and administration to a probability sample. However, consistency with propositions previously advanced in the literature suggests that this is a promising first step. Future research can examine in greater detail the psychographic determinants of complaining that have been suggested here, and relate them more directly to demographic factors.

Complaining can be viewed either as behavior consistent with an overall willingness to expend non-monetary resources in consumption, or as a means of recouping the legitimately anticipated benefits of previously-invested resources. Complaint-prone consumers' involvement in consumption is not merely "recreational" (Bellenger and Korgaonkar 1980), but is rather an instrumental means of achieving levels of value (given the concerns for quality and style) perceived as unfairly denied.

When such consumers perceive marketers to be the cause of their dissatisfaction, that dissatisfaction is likely to involve sensitivity to expenditures of both non-monetary and monetary resources. Marketers should be aware that, in these circumstances, simply offering to replace an item, repeat a service, or refund the complainer's money, without addressing the consumer's non-monetary investments, may not be perceived as an adequate remedy. Marketers interested in retaining such customers should seriously consider offering them some compensation for their time and effort, and possibly also for any social-psychological risks they may have taken. Such compensation may at times require little more than recognition of these expenditures and risks, so that the complainant does not leave the scene, ostensibly having received some remedy, but actually with some residual dissatisfaction based on the marketer's lack of sensitivity to the full range of costs incurred.

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