TAXONOMY OF THE INFLUENCE OF OTHER CUSTOMERS IN CONSUMER COMPLAINT BEHAVIOR: A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Most research in consumer complaint behavior (CCB) emphasizes the motivations for making complaints, complaint responses, and subsequent behavior; however, the role of interpersonal influence on CCB has drawn little attention. This study investigates CCB from a social-psychological perspective according to social facilitation effects and interpersonal influence literature. Based on a qualitative study via a modified critical incident technique, this study identifies four major categories consisting of 17 subcategories of interpersonal influence on CCB. The findings suggest that the mere presence (physical and mental) of other customers (acquainted and unacquainted) may play a critical role in consumers' decisions to make complaints in the service context. Sources of others' influences on complaint decisions are identified. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing researchers have attempted to better understand consumer complaint behavior (CCB) in the past three decades due to the fact that it is an important post-evaluation response of consumer dissatisfaction (Liu and McClure 2001). Within the service/product context (e.g., Liu and McClure 2001), past research on CCB has mainly focused on consumers' motivations for making complaints (e.g., Morel, Poiesz, and Wilke 1997), complaint responses (e.g., Day and Bodur 1978; Hirschman 1970; Singh 1990), effects of complaining (e.g., Nyer 2000), subsequent behavior (e.g., Blodgett and Anderson, 2000),

consumer complaint handling (e.g., Estelami 2000), and non-complaining (e.g., Chebat, Davidow, and Codjovi 2005).

A neglected area in CCB is the potential effect of other customers on an individual's complaint behavior. It is possible that the mere presence (i.e., simply "being there" with no interaction) of and/or interaction with acquainted or unacquainted others at the time of service failure may influence consumers' complaint decision-making processes and, ultimately, their complaint behavior. Although no known research has directly investigated this issue, there is evidence to suggest such a proposition.

First, the importance of social significance in consumer satisfaction was mentioned by Day (1977). According to Day (1977), people have the desire for the approval of others for publicly- or jointly-consumed products. The reaction of other consumers to a purchase may have influence on the purchaser's satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction level with respect to a purchase. This social factor seems to play a critical role in satisfaction.

Second, the importance of social presence (i.e., presence of other customers) has been investigated in the field of consumer research (e.g., Argo, Dahl, and Manchanda 2005; Dahl, Manchanda, and Argo 2001; Luo 2005; McGrath and Otnes 1995). With respect to the level of acquaintance, McGrath and Otnes (1995) examined different types of influence among unacquainted consumers in the retail setting by using the framework of interpersonal influence. They concluded that strangers are sometimes a source of inspiration and frustration during the shopping process, depending on consumers'

shopping activities and how they perceive challenges of accomplishing tasks. Regarding the type of presence, through the use of a field study approach, Dahl et al. (2001) found that social presence of another individual or group of individuals (either real or imagined) during purchase can create embarrassment for consumers (Dahl et al. 2001). Recently, Luo (2005) further applied the concept of social presence in understanding consumer impulse buying behavior.

Third, Zajonc's (1965) social facilitation theory recognizes the importance of the social environment on individuals' behavior and posits that the mere presence of others (i.e., without interaction between individuals taking place) can affect an individual's behavior. Some studies have been conducted to understand consumer shopping behavior and online auction behavior in relation to this theory (e.g., Sommer and Sommer 1989; Rafaeli and Noy 2002). This study further proposes that consumers' decisions to make complaints may be dependent on their perceptions of other customers' presence.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the role of other customers in CCB, in the service context, from a social-psychological perspective. The service context is chosen because of its inseparability property (Zeithaml and Bitner 2003), i.e., the simultaneous production and consumption of services, requiring the involvement of the customer. As the customer is taking part in the commingled production-consumption process, the same customer is often exposed to other customers. In addition to precepts from CCB literature, the present investigation utilizes the interpersonal influence literature (e.g., Dahl et al. 2001; McGrath and Otnes 1995) and theory of social facilitation effect (Zajonc 1965) as its frameworks.

The exploratory study addresses the question as to whether the presence (physical and mental) of other customers (acquainted and unacquainted) influence dissatisfied customers' decisions to make complaints. Specifically, we seek to answer the following questions: "Do others in the service environment, acquainted and unacquainted, affect consumers' voicing complaints to service providers? "Can others influence consumers' voice complaint behavior even if they are not physically present with the consumer?" If so, how do acquainted or unacquainted others who are present or not present in the service environment affect consumers' complaint behavior? In other words, what are the sources of influence? In order to answer these questions, we attempt to identify and categorize the potential types of influence via a qualitative method (i.e., modified critical incident technique) in hopes that existing knowledge related to CCB as well as interpersonal influence is enhanced.

This article consists of four sections. First, past literature in CCB and social influences will be discussed with an emphasis on two theories that help guide this research, including interpersonal influence and social facilitation effect. Second, the methodology section explains data collection, nature of respondents, and the coding technique used to obtain meaningful results pertaining to this research. Third, results will be presented. Finally, discussion and conclusions will be presented as well as future research directions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Consumer Complaint Behavior

Complaint behavior is generally related to the emotional reactions of dissatisfied consumers due to a product and/or service failure. According to Jacoby and Jaccard (1981), it is defined as "an action taken by an individual which involves communicating something negative regarding a product or service to either the firm manufacturing or marketing that product or service, or to some third-party organizational

entity [such as the Better Business Bureau or the Federal Trade Commission] (p.6)." Past research categorizes complaint behavior on two levels. At the first (behavioral) level, dissatisfied consumers would take actions and express their unhappiness toward the seller/service provider, their family, and friends, or even a third party (Crie and Ladwein 2002; Singh 1988). They make complaints in order to achieve certain goals, including seeking redress and boycotting the product or service (Day 1984). At the second (non-behavioral) level, no specific action is taken by the displeased consumer due to several reasons, such as no desire to voice complaints or not being able to recall the incident (Crie and Ladwein 2002).

Researchers have investigated different factors that determine complaint behavior, and findings indicate that perceived dissatisfaction is a necessary antecedent (Crie and Ladwein 2002; Oliver 1987). However, complaint behavior does not always take place when dissatisfaction is experienced (e.g., Chebat et al. 2005; Crie and Ladwein 2002). Consumers' perceptions of cost/profit ratios with respect to complaining, types of purchase, loyalty to the brand and/or store, individual personality, and demographic variables are likely to have an impact on how consumers respond (Crie and Ladwein 2002). Crie and Ladwein (2002) utilized commitment theory to explain complaint behavior and proposed that the buyer-seller relationship may shape the response style of dissatisfaction. Other research suggests that CCB varies by store characteristics, attitudes toward complaining, perceptions of likelihood of success, and factors related to stability and controllability (Blodgett and Anderson 2000; Chebat et al. 2005). As stated, no known studies have examined the role of interpersonal influence as a determinant of complaint behavior. However, Folkes (1984), in a study on the effects of attribution on consumers' reactions to service failures, acknowledged the possible influence of others' presence on consumer reactions to product failure.

Interpersonal Influence on Consumer Behavior

The importance of social influence has been addressed in the field of consumer behavior with the focus on interpersonal influence from *acquainted* customers with whom the consumer has a certain relationship, such as family (e.g., Moschis 1985), peers (e.g., Childers and Rao 1992), and reference groups (e.g., Bearden and Etzel 1982). For example, Lascu and Zinkhan (1999) examined how consumers conform to other people's influence in marketing settings and recognized several factors that influence consumer conformity, including group characteristics, task difficulty (i.e., clarity of outcome), past experiences, and personality traits. In terms of group characteristics, they found that the size of group, leadership, likelihood of future interaction with the group, and extent of consensus affect consumers' desire to conform.

Researchers have also recognized interpersonal influence from *unacquainted* customers (e.g., McGrath and Otnes 1995). McGrath and Otnes (1995) studied stranger interaction in the retail setting and concluded that interactions among unacquainted consumers do, in fact, take place; these experiences can either help or hamper shopping experiences in both overt and covert manners. The authors defined overt influences as actual face-to-face interactions between strangers; covert influences are referred to as the situation in which only one customer is conscious of the influence during the encounter.

While the importance of physical social presence of acquainted and unacquainted others has been recognized, a scholar suggests that it is not necessary for the social audience to be physically present to have an impact (Miller 1996). Consumers may be alone and imagine that others in the surrounding environment are watching them and their actions. The imagined action of a

social presence may be associated with a person or a group of people (Latané 1981), which has been found to affect consumers' levels of embarrassment during purchase processes (Dahl et al. 2001). It is also posited that imagined social presence may be associated with word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. People are likely to make inferences based on information received through WOM communication (Wilson and Peterson 1989). Sources of WOM communication, regardless of the level of acquaintance, may be regarded as social audiences which are not physically present. Thus, it is proposed that consumers imagine the presence of others and recollect the information that they have learned from them (i.e., WOM communication), which, in turn, may have an effect on their complaining decisions.

Social Facilitation Effects

According to Zajonc (1965), the tenets of social facilitation theory predict that the mere presence of others influence individual behavior and performance. That is, influences may occur even when the individual does not interact with other people in the surrounding environment. The presence of others may either enhance or impair an individual's performance.

Academicians have developed three major explanations for the social facilitation phenomenon (Aiello and Douthitt 2001). Drive theory suggests that the mere presence of others may increase physiological arousal (or drive) within an individual, which, in turn, makes a simple task or well-learned task easier to accomplish. Conversely, the same arousal could render a complicated or new learning task more difficult (Aronson, Wilson, and Akert 1999). The premise is that others may have some significance to the performer (e.g., potential for reward/punishment) that may affect an individual's performance (Zajonc 1980). Based on drive theory, social comparison theorists suggest that individuals

may be affected by others due to their concern that they are being evaluated. Thus, according to this theory, arousal or drive is only elicited when an individual's performance is thought to be assessed by the others (Cottrell 1972). Lastly, cognitive process theory explains the effects of the mere presence of others on the attention to and processing of different types and amounts of information. For instance, rather than processing information about the task at hand, the mere presence of others may cause an individual to redirect his/her attention to the others in an effort to assess whether or not they are monitoring his/her performance or may pose a threat. This theory extends influencers on drive or arousal, and ultimately on performance, to include situational, individual, and group size factors (Paulus 1983).

In a comprehensive review of social facilitation literature and research, Aiello and Douthitt (2001) offered a unifying framework that identifies five major factors that affect how the presence of others influences a performer's behavior. These factors include type of presence factors (e.g., type of presence, relationship of other with performing individual), situational factors (e.g., feedback from others), individual factors including perceptions and reactions of individual as well as their characteristics, task factors (e.g., complexity of task), and performance factors (e.g., cooperation/competition).

Social Facilitation Effects and Consumers

Grounded in the social-psychology field, social facilitation effects have been found in the field of consumer behavior. Depending on situations, social facilitation can have both positive and negative effects on consumption behaviors (Gaumer and LaFief 2005). For example, past research has revealed that consumers who are accompanied by others spend more time shopping in stores. Sommer and Sommer

(1989) found that the presence of others extends consumers' length of stay and, thus, increases purchases. Rafaeli and Noy (2002) harnessed the theory of social facilitation for understanding online auctions and concluded that participants of online bidding tend to stay longer in the auction activity and perform better during the auction when exposed to a higher level of virtual presence of other bidders. On the other hand, Gaumer and LaFief (2005) proposed that social facilitation theory indicates that crowding may influence the customer's purchase decision as well as result in negative emotions and behaviors (e.g., deindividuation). Consumers may buy items that they usually would not or vice versa when they perceive others as evaluating them and, thus, behave differently.

METHOD

The influence of other customers on CCB is explored through a qualitative methodology similar to the critical incident technique (CIT). Critical incidents refer to the descriptions of events and behaviors. CIT is a method of classification that helps determine categories based on an analysis of a specific set of data. It is especially useful when the purpose of the research is to enhance knowledge of a phenomenon that has not been extensively documented (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990). While CIT has been mainly adopted to analyze data from interviews or observations, the current study utilizes a modified version that allows respondents to provide answers to relevant questions in written form.

Data Collection

In order to explore the role of other customers in CCB, critical incidents were collected from a convenience sample of undergraduate students majoring in business-related programs at a southwestern university. This sampling technique is deemed appropriate when the research is exploratory in nature. The students were requested to answer the following questions outside of class and to submit them to the researchers within a two-week period. In order to gain more insights into the topic of interest, the students were encouraged to complete the questions by being given extra credit incentives in their respective classes.

- Please think of a situation in which you have experienced poor service in the service setting (e.g., airlines, restaurants, hotels, etc.) and thought about making a complaint.
- Please describe the situation. Why did you feel dissatisfied?
- Did you finally make a complaint? If yes, then please think back, 1) Why did you decide to complain? 2) How did you complain? and 3) What were the processes and the outcome? If you did not complain, then please give reason(s) why you decided not to complain.
- Do you think the presence of other customer(s), including those you knew and those you did not know, had any impact on your decision to complain or not to complain? Why?
- How difficult/easy did you feel it was to make a complaint in your situation? What made it so difficult/easy for you?

The above questions required the respondents to recall past experiences regarding complaint behavior, including the situations and possible factors that encouraged and/or discouraged their decisions to make complaints. More specific questions regarding the presence of other customer(s) were posed to ensure that sufficient information about the influence of

others in a complaint behavior setting would be obtained.

A total of 97 respondents, 82 females and 15 males, documented their dissatisfying experiences which resulted in 97 incidents. Of the 97 incidents, 34 were in the context of restaurants, 20 in airlines, 11 in phone services, 13 in retail services, and the balance in automobile rental, hotel, and other service industries. Of the total sample, 27 respondents were dropped from further analysis due to the fact that no relevant information regarding other customer(s) in the setting was mentioned, culminating in a useable sample of 70 incidents.

Classification of Incidents

For the purpose of this research, a similar analytic technique to the one used by Bitner, et al. (1990) was employed. This study's data analysis involved several stages. First, on a separate basis, each of the researchers carefully read and sorted the incidents into categories. Each researcher reviewed the critical incidents for similarities and differences that pertained to the influence of other customer(s) in reported experiences. Second, the researchers compared the results of the initial stage of analysis, identifying the similarities and differences between researchers' classifications. Each incident was assigned to only one category. Thorough reading of incidents and the actual words used by the respondent were considered in category assignment in cases where potential overlapping might occur. Interjudge agreement on the assignment of incidents into categories was 87%. Differences in categorical results were discussed until a consensus on categories was achieved. Third, the researchers labeled categories through further discussion.

RESULTS

Four major categories of influence of other customers emerged from this study. The first dimension is concerned with the relationship the consumer has with other customers in the service context (i.e., acquainted versus unacquainted customers). The second dimension is involved with the type of social audience surrounding the consumer (i.e., physical presence versus mental presence) (see Figure 1). The first category, *Acquainted Customers with Physical Presence*, consists of three subcategories:

(1) Encouragement/Confidence/Support,
(2) Embarrassment Avoidance, and
(3) Obligation.

The second category, *Unacquainted Customers with Physical Presence*, encompasses eight subcategories:

(1) Encouragement/Confidence/Support,
(2) Embarrassment Avoidance,
(3) Altruism,
(4) Problem Awareness through Service Comparison,
(5) Leadership,
(6) Diffusion of Responsibility,
(7) Accessibility, and
(8) Revenge.

The third category, *Acquainted Customers with Mental Presence*, includes three subcategories:

(1) Confidence/Support,
(2) Supplemented Annoyance, and
(3) Heightened Anticipation.

Finally, the fourth category, *Unacquainted Customers with Mental Presence,* addresses three categories:

(1) Supplemented Annoyance,
(2) Altruism, and
(3) Sympathy.

The following is a description of the major categories and respective subcategories

with respect to respondents' descriptions of how other customers, present at the time of service failure, influenced their CCB.

FIGURE 1

Taxonomy of the Influence of Other Customers in Consumer Complaint Behavior

		Level of Acquaintance	
		Acquainted Customers (family, peers, friends, etc.)	**Unacquainted Customers**
Type of Social Presence	**Physical Presence**	• Encouragement/Confidence/Support • Embarrassment Avoidance • Obligation	• Encouragement/Confidence/Support • Embarrassment Avoidance • Altruism • Problem Awareness through Service Comparison • Leadership • Diffusion of Responsibility • Accessibility • Revenge
	Mental Presence	• Confidence/Support • Supplemented Annoyance • Heightened Anticipation	• Supplemented Annoyance • Altruism • Sympathy

Acquainted Customers with Physical Presence

Past research indicates that interpersonal influence occurs through family, peers, or reference groups (e.g., Bearden and Etzel 1982; Childers and Rao 1992; Moschis 1985). According to the findings, acquainted customers include family members, peers, friends, and significant others.

Encouragement/Confidence/Support

Encouragement/confidence/support refers to the strength from family members,

peers, and friends given to customers in the wake of service failures. The transference of strength results in customers feeling right and correct about their decisions to voice dissatisfaction. The data show strong evidence that family members, especially parents, can have major influence on respondents' complaint behavior. For example, two different female respondents mentioned the impact that their parents had on them when encountering dissatisfying experiences.

"My dad had a huge impact in my complaint. He had such an impact because

he told me how the situation turned out was completely unfair…."

"…I was a little disappointed because I was craving a juicy rare steak. However, my mother finally convinced me to speak up about my order…."

In addition to family influence, findings reveal that the large size of the group of acquaintances helped some respondents feel more confident and supported, driving their decisions to complain. This finding is consistent with the study by Lascu and Zinkhan (1999). Being accompanied by a large group is likely to help consumers have greater confidence in voicing their dis-satisfaction to the service provider.

"My party had about 17 people in it, and all of us were very upset…Having a large group definitely encouraged us to complain because we out-numbered the manager and waitress."

Embarrassment Avoidance

Embarrassment avoidance occurs when consumers feel uncomfortable in making complaints because they are accompanied by other acquainted customers and do not want to bring perceived negative attention to themselves. The lesser tendency to make a complaint appears to be caused by the potential damage to the consumer's self-image and/or reputation.

"I just don't want to look 'difficult' in front of my friends and family…Their presence had a great impact on why I chose not to complain. I didn't want to make a scene or gain a reputation with the group…."

The dampening effect of others on vocalizing dissatisfaction may also be associated with the potential reaction of acquainted others. For example, being accompanied by a person who is highly likely to cause a raucous when a complaint is registered may reduce the customer's desire to voice dissatisfaction. In an incident related to airline services, a respondent stated that her reasoning behind the decision not to complain was the fear that it might ignite her friend to respond in an embarrassing fashion.

"I didn't want to get her involved as well. This was due to her sometimes getting carried away if she becomes upset. So to avoid a scene and added frustration, I decided to walk away."

Obligation

Obligation is defined as complaints made due to the customer's consideration and concern for his/her acquaintance's service experience in the hope that it will turn out satisfactory. Most incidents related to this subcategory took place in a restaurant setting.

"…my friends did have an impact on my decision to complain (to request for faster service for the vegetable dish). Since my friends are a middle-age couple, I respect them since they are older than me. I wanted to make this dining experience enjoyable for them. Also, since they really wanted to try this vegetable dish, I did not want to disappoint them…"

The obligation can also be expanded to include the notion that respondents feel the responsibility to help relieve the stress of those accompanying them. In the following example, a respondent reported a very unpleasant dining experience in a café in which the waitress's rude behavior was upsetting a companion.

"My sister's friend became extremely embarrassed, and almost to the point of tears…I decided to complain because I could not believe such behavior was going on. Furthermore, I feel sorry for my sister's friend who was very upset…The presence of

my sister and her friend definitely compelled me to complain…."

Unacquainted Customers with Physical Presence

Through in-store observations, McGrath and Otnes (1995) investigated stranger interactions in the retail setting and detected that strangers can influence consumer behavior via both overt (i.e., actual face-to-face interaction between two customers) and covert (i.e., awareness of influence on the part of only one customer) effects. In this category, eight subcategories were identified. Some of the critical incidents reported by the respondents illustrate how unacquainted customers play different roles in determining complaint actions.

Encouragement/Confidence/Support

Similar to the encouragement provided by acquainted customers (e.g., parents), the findings reveal that unacquainted customers are likely to make the consumer feel confident and supported. This support sends signals to the consumer that it is appropriate to take a stand when a service failure occurs.

"I was unsatisfied because the airline did nothing to remedy the situation…talking to the other customers helped gain more confidence in knowing that I was right and that what the airline was doing was wrong."

Similar to the context of "acquainted" customers, larger groups of unacquainted customers seem to be associated with greater perceptions of support, potentially resulting in a greater probability that a complaint will be levied.

"They also have the same problem and we thought if more people complain maybe the problem would get fixed…"

The results also reveal that the consumer tends to look for specialized help from other customers in terms of complaining to service providers. The help may take several forms including unacquainted customers serving as witnesses and/or providing testimonials about the severity of the service failure. This is similar to overt stranger influences (e.g., help-seeker; proactive helper) identified by McGrath and Otnes (1995). Here is the example:

"The customers around me which totaled well over 150 people not only acknowledged my argument with the supervisor but were agreeing with me and making comments to him about the rude treatment."

Embarrassment Avoidance

Embarrassment avoidance, also found in the "acquainted" customer category, refers to the situation in which consumers feel uncomfortable in making complaints because they are surrounded by other unacquainted customers and do not want to make a scene. The fact that these consumers choose not to complain in the presence of other customers, unknown to them, may point to the importance of their public images.

"…if I hadn't been in a crowded airport I might have caused more of a fuss and demanded to make them let me on the plane. Because of the amount of people around I did not want to cause a huge scene."

The embarrassment resulting from being surrounded by a group of unknown customers may reflect negative feelings examined in Argo et al.'s (2005) study. They found that the size of the group may increase the negative emotions of customers especially within close proximity (e.g., in the airport).

Altruism

Altruism, similar to "obligation" in the acquainted customer category, refers to customers' genuine concern for other present customers. The hope appears to be that, if the customer complains, other customers' suffering will end. This subcategory is labeled *altruism* rather than "obligation" to help differentiate and reflect the fact that these individuals are willing to complain for others with whom they have no relationship (i.e., unacquainted customers). As suggested by Batson (1991), altruism can be defined as a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare (p. 6). For example, one respondent who experienced an airline service failure reported the following experience.

"...the other customers' presence helped me want to complain more. I did not like to see how the other customers were being treated...."

Problem Awareness through Service Comparison

Problem awareness through service comparison is an experience in which customers' decisions to complain, on their own behalf, are influenced by comparing their own service with that of unacquainted others. The comparison focuses on the equality or inequality of service treatment. In some instances, this comparison precipitates customers' awareness that, indeed, they are recipients of poor service. Through a comparative evaluation of the service provided to other unacquainted customers, consumers may realize it is necessary for them to speak up about their plight.

"The thing made us all mad was that the table next to us, which had five people at it, got their food before we did and they sat down after us. They had all ordered full meals

and we didn't understand why it was taking our three mini pizzas so long."

Customers may also make inferences about the cause of the unequal service provisions. For example, some respondents felt that the reason for their receiving poorer service, as compared to other customers, was their younger status.

"I think the fact that I looked young and like a student had a lot to do with why I did not get the help I needed. I saw many older people who looked like they had money get helped...I complained because I was treated unfairly..."

Although in the abovementioned instances comparisons resulted in complaints being registered, it is possible that comparison helps the consumer to realize that other customers are also experiencing the same level of service, preventing him/her from voicing dissatisfaction. The following example reveals how consumers may choose not to complain after experiencing an unpleasant service failure.

"...the pilot and everyone working aboard the flight were trying to calm everyone down. We were all really annoyed and wanted to complain but it is obvious that the situation affected everyone ...everyone was going through discomfort..."

Leadership

Leadership is an influence that occurs when it becomes apparent that, in order to receive attention from service providers who may correct the situation, someone in a group of people must to take the initiative to make a complaint on behalf of the group. Unlike the influence of "problem awareness through service comparison", which pertains to the degree of fairness with one's service in comparison to others' service and the decision to complain for one's self, leadership arises when the consumer realizes that everyone is

experiencing the same problem and feels that he/she must emerge as a leader to inform the service provider about the situation.

"I think all the other customers that had this woman as a waitress wanted to complain. I decided to take the initiative because working in retail myself I know how important it is to be courteous to customers…."

Diffusion of Responsibility

In contrast to the leadership influence, the findings revealed that some consumers decide not to make complaints because they think other customers will do so in their place. This subcategory is referred to as diffusion of responsibility. *Diffusion of responsibility* influence occurs when an individual's sense of responsibility is diminished in the presence of other onlookers (Crooks and Stein 1991). In the CCB context, when other customers are present, some individuals believe that those around them may take the lead in complaining, relieving these individuals of this unpleasant duty.

"… I figured that someone out of our group would complain and that would be enough for me that the airline is aware of what went on."

Accessibility

Accessibility is defined as the perception that physical presence of other customers may make the task of approaching the service provider a more difficult one. According to the results, some consumers tend to perceive complaining to be more problematic as the number of customers increases. The other customers, acting as physical barriers, pose challenges to individuals in accessing employees. The lack of accessibility, due to the crowding, may deter consumers from finally complaining.

"I think the presence of other customers had an impact on my decision not to complain. First off the pickup area was very crowded and noisy. I didn't want to have to fight my way to the front…"

Revenge

Revenge relates to the consumer's desire to hurt the business by vocalizing complaints within the hearing distance of other present customers. The complaints are expressed when complainers can be sure that their efforts will result in making other customers aware of the service provider's failings. One male respondent sought such revenge on a national retail chain.

"I voiced my complaint loud and proud! I wanted the other customers to know what happened."

The influence discussed in the following section involves dissatisfied consumers whose decisions to make complaints were based on the mental presence, rather than physical presence, of other customers, either acquainted or unacquainted.

Acquainted Customers with Mental Presence

Confidence/Support

This subcategory indicates that acquainted customers who are absent from the service setting may also provide mental support for consumers' decisions to make complaints. Without being accompanied by their acquaintances, dissatisfied consumers may imagine the presence of their family or friends and what their family or friends would have suggested. Then, they choose how to deal with the situation based on their imagination. In this case, family and peers tend to lend support and provide reasons for having to make complaints even though they may not be physically present. A female

respondent stated her problem with the local phone company and decided to complain.

> "...it was easy to complain because we had support. Many other people we knew had the same problems…"

Supplemented Annoyance

The subcategory, *supplemented annoyance*, addresses the situation in which consumers may get angrier with the service provider due to the recall of their acquaintance's disappointing experiences and finally choose to complain even when the acquaintances are not physically present in the situation. The consumer might feel more annoyed simply because they recall how their friends had been treated by the same service provider and know that the service provider had not done much to rectify the problem.

> "The negative experiences some of my friends had with Sprint influenced me to make the complaint because I was fed up with the company."

Heightened Anticipation

Communication with family and/or friends regarding appropriate levels of service may heighten the individual's anticipation as to how the service should be provided. With expectations influenced by acquainted others' previous communications, complaints may be levied when they otherwise would not have been made. Here the expectations are formed based on information obtained from WOM communication through acquaintances, such as family and friends. This sub-category is termed *heightened anticipation*.

> "I decided to complain because I was told (by friends) that usually beer companies are pretty good about customer satisfaction and it might be worthwhile to let them know I was unhappy."

Unacquainted Customers with Mental Presence

Supplemented Annoyance

Effects similar to supplemented annoyance in the acquainted customer context may also take place when consumers' decisions to complain are influenced by un-acquainted customers who are not physically present. According to our findings, consumers may seek information provided by other customers from various sources (e.g., consumers' complaints made to Better Business Bureau, online consumer reviews), which can be regarded as WOM communication (e.g., Chatterjee 2001). After investigating relevant information provided by unacquainted customers and realizing how poor the service was for other customers, dissatisfied consumers may decide to express their frustration with their own service experiences. In this case, confirmation may be what consumers are seeking from other unknown customers.

> "But after all of this I was searching online for consumer complaints and found many people who too experienced the same terrible service with Dell…these complaints made me want to express my frustration as well and therefore I am writing the formal complaint."

> "The next thing I decided to do was to contact the Better Business Bureau to see if there were any complaints about Jiffy Lube…."

Altruism

Altruism, similar to "altruism" in the unacquainted-present customer category, refers to customers' genuine concern for other imagined, future customers. Similarly, the customer hopes that complaints made by him/her would help these other customers from suffering in the future. For example, two respondents who experienced airline/auto

service failures reported their experiences and explicitly mentioned that they did not want other customers to suffer similar failures.

"I complained not only for myself, but also for the other customers of this airline. I did not want anyone to have to go through what I went through in the future."

"I do not know any other customers at this particular dealership. However, I do hope that my complaining did some good for other customers like myself."

Sympathy

Sympathy, the last subcategory in this research, refers to genuine concerns for the service provider when a consumer perceives that the business is experiencing a downturn due to physical absence of customers. That is, the consumer may make inferences about the viability of the business from the fact that there are no customers in the service setting. Dissatisfied consumers may choose to ignore the service failure and decide not to make complaints due to sympathetic thoughts toward the service provider. This is especially true when the consumer has built a close relationship with the provider.

"We decided not to complain because we had met the owners before and felt bad because the business wasn't doing well…considering that we were the only ones in the restaurant…"

In an attempt to provide a preliminary framework of findings relative to the sources of effects of others on consumers' complaint behavior and whether these sources appear to encourage and/or discourage complaint decisions, Figure 2 is presented. Figure 2 provides a summary of factors or sources of different types of influence revealed in this study that may explain social facilitation and interpersonal effects of others on complaint behavior. These sources are communication from others, group size, perceptions,

individual characteristics, and concern for others. This summary is used as a guideline for the following section.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this research was to investigate the role of other customers at the time of service failure in CCB. Justification for this exploratory investigation was based on theories of social facilitation effects from social psychology and interpersonal influence from consumer behavior. Four major categories consisting of 17 subcategories of influences of other customers in the complaint setting, i.e., acquainted and unacquainted customers with physical and mental presence, were identified in this study. This study not only confirms the precepts of social facilitation theory which underlines both positive and negative effects of presence of other customers, i.e., customers can be affected by others even when they have not interacted, but also applies the characterization of mere presence into the context of complaint behavior.

Supportive communication from others, acquainted or unacquainted and present or mental, appears to be a powerful tool in encouraging consumers to complain. Specifically, encouragement, confidence, and support from others were cited as encouraging factors in decisions to complain in three of the four categories, i.e., acquainted/physical, unacquainted/physical, acquainted/mental. In addition, when acquainted and unacquainted others were physically present and provided positive feedback about the service failure, large group size appeared to be a joining positive force in decisions to complain. Social support from friends and family in service establishments has been documented in the literature (Stephens and Gwinner 1998; Wills and Shinar 2000). Although not recognized in the context of complaining, McGrath and Otnes (1995) identified a consumer category they termed "help-seeker."

FIGURE 2

Social Facilitation and Interpersonal Effects and Consumer Complaint Behavior

Source of Influence	Subcategory of the Influence	Level of Acquaintance/Type of Social Presence	Effect on Complaint Behavior (i.e., encourage or discourage complaint behavior)
Communication from Others • Feedback from Others	**1. Encouragement/ Confidence/Support** **2. Heightened Anticipation** **3. Supplemented Annoyance**	Acquainted/Physical Unacquainted/Physical Acquainted/Mental Acquainted/Mental Acquainted/Mental Unacquainted/Mental	Encourage Encourage Encourage Encourage Encourage Encourage
Group Size	**1. Encouragement/ Confidence/Support*** **2. Embarrassment Avoidance*** **3. Accessibility**	Acquainted/Physical Unacquainted/Physical Unacquainted/Physical Unacquainted/Physical	Encourage Encourage Discourage Discourage
Perceptions • Concern about Impressions of Others (or Self Image) • Social Comparisons • Desire to Make Impression	**1. Embarrassment Avoidance** **2. Problem Awareness through Service Comparisons** **3. Revenge**	Acquainted/Physical Unacquainted/Physical Unacquainted/Physical Unacquainted/Physical	Discourage Discourage Encourage/Discourage Encourage
Individual Characteristics • Leadership Ideology (or Dominance Personality)	**1. Leadership** **2. Diffusion of Responsibility**	Unacquainted/Physical Unacquainted/Physical	Encourage Discourage
Concern for Others • Selfless, Genuine Concern for Others	**1. Obligation** **2. Altruism** **3. Sympathy**	Acquainted/Physical Unacquainted/Physical Unacquainted/Mental Unacquainted/Mental	Encourage Encourage Encourage Discourage

*Group size in conjunction with other factors

This type of customer seeks information and advice from unacquainted McGrath and Otnes (1995) also identified two types of helpers, i.e., reactive and proactive helpers. In the complaint context, these categories may translate to categories of others who may react to the verbal call of support (i.e., reactive helper) from individuals others in order to reduce risk, e.g., risk in purchasing the "wrong" product. (i.e., help-seeker) or volunteer support without prompting (i.e., proactive helper) from individuals. It is not clear from this study's results whether or not consumers actively sought support from those present in the service setting. Future research is needed to better understand, in the context of complaint behavior, how consumers and those present may interact with one another to seek and/or provide support in service environments.

Interestingly, communications and feedback of family and friends, as well as strangers, can be reproduced in the imagination of the consumer. Largely, this input serves to bolster the consumer's decision to complain. These communications stem from past conversations with family and friends about appropriate service provisions (i.e., heightened anticipation) in which disconfirmation of expectations likely occurs, imagined words of support for and acknowledgement of a service failure (i.e., encouragement/ or confidence or support), and remembrances and/or knowledge of similar service failures experienced by family and friends and unknown customers (i.e., supplemented annoyance). In the latter case, companies should take note that complaints by unknown others through online customer reviews, blogs, etc. may serve to elicit voiced complaints to company representatives. This sheds light on the existing word of mouth communication literature (Harris, Baron, and Ratcliffe 1995; Wilson and Peterson 1989) in that complaining behaviors may be the outcome of word-of-mouth communication which has not been addressed widely in the existing literature. The

findings regarding the influence of other customers with mental presence under the mentioned categories strongly suggest that customers who judge the service performance based on their knowledge obtained from some personal marketing sources (Steyer, Garcia-Bardidia, and Quester 2006) tend to view the service failure even more severely culminating in a complaint.

Genuine concern for others appears to elicit complaints from consumers to service providers. This concern can extend to family and friends accompanying the consumer at the time of service failure (i.e., obligation), strangers in the servicescape that are perceived by the consumer to be victims of a service failure (i.e., altruism – unacquainted/physical), and imagined future consumers that are thought to likely experience the same service failure fate (i.e., altruism - unacquainted/mental). Alternatively, the absence of consumers may discourage voice in a concern for the service provider (i.e., sympathy). Thus, in this situation, the target for concern is not others in the service environment but rather for the service provider.

In general, the present research findings suggest that others, in particular acquainted others who are present or imagined, may induce consumers to complain. However, the results also imply that others, under certain conditions, can impede consumers' complaint behavior. Acquainted and unacquainted others, physically present, who may not have verbalized support and/or who, in some manner, are perceived to be non-supportive of complaining in the particular situation, may elicit a consumer's avoidance response in an attempt to minimize potential embarrassment. In other words, consumers appear to be fearful that others may formulate unwanted impressions of them if they choose to complain. In the case of unacquainted others, large groups of strangers may enhance this effect. These findings are consistent with social comparison theory which

supports the notion that social influence affects behavior because individuals may be concerned how others view them (e.g., Carver and Scheier 1978, 1981, 1982) or that others may be evaluating them (e.g., Cottrell 1972). Lastly, rather than concerns about embarrassment, consumers may be dissuaded from voicing complaints due to strangers' physical presence impeding accessibility to the service provider. Consumers may feel that it would be too difficult to reach the service provider given the obstruction presented by the mass of others. This suggests that practitioners should be cognizant of how waiting lines and service areas are configured so as not to block consumers from accessing service providers in these situations.

Some types of influence from others seemingly both encourage and discourage voicing complaints to service providers. In the "problem awareness through service comparisons" category, respondents indicated that comparisons of their poorer service to that of those unknown to them and present in the service setting instigated complaints. As is the case with embarrassment avoidance, this social facilitation effect type aligns with the social comparison theory (e.g., Carver and Scheier 1978, 1981, 1982). Conversely, in the same category, the knowledge that all consumers were suffering in the same circumstances seemed to squelch some from complaining. Investigations about own comparisons of service with that of others, e.g., service comparisons that are perceived to be similar or different, and how they impact voicing dissatisfaction would helpful in better understanding this phenomenon.

Feelings of leadership and responsibility, or lack thereof, to unfamiliar others also seem to have an effect on whether complaints are encouraged or discouraged. Interestingly, some felt responsible for speaking up for others experiencing a service failure (i.e., Leadership) whereas other consumers believed that someone from the audience would relieve them of this responsibility (i.e., Diffusion of Responsibility). According to personality research, individuals may be described and identified by their personality characteristics in various dimensions, one of which is dominance (Gough 1957). Dominance includes aspects of "leadership ability, dominance, persistence, and social initiative" (Robertson and Meyers 1969, p. 165). It is likely that individuals who possess dominance personality characteristics tend to take the initiative to make a complaint. In an attempt to understand "Diffusion of Responsibility," one stream of research that explains how presence of others may reverse social facilitation effects may be helpful (Harkins 1987). Specifically, "social loafing" supports the notion that some individuals are less motivated to perform well when in the presence of others in comparison to situations in which they are alone. Harkins and Szymanski (1988) found that social loafing effects can be eliminated when individuals have a tendency to evaluate themselves or perceive that others are evaluating them. Future research is needed to explain why some consumers defect to others in the service arena to complain whereas other consumers undertake the responsibility for complaint actions. Perceptions of others' evaluations and/or tendency to self evaluate should be noted as possible factors in explaining these different reactions.

In general, the present study's results confirm some theories and findings provided in interpersonal influence and social facilitation literatures. For example, the number of present others was mentioned by some respondents in the present study, in conjunction with other factors, in explicating their complaint decisions. This is consistent with Lascu and Zinkhan's (1999) study in which size of group was found to affect consumers' intentions to comply. Also, individuals' "imagined" communications from strangers and family and friends appear to influence their complaint behavior (Wilson and Peterson 1989). Social comparison theory (Cottrell 1972), purporting social

effects as being driven by evaluations, is supported by this study's findings through such categories as "Embarrassment Avoidance" and "Problem Awareness through Service Comparisons." Communication from acquainted and unacquainted others, instrumental in supplying support to consumers undergoing service failures, seemingly has influence on decisions to complain. Aiello and Douthitt (2001), in their review of social facilitation literature and research, cited "feedback from others" as a subcategory of one of five major factors (i.e., situational factors) that may impact how others affect an individual's performance.

Despite the abovementioned confirmations, questions remain. For instance, concern for others is not known to be specifically identified in interpersonal or social facilitation literatures for having a role in how others affect individuals' performances. Yet, the present findings clearly suggest that these concerns may play a role in how others affect consumers' complaint decisions. In addition, Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2003) propose that consumers read others' emotions which may, in turn, affect their behavior. However, this study's findings did not corroborate this concept. Lastly, according to social facilitation theory, this study does not reveal whether or not "drive" was heightened through the presence of others and/or whether the perceived complexity of the task of complaining is influential in how others' presence influence complaint performance. Research in these areas is warranted.

Practitioners can use the information gleaned from this study relative to interpersonal influence and social facilitation effects in designing strategies related to CCB. First, in illustration, evidence from this study implies that service managers wishing to glean complaints from customers, rather than facilitating their permanent exit, should be sure to implement complaint processes in multiple ways, e.g., one strategy may allow would-be complainers to be accompanied by supporters; whereas, another strategy may offer an environment in which no others are present. Secondly, service providers that deal directly with consumers may be trained to identify different types of interpersonal influence on CCB. They may be instructed to manipulate the aspects of the different types of effects so as to encourage complaining behavior among their customers. Thirdly, the findings regarding the influence of other customers with mental presence strongly suggest that customers who judge the service performance based on their knowledge obtained from personal marketing sources (Steyer, Garcia-Bardidia, and Quester 2006) tend to view the service failure even more severely culminating in a complaint. This information confirms extant WOM research and addresses the importance of managing WOM communication for marketers. Fourth, the subcategory "sympathy" has certain implications. When building relationships with customers, the service provider is encouraging dissatisfied customers to make constructive suggestions so that improvements can be made; however, the service provider must note that there is a possibility that disgruntled customers could be less willing to voice complaints due to their concerns for the service provider. Therefore, practitioners should not only build good relationships with their customers but also encourage feedback from customers so that their opinions can be heard.

As is true of any research, the limitations of this study should not be ignored. First, this study uses students as a convenience sample; therefore, the generalizability is limited in scope. For example, the absence of reports of influence by work colleagues (e.g., peers, superiors) is notable. Also, due to limited experiences, students may be less independent than older counterparts in which case they may have a stronger need to elicit support of others in making decisions about voicing complaints to service providers. Second, this research employed a modified critical incident

technique based on retrospective reports. It is possible that recall bias could have influenced the results. Third, this research only addresses voicing complaints to service providers. However, it does not explain how the mere presence of others might affect other types of complaint behavior such as exit.

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