EMOTION, COPING AND COMPLAINING PROPENSITY FOLLOWING A DISSATISFACTORY SERVICE ENCOUNTER

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a conceptual model of consumer complaint propensity as a result of a dissatisfactory service encounter. Gaps in the existing literature have been identified with particular reference to service industries. How people cope with the negative emotion that results from a dissatisfactory service encounter is the focus of the paper. It is proposed that the relationships between disconfirmation and the emotional component of dissatisfaction, and emotion and coping strategy, are moderated by involvement. The paper concludes with suggested directions for further research.

INTRODUCTION

While zero-defects have been widely accepted as the panacea in the marketing of goods, human nature being what it is, together with the inherent characteristics of services (intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability and inseparability (Palmer, 1994)), producing error-free service or achieving total consumer satisfaction with every service encounter is almost impossible (Fisk, et al, 1993). What happens when service consumers are dissatisfied, and how managers can retrieve this situation has led to research into the service encounter and the behavior of both the consumer and the service provider within this interaction (Bitner, et al, 1994; 1990; Guiry, 1992; Mohr and Bitner, 1991). However, this does not address the issue of the dissatisfied consumer who may not only never patronize the offending organization again but may very likely be irreparably damaging the reputation of the organization by their negative word-of-mouth activity (Richins, 1989).

Research in services indicates that because of the intangible nature of services, pre- and post-purchase consumer evaluation involves both image or reputation of the organization, and word-of-mouth communication (Grönroos, 1991; Parasuraman, et al, 1985). Therefore, an organization is not only likely to have a dissatisfied consumer as a result of a less than satisfactory service encounter (Best and Andreason, 1977), but it is more likely to lose other consumers and prospective consumers from the resulting negative word-of-mouth communication. It has thus become of paramount importance to service providers to not only get it right the first time but, if by chance, they do not, to turn the situation around as soon as possible before any lasting damage is done (Hart, et al, 1990). To this end it is important that an understanding is gained of the post-purchase consumer evaluation process. It therefore seems important not only to understand how consumers form their (dis)satisfaction judgments but, what is of equal importance, is an understanding of the process which leads to the behaviors resulting from the dissatisfaction, namely consumer complaint behavior (CCB) (Singh and Pandya, 1991).

This paper proposes a model of the CCB process following the negative emotion generated from a dissatisfactory service encounter (see Figure 1). A review of the CCB literature has been carried out with special reference to services. While this paper does not include empirical research, propositions are outlined and research directions discussed, including proposed instruments to measure the various constructs within the conceptual model.

CONSUMER COMPLAINT BEHAVIOR

CCB research in services represents some interesting challenges. The special characteristics of services, namely their intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability (Palmer, 1994), would suggest that post-purchase evaluation is highly subjective which in itself creates unique issues. Furthermore, consumers are more likely to engage in more post-purchase evaluation with services than with goods due to the experience and credence properties which can not be adequately assessed prior to purchase (Zeithaml, 1981). This then leads to another set of issues within the

complaint process such as judgment and perception (Best and Andreason, 1977). The inseparability of service the provider and consumer, the experiential nature of services (Palmer, 1994) and that service delivery is predominantly a social interaction again generates special issues (Grove and Fisk, 1983). Thus, a dissatisfied consumer may not only want the poor service performance rectified but may also require the damage done to their interpersonal relationship with the provider be repaired (Krapfel, 1985).

This raises questions about the non-economic issues within the CCB process. Those researchers who have looked at the non-economic factors in CCB, such as personality type, interaction styles, demographic variables, situational variables and sociological perspectives (see Rogers and Williams, 1990 for a review), have still tended to view the CCB process in terms of economic outcomes (Krapfel, 1985). Moreover, even those who have argued for studying the process to gain a better understanding of CCB (Singh and Pandya, 1990), have focused on the cognitive components. In effect, they have failed to take into account the social psychology literature that points out that it is both cognition and emotion that guides behavior, not just cognition (Weiner, 1986:

Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). This has been taken a step further by Hunt (1993) who stated:

> *"it is emotion, not cognition, that drives CS/D &CB..."* and *"...the evidence is now overwhelming that emotion is the critical element in CS/D&CB"* p40.

Even researchers such as Folkes (1988) who looked at attributions, the outcome of which is emotion (Weiner, 1986), have failed to address the emotional outcome of the attribution process, with the exception of anger (Folkes et al, 1987).

While Westbrook and Oliver (Oliver, 1989, 1994; Oliver and Westbrook, 1993; Westbrook, 1987) have found that affect is an important component of the (dis)satisfaction process, little research has been carried out to ascertain how this affect (or more specifically emotion) effects the CCB process. When researching the influences on the propensity to complain, several authors have included non-economic variables as can be seen in Table 1. However it appears that there has been little, if any, research addressing the influence of emotion on the propensity to complain (Krapfel, 1985).

Table 1
Summary of Influences on Propensity to Complain

| Year	Author	Economic/Non-Economic Factors	Relationship
1979	Krishnan	Internal responsibility attributions	Negative
"	"	External responsibility attribution	Positive
1980	Bearden	Self-monitoring	None
"	"	Social norms	None
"	"	Personal norms	Positive
"	"	Positive attitude toward complaining	Positive
"	"	Perceived risk	Negative
"	"	Past satisfaction with product class	Negative
1980	Gronhaug	Consumer role involvement	Positive
1982	Richins	Perceived net benefits from complaining	Positive
"	"	Personal norms	Positive
"	"	Perceived societal benefits from complaining	Positive
1987	Folkes et al	Perceived control	Positive
"	"	Stability	Positive
1993	Parker et al	Non-monetary costs	Positive
"	"	Self-categorizations representing high levels of involvement	Positive
"	"	Gender	None

Adapted from Krapfel, 1985.

Krapfel (1985) has also pointed out that models of CCB have not taken into account other psychological factors, such as restoration of self-esteem. He suggests that while focusing on the particular complaint responses, researchers have failed to take into consideration why consumers make a particular response to dissatisfaction, i.e., what are the motives for their behavior. Thus it would seem appropriate to develop a model of CCB taking into consideration the emotional component of dissatisfaction and how consumers cope with this to achieve their desired outcome.

Another important aspect of consumer behavior that is thought to have particular relevance to the post-purchase process and, in particular, CCB is that of involvement (Singh and Pandya, 1991). Very little research has been carried out examining how involvement affects CCB. Rogers and Williams (1990) suggested that both product involvement and purchase involvement are likely to be associated with complaining behavior but did not specifically address this in their research. Westbrook (1987), when examining the relationship between consumer affective responses to product/consumption experiences and aspects of the post purchase process, suggested that involvement had a strong

affective bias in relation to word-of-mouth communication. Taking a step back in the post-purchase process, Mano and Oliver (1993) examined the effects of product involvement on post-consumption experience, namely product evaluation, product-elicited affect and product satisfaction. They found that high-involvement products elicited stronger emotional reactions. These reactions are likely to be even more pronounced for services due to the experiential nature and the more intense post-purchase evaluation (Zeithaml, 1981). This would suggest that when examining the emotional component of CCB, involvement could have a crucial moderating role to play. This would be especially the case when researching CCB in services. Research has identified that services, due to their inherent characteristics, have some degree of personal relevance by virtue of the social interaction (Czepiel, et al, 1985) and have a higher degree of risk involved with their purchase than for goods (Murray and Schlacter, 1990; Zeithaml, 1981). It is therefore considered that both these factors have direct implications for the involvement construct in the CCB process with services (Singh and Pandya, 1991).

Figure 1
A Conceptual Model of Emotion, Coping and Complaining Propensity Following
a Dissatisfactory Service Encounter
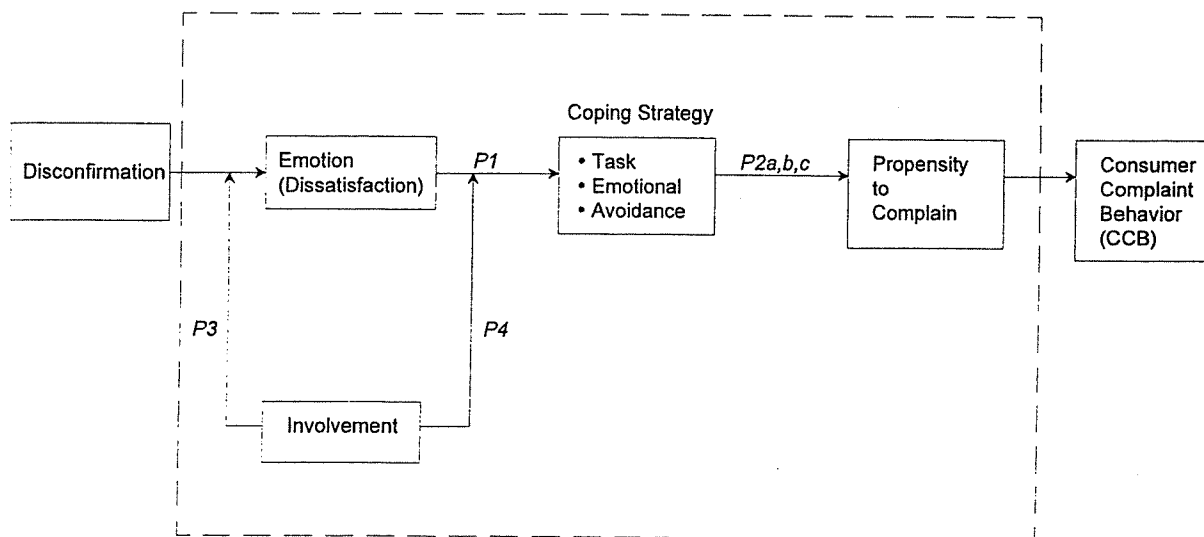
THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The model depicted in Figure 1 conceptualizes the post-dissatisfaction process. It proposes that emotion and coping strategy are important antecedents of the propensity to complain. It further suggests that the relationship between disconfirmation associated with the service encounter and the resulting emotional component of dissatisfaction will be moderated by the degree of involvement. Involvement is also likely to have a moderating impact on the relationship between emotion and coping strategy. A detailed discussion and justification for the proposed causal linkages follows.

Emotion

In 1984, Day proposed that it was not the judgment of (dis)satisfaction per se that motivated a consumer to complain but rather the antecedent negative emotional state that arose from the appraisal of unfavorable product/consumption outcomes. However, with the exception of the work by Oliver and Westbrook and their colleagues, as already discussed, few researchers in the area of consumer post-purchase behavior have examined Day's proposition. This is surprising since the subject of emotion has long (James, 1894 reprinted 1994) been a topic of interest and debate by researchers studying individuals and their social interaction, of which services is one type. It is generally considered that emotion is a complex phenomenon and many of the issues that puzzled researchers over a century ago are still subject to debate today (Bowers, et al, 1985). An added confusion is the use of the term within the literature. Affect comprises emotion and mood, and these terms are often used as though they were interchangeable (Morris, 1989). Mood is an affective state that is capable of influencing a broad range of responses, many of which may seem quite unrelated to the mood-precipitating event (Morris, 1989). It has no target or specificity and can endure over a considerable period of time (Morris, 1989). Emotion however, is considered to be typically more dramatic than mood and, more importantly, has specificity. For an affective state to be an emotion it requires an instigation or eliciting

stimulus (Izard, 1977). It also requires a target (Morris, 1989) which is usually closely related to the cause and is perceived to be responsible for the episode by the person experiencing the emotion (Averill, 1982). There is also an aim or objective of the response that, if obtained, would bring the emotional episode to an end (Lazarus and Folkman, 1991).

While there are conflicting views (Ekman, 1992), it is generally thought that there are base emotions from which all others evolve (Izard, 1977; Plutchik, 1980). Izard's taxonomy, which consists of ten emotions as set out in Table 2, has already been applied successfully in post-purchase research (Westbrook, 1987; Oliver and Westbrook, 1993; Oliver, 1994).

Table 2
Izard's (1977) Taxonomy of Emotions

Emotion	Valence	Focus
Anger	Negative	External
Disgust	Negative	External
Contempt	Negative	External
Distress	Negative	Situational
Fear	Negative	Situational
Shame	Negative	Internal
Guilt	Negative	Internal
Interest	Positive	External
Joy	Positive	Internal
Surprise	Neutral	External

Externally directed or focused emotions are thought to be the result of causal attributions to the eliciting stimulus (Izard, 1977; Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). The internally directed emotions arise from causal attributions directed at the person experiencing the emotion (Weiner, 1986; Izard, 1977; Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). Emotions with a situational focus are those which can not be attributed to either the person experiencing the emotion or to the eliciting stimulus but, rather, the situation in which the emotion-arousing event occurred (Weiner, 1986; Izard, 1977; Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). However, the proposed conceptual model developed here is not concerned with the process deriving the emotion but, rather, the behavioral reaction or the method of coping with, and terminating, a particular emotion.

Coping Strategy

Any experience which is seen as harmful or threatening to one's state of well being creates negative emotion (Izard, 1977). The resulting stress creates a need for coping within the individual (Lazarus, et al, 1980). For services that have a high degree of social interaction (e.g., health care, beauty salons, restaurants, and hairdressing (Lovelock, 1983)), a dissatisfactory service encounter may exacerbate this stress. How an individual copes will either prolong, attenuate, end or change the emotional episode (Lazarus, et al, 1980). Coping involves actual attempts by the person to change the stressful transactions within their environment or to regulate the negative emotions that result from the transaction (Lazarus et al, 1980). Thus, coping can be viewed as a cognitive or behavioral response to an emotion, having the function of arousal or tension reduction (Lazarus and Folkman, 1991; Carpenter, 1992). Due to the experiential nature of services (Zeithaml, 1981) and the interactive process that service delivery involves (Grove and Fisk, 1983), coping behavior has particular relevance for consumers experiencing a dissatisfactory encounter. Thus proposition *P1* is:

> *P1: In cases of negative emotions resulting from a dissatisfactory service encounter, consumers will adopt various coping strategies.*

Coping, like emotion, has several different theoretical perspectives (Folkman, 1992). Three models predominate in the social psychology literature, namely, the ego-psychological model, the trait/dispositional model and the contextual model (see Folkman, 1992 for more detail). The contextual model, which is the most widely accepted of the three, assesses coping in relation to specific stressful conditions or situations (Folkman, 1992). It examines what a person actually thinks and does, and views coping as a changing process rather than a fixed personality trait (Folkman, 1992). Thus, research has shown that people vary their coping from context to context, depending on whether the event is viewed as harmful, a loss or threatening, the social role involved, environmental and social factors, what is at stake,

and what the options are for coping (Folkman, 1992).

Within this contextual approach are two further models. One of these focuses on the process and the other addresses the outcomes of the coping process (Folkman and Lazarus, 1991). The process model, although not without limitations, has become dominant in contempory social psychology research (Folkman, 1992). Indeed, the scales that are widely used for assessing coping behavior are based on this model such as the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ) and the Ways of Coping Checklist (WCC) developed by Lazarus and Folkman, and more recently the Multidimensional Coping Inventory (MCI) developed by Endler and Parker (Folkman and Lazarus, 1992; Endler and Parker, 1990).

These scales were developed on the premise that people use particular types of coping strategies across situations. They assess the process of coping rather than the outcomes of the coping process (Folkman, 1992). Lazarus and Folkman (1991) believe that people either engage in problem focused coping when they feel they have personal control over the outcome or recurrence of the problem in the future, or emotionally focused coping when they feel they have little control. These strategies for coping serve to regulate the distress (Folkman, 1992). Endler and Parker (1990) incorporated emotionally focused coping within their scale. However, they renamed problem focused coping, task oriented and added a third strategy, namely, avoidance. Avoidance oriented coping, where a person chooses to escape from or avoid the distress, includes seeking social support or engaging in another task at hand.

The type of coping strategies a person will use in any particular person-environment relationship will depend on their motivation, beliefs about themselves and the world, and their perceptions of the resources they have available for coping such as financial means, social and problem solving skills, time and energy (Folkman and Lazarus, 1991). Thus, a consumer who is feeling angry as the result of a dissatisfactory service encounter, but nonetheless feel they have some degree of control over the situation, may adopt a task oriented coping strategy. A task oriented coping strategy is characterized by a need for a greater understanding of the problem and a more planned

and rational approach to dealing with the stressful situation. This planned, rational coping strategy suggests that a consumer adopting this strategy may also assess the likelihood of success and costs involved in complaining. As such, the propensity to complain may well be contingent upon an assessment of these benefits and costs. Thus proposition *P2 (a)* is:

> *P2 (a): The propensity to complain for a consumer adopting a task oriented coping strategy will be contingent upon their assessment of the benefits and costs of complaining.*

If however, the angry consumer feels they have no control over the situation, they are likely to adopt an emotional coping strategy to relieve the stress and anger. Furthermore it is conjectured here, that due to the interactive nature of many services, the consumer is likely to have a greater propensity to complain. Thus proposition *P2(b)* is:

> *P2 (b): All things being equal, consumers adopting an emotional coping strategy will have a higher propensity to complain.*

On the other hand, they may not be willing or able to make resources available for coping, such as time and effort. Therefore, they would choose an avoidance strategy, in which case they will put the incident to the back of their mind and effectively escape from the anger by doing something unrelated to the situation such as reading a book or going for a walk. Thus, proposition *P2 (c)* is:

> *P2 (c): Adoption of an avoidance coping strategy is likely to lead to a lower propensity to complain.*

The model proposed in this paper uses coping strategies as developed by Endler and Parker (1990), given a negative emotion that has arisen out of a dissatisfactory service encounter. It is not concerned with the various outcomes of the coping strategy, thus, the dependent variable is restricted to the propensity to complain as developed by Day and Landon (1976). However, it may evolve that consumer complaint responses

(Singh, 1990) could well be an avenue for research in the future. For a more detailed outline of different types of coping behavior, given different coping strategies, the reader's attention is drawn to Folkman and Lazarus (1991).

The proposed conceptual model uses the sequence of appraisal emotional reaction coping response as suggested by Bagozzi (1992) in his work on self-regulatory processes. Thus, coping strategy is seen here as mediating the relationship between emotion and propensity to complain.

Involvement

The concept of involvement was originally proposed by Herbert Krugman to characterize the differences in the intensity of interest that consumers approach their interaction and dealings in the market place (Loudon and Della Bitta, 1993). Due to the inherent characteristics (Palmer, 1994) and the personal relevance of services (Murray and Schlacter, 1990), involvement is particularly relevant when examining the CCB process after a dissatisfactory service encounter. Involvement is defined as the perceived level of personal importance and/or interest evoked by a stimulus (or stimuli) within a specific situation (Engel et al, 1993). Celsi and Olson (1988) clarify personal relevance or importance in that something must be perceived as being self-related or somehow instrumental in achieving personal goals and values. The concept of involvement has three main properties (Loudon and Della Bitta, 1993). The first, intensity, refers to the degree of involvement a person experiences and, within the consumer behavior literature, is often termed "high" or "low" involvement. The second is the direction or the target of the involvement. The third is persistence, referring to the length of time a person remains in the involvement state.

While research on the antecedents of involvement have generated a large variety of factors, within the consumer behavior literature, Engel, et al (1993) have highlighted three. Personal factors are seen to be a stable trait. The level of involvement is highest when the product or service is perceived to be enhancing self-image. Product factors includes the choice of alternatives. Involvement increases as the choice of alternatives

is seen to be more differentiated. Risk of purchase or use is another product factor which serves to heighten involvement. The greater the perceived risk the greater the likelihood of high involvement. The final product factor is the hedonic value or emotional appeal and the perceived ability of the product or services perceived to provide pleasure. The more important these factors the higher the involvement. The last antecedent identified by Engel, et al (1993) is situational factors. Unlike the previous two which are enduring, these are said to be temporal and change from purchase to purchase. Hence it is more the situation in which the product/service is purchased rather than the product/service per se that creates the felt involvement (Richins and Bloch, 1986).

Both the social psychology (Averill, 1982; Izard, 1977; Folkman and Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus et al, 1980) and CCB (Day, 1977; Barber and Venkatraman, 1986; Jayanti and Jackson, 1991; Singh and Pandya, 1991) literatures suggest that involvement can intensify and determine the quality of arousal or emotional responses. The consumer behavior literature also suggests that involvement affects cognitive processes (Muncy and Hunt, 1984; Stone, 1984; Celsi and Olson, 1988; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Thus, the model proposed in this paper suggests that product involvement will have a moderating effect (Bloch, 1981) on both the relationship between disconfirmation and emotion, and that between emotion and coping strategy. More formally, this is stated in the following propositions:

P3: The relationship between disconfirmation associated with the service encounter and the emotional component of dissatisfaction will be moderated by involvement.

P4: The relationship between emotion and coping strategy will be moderated by involvement.

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This model could be empirically tested using the DESII scale (in part) developed by Izard (1977). This scale has been widely used and subjected to extensive empirical testing with sound results (Izard, 1991). It is suggested that

contempt, disgust and anger be selected as the emotions, as they are the ones most likely to influence post-purchase behavior given a particular consumption experience (Westbrook, 1987).

Product involvement has been measured by using the Personal Involvement Inventory developed by Zaichkowsky (1985). Subject to empirical testing, this scale had internal reliability, reliability over time, content, criterion and construct validity that met the required standards (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Although this scale was developed for products, it could be adapted for services.

Although the WCC, and the WCQ which was developed from the WCC, both continue to attract research interest, Endler and Parker (1990) suggest that the empirical support for the coping subscales is weak and the internal consistency is modest. They went on to develop the Multidimensional Coping Inventory (MCI) which, as a result of empirical testing, they suggest is a valid and reliable measure of coping strategies (Endler and Parker, 1990). Therefore it is recommended that the MCI be used.

This model could be tested over a variety of service types such as routine verses non-routine services, generic verses professional services (Hill and Neeley, 1988), those high/low in experience qualities or high/low in credence qualities (Zeithaml, 1981). The degree of customization of the service could also be a possible criterion for selecting the appropriate service categories (Hartman and Lindgren, 1993).

While the proposed model could be viewed as relatively simplistic especially considering the complexity of the CCB process and the compounding of this by the complex variables involved, it is thought that the best progress in understanding this process will come by taking a simple, yet focused approach. This model could later be extended by adding multidimensional response styles and examining temporal affects.

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