

ASSERTION AND ATTENTION TO SOCIAL COMPARISON INFORMATION AS INFLUENCES ON CONSUMER COMPLAINT INTENTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Assertion relates to a variety of consumer behaviors including redress seeking, resisting sales requests, and requesting information. It seems that certain behaviors associated with assertion such as consumer complaining involve more risk of social disapproval than others. It is proposed that even though consumers may be assertive in resisting sales requests and requesting information they will not differ from others in their complaint behavior if they score high on "attention to social comparison information," a trait related to fear of negative evaluation and conformity. This research investigated and found support for this proposition. Implications of the findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer complaining behavior (CCB) involves the communication of something negative about a product, service or purchase episode (Singh and Howell 1985; Jacoby and Jaccard 1981) and can range from relatively mild actions such as voicing dissatisfaction to a store employee, to much more extreme forms such as taking legal action against an offending party (Singh 1988).

Consumer complaining behavior often involves confrontation in the communication of negative information to other people. The negative information may not be well received and the receiver may disapprove of the complaint and/or the complainer. Because complaining involves confrontation it often requires that complainers be assertive and "stand up for their rights." Assertiveness is defined in terms of standing up for one's rights in socially acceptable ways (Alberti and Emmons 1974; Galassi and Galassi 1978; Richins 1983).

There has been considerable research regarding the relationship between assertion and complaining. Using a psychological scale measuring assertion, Fornell and Westbrook (1979) found assertion to be positively related to

complaint intentions, however, in a subsequent study Westbrook (1981) found no relationship between assertion and complaining. Richins (1983) found that a scale custom designed to measure consumer assertiveness related positively to consumer complaining. More recently, Slama and Williams (1991) found that groups formed on the basis of combinations of high and low scores on both aggression and assertion differed with respect to various types of complaint intentions. Both the Richins (1983) and the Slama and Williams (1991) studies used the Richins (1983) scale which has items related to redress seeking as one of its components of assertion. Given the existence of a redress seeking component this assertion scale would logically be expected to correlate more positively with complaint intentions than would a more general assertion scale lacking redress seeking items. Therefore, the evidence regarding whether and how the more general trait of assertion (not including redress seeking measures) relates to complaining behavior is not conclusive.

Certain people are particularly sensitive to how others perceive them and this may interfere with their ability to complain even though they may be assertive under less confrontational conditions. A potentially meaningful concept capturing sensitivity to social cues which may lead to a reluctance to engage in assertive complaining behavior is "attention to social comparison information" (ATSCI) (Bearden and Rose 1990; Lennox and Wolfe 1984). Bearden and Rose (1990) state that consumers who score high on ATSCI are likely to obtain social cues from many sources in the marketplace including: behaviors of others, explicit pronouncements of the appropriateness of certain actions made by important referents, the structure of rewards and sanctions within reference groups, and attributions about likely reactions of reference group members. Such consumers are likely to be particularly sensitive to the reactions of business personnel to their complaints.

Bearden and Rose (1990) have examined ATSCI as a moderator of consumer tendencies to conform using the ATSCI scale developed by Lennox and Wolfe (1984). The results of their research showed that consumers scoring high on ATSCI are likely to feel that others would judge them by their purchases and are likely to care about others' evaluations of their purchases. The results also showed that consumers scoring high on ATSCI are likely to conform to social pressure when making product preference judgements.

ATSCI has its origins in self-monitoring research. It is one of the subscales which emerged from Lennox and Wolfe's (1984) revision of Snyder's (1974) original self-monitoring scale. Self-monitoring is the idea that some people regulate their behavior in accordance with situational social cues. Therefore, these people act more on the basis of the situation and less on the basis of their personality traits than do other people. Research on self-monitoring in the buyer behavior context has supported this notion. For example, Becherer and Richard (1978) found that personality traits were much better predictors of brand preferences among people who score low on self-monitoring than among people who score high on self-monitoring. Similarly, Bearden and Crockett (1981) found higher correlations between attitudes toward complaining and complaint intentions for people who score low on self-monitoring than for people who score high on self-monitoring.

We expect ATSCI to operate similarly to self-monitoring in the sense that low levels of ATSCI should be associated with a strong relationship between general assertion and complaining behavior while high levels of ATSCI should be associated with a weak relationship between assertion and complaining behavior. While we expect ATSCI to behave like self-monitoring in moderating the strength of the relationship between personality and specific behavioral intentions, ATSCI is different from self-monitoring as originally conceptualized in that it represents a specific motive for self-monitoring.

Lennox and Wolfe (1984) contend that people self-monitor for two different motives. These motives are either to "get ahead" meaning to use self-monitoring as a way to manage self-presentation to attain power, control and status, or,

to "get along" meaning to regulate self-presentation in a manner which avoids the risk of social disapproval. The ATSCI scale is one of two subscales that Lennox and Wolfe use to measure the "getting along" motive for self-monitoring. The ATSCI subscale seems to capture a strong motivation to comply with social pressure (Bearden and Rose 1990) and is therefore particularly likely to moderate the influences of assertion on complaining behavior.

The moderating influence of ATSCI is most likely to occur for the complaint behaviors which are most confrontational. Singh (1988) has created a typology of complaint behaviors which includes voice complaints, private complaints and third party complaints. The third-party complaints were found to be least frequent and to require the most aggression and assertion by Slama and Williams (1991). They suggested that other forms of complaining may be perceived as easier and more appropriate than third-party complaints. Given this evidence which implies that third-party complaining is relatively confrontational it is expected that the moderating influence of ATSCI will be strongest for this form of complaint behavior. The purpose of the current study is to test the idea that ATSCI moderates the relationship between assertion and complaining behavior, particularly for severe third-party complaint behaviors.

Given the expected relationships between ATSCI, assertion, and complaint behavior the present study will test the following hypotheses:

H1: Private complaint intentions will be significantly higher for high compared to low assertion subjects who score **low** on the ATSCI. No differences are expected on private complaint intentions between high and low assertion subjects who score **high** on the ATSCI.

H2: Third-party complaint intentions will be significantly higher for high compared to low assertion subjects who score **low** on the ATSCI. No differences are expected on third-party complaint intentions between high and low assertion subjects who score **high** on the ATSCI.

METHOD

Procedure

The study employed a 2 (attention to social comparison information: low or high) X 2 (assertion: low or high) factorial design. Following a method utilized in related research, median-splits were used to classify subjects into "low" and "high" scoring groups on the ATSCI and assertiveness measures in accordance with design conditions.

Subjects

One hundred and ninety three students at a large midwestern university were administered a questionnaire. The assessment instrument contained measures of attention to social comparison information, assertion, and complaint behavior. Attention to social comparison information was assessed via the ATSCI scale which consists of thirteen, six-point items scaled always false to always true (Lennox and Wolfe 1984).

Measures

Assertive consumer behavior was measured via two subscales relating to resisting sales requests and requesting marketplace information (Richins 1983). Each subscale consisted of five, seven-point items scaled strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Recall that earlier research (Richins 1983; Slama and Williams 1991) employing the Richins (1983) scale included a redress seeking subscale in addition to the resist and request subscales. Given that the focus of the present study was oriented toward examining the impact of a more general assertion trait on complaining behavior, the redress subscale was omitted as it would be expected to be more positively correlated with complaint behavior than would a more general assertion measure (omitting the redress subscale).

Private and third party consumer complaint intentions were assessed via a problem scenario with possible reactions to the scenario (see Figure 1). The product-situation selected for the scenario is one with which student consumers are likely to

readily identify. An initial complaint has been registered to store management which has been unresponsive, and seven possible complaint reactions are provided (adapted from the Singh (1988) taxonomy of complaint behaviors). The first three items represent private complaint intentions, while the remaining items represent third-party complaint intentions.

Figure 1
Consumer Complaint Scenario

Imagine that last week you purchased a jacket for \$150. This week the shoulder ripped beyond repair. You are certain that it ripped because of poor workmanship and not because of your actions. The store management where you bought the jacket refused to exchange it or refund your money. Please indicate how likely it is that you would take each of the following actions by circling a number from one to 10 to the right of the item. The more likely that you would take the indicated action the higher the number you should circle.

Decide not to shop at that store again.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Speak to your friends or relatives about your bad experience.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Convince your friends or relatives not to shop at that store.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Complain to a consumer agency and ask them to make the store take care of the problem.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Report to a consumer agency so that other consumers can be warned.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Write a letter to the local newspaper about your bad experience.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Take some formal action against the store/manufacturer.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

RESULTS

Reliabilities

Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the multiple item measures used in the study. Estimates for ATSCI and assertiveness measures were in the .75 to .85 range. Estimates for private and third-party complaint intentions were .67 and .86, respectively. Overall, these alphas are quite comparable with estimates reported in related research.

Analysis of Variance

Recall that both private and third-party complaint intentions were expected to be higher for high compared to low assertion subjects scoring low on the ATSCI. In contrast, no differences were expected on complaint intentions between high and low assertion subjects scoring high on the ATSCI. Table 1 presents ANOVA results consistent with expectations. Significant ATSCI by assertion interaction effects were found for private and third-party complaint intentions.

Table 1
ANOVA Results for Private and Third-Party Complaint Intentions

	F	df	p
<u>Private Complaint Intention</u>			
ATSCI	.01	1, 189	.925
Assertion	1.06	1, 189	.303
ATSCI X Assertion	6.57	1, 189	.011
<u>Third-Party Complaint Intention</u>			
ATSCI	1.81	1, 189	.180
Assertion	3.24	1, 189	.074
ATSCI X Assertion	3.70	1, 189	.027

Table 2 presents complaint intention means for each condition which strongly support hypotheses H1 and H2. Note that private as well as third-party complaint intentions are significantly higher for the high compared to the low assertion individuals who score low on the ATSCI. In contrast, as predicted, no differences were found

between high and low assertion individuals who score high on the ATSCI.

Table 2
Means for Private and Third-Party Complaint Intentions for each Condition

	Low ATSCI/ Low Assert (n=33)	Low ATSCI/ High Assert (n=50)	High ATSCI/ Low Assert (n=64)	High ATSCI/ High Assert (n=46)
Private Complaint Intention	24.30	26.54	25.77	25.11
Third-Party Complaint Intention	16.55	21.84	17.75	17.61

Note: Private and third-party complaint intention means significantly different for low ATSCI/low assert and low ATSCI/high assert conditions (t-values 2.63, $p < .011$ and 2.85, $p < .006$, respectively).

Private and third-party complaint intention means not significantly different for high ATSCI/low assert and high ATSCI/high assert conditions (t-values .83, $p < .410$ and .09, $p < .931$, respectively).

DISCUSSION

The relationship between assertion and complaining behavior has engendered much research attention. Results of the present study offer an interesting insight for understanding this relationship. A dimension of self-monitoring, attention to social comparison information (ATSCI), was found to moderate the relationship between general assertion and both private and third-party complaint intentions. That is, complaint intentions were found to be higher for high compared to low assertion individuals who also scored low on ATSCI. No differences were found between high and low assertion individuals who scored high on ATSCI. Future researchers examining the relationship between assertion and complaint behavior may want to consider accounting for the moderating influence of ATSCI.

Previous literature has documented the importance of complaint resolution to a firm's success in the marketplace (Morris 1988). Given the findings of the present study, that when encountering a problem scenario that went

unresolved, high assertion/low ATSCI individuals evidenced a greater tendency to; communicate bad experiences to friends and relatives, persuade friends and relatives against patronage, report to consumer agencies, and write letters to newspapers, the effective handling of first attempt complaints from these individuals would appear to be of critical importance to organizations. This does not mean that firms should make special attempts to identify high assertion/low ATSCI consumers, but, that the existence of such consumers makes it all the more critical for firms' employees to recognize the importance of handling first attempt complaints in a manner which is perceived to be fair by the consumer.

Goodwin and Ross (1989) suggest that the perceived fairness of a complaint resolution influences subsequent satisfaction as well as the willingness to trust the organization in the future. Tangible compensation and the style of interaction were identified as important determinants of perceived fairness. By extension, for high assertion/low ATSCI individuals, the need for firms to immediately address compensation issues and offer expressions of courtesy as a means of "heading off" these individuals proclivity to employ private as well as third-party complaining is essential.

While low ATSCI/high assertion consumers may pose an immediate problem for companies it seems that some high ATSCI/low assertion consumers are likely to have a negative long term impact if their complaints are not resolved successfully on first attempt because these people may "hold in" their dissatisfaction and form grudges toward offending organizations. Sorensen and Strahle (1990) have found that consumers who have a "fear of negative evaluation" (a trait positively correlated with ATSCI) tend to experience more dissatisfaction than other consumers, and at the same time, have negative attitudes toward complaining. Sorensen and Strahle suggest that such consumers are "accumulating" dissatisfaction rather than resolving it through complaining. Similarly, high ATSCI/low assertion consumers are experiencing dissatisfaction which is not being released through complaining and it is possible that some of them could become grudge holders. Grudge holders have been found to remain upset for years and, in

some instances, continue negative word-of-mouth influence even five to ten years after an unsatisfactory experience (Hunt, Hunt, and Hunt 1988). To avoid this situation, companies should try to resolve complaints successfully on the first contact and also make it as easy as possible, and as socially acceptable as possible for consumers to express dissatisfaction since the results of this study clearly imply that consumers high in ATSCI find it more difficult to complain than other consumers.

Limitations of the this research relate to the complaint domain studied and the nature of the sample. Future research should explore complaint scenarios related to different products and services. Replications of the present study with alternative samples are also warranted. These limitations notwithstanding, the present study clearly points to the significance of ATSCI as a moderator of the relationship between assertion and complaining behavior.

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