

# CONSUMER INTERACTION STYLES AND PURCHASE COMPLAINT INTENTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

Employing a previously developed scale for measuring consumer interaction style this study investigated the relationship between personality and specific consumer responses to purchase dissatisfaction. One hundred sixty-five students responded to a questionnaire measuring interaction style and consumer complaining behavior. Significant relationships were found suggesting that interaction style is a determinant of the type of complaining behavior in which consumers engage. Recommendations for further research in the area are offered.

## INTRODUCTION

Post-purchase activities have received increasing attention from consumer researchers in recent years. Focus has been on satisfaction, dissatisfaction, repeat purchasing, post purchase communications, and complaining behavior. Complaining behavior represents an important avenue of study, since complaints provide information to companies which may be useful in improving products and services. At the same time complaints may foster unfavorable attention in the market place and even in the news media.

Research on complaining behavior has focused both on situation- and product-specific complaining and on personal antecedents to complaining behaviors. In this study we investigate the direction and degree to which one aspect of personality may influence consumer complaining behavior.

## CONSUMER COMPLAINING BEHAVIOR

Consumer complaining behavior (CCB) is defined as "...a set of all behavioral and non-behavioral responses which involve communicating something negative regarding a purchase episode and is triggered by perceived

dissatisfaction with that episode" (Singh and Howell 1985, p. 42). It has also been defined as "... an action taken by an individual which involves communicating something negative regarding a product or service either to 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)" (Jacoby and Jaccard 1981, p. 6).

Numerous attempts have been made to categorize the possible responses to consumer dissatisfaction (Bearden and Teel 1980; Best and Andreasen 1977; Day 1984; Singh and Howell 1985). One taxonomy of complaining behaviors classified CCB in terms of (Singh 1988):

1. Forget about the incident and do nothing.
2. Definitely complain to the store manager on the next trip.
3. Decide not to shop that store/manufacturer again.
4. Go back to the store immediately to complain.
5. Speak to friends and relatives about the bad experience.
6. Convince friends and relatives not to shop the store again.
7. Complain to a consumer agency and ask them to force the store to take care of the problem.
8. Write a complaint letter to the local newspaper.
9. Report to the consumer agency so they can warn other consumers.
10. Take some legal action against the store.

Each of these behaviors is a significant response to dissatisfaction and can damage a marketer. Even the "do nothing" response is potentially harmful. Many consumers do not actively complain, but a dissatisfied customer who does nothing to resolve the problem or vent negative feelings is one to whom the seller cannot

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respond and resolve the problem (Olshavsky 1977; Sorensen and Strahle 1990). Even if the consumer overlooks one problem, loyalty will likely be eroded, and subsequent dissatisfaction may result in stronger action in the future.

Since the listed behaviors suggest an increasing intensity of complaint behavior, it is not appropriate to consider these responses as components of a complaining scale (Singh 1988). Rather they are independent actions which, in some cases, may be employed in combination by a consumer in response to purchase dissatisfaction. Measuring CCB presents a conceptually difficult problem. Asking consumers what they would normally do when dissatisfied with a purchase without providing product- and situation-specific information or asking what they have usually done in the past ignores situational and product related factors which have been shown to be relevant in determining the direction and intensity of complaining behavior.

Another problem with measuring complaining behavior is that what a consumer does is dependent on what happens in a hierarchy of complaint responses. For example, if a consumer has a problem with a product, returns to the retail store to complain and is met with a smile and an exchange or refund, the complaining behavior stops, and positive feelings may be restored. Thus changing future behavior or third party complaining will likely not be pursued if the initial complaint is successful.

#### **PERSONALITY AS A CONSUMER CONSTRUCT**

Just as the degree of satisfaction with products varies widely over products and individuals (LaTour and Peat 1979), so complaining behavior varies widely over situations, products and individuals (Richins 1982; Lawther et al. 1979). The attitude toward complaining is a factor determining whether or not complaining will occur (Halstead and Droge 1991). Numerous situational and personal variables have been investigated as they relate to CCB. In particular, consumer personality has been studied with respect to its influence on the nature and intensity of complaining behavior (Faricy and Mazis 1974; Foxman, Raven and Stem 1990; Fornell and

Westbrook 1979; Grabicke, Schaetzle and Staubach 1982; Landon 1977; Nantel 1985; Richins 1983, 1987; Wall et al. 1977; Zaichkowsky and Liefeld 1977; Zikmund and Miller 1974). As a rule the relationship between complaining behavior and the dimensions of personality investigated have been weak and inconsistent.

Many attempts have been made to relate varying types of buying behavior to personality, but results have often been equivocal. Many researchers have suggested that generalized personality tests are unlikely to be helpful in consumer research (Kassarjian 1971). Thus tests should either be custom made or carefully selected to measure personality constructs that logically relate to consumer behaviors.

The first qualification for attempts to relate personality to consumer complaining behavior is to look at variables that logically may underlie complaining. It has been suggested that consumer interaction style may provide a viable base for study (Richins 1983). Interaction style is made up of two personality dimensions, aggressiveness and assertiveness.

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). This suggests that assertive complaining would involve a more or less amiable exchange with fair and equitable problem resolution as the goal.

Aggressiveness is defined in terms of power, abusiveness, rudeness, coercion, threats and punishments (Buss 1961; Tedeschi, Schlenker and Bonoma 1973; French and Raven 1959; Richins 1983). Aggressive complaining behavior might involve threats to take business elsewhere, to complain to the Better Business Bureau or to take legal action, the use of strong or abusive language and promising to tell friends to stay away from the business.

Since consumer complaining may require effort and a degree of extroversion, it seems likely that CCB could be, in some measure, linked with assertiveness and/or aggressiveness. In an exploratory study of personality and complaining behavior, Fornell and Westbrook (1979) applied the personality concepts of assertiveness and aggressiveness. They used scales based on clinical

applications to measure the two personality constructs and found relationships between combinations of assertiveness and aggressiveness and four complaining behaviors:

1. Complaining to the manufacturer when the product fails to meet prior expectations.
2. Complaining to the retail store when a product fails to meet prior expectations.
3. Complaining to the manufacturer when a favorite product is discontinued.
4. Complaining to the manufacturer when a favorite product deteriorates in quality.

It was found that low scores on both aggressiveness and assertiveness were associated with low complaining intentions. The opposite did not seem to be true, however, as high scorers on both factors did not appear to be high complainers. Rather high complaining intentions appeared to be associated with either high aggressiveness scores or high assertiveness score, but not both. In a subsequent study Westbrook (1981) found no relationship between either assertiveness or aggressiveness and complaining behavior.

Richins (1983) developed specialized scales for measuring consumer assertiveness and aggressiveness. She identified four consumer interaction styles based on the two measures: Assertive (high assertive/low aggressive), nonassertive (low assertive/low aggressive), aggressive (low assertive/high aggressive and resort-to-aggression (high aggressive/high assertive). She found that social acceptability of complaining, enjoyment of complaining and number of complaint actions were related to the personality types. Higher levels of assertiveness were associated with the number of complaint actions, while higher aggression levels were associated with all three.

### DESIGN OF THE STUDY

In this study we are concerned with the relationship between interaction style and complaining behavior. We utilize the Richins (1983) scales to measure assertiveness and aggressiveness and divide respondents into the four groups she suggested. To extend her work, we employ the complaining intentions taxonomy

suggested by Singh (1988) to investigate the relationship between personality and specific complaining activities. Providing case scenarios as a basis for collecting data on complaining seems particularly appropriate when investigating the effects of individual factors on complaining behavior. Accordingly, we provided a dissatisfaction scenario together with possible reactions to the problem indicated in the scenario (Figure 1).

**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 0 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.

- Do nothing about the incident
- Decide not to shop at that store again
- Speak to your friends or relatives about your bad experience
- Convince your friends or relatives not to shop at that store
- Complain to a consumer agency and ask them to make the store take care of your problem
- Report to a consumer agency so that other consumers can be warned
- Write a letter to the local newspaper about your bad experience
- Take some formal action against the store/manufacturer

The product and situation selected for the scenario in this study were ones with which most consumers should be able to readily identify. The scenario was presented as an extreme case where a problem has been encountered and has been unresolved by the first attempt at resolution or redress. The person must now decide where to go from here. An initial complaint has been registered to store management who have been unresponsive, and a variety of possible reactions are presented. This means that the two behaviors dealing with complaining to the manager as listed in the Singh (1988) taxonomy are inappropriate for

study in the context of this analysis. The behaviors investigated here would come after complaining to the manager have not been successful in resolving the problem.

Based on past research the following hypotheses are investigated:

H1: Nonassertives will have the lowest involvement in all types of CCB.

A person who scores low in both assertiveness and aggressiveness could be expected to be less inclined to take any sort of action in a dispute. This should be true for any sort of CCB. Richins (1983) found that nonassertives saw complaining as less socially acceptable than others, and they engaged in fewer complaint actions.

H2: Assertives will engage in CCBs aimed at gaining problem solution.

The essence of assertion is to communicate a problem in a socially acceptable manner in order to reach a solution. We should therefore find that CCBs leading to an agreeable end would be pursued by these individuals.

H3: Aggressives will engage in CCBs directed at retaliating against or punishing the offending seller.

Aggression seems to be accompanied with a certain degree of hostility. The aggressive person should engage in CCBs that will leave them in a power position relative to the adversaries who have wronged them in the market place.

H4: Aggressives and assertives will be more active in all types of CCB than resort-to-aggressives and nonassertives.

Research evidence is mixed on this point. Fornell and Westbrook (1979) found that resort-to-aggressives were less inclined to complain than either assertives or aggressives, while Richins (1983) determined that resort-to-aggressive interaction style was associated with a higher perceived social acceptability for complaining and number of complaint actions. It may ultimately be found that this relationship is dependent on the

type of CCB involved as suggested here in hypotheses 2 and 3.

## RESULTS

Data on interaction style and complaining intentions were collected at two major universities from 165 undergraduate students. There was a substantial difference across the types of complaining intentions of the respondents as indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Mean Scores for Complaining Intentions**

<u>Complaining Intention</u>	<u>Mean Score</u>
Do nothing about the incident	2.4087
Decide not to shop at that store again	8.2000
Speak to your friends or relatives about your bad experience	8.5975
Convince your friends or relatives not to shop at that store	7.1258
Complain to a consumer agency and ask them to make the store take care of your problem	5.3313
Report to a consumer agency so that they warn other consumers	4.3711
Write a letter to the local newspaper about your bad experience	3.1813
Take some formal action against the store/manufacturer	4.9625

Respondents reported a low probability of doing nothing, but most said that they would be quite likely to decide not to shop at the store again and to speak to friends and to convince them not to shop the store again. The last four more proactive and time-consuming responses scored lower than the more conventional responses.

Table 2 indicates that low aggressiveness is associated with an intention to do nothing about the dissatisfying situation. The Resort-to-Aggression interaction type had the lowest score for taking no action.

Tables 3 through 5 show that interaction style had no effect on the intention to engage in CCBs involving boycotting the store or to communicate with or attempt to influence others. The CCB scores here were the highest noted in the study. This suggests that most respondents saw a shopping boycott, speaking to friends and convincing friends to avoid the store as appropriate

and easily taken responses. Apparently their aggressiveness and assertiveness levels had no

**Table 2**  
**Do Nothing CCB Response by Interaction Style**

	Assertion	
	Low Nonassertive	High Assertive
Low Aggression	3.1277*	2.7297*
High Aggression	2.2059	1.5714

Oneway Anova p = .01

\*Difference significant from Resort-to-Aggression (Duncan Multiple Range Test p = .05)

**Table 3**  
**Stop Shopping at Store CCB Response by Interaction Style**

	Assertion	
	Low Nonassertive	High Assertive
Low Aggression	7.8085	8.4595
High Aggression	8.5588	8.1190

Oneway Anova p = .48

**Table 4**  
**Speak to Friends CCB Response by Interaction Style**

	Assertion	
	Low Nonassertive	High Assertive
Low Aggression	8.4894	8.9441
High Aggression	8.5000	8.5000

Oneway Anova p = .71

**Table 5**  
**Convince Friends Not to Buy CCB Response by Interaction Style**

	Assertion	
	Low Nonassertive	High Assertive
Low Aggression	6.8696	7.2973
High Aggression	7.1765	7.2143

Oneway Anova p = .86

**Table 6**  
**Complain to Consumer Agency to Get Redress CCB Response by Interaction Style**

	Assertion	
	Low Nonassertive	High Assertive
Low Aggression	4.000	5.3784*
High Aggression	6.2647*	6.0238*

Oneway Anova p = .00

\*Difference significant from Nonassertive (Duncan Multiple Range Test p = .05)

effect on their intentions here. The interaction style personality dimension seems to affect buyer intentions only for the less often followed CCBs.

Aggressiveness and assertiveness both appeared to affect the respondents' intentions to complain to a consumer agency to get some sort of satisfaction or redress (Table 6).

Table 7 considers the situation where the motivation for contacting the consumer protection agency is changed to seeing to it that other consumers are warned of the offending firm. Here assertiveness alone is related to CCB intention.

Table 8 shows that high assertiveness was associated with the intention to write to a local newspaper to complain about the problem.

Presumably the most extreme action a consumer can take in a purchase dispute is to take

some sort of formal legal action. Table 9 treats this response. In this case aggression alone is significantly associated with the action.

**Table 7**  
Complain to Consumer Agency to Warn Other Consumers CCB Response by Interaction Style

	Assertion	
	Low Nonassertive	High Assertive
Low	3.5435	4.8378*
Aggression	Aggressive	Resort-to-Aggression
High	4.0794	5.1429*
Oneway Anova p = .03		

\*Difference significant from Nonassertive  
(Duncan Multiple Range Test p = .05)

**Table 8**  
Write to Local Newspaper CCB Response by Interaction Style

	Assertion	
	Low Nonassertive	High Assertive
Low	1.3617	3.5405*
Aggression	Aggressive	Resort-to-Aggression
High	3.1471	3.8095*
Oneway Anova p = .02		

\*Difference significant from Nonassertive  
(Duncan Multiple Range Test p = .05)

Turning to the hypotheses advanced, we can see that several were supported by the findings of this study. Hypothesis 1 posited that nonassertives would have low involvement in all types of CCB. Referring again to Tables 2 through 9 we see that proposition borne out. Nonassertives were the most likely to take no action, and their intention score was the lowest across all of the other situations, even though some differences were not significantly different.

Hypothesis 2 speculated that assertives would

be more likely to intend to engage in problem solution behavior. The idea that assertives

**Table 9**  
Take Formal Action CCB Response by Interaction Style

	Assertion	
	Low Nonassertive	High Assertive
Low	3.8511	5.0270
Aggression	Aggressive	Resort-to-Aggression
High	5.7353*	5.5238*
Oneway Anova p = .01		

\*Difference significant from Nonassertive  
(Duncan Multiple Range Test p = .05)

generally seek amiable discussion of and resolution to problems makes this hypothesis viable. Redress is involved in one consumer agency complaint (Table 6) and formal action. The hypothesis is supported for the consumer agency complaint, but aggression appears to be the major factor driving respondents to court. In this case, perhaps punishment becomes the motive as much as restitution.

Retaliation is a possible motive in any consumer dispute. This could be accomplished by boycotting the institution involved, getting others to join the boycott, seeking public warnings through a consumer agency or writing to a newspaper, and taking legal action. Hypothesis 3 posits that aggressiveness will be associated with this vindictive behavior. This involves several of the responses studied here. No evidence was seen for interaction style effects for personal or expanded boycotts. For both newspaper and consumer agency avenues for warning consumers, assertiveness rather than aggressiveness appeared to be the underlying personality force. Only for the extreme case of formal court action was hypothesis 3 supported. Aggressiveness seems to be associated more with personal satisfaction than with communicating to others about the offending institution.

Hypothesis 4 suggests that either high assertiveness or high aggressiveness will lead to

the highest levels of CCB across all alternatives. Inspection of all the tables suggests only slight support for this hypothesis. Assertive and resort-to-aggression interaction styles were associated with the lowest intention to do nothing and the highest intent to complain to a consumer agency to warn others. High assertion, high aggression and high resort-to-aggression styles were associated with taking formal action. The hypothesis was partially supported, but resort-to-aggression underlay high levels of complaining intention more often than previous research results would predict.

### CONCLUSIONS

The idea that consumer interaction style is associated with consumer complaining intentions is supported in this analysis. More work remains to sort out the relative effects of aggressiveness and assertiveness, however. The strongest finding here indicates that consumers low in both assertiveness and aggressiveness seem to have the lowest propensity to engage in all types of CCB. It appears, too, that interaction style becomes a force underlying CCB only in the less common types of response. The actions yielding the highest mean intention scores saw no relation to interaction style.

More research is indicated for this area. Designs to more fully investigate the differing effects of assertiveness and aggressiveness should be developed. Data from adult samples with more complaining experience than the typical college student should be drawn.

The scenario method for measuring complaining intentions seems useful. It would be appropriate to extend this to a variety of products and situations. Differing levels of product interest and varying emotions arising out of the dispute could invoke different responses based on interaction style.

Finally, samples large enough to split by gender should be used. Evidence in other consumer research suggests that gender effects can be significant in understanding the impact of personal forces on buying and complaining behavior.

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