# AN ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL EXPLANATION OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION, DISSATISFACTION AND COMPLAINING BEHAVIOR

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## INTRODUCTION

Research in the field of consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction (CS/D) can be divided into two broad categories. The first broad category contains studies which are mainly concerned with prepurchase and purchase related processes leading up to CS/D (e.g., Day, 1984). Second, there are studies concerned with the outcomes following CS/D such as brand switching, negative word of mouth, and consumer complaining behavior (CCB). The first category of studies is mainly concerned with the antecedents of CS/D, whereas the second is mainly concerned with the consequences of CS/D. The second set of studies is of interest to marketers who want to learn about the long term effects of a purchase experience on brand and store loyalty and to public policymakers who are more interested in whether or not consumers will act on their dissatisfaction by complaining or whether government intervention is required to provide a remedy.

No model in the CS/D field currently provides an explanation that would help CS/D users understand the process that occurs after an unsatisfactory purchase experience. Although some CCB researchers have paid attention to this point, their models have focused on antecedent state variables such as the degree of dissatisfaction or the perceived cost of complaining as they might affect voicing outcomes. Few studies have dealt with the process by which purchase experiences lead to final outcomes of interest to marketers and public policymakers.

One area of investigation would be based upon consumer information processing models. These models have received much research attention in recent years with almost exclusive focus on prepurchase issues. The concepts in these models are also applicable to postpurchase issues. They appear to offer useful and researchable insights into postpurchase behavior and attitude changes.

The present paper will consider CS/D in the context of alternative information processing models. The paper concludes that Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (abbreviated ELM) holds great promise for understanding how CS/D leads to one or more of several possible postpurchase consequences. The final section includes a set of researchable propositions arising out of the ELM framework that can shed new light on this critical research area.

## CONSUMER INFORMATION PROCESSING MODELS

There are several information processing models that have been used to describe how consumers make purchase decisions. Two of the most commonly used major information processing models are Fishbein and Ajzen's (1981; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980); see also Sheppard, Hartwick, & Warshaw, 1988) Theory of Reasoned Action and Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (which will be described later). Fishbein and Ajzen's theory builds on expectancy-value research to try to discover the attitudinal and normative determinants of a purchase decision. The attitudinal component is divided into beliefs and evaluations of those beliefs. The normative component is divided into normative beliefs and motivations to comply with important others. This parsimonious theory has generated much support and much controversy (e.g., Ajzen, 1985; Miniard & Cohen, 1983).

Fishbein and Ajzen's theory has implications for understanding CS/D since it involves attitudes and behavioral intentions. Thus, following from the Theory of Reasoned Action, if a consumer has a specific belief about a purchased product that is disconfirmed by a competitor's advertisement, then consumer dissatisfaction might be increased due to the operation of changes in beliefs which, in turn, would influence attitude toward purchasing the brand again. Depending on whether the belief is salient or not, the degree of CS/D and extent of change of behavioral intention might be predicted. Another contribution of the Theory of Reasoned Action is that it emphasizes specificity of measurement. Thus, researchers in this tradition would approach the post-CS/D process by focusing on behavioral intention for a specific context, time, target, and action.

There has been little explicit application of information processing models to understanding CS/D. For example, Sternthal and Craig (1982) wrote a book titled Consumer Behavior: An Information Processing Perspective which did not contain any explicit discussion of CS/D or CCB. One exception is the work of Richard Oliver (1980b). In Oliver's model, CS/D is seen as a response to the discrepancy between expectations and performance. Brand choice is assumed to be influenced by beliefs about how the product is expected to perform (prepurchase expectations) which influence prepurchase intentions. After the product is used, either confirmation or disconfirmation (which might be positive or negative) of the prepurchase expectations occurs. If the product performs adequately, then expectations are fulfilled, and satisfaction is the outcome. Dissatisfaction occurs when negative disconfirmation occurs which means that product usage has fallen below expectations. Postpurchase attitudes are influenced by the resulting CS/D. If the experience has been positive, repurchase is likely.

Oliver's model and several other information processing models (including Fishbein and Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action itself) do not explicitly take into account the fact that much information processing research provides strong evidence that the amount of thinking people engage in varies tremendously depending on situational factors and that the amount of thinking can have significant effects on attitudes. Heretofore, researchers such as Oliver and others have considered CS/D to have been formed at one time. Nevertheless, common experience tells us that the formation of CS/D can take considerable time and involve considerable thinking. Given this, the question then is: what do we know about the way in which that process of thinking

takes place that can help us understand what will happen after CS/D is formed. One model that explicitly takes this process into account is Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model.

## THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL OF PERSUASION

According to Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Unnava, & Strathman, 1990; see also Petty, Cacioppo, & Kasmer, 1988), attitudes are "...general evaluations (that) can be based on a variety of behavioral, affective, and cognitive experiences, and are capable of guiding behavioral, affective, and cognitive processes" (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, pp. 4-5). There are affect-induced, cognitive-induced, and behavioral-induced attitude changes, a distinction that will discussed later. It will be assumed that consumers develop CS/D beliefs and attitudes as a function of exposure to one or (usually) more factors such as persuasive messages (e.g., an advertisement), or conversations with others, or product usage.

According to the ELM, if the motivation to analyze the arguments (where arguments are pieces of information relevant to a dimension that the consumer uses in determining the advantages of the position advocated) related to a factor is high and ability to analyze those arguments is high, then it is likely that consumers will pay more attention to, and think about, the arguments. The results of this elaboration will be cognitive processing that might be predominately favorable, unfavorable, or neither. If favorable (unfavorable), then a positive (negative) attitude should result.

Attitudes that result from examining and thinking about the arguments is called central route induced persuasion. For example, suppose a person bought a new foreign mid-sized car that "bottoms out" frequently and gets poor gas mileage and is told by a close friend that he personally knows one other purchaser of a previous year's version of the same brand of car who definitely does not have the bottoming out problem and gets better gas mileage. The consumer dissatisfaction in this example would be classified as central route induced dissatisfaction because the close friend mentions two message arguments (i.e., that he knows another who does not have the two problems) and the consumer has both the ability to understand the message arguments and the motivation to devote cognitive resources to the analysis of the message arguments. The motivation factor is especially important because the consumer is searching for an explanation of his own experience with the product.

Another example of persuasion as a function of traveling the central route might be someone who receives a haircut from a new barber that results in his conclusion that he is dissatisfied with the haircut. The person notices that the haircut results in sideburns that are too short, a back hairline that is uneven rather than straight, and hair that is cut too short near the ears. On the other hand, two other aspects of the haircut--a shampoo during the haircut and the length of hair cut at the forehead--are evaluated positively. Assuming equal levels of argument importance, thinking about these three negatively evaluated arguments in combination with the two positively evaluated arguments would create a negative attitude toward the haircut. Once again both motivation to process the arguments (because of the new barber) and ability to process the arguments are high.

Not all persuasion occurs by the central route. Peripheral route induced persuasion occurs when the consumer is unmotivated to and/or unable to process the arguments. When the peripheral route to persuasion is traveled, persuasion occurs due to peripheral cues. These are cues present that can cause persuasion and which do not necessarily involve examining the arguments.

For example, if a consumer's oldest child voices his dislike of a brand of margarine that a consumer purchases for the first time, the consumer might experience dissatisfaction with the product even though no specific arguments are presented by the child stating that the brand of margarine is a bad product. Thus, his oldest child's opinion might be a peripheral cue since the consumer was not motivated to analyze his own experience with the product or other information.

A similar example illustrates another peripheral cue. Subsequent to purchase, a consumer might view a commercial for a competing brand of margarine and notice a famous celebrity in the ad and experience positive attitude change toward this competing product (mainly because the source is serving as a peripheral cue) and thus greater dissatisfaction with the original margarine. A final example of a peripheral cue might be an unhappy mood. If yet another margarine purchaser happened to have a terrible day at the office, then after he returned home, he might use the margarine and find it unsatisfactory because of the negative mood. In this example, the negative mood is serving as a peripheral cue.

Assuming equally powerful and/or memorable peripheral cues, each of the three margarine consumers might have the same level of dissatisfaction with the margarine, however the determinants of that dissatisfaction are different for each one. A fourth margarine user who cooks a lot and thinks carefully about the taste and cooking qualities of the product and pays attention to the arguments in advertisements for competing brands, but still experiences dissatisfaction is likely to have more persistent (lasting over time) and resistant (to counterattack from other factors) dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction that is more predictive of behavior (e.g., complaining behavior) than attitudes produced by the peripheral route. No other consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction theory is capable of making such a prediction.

## RESEARCH ON THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL OF PERSUASION

The ELM offers a number of predictions about the specific conditions affecting attitudes. For example, Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann (1983) used a 2 X 2 X 2 between-subjects factorial design to provide evidence that under high personal relevance central route induced persuasion is more likely to occur, whereas under low personal relevance persuasion by the peripheral route (where the cue is an attractive source) is more likely to occur. The manipulated variables were: personal relevance (high or low), source attractiveness (high or low), and argument quality (strong or weak).

The results provided strong evidence that under low personal relevance the celebrity sources exerted the main influence on attitudes, whereas the quality of the arguments had a minimal, but significant, effect on attitudes. On the other hand, under high personal relevance, the celebrity sources had no significant influence on attitudes, but the quality of the arguments exerted the main influence.

In another study, Moore, Hausknecht, & Thamodaran (1986), in an advertising time compression study, used a 2 X 2 X 2 X 3 between-subjects factorial design. The manipulated variables were: product class (shavers or calculators), source factors of source credibility (for the calculator product), and source attractiveness (for the razor product), argument quality (weak versus strong), and speed of message exposure rate (normal, 130% of normal, and 160% of normal). They provided evidence that the same source can serve in three different roles. The first two roles showed similar effects to the Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann results. When the elaboration likelihood was highest, argument quality was the most important determinant of attitude, whereas when the elaboration likelihood was lowest, a source factor was the most important determinant of attitudes. Under conditions of moderate elaboration likelihood, source factors and argument quality interacted. To summarize their results, participants processed the message arguments when it was easy to do so, but used the message source as a peripheral cue when processing the message was made more difficult. When the message processing was just somewhat difficult (under conditions of moderate elaboration likelihood), participants decided to exert the necessary effort to process the arguments when they thought that it would be in their best interest. In this case, exposure to a high credibility (or high attractiveness) source was the indicator that such processing of the message arguments was in their best interest. Moore et al. (1986) have performed the only published study providing evidence for ELM predicted effects for a single variable across three separate levels of elaboration likelihood (see Petty, Kasmer, Cacioppo, & Haugtvedt, 1987 for more explanation of the implications of the Moore et al. study).

According to the ELM, variables such as an unattractive source or a negative mood can influence the amount and direction of CS/D by one of only three ways. First, they can serve as peripheral cues (as shown, for example, in the low personal relevance conditions in the Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann (1983) study). Second, they can affect the extent and/or direction of issue and argument elaboration (as shown, for example, in the moderate elaboration likelihood condition of the Moore et al. study where there was an effect on the extent of argument elaboration). Finally, they can serve as persuasive arguments. See Petty, Kasmer, Haugtvedt, & Cacioppo (1987) and Petty, Cacioppo, Kasmer, & Haugtvedt (1987) for a more extensive discussion of the multiple roles of variables in the ELM.

Each of these effects occurs in different, predictable situations. The fact that, according to the ELM, variables are capable of serving in multiple roles is also important because some researchers (e.g., Stiff, 1986) have not understood these multiple roles. See Petty, Kasmer, Haugtvedt, & Cacioppo (1987) and Petty, Cacioppo, Kasmer, & Haugtvedt (1987) for a more extensive discussion of these issues.

## AN APPLICATION OF THE ELM: THE CASE OF AFFECT

Affect is an area of considerable importance to CS/D. Hunt (1988, p. 739) states that investigations into this area "...might overturn much of the past research in the field." Westbrook (1980; 1987) has written papers that illustrate applications of affect to CS/D. An ELM analysis provides a good framework for understanding how affect influences attitudes. Petty, Cacioppo, and Kasmer (1987) discuss the three roles for affect in a persuasive communication context. The three earlier mentioned roles were as a peripheral cue, as an influence on the extent or direction of argument processing, and as a persuasive argument.

The Petty, Cacioppo, & Kasmer (1987) ELM analysis of affect provides a broader conceptualization of the influence of affect than the Westbrook analysis. Westbrook (1980) hypothesized that product satisfaction varies directly with favorability of mood, but did not provide supporting evidence. Assuming that Westbrook had found such evidence and that mood was not influencing thought content, affect would be serving as a peripheral cue. Another example of affect serving as a peripheral cue in a CS/D situation would be the situation mentioned earlier where negative mood caused the margarine purchaser to be dissatisfied. This type of process would be only one of three possible effects of affect according to the ELM analysis. Affect could serve as a persuasive argument under conditions of high motivation and ability to process the message arguments where persuasion is occurring via the central route. Affect can also bias processing of the message arguments or determine the extent of processing of the message arguments (see Petty, Cacioppo, & Kasmer, 1987). Once again the route traveled is crucial because of the different implications for persistence, resistance, and the connection of attitudes to actual behavior.

## AN ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Some of the different theories in the CS/D literature show similarities when examined in the context of the ELM. The theories that have been used to explain consumer dissatisfaction such as adaptation level theory (Oliver, 1980a), assimilation/contrast theory (Olson & Dover, 1979), comparison level theory (LaTour & Peat, 1980), and dissonance theory (Cardozo, 1965) might be categorized as to whether they emphasized either the central route or the peripheral route. For instance, both dissonance theory and Oliver's (1987) model of satisfaction and complaining might be categorized as a central route approach because both theories assume that CS/D results from consumers' relatively in-depth consideration of the adequacy of the purchase decision (e.g., analyzing a position along dimensions important to the consumer) in the context of product usage and/or other information. For example, according to cognitive dissonance theory, when expectations are disconfirmed,

psychological tension is created that might result in attitude change. Many approaches to CS/D emphasize the central route approach, whereas other approaches emphasize peripheral cues (such as the previously mentioned example of a negative mood causing dissatisfaction).

## COMPLAINING BEHAVIOR

One of the most important contributions of the ELM is to understand and predict consequences of CS/D such as complaining behavior. This type of analysis would augment other work (e.g., Andreasen, 1988, 1989; Day, 1984; Folkes, 1984; Singh, 1988) and provide a richer understanding of complaining behavior.

Andreasen (1988) discusses four main sets of factors that determine complaining: 1. the cost-benefit model, 2. the personality model, 3. the learning model, and 4. the restraints model. The cost-benefit model proposed by Richins (1980) is a specific case of persuasion due to traveling down the central route.

Personality is also considered in the ELM. The individual difference variable of need for cognition has implications for the personality model. Need for cognition is the tendency for individuals to enjoy thinking (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). People who are high scorers on the need for cognition scale are motivated to engage in effortful cognitive activity, whereas low scorers are motivated to avoid such activity. It is expected that, in certain situations, high need for cognition consumers are especially likely to devote cognitive processing to complaining related stimuli. For instance, high need for cognition consumers might be more likely to notice flaws that might go unnoticed by someone lower in need for cognition, especially under conditions where judgmental rather than manifest problems exist (using Andreasen and Best's (1977) terminology). As Best (1981, p. 6) points out, sometimes consumers suffer serious problems even though they are not capable of even realizing that a problem exists. Studies showing that complainers are more educated (e.g., Morganosky & Buckley, 1987; see Andreasen, 1988, p. 695 for citations to other studies) might be explained by need for cognition. In other words, need for cognition might be a more theoretically justified mediator of consumer complaining behavior in comparison with education.

In other situations, high need for cognition will be associated with lower levels of complaining behavior. Specifically, a knowledgeable consumer might examine the owner's manual and thus experience enhanced understanding of exactly what is to be expected from product performance. These realistic expectations will result in higher consumer satisfaction because the product may more likely live up to these expectations. Of course, if the owner's manual and/or customer service failed to adequately address problem areas, then increased consumer dissatisfaction would result. Furthermore, this increased consumer dissatisfaction is expected to be even greater than for someone who was not subjected to the weak arguments. Therefore, contrary to what Day and Landon (1977, p. 434) claimed, a higher level of product knowledge is not necessarily expected to result in higher consumer dissatisfaction. According to the ELM analysis, knowledge and thinking could lead to greater satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, a useful explanatory model of the process whereby CS/D is formed and CCB chosen is the ELM. Central route induced persuasion creates both more enduring (i.e., longer lasting) and more resistant (i.e., less susceptible to counterattack) attitudes toward the position advocated in the persuasive message. The differences in persistence and resistance provide specific guidelines for understanding when consumer dissatisfaction will be transitory and malleable and under what conditions it will be more permanent and hard to change. The ELM also provides an organizing framework for some of the existing theories and descriptions of CS/D and CCB.

Based on the above discussion, nine illustrative researchable propositions that follow from the ELM will be listed.

1. Because central route induced persuasion creates a closer connection between attitudes and behavior (such as complaining behavior), the route to persuasion should be examined. For example, previous research on the models of the consequences of CS/D that has focused on the degree of dissatisfaction or the perceived cost of complaining on voicing outcomes has examined relatively isolated outcomes. A better approach would be to interpret the results to discover the underlying process by which CS/D exerts such effects. A starting point for understanding the underlying process would be an attempt to understand which route is being traveled.
2. The ELM can help guide research on post-complaining behavior such as Bearden and Oliver's (1985) "secondary satisfaction." Secondary satisfaction refers to post-complaining satisfaction due to factors such as the remedy provided as a response to the complaint or the satisfaction people feel just by the very act of complaining (i.e., getting it off your chest). One hypothesis would be that the example where the remedy is provided as a response to the complaint would result in longer lasting secondary satisfaction because it would be more likely to be formed via the central route to persuasion. In other words, although getting something off your chest might provide temporary relief, the reality of a problem that is not being solved finally takes its toll in continued dissatisfaction and failure to buy the product again.
3. Because central route induced persuasion creates both more enduring and more resistant attitudes than peripheral route induced persuasion, the process of the creation of CS/D must be examined. For example, if it can be determined that consumer dissatisfaction was created via the central route, then government policy makers when faced with a low level of complaining behavior would have greater confidence in predicting that action is needed due to the increased probability of greater persistence and resistance.
4. Factors that influence motivation and ability to

process message arguments (such as personal relevance for the motivation dimension or prior knowledge for the ability dimension) need to be explicitly examined in CS/D research rather than looked at to explain results after a study has been completed.

5. Because affect does not simply operate as a peripheral cue (as Day, 1984 implies), a study showing that affect is capable of serving both as a peripheral cue and in another role (such as a variable that will cause greater attention to the message arguments under moderate personal relevance) would be a contribution.

6. The strength of the message arguments that sometime lead to CS/D is potentially an important variable for investigating some of the preceding propositions. For instance, if the message arguments are equal in importance, under some conditions (e.g., under conditions of high personal relevance), strong message arguments leading to dissatisfaction might be expected to result in more dissatisfaction in comparison with weak message arguments that are easier to counterargue. Under other conditions (e.g., under conditions of low personal relevance), the difference between the strong and weak arguments with respect to their effect on dissatisfaction is expected to be lessened or eliminated.

7. In situations of low motivation and/or ability, when people are unwilling and/or unable to elaborate extensively on the message arguments, consumer dissatisfaction related variables will probably operate as peripheral cues and the dissatisfaction will not be closely related to complaining behavior or long lasting.

8. Need for cognition is an individual difference variable that might be useful in explaining individual differences in CS/D. Under some conditions (such as under a judgmental as opposed to a manifest problem situation or a situation where minor flaws are hard to detect by the average person), consumers high in need for cognition should experience higher levels of dissatisfaction. Under other conditions (such as a knowledgeable consumer who might examine the owner's manual in more depth or understand more fully the limitations of a technical product), consumers high in need for cognition would be predicted to experience lower levels of dissatisfaction. For complaining behavior, under conditions of high personal relevance, higher need for cognition is likely to be associated with more complaining or at least more thoughts about possible complaining options.

9. The ELM provides a possible organizing framework for complaining behavior research. This framework should help researchers follow Andreasen's (1988, p. 713) important advice of "discovering under what circumstances and for which consumer segments each model applies."

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