

Consumer complaint behavior: Beyond Hirschman's exit-voice-loyalty framework

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Abstract:

Studies on consumer complaining behavior mainly focus on complaining behavior predictors (e.g., culture, demographic characteristics, personality characteristics). Academics and practitioners have accorded little attention to the concept of a consumer complaint behavior and the complaint responses structure. In fact, since Hirschman's "Exit-Voice-Loyalty model," few researchers have attempted to improve and offer new frameworks (e.g., Singh's taxonomy; Day and Landon's dichotomy).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the classical taxonomies of consumers complaining behavior. The first result shows that the conceptual and methodological studies bring about significant variation and differentiation in terms of terminology, variable definitions, number of variables used, and model structure. These different interpretations could naturally generate contradicting classifications and misleading results. The second result refers to the inadequacy of the classical taxonomies to withstand the test of time. Today's consumers have multiple complaining opportunities or platforms that need to be considered in the research model.

Companies are facing challenges when it comes to choosing which communication platform must be prioritized. For instance, social media platforms add another layer of complexity to the study of complaining behavior. In light of these changes, academics should design integrated models to guide research and help practitioners acquire more profound knowledge and design efficient complaints handling systems.

From a managerial perspective, companies hold incomplete and inaccurate customer satisfaction data. While consumer complaint behavior is studied separately, academics have pointed out that complaint actions are part of the post-purchase outcomes. Therefore, including complaints in the satisfaction, dissatisfaction process will only give companies a complete picture. Managers could improve satisfaction data and analysis through the use of sound recovery systems.

Keywords: Customer complaint behavior, complaints, dissatisfaction, voice, exit, model

JEL Classification : M3

Paper type: Theoretical Research

1. Introduction

An extensively explored area of study has been post-purchase outcomes that include customer satisfaction and complaint behavior. Research suggests that the study of Customer Complaint Behavior (CCB) is equally crucial because the average company loses about 20% of its customers due to dissatisfaction (Timn,1990). In addition, companies risk long-term damage if dissatisfied consumers engage in private responses such as Negative Word-of-Mouth (NWOM) or exit (i.e., switching silently to the competitors).

Rosentein (1988) explains that consumers find existing levels of service lacking and rarely matching their increasingly demanding expectations. Given the importance and relevance of CCB, much Research has been interested in examining: who complains (differences between complainers and non-complainers), how dissatisfied consumers complain, and the efficient predictors of CCB. The market-oriented business philosophy that shaped recent studies in the marketing discipline has contributed to this focus (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Narver and Slater, 1990). In the business context, service failures are viewed as natural events that are very difficult to avoid. Nevertheless, on the other hand, customer dissatisfaction can be avoided or handled at all costs (Arora and Chakraborty, 2021). Indeed, customer satisfaction is dependent on the performance of the service recovery.

Efficient and effective communication links between consumers and the company are crucial from a managerial standpoint. It creates an opportunity for consumers to express their feelings and opinions directly to the company instead of choosing private actions. Indeed, companies are given a chance to put the service back on track and recover the client (Royal, 1995; Rinehart, 1998). According to Goodwin and Ross (1990), recovered customers may become more profitable compared to those satisfied since the beginning. Researchers are still exploring how best to manage consumer complaints. For example, studies evaluate the effectiveness of digital complaining channels compared to complain channels involving direct human interactions (i.e., telephone or face to face) (Jeanpert, Jacquemier-Paquin, and Claye-Puaux, 2021). Jeanpert et al. (2021) suggest that direct human interaction is necessary to customer relationships, especially perceived justice. Still, Research shows that dissatisfied complainant requires more than just an explanation or apology but prefer more tangible results. Recovery systems are effective when the complainants are offered restitution (Hill and Baer, 1994; Rinehart, 1998). Naturally, Rinehart (1998) stresses the importance of a comprehensive understanding of consumer decision-making, evaluative processes, and all related variables for academia and businesses.

Research has also discovered several disturbing realities. Haslstead (1993) found that companies often view low complaint rates and repeat patronage as indicators of high levels of customer satisfaction. Hren (1996) found that loyal customers are more likely to complain to the offending company, confirming Hirschman's (1970) speculation regarding the loyalty construct. Furthermore, dissatisfied consumers with a product purchase or consumption is more likely to complain than dissatisfied service consumers (Day and Muzaffr, 1978). Hence, dissatisfied service consumers are more likely to engage in exit behavior (Aquila and Koltin, 1992).

Despite the difficulty for service consumers in particular to identify the source of their dissatisfaction, companies should invest in robust recovery systems for all the reasons mentioned above (Rinehart, 1998). Efficient recovery systems require a deep understanding of satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and CCB. Singh (1988) reports that companies use customer response data to make strategic decisions. As a result, Research on consumer complaint behavior is crucial to give a complete picture regarding customer satisfaction data that are incomplete and inaccurate in light of these disturbing realities (Singh and Panda, 1991). The previous arguments explain the managerial contribution to the study of consumer complaint activity and why it is still an active research field.

Over the last decades, consistent research efforts have produced many conceptual and methodological studies characterized by variation and differentiation. Nevertheless, academics are still calling for the need for a more comprehensive and dynamic model (Tronvoll, 2012; Istanbuluoglu and al., 2017). Studies and methods are mainly based on the exchange-dominant

perspective. However, this perspective fails to acknowledge consumers as value co-creators and active participants (Arora and Chakraborty, 2021).

This paper aims to examine the basic models of CCB and discuss their inadequacies and most recent conceptual works. We begin this paper with a provision of a general scope of CCB where we introduce the main definitions of complaint behavior, dissatisfaction more specifically. The following section examines the principles of three classical models: Hirschman's framework (1970), Day and Landon's dichotomy (1977), and Singh's model (1988). Next, we shed light on essential variables and concepts and the contribution of each taxonomy to the CCB literature. Finally, we reflect on the main works, their limits, and recent frameworks emphasizing processes perspective and online behavior.

2. Customer Complaint behavior

Day and Landon (1975) and Day (1977) describe Consumer Complaining Behavior as any research dealing with what consumers do or do not do due to the evaluation process of consumption experience. Complaints communicate customers' frustrations and wish to change and improve the undesired event (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987). A broader definition will include behavioral and non-behavioral responses to satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Day, 1980, Singh, 1988). Indeed, a standard definition used in the literature defines CCB as: "[. . .] a set of multiple (behavioral and non-behavioral) responses, some or all of which are triggered by perceived dissatisfaction with a purchase episode" (Singh 1988, p. 94).

Studies suggest that NWOM is the most common action dissatisfied consumers engage in among the various complaint responses defined in the literature (Istanbulluoglu and al., 2017; Kitapci et al., 2019). Plus, service customers usually seek out word-of-mouth to gather information before purchasing decisions (Murray, 1991; Bateson, 1995). This finding is quite alarming for companies because it leaves no opportunities for service recovery to rectify the issue. It might also impact potential consumers.

Although researchers have intensively studied the structure and determinants of consumer complaint responses, the literature is still fragmented because determinants are studied separately or in small groups (Morel et al., 1997). Thus, the task of proposing an integrated model of CCB becomes tricky. Few studies found culture to be a good predictor of a consumer's propensity to complain (Hernandes et al., 1991; Hewstone, 1988). Western managers rely heavily on CCB findings for decision-making in domestic markets and foreign, non-western markets (Liu and McClure, 2001).

Although cultural norms appear to be changing and more standardized, Liu and McClure (2001) have found significant differences in CCB responses and CCB intentions between Western and non-western consumers. Dart and Freeman (1994) showed that demographic variables have weak explicative power. On the other hand, personality characteristics were strong predictors of the likelihood of complaining and types of complaint responses (Blodgett, Granbois, and Walters, 1993; Rinehart, 1998). Indeed, Rinehart's (1998) study of the locus of control was designed to fill the void in the literature regarding the lack of interest in examining personal characteristics.

Others consider CCB a dynamic process that includes multiple actions that customers might perform simultaneously or successively to deal with dissatisfied experiences (Crié, 2003; Tronvoll, 2012). For some research, it is crucial to disentangle the satisfaction and dissatisfaction process from the CCB. Numerous studies present how to define and operationalize the right dependent variable and predictor variables (Day, 1980).

3. Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction

Not all dissatisfied consumers, however, express their dissatisfaction through complaint behavior (Clabaugh, 1979). Therefore, research has focused on identifying the characteristics and magnitude of satisfied consumers versus those dissatisfied who choose to complain and those who choose no-action responses. The results highlight the large share of dissatisfied consumers compared to the satisfied ones (Kendall and Russ, 1977; Andreassen, 1976). However, responses varied from action to no-action. These findings prompted research into this behavior.

Although dissatisfaction is necessary but not a sufficient condition for complaint behavior, a growing body of literature interested in satisfaction and dissatisfaction processes has included complaint behavior as a strong indicator of satisfaction. Furthermore, Clabaugh (1979) stated that retailers, manufacturers, government, and third-party organizations have considered the complaint behavior a strong indicator of consumer dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, Landon (1977) advances a low correlation between dissatisfaction and complaint behavior.

Researchers have tried to expand their knowledge about dissatisfied consumers. Thus, a long list of theories has been mobilized to investigate consumer dissatisfaction: assimilation theory, attribution theory, confirmation/disconfirmation theory, consumer alienation theory, contrast theory, assimilation-contrast theory, and generalized negativity.

Dissatisfaction might not be related to the service or product but is a function of a plethora of causes that can happen at any given time of the consumption experience (Jacoby and Jaccard, 1981; Richins and Verhage, 1985; Maute and Forrester, 1993). For example, Istanbuluoglu et al. (2017) pointed out that dissatisfaction towards the company can be related to the company itself, salesperson, delivery, advertisement, or after-sales services. The evaluation process does not end after using the service or product but includes the after-sales services. All these elements from the consumption experience (Gilly and Gelb, 1982). When the experience does not match the expectations, dissatisfaction occurs. Pushing further, researchers stated that the way company's handle recovery system affects consumer satisfaction and repurchase intention (Chia, 2000). Indeed, the customers' evaluation process might also include an appreciation of their response to the complaints. A study has found that CCB plays the role of mediator between dissatisfaction and revisiting intentions (Lee and Kim, 2020). Therefore, an empirical examination of voice complaint outcomes and post-resolution repurchase intentions is required (Blodgett et al., 1993).

4. Classical taxonomies of CCB

4.1 Hirschman's model (1970)

In Hirschman's model (1970), dissatisfaction is an essential element of the customer experience. This framework portrays customers as willing agents that wish to take action in order to address the issue and even confront the offending organization (James and John, 2021). According to Graham and Keeley (1991), economic and political behaviors are represented by the "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty" variables.

Exit is viewed as an economic behavior that signals a performance problem that needs to be handled by the organization. This impersonal but quantifiable feedback refers to the concept of the Invisible Hands (Graham and Keeley, 1991). If the organization does not act swiftly, it risks decline and replacement. This view is consistent with the economic philosophy of the survival of the fittest.

From a political perspective, voice refers to customers willing to address the offending organization. This feedback mechanism allows the organization the opportunity to rectify the problem and even strengthen the relationship. Thus, the economic and political behaviors induce organizational change and ensure organizational well-being. Other researchers view exit as damaging behavior and do not allow companies to get any feedback from their customers (Istanbuluoglu and al., 2017).

Hirschman (1970) argues that lack of exit options generates voice as the only possible behavior for dissatisfied customers, as in classic monopolies. This argument implies a positive relationship between exit and voice (James and John, 2021). For instance, when exit options increase, voice decreases. He adds that sometimes customers use exit options in order to threaten the company to redress the situation. If the issue has not been resolved, the customer switches to another company exacting his initial threat. Thus, the availability of exit opportunities is an excellent incentive for customers to voice their complaints.

Researchers note that voice is a complex behavior that needs much attention (Dowding and John, 2012). For example, it could be an individual and also a collective act. Choosing between voice and

exit is also a function of cost and benefit evaluation (James and John, 2021). In addition, psychological processes impact the customer's evaluation process and cost perception.

According to Hirschman (1970), loyal customers are willing to use voice instead of available exit options (James and John, 2021). Loyalty is defined as a unique bond between a customer and a given company. Therefore, loyal customers are less likely to choose exit even given more exit options. Furthermore, we can find two versions of loyalty in the literature coherent with Hirschman's framework: domain-specific and generalized loyalty (James and John, 2021).

Researchers highlight the concept's ambiguity in the model, and some even call it an equation filler (Graham and Keeley, 1992; Barry, 1974). There are various interpretations of the loyalty variable. Few researchers have considered it an equally valid response to dissatisfying service or product experience.

We might consider loyalty as a no-action response. In other words, we deal with loyal customers who do not want to complain and continue their patronage due to neglect or patience (Ro, 2014). This no-action disposition stems from tolerance and wanting to give the company a chance to improve its service or product quality. On the other hand, neglectful customers might lack interest or think it is not worth the trouble (James and John, 2021).

Others have described loyalty as a psychological disposition and an influential mediating variable. The impact of loyalty varies from one customer to another, impacting the behavioral response "exit-voice."

James and John (2021) argue that a much better attempt at introducing the loyalty construct could be found in the Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect model (EVLN). The EVLN framework has a clearer conception of the loyalty construct, taking the person's personality and experiences as solid indicators of his loyalty (Lyons, Lowery, and DeHoog 1992).

They state that routines, habits, reluctance towards change, and fondness toward the people working in the company affect the loyalty disposition.

We identify two opposing ideas within this perspective (Graham and Keeley, 1992). The first group claims loyalty decreases the incidence and volume of voice and the second one argues that loyalty increases voice response. It might be because loyal customers prefer to stand by the company and voice their concerns instead (Istanbulluoglu and al., 2017). For instance, voice is more convenient for loyal customers that intend to improve the declining quality before giving any thoughts to switching companies (Hirschman, 1970; Dowding et al., 2000; James and John, 2021).

4.2 Day and Landon's Dichotomy (1977)

Day and Landon's model attempted to answer the need for a theoretical framework to guide research in the field of CCB (Day, 1980). It establishes CCB as a distinct process different from the variables that generate feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Day, 1980). Day and Landon's (1977) CCB model is described as a dichotomy. It first makes a clear distinction between action and no-action responses. Then, it defines complaining activities into private and public. For instance, public actions include all complaining responses that are visible to the company.

This model has the advantage of incorporating more complaining options available to consumers (Istanbulluoglu et al., 2017). According to Day (1980), this critical work took steps further but did not offer a detailed theoretical structure or testable hypotheses. However, Day and Landon's (1977) model remains one of the two most accepted taxonomies, along with Hirschman's (1970) model. Later, Landon (1977) tried to go deeper in his conceptualization effort of the CCB construct. He identifies dissatisfaction, importance, benefits from complaining, and personality as predictors of complaint behavior. Relationships are drawn between these predictors and other variables such as:

- Satisfaction = f (expectations, perceived product performance)
- Importance = f (product cost, search time, physical harm, ego involvement)
- Benefit from complaining = f (the payoffs and costs of complaining)
- Expected payoff from complaining = f (importance and nature of the product problem-defect)

- Expected cost of complaining = f (firm reputation for product quality, willingness to make adjustments).

Researchers raise some significant concerns regarding Landon's work (Day, 1980). First, it is argued that it leaves many unanswered questions regarding the structure and interrelationships of the variables. Second, it does not provide a complete picture of CCB. However, few studies have found the model helpful. (Bearden, 1980; Richins, 1980).

Bearden (1980) utilized Landon's work to study the propensity to complain and six predicting variables. Unfortunately, the results seem to add less clarity and mixed support to Landon's proposed independent variables and their interrelationships. As suggested by Landon (1977), Richins (1980) focus on the relationship between complaint behavior and its relevant costs and benefits. Sadly, the supporting results remain relatively weak (Day, 1980).

4.3 Singh's Taxonomy (1988)

We explore our third model, considered more complex and sophisticated in its form. Singh's (1988) model introduces three Variables: voice, third-party, and private responses. The model is classified based on the object at the receiving end of the customer complaints. Companies, people, and organizations represent the objects in the model. These objects range from internal to external. Istanbuluoglu and al. (2017) explain that Singh's model (1988) considers a second classification criterion: objects involvement or not in the dissatisfying experience. The model focuses on the characteristics of the objects receiving complaints (Singh, 1988).

First, third-party behavior is represented by external objects, media, consumer agencies, or legal firms that are not involved in the dissatisfying episode. Second, private responses refer to internal objects such as friends and family who are not involved in this negative transaction. Third, the voice category included complaints directed to the company, manufacturer, or retailers. The company is considered involved directly in the process and external to the consumer's circle. This category includes no-action response because it is directly related to the company.

5. Discussion

From a terminology standpoint, it is safe to say that CCB models use different terms to describe the same matter. For example, when talking about the complainant and non-complainant, some models use the action, and no-action terminology, while others use behavioral and non-behavioral concepts. Nevertheless, Hirschman (1970) uses the loyalty construct to describe a no-action response.

Models variations also stem from the definition of the non-complainant consumer category. Research describes non-complainant as neglectful or unable to complain because they lack knowledge. For Hirschman (1970) and Ro (2014), loyal dissatisfied customers remain silent because they wish to support the offending company. From this perspective, loyalty is not a third response but a predictor of exit and voice responses.

Neglect is defined as a dissatisfied consumer that prefers to stay passive despite the unwanted outcome. While Hirschman (1970) does not qualify non-complaining as an action, for other taxonomies, the Non-complainant category is referred to as no-action (Day and Landon, 1977) and 'does nothing' (Day et al., 1981).

Taxonomy's variations could be explained in terms of the type of variables used and their number. For example, day and Landon (1977) define three variables: action/no-action, public/private, and the function. Likewise, Singh (1988) recognizes two variables external/not external and involved/not involved.

Generally, taxonomies categorize complaining responses based on their characteristics. Meanwhile, Singh's (1988) taxonomy is based on the complaint's characteristics and object. The complexity or dilemma lies in the fact that every research interprets the characteristics of the complaint responses differently. Indeed, there is a lack of consensus and homogeneity on terminology and meaning.

To illustrate this point, we can go back to Singh's (1988) categorization of the intention not to repurchase (i.e., exit or re-patronage) under the private actions category. It is considered an internal response directed at a non-involved party. Another interpretation could be that exit behavior indicates consumer attitudes towards the offending company (Istanbulluoglu et al., 2017). In this scenario, the company is defined as external and involved. Based on this interpretation, intention not to repurchase could also be classified as a voice response.

It could be said that the traditional taxonomies leave a lot of freedom and room for interpretation which could easily lead to studies using contradictory versions of the same model or several contradicting classifications. Consequently, results based on these models could easily be misleading. Thus, no real achievement or growth would be accomplished regarding CCB literature, and we are not going to be any closer to building a solid paradigm and safe results.

Regarding exit activities, most taxonomies specify a category of customers who do not wish to repeat the purchase experience due to dissatisfying episodes (e.g., Hirschman, 1970; Day et al., 1981; Tronvoll, 2012). They, however, propose different terminologies such as the exit, stopping patronage, personally boycotting the product, brand of the manufacturer or seller (Day et al., 1981). However, Singh (1988) does not identify exit as a category but includes it with negative word-of-mouth under the private responses category. Contrary to that, Hirschman (1970) gives a detailed explanation of the exit. In addition, he introduces the concept of loyalty to explain that disloyal dissatisfied consumers are more likely to end the relationship with the manufacturer, supplier, or/and sellers.

Voice responses include direct and constructive feedback from dissatisfying to the concerned company. Voice actions are said to be increased by the loyalty factor because loyal consumers seek improvement instead of leaving the company. In this case, exit might still be a final option if the company does not provide a satisfying reaction.

The taxonomies differ in their definition of the act of seeking redress by identifying one variable for some and two variables for others, such as: seeking redress for the company (Day and Landon, 1977) and seeking redress from the seller or from the manufacturer (Day et al. 1981).

Complaining to third-party variable, Day and Landon (1977) identified two variables (i.e., seeking legal action and complaining to third parties) during Day et al. (1981) identified three. Singh (1988) refines the model by adding audiences as another categorization layer (i.e., voice to the seller and third party responses). Only Day et al. (1981) attempt to identify a wide range of voices complaining objectives such as: warning the public, expressing dissatisfaction, influencing retailers, manufacturers, and even legislation.

The contrast in taxonomies could also be explained in the distinction between public and private actions (Day and Landon, 1977; Singh, 1988; Crié, 2003; Istanbulluoglu et al., 2017). For example, Hirschman (1970) and Day et al. (1981) do not include this categorization in their proposed models. All complaint actions that the company does not detect are called private responses. On the other hand, visible complaints activities to the company are called public responses. Singh (1988) uses external and not external terminology to separate actions visible to the company vs. the invisible complaint actions. Public actions are separated into complaints directed at the offending company or third parties (e.g., consumer organizations and legal representatives) (Day and Landon, 1977; Singh, 1988).

The involved and not involved category is only used in Singh's (1988) taxonomy. However, it enables researchers to identify the type of action and the objects it is directed to (e.g., company or friends and family).

The efforts to conceptualize and measure CCB is hindered by the complexity of the concept. Day (1980) argues that future research needs to disentangle consumer behavior from satisfaction and dissatisfaction processes while others argue for a more comprehensive model. Crié (2003) and Istanbulluoglu et al. (2017) have pointed that CCB is not conceptualized as a process. Consumer complaint is not only one destination activity, but it is a back forth process of evaluation that might lead the dissatisfied consumer to engage simultaneously or successively in several complaint

activities. The available taxonomies lack a hierarchical structure with clear steps or stages that consumers go through before the final actions (Crié, 2003).

6. Conclusion

An integrated model could answer some of the theoretical and conceptual problems academics deal with in the CCB domain. They offer a more realistic description of the CCB process and should be helpful from a managerial perspective. Recent theoretical and conceptual tried to offer more integrated propositions in response to the challenges and limits of classical taxonomies (Crié, 2003; Istanbuluoglu et al., 2017). What needs to be done now is an effort to put these propositions to the test. These models offer simplified categorization and terminology that leads to more refined structures and valuable and helpful results.

Furthermore, communication channels through which consumers can voice publicly or privately have grown this last decade tremendously. As a result, it could be more problematic for managers to decide which communication channel is worth monitoring. Study results showed significant differences between online and offline consumers based on the preferred to purchase channels in terms of purchase satisfaction, CCB, and impulse buying (Choi and Bum, 2020). Furthermore, consumers preferring offline purchasing tend to engage in private complaint behavior even when satisfied with their purchase.

On the contrary, consumers preferring online purchasing do not choose to complain when dissatisfied. Therefore, it is essential to point out the role of human interactions even in this era of digital complaint channels. The integrated models have the advantage of integrating new channels of complaints. It offers an excellent opportunity for exploring new avenues of research regarding online complaint behavior and efficient complaints handling processes.

Regardless of the communication channels, it is a fact that NWOM is the number one complaint response chosen by consumers. Therefore, from the business point of view, understanding who complains, how, and why aims to help managers design communication tools and strategies that promote direct complaining. Indeed, there is a need to promote complaining behavior directed toward the organization rather than toward other, impressionable potential consumers. If complaints are discouraged, unhappy customers are likely to share with others their dissatisfying experiences.

This conceptual research has certain limitations. It provides an opening for future research that analyzes the integrated CCB model propositions and their empirical testing (Crié, 2003; Istanbuluoglu et al., 2017).

Another important issue was raised. According to Arora and Chakraborty (2021), the extensive body of literature of CCB shows an evident lack of concern for the ontological and epistemological questions. The lack of clear paradigmatic position in the research articles will ultimately impact theory development and consequently the validity of empirical work. It can also be seen in the repetitive usage of a limited set of methods and instruments of investigation. It hinders innovation, creativity, and exploring new answers to the standard research questions. Clear definition of paradigmatic position is crucial when implementing and testing the proposed integrated models in order to enhance effective theory building.

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