

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE ON CONSUMER COMPLAINT BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Although the rates of dissatisfaction with products and services are high, relatively few consumers ever place formal complaints. One variable that has received very little attention as it relates to placing a complaint is informal communication. Drawing on research in social psychology, this paper proposes that communicating with family and friends about a purchase-related problem may influence a dissatisfied consumer's decision to place a complaint. Informal others can provide informational or socioemotional resources that may increase or decrease the likelihood of making such a public response. The implications of this hypothesis for researchers and practitioners are examined.

INTRODUCTION

How consumers respond to dissatisfaction with products or services they have purchased has been the subject of an extensive body of research; see volumes by Day (1978) and Day and Hunt (1979), (1990). Day and Landon (1977) have classified reactions into two broad categories: public responses and private responses. Public responses refer to behaviors directed toward individuals outside the dissatisfied consumer's social network, e.g., those directly involved in the problem situation (retailers, managers, etc.) or "third-parties" (Better Business Bureau, Federal Trade Commission, etc.). Actions falling into this category include placing a formal complaint and seeking redress. Private actions, on the other hand, entail behaviors aimed at handling the problem in a private or personal manner. Included in this category are communications directed at one's informal social network, i.e., friends, family members and other individuals outside the "professional" sector.

With a few exceptions (Morris 1988), researchers have examined public and private

reactions to consumer dissatisfaction as mutually exclusive responses. Private responses are assumed to be an alternative to public ones (Day and Landon 1977). Similarly, variables that predict when a discontented consumer will engage in one response over another are typically investigated (e.g., see Curren and Folkes 1987; Richins 1983). However, it is feasible that, under some circumstances, public and private reactions are related. For instance, a private response like communicating with family and friends may affect a dissatisfied consumer's decision to engage in a public action like placing a complaint with a seller. Informal others can provide informational or socioemotional resources that may increase or decrease the likelihood of making a public response. This paper considers this hypothesis by (1) reviewing relevant research to support the role of social influence in determining complaint behavior; (2) examining the specific ways in which social factors can affect consumer complaining; and (3) discussing the implications of studying social influence for researchers and practitioners.

SUPPORT FOR THE INFLUENCE OF INFORMAL COMMUNICATION ON THE DECISION TO PLACE A COMPLAINT

Although the rates of dissatisfaction with products and services are high, relatively few consumers ever place formal complaints (complaints directed at sellers, manufacturers, etc.). Researchers have looked at a host of demographic, psychological and situational variables that will predict when disgruntled buyers will make such a response to resolve a problem; see Robinson (1979) and Singh and Howell (1985) for reviews. One variable that has received very little attention as it relates to placing a formal complaint is informal communication. Yet, there is reason to believe that this communication may influence the propensity to engage in formal responses. Social influence is a determinant of many behaviors, especially in stressful situations

(Darley and Aronson 1966; Aronson, 1988). Stress produces arousal that impedes cognitive functioning, which, in turn, may produce uncertainty about how to act (Ruback, Greenberg and Westcott 1984). It is not surprising, then, that a vast amount of social psychological research has found that when individuals experience difficulties ranging from major life events to minor "hassles," they consult people with whom they have close relationships for support (Wortman and Dunkel-Schetter 1987).

Social influence also plays a role in consumer behaviors. Informal groups provide information that can affect consumers' preferences and purchase decisions (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Moschis 1976). Variables like perceived risk, the source's level of expertise, and the consumer's need for social approval are among the factors found to predict the degree of influence other people exert on the consumer (Witt and Bruce 1972; Park and Lessig 1977).

Examining the effect of informal communication on the decision to place a formal complaint further addresses the impact of social influence on buyer behavior. What is already known about informal communication among dissatisfied consumers attests to the possibility of this communication affecting formal responses. For example, studies have shown that anywhere between 30% and 60% of dissatisfied consumers interact with family and friends following a purchase-related problem (Day and Ash 1979; Day and Landon 1977; Diener and Greyser 1978; Richins 1983). The reasons for this informal communication are varied. The most commonly studied motivation has been negative word-of-mouth, the tendency for disgruntled consumers to relay unfavorable information about a faulty product to informal others in an effort to warn them about the item (Day and Landon 1977). Negative word-of-mouth is most likely to occur if a problem is perceived as serious, blame for the problem is ascribed to sources external to the consumer (e.g., manufacturer, retailer), the cause of the problem is seen as stable or is seen as seller-controlled, and the consumer believes that placing a formal complaint has little chance of resolving the problem (Curren and Folkes 1987; Richins 1983).

Dissatisfied consumers may talk to informal others for reasons besides negative word-of-mouth. In a study reported by Malafi (1990), consumers described a time they had been dissatisfied with a product or service. They then answered several open-ended questions regarding interactions with their informal networks following the event. These questions were derived from the psychological literature on "social support." This term refers to the mechanisms by which close, informal relationships protect people from the negative consequences of stress (Wortman and Dunkel-Schetter 1987). The support provided by informal others takes many forms, including instrumental aid (e.g., lending money), advice-giving and socioemotional support (e.g., listening, cheering up). With some exceptions, social support has been found to have a positive effect on physical and mental health; see Wortman and Dunkel-Schetter (1987) for a complete review. Research also shows that social support can influence formal help-seeking (e.g., calling the police following a crime [Ruback et al. 1984] or seeking psychiatric or health care services [Gottlieb 1976]).

Applying the social support perspective to responses to consumer dissatisfaction, the results of Malafi's (1990) study revealed a variety of motivations behind dissatisfied consumers' interactions with family and friends. Table 1 shows that the most common reason mentioned was informational. Sixty-three percent of the consumers reported talking to others primarily to get advice about how to deal with their problem. A large percentage also consulted informal others for socioemotional reasons, e.g., to share feelings (55%) and to get sympathy (40%). Surprisingly, only about eight percent of the consumers reported engaging in behaviors indicative of negative word-of-mouth.

The results of this study (Malafi 1990) also highlight the reciprocal nature of informal communication, an aspect of interaction often neglected by researchers. Not only were disgruntled buyers asked about the help they had sought, they were also queried about the assistance they had received from informal others. These findings are presented in Table 2. Most consumers (70%) reported obtaining informational assistance (advice, appraisal information), followed

by socioemotional aid like being "cheered up" (32%) and expressions of support and approval for the actions that had been taken (29%). These findings suggest the importance of investigating more closely the reciprocal nature of informal communication.

Table 1
Reasons Consumers Listed for Consulting Informal Others¹

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Percentage of Consumers Listing Reason²</u>
To get advice	63%
To share feelings	55%
To get sympathy	40%
Person had similar experience	29%
Person is mother, father, etc.	25%
Person was there	15%
Warn other person	8%
Other	17%

¹Taken from Malafi (1990)

²n = 126

Table 2
Types of Assistance Offered To Consumers By Informal Others¹

<u>Assistance</u>	<u>Percentage of Consumers Given This Type of Assistance²</u>
Advice	70%
Cheering Up	32%
Expressions of support for consumer's actions	29%
Help in making a formal complaint	27%
Instrumental assistance	21%
Listening	21%
Relating own experience	18%
Nothing	11%
Other	11%

¹Taken from Malafi (1990)

²n = 126

It should be noted that, in her study, Malafi examined the experiences of college student consumers and the perceptions of only one party to

the informal interaction. However, the results of the investigation point to the possible impact of social influence on the complaint process. First, many consumers do interact with family and friends when they experience dissatisfaction. Many of these discontented buyers are in search of advice about how to act, in addition to more emotional types of support. Often, informal others provide these forms of assistance to consumers. Because of the reciprocity of this interaction, it is possible that family and friends can have an impact on the dissatisfied consumer's decision to place a formal complaint, either increasing or decreasing the likelihood the consumer will place a complaint. The next section considers this hypothesis in more detail.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE IN THE COMPLAINT PROCESS

As previously stated, the impact of social factors on consumers' decisions to place a complaint has received scant examination. The exception is the work of Nantel. In a 1985 paper, Nantel introduced the idea that social pressures can influence a disgruntled consumer's propensity to place a complaint. He believed that the relationship was moderated by an individual's level of self-monitoring (Snyder 1974). Individuals low in self-monitoring rely on their own values to guide behavior; those high in this characteristic rely on situational cues. Accordingly, social pressures may exert more influence on the complaining behavior of high self-monitors than that of low self-monitors. A similar reliance on personality variables comes from Sorensen and Strahle (1990) who speculated and found that consumers with a high fear of negative evaluation (Leary 1983) were more likely to be affected by social pressures than those low in this trait.

Although still concerned with the impact of social factors, the present analysis differs from Nantel's and Sorensen and Strahle's work in two ways. First, the present analysis considers social influence in a broader sense than "social pressures." Although pressure toward conformity may be involved, the analysis here assumes that consumers are in need of information and support. Any assistance obtained from informal others can have an impact on the consumer's choice to make

a complaint, regardless of whether informal others exert pressure or the consumer feels pressure to conform. Second, the present analysis is less concerned with the impact of the consumer's personality than is previous work. The process discussed here is assumed to occur independent of personality variables, although certain characteristic tendencies of the consumer may make influence more or less likely to have an effect.

Thus, rather than focusing exclusively on social pressures, the present analysis assumes that social influences on complaint behavior take place primarily through two mechanisms: informational influence and socioemotional support. These two factors will be discussed next, along with the impact each can have on the decision to make a complaint. However, it should be noted that, although the present discussion is limited to informational and socioemotional support, other modes of influence are likely to exist. Furthermore, although informational and socioemotional support are discussed separately, they may occur together. For example, getting advice from someone is a way of obtaining information. Yet, if the advice concurs with what the consumer is already thinking, then it conveys affirmation, a socioemotional function.

Informational Influence

The primary reason consumers turn to informal others following a purchase-related problem is to obtain information about how to deal with the mishap (Malafi 1990). Family and friends can provide that information either directly or indirectly. Direct information involves specific suggestions regarding a particular course of action (Ruback et al. 1984). It also may include arguments supporting the suggestions. Direct information is commonly known as "advice." Recall that in the investigation discussed earlier (Malafi 1990), about 70% of the consumers reported that friends and family offered this assistance.

The second way informal others can pass information on to the consumer is indirectly. Here, family and friends do not necessarily advocate a particular action; rather, they may increase the salience of the action, thereby

allowing the consumer to give it serious consideration (Ruback et al. 1984). Indirect informational influence can occur in many ways. For example, family and friends can cue a consumer to a particular "script." A script is a stereotyped sequence of behaviors appropriate for a given situation (Abelson 1981). Although the ideal action to resolve a purchase-related difficulty probably varies depending on the problem, the most advocated response may be to voice a formal complaint (Malafi 1991; Olshavsky 1977). Informal others also can cue a consumer to the behavioral norms for a particular reference group to which he/she belongs or to which he/she aspires to belong. Demographic differences that have been found between complainants and non-complainants may indicate the existence of differential group norms for taking formal action. Informal others also can serve as a social comparison object (Festinger 1954; Moschis 1976). Finally, dissatisfied consumers can gain information simply by observing what others do. Watching another person's reactions and behaviors in response to a similar situation may provide the consumer with information about handling his/her own problem.

The information gained from informal others can have an impact on the complaint process in many ways. Before any decision about formal action is confronted, family and friends can influence judgments of dissatisfaction. For example, the presence of others who either like or dislike a particular food can affect a consumer's satisfaction with the food as well as his/her consumption behavior (Engell, Kramer, Luther and Adams 1990). Similarly, informal others can influence perceptions of problem seriousness (Ruback et al. 1984), which, in turn, can influence the probability of complaining. In addition, informal others can affect any variable that has been found to be related to complaint reactions. Things like attributions (Folkes 1984), perceptions of the costs and benefits associated with complaining (Richins 1979) and attitudes about retailer responsiveness (Diamond, Ward and Faber 1976) can all be affected by the information supplied by informal others, thereby increasing or decreasing the likelihood that a dissatisfied consumer will take formal action.

How amenable a disgruntled consumer is to

informational influence probably depends on many factors, including those related to the problem situation, the informal source of information, and the dissatisfied consumer. Among the situational factors is the severity of the problem. Problems that are more severe in terms of cost, inconvenience, health risks, etc. probably generate a lot of arousal. High levels of arousal that impair cognitive functioning may lead consumers to consult informal others. Arousal may also increase consumer persuasibility. Problems of an ambiguous nature have a high potential for informational influence, too. In terms of the informal source of information, his/her expertise in the area is one factor likely to determine the extent of influence. Another important factor is the source's similarity to the disgruntled consumer. Dissatisfied consumers are more likely to seek out similar rather than dissimilar others for advice (Malafi 1990). Similar others may also wield more influence than dissimilar individuals. Finally, characteristics of the consumer may affect how susceptible he/she is to informal influence. Things like the consumer's own experience and level of knowledge about a particular product category may affect susceptibility. The higher these are, the less apt the consumer is to need or be interested in others' input. Another important variable is the consumer's personality. Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel (1989) have suggested that consumers vary in their levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence. And, as previously mentioned, characteristics like self-monitoring and fear of negative evaluation may also moderate the impact of social influence on the decision to complain.

Socioemotional Support

The second type of support informal others can provide that may influence a dissatisfied consumer's decision to take formal action is socioemotional support. This support takes many forms. It can involve listening, conveying positive affect, "cheering up" or expressing agreement with the consumer's beliefs, feelings and actions (Wortman and Dunkel-Schetter 1987). Over 60% of the study participants in Malafi's (1990) study said they had spoken to family and friends to "vent" their feelings or to obtain sympathy. When

examining consumers' perceptions of what they received from informal others, large percentages of participants reported that other people had listened to them or joked and kidded with them as a way of cheering them up.

The role of socioemotional support in the decision to make a complaint is probably less apparent and less direct than that of informational support. Nonetheless, its impact on formal complaining is important. Socioemotional support can affirm the consumer's beliefs about the event, thus bolstering his/her confidence, which, in turn, may affect subsequent complaint actions. Informal others providing socioemotional support also can alleviate arousal or stress. In a less stressful state, the consumer is apt to think more clearly, i.e., process information more effectively, which may have an impact on complaining. Finally, socioemotional support can have a cathartic effect. Having someone listen to a problem may allow the consumer to "blow off steam," thus making it less necessary to take formal action.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE SOCIAL INFLUENCE PERSPECTIVE

Considering the impact informal communication has on the decision to place a formal complaint has several implications. Theoretically, it sets the consumer's decision to place a formal complaint in a broader social context. Consumers do not live in a vacuum. Rather, their actions are subject to social influence, directly or indirectly. The decision to complain is no different. In the future, theoretical speculation on predictors of complaint behavior should consider social variables.

The perspective of this paper also has implications for researchers. A new set of variables related to social context is proposed for empirical consideration. Because of the complexity of social interaction, it will be a challenge for researchers to develop appropriate methods to assess the impact of social variables. Techniques like role-playing or interpersonal argument analyses (Jacobs and Jackson 1982) may be useful. In addition, methods developed by social psychologists to study social support (see Wortman and Dunkel-Schetter 1987) might also be appropriate for the study of informal responses to

consumer dissatisfaction.

Finally, considering the impact informal communication has on the decision to place a formal complaint has implications for business. Despite business' best efforts, there will always be some proportion of consumers who are dissatisfied with a product or service. Given the negative consequences of customer dissatisfaction in terms of discontinued patronage and negative word-of-mouth, a better understanding of the factors that influence how consumers react to dissatisfaction is worthwhile.

In conclusion, this paper calls for an examination of how informal social influence affects the decision to place a formal complaint. Although the ideas presented here are largely speculative, they are meant to stimulate researchers' thinking about social factors as they relate to complaint behavior. It also should be noted that this paper does not call for an examination of social influence to the exclusion of other variables. No one variable alone, including social influence, will perfectly predict when a dissatisfied consumer will complain. However, a consideration of social factors, in addition to psychological and demographic variables, may improve researchers' understanding of consumers' responses to dissatisfaction.

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