The Need to Vent and Dissatisfactory Self-Service Technology Encounters
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Abstract

Reports of customer dissatisfaction with self-service technologies (SSTs) are becoming increasingly common. The SST context is characterised by customer participation in service production and delivery, independently of service personnel. With no opportunity for human-to-human interaction, feelings of customer irritation and frustration can have a tendency to build-up in dissatisfactory SST encounters. If SSTs do not perform as promised, customers can become angry and frustrated, and do not have the security or reassurance of human service personnel. With this in mind, it is argued that customers’ “need to vent” will be an important predictor of customers’ complaint behaviours (CCBs), i.e., voice, negative word of mouth, negative “word of mouse”, third party action, false loyalty and exit, in dissatisfactory SST encounters. The “need to vent” is defined as the need, when one has a problem, to seek relief by expressing one’s problem / “getting it off one’s chest”. This construct has been subject to little conceptual or empirical scrutiny, and to the researchers’ knowledge, has not been previously operationalised or measured. This paper begins to address this gap by presenting a conceptual model and hypotheses depicting the relationships between the need to vent and CCBs in the context of SSTs.

Keywords: self-service technologies (SSTs), customer complaint behaviours (CCBs), customer venting

Introduction

Some may argue that quality discrepancies are less likely to occur in SST encounters given that employee inputs are no longer largely responsible for the production and delivery of services. However, there is evidence of the increasing challenges and frustrations customers face in dealing with SSTs (Parasuraman, 2000), suggesting a need for research. Some customer dissatisfaction is inevitable with all services (DeWitt and Brady, 2003), especially SSTs (Bitner et al., 2002). In the event of customers experiencing dissatisfaction with SSTs, it is important that they report it directly to the organisation (voice). Voice provides organisations with the opportunity to analyse and rectify customer dissatisfaction, so that customers can be retained, and exit and negative word of mouth behaviours can be reduced. However, in the SST context, it is thought that voice might be inhibited for reasons including the lack of interpersonal interaction between customers and service personnel. Therefore, it is important to examine the antecedents of CCBs in the SST context, however, to date, such research has been limited (see, for exception, Dall’ Olmo Riley et al., 2000; Snellman and Vihtkari, 2003) and so it has been encouraged (Holloway and Beatty, 2003). The SST context is proposed to be a quasi moderator, in that it interacts with the independent variable (need to vent) and it is also related to the dependent variable (CCBs). This paper focuses on customers’ “need to vent” which is argued to be an antecedent of CCBs, including voice, in the SST context. The paper is organised as follows: Firstly, the need to vent construct is defined and research conducted to date pertaining to this construct is reviewed briefly. Secondly, hypotheses are generated about the relationships between the need to vent construct and CCBs as stipulated by the conceptual model (see Figure 1). Finally, the paper concludes with directions for future research and potential managerial implications.
The Need to Vent

Catharsis/venting may be described as a sense of relief one may feel by explaining successfully a personal difficulty to another, otherwise described as “getting it off your chest”, “getting it into the open” (Stiles, 1987), “blowing off steam”, or “letting it out” (Bushman et al., 2001). The benefits of cathartic complaining stem from its capacity to make people feel better (Bushman et al., 2001). As noted by Bennet (1997, p. 157), “according to the catharsis hypothesis, feelings of anger and animosity towards a source of annoyance can be drained off via an acute expression of aggression against that person or organisation.” In everyday social interaction, Alicke et al. (1992) found that most complaints were made for the purpose of venting frustration (Jacoby and Jaccard, 1981), and being heard for its own sake. The non-instrumental perspective of complaining attributes complaining behaviour to people’s desire to express themselves and be listened to, irrespective of whether voice results in redress (Barry and Shapiro, 2000). This is supported by Richins (1980), who reported that customers identified that a perceived benefit of complaining was the chance to vent frustration and anger. So too, qualitative research conducted by Holloway and Beatty (2003) in the online retail setting, found that a key reason reported for complaining was the desire to express one’s feelings and anger. Complaining, especially voice, gives customers the opportunity to tell their side of the story which serves as a kind of reward for customers (Crie, 2003). It has even been suggested that customers’ psychological interests in achieving redress may necessitate complaining, taking precedence over economic interests (Maute and Forrester, 1993). Kowalski and Erickson (1997) suggested that not complaining may be more damaging interpersonally than complaining. Rather than expressing frustrations and minor irritations as they arise, people who silence their complaints until they become unmanageable risk serious damage to their relationships. However, venting and CCB is only now becoming the focus of research in psychology and marketing (Nyer, 1999).

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

The proposed conceptual framework is displayed in Figure 1, depicting the relationships between the need to vent construct and the six types of CCBs identified from the literature. The hypotheses are couched in terms of self-service technologies.

The Need to Vent as a Predictor of Voice in the SST Context

In the SST context, “not only do customers feel frustration and distress with technology, but they also show it” (Picard, 2000, p. 712). In the computing literature, Picard (2000) reported on a study conducted by Concord Communications in the United States that found that 84 per cent of help-desk managers surveyed held that users of computers admitted to engaging in “violent and abusive” behaviour toward computers. Furthermore, another study by Mori, as cited in Picard (2000), reported that of those surveyed who worked with computers in the United Kingdom, four out of five respondents had witnessed colleagues hurling abuse at their PCs, and a quarter of users under 25 years of age admitted to having “kicked” their computer. Drawing from the findings of these studies in computing, it follows that if customers experience SST-related problems, they may well wish to express their dissatisfaction.

However, today’s SSTS, without emotional intelligence, largely ignore customers displaying frustration with SST problems, which would be likely to lead customers to become increasingly frustrated, and, in turn, increase their desire to get this frustration off their chest. Indeed, in SST encounters devoid of human-to-human interaction, the need to let somebody...
know about the problem may seem even more compelling than in the traditional interpersonal service encounter. Therefore, it is argued that the “need to vent” in the SST context will increase customers’ likelihood of voicing their dissatisfaction to the organisation.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

It should also be noted that the “need to vent” might also influence customers’ choice of complaint communication mode, e.g., e-mail, Web forms, automated telephone, face-to-face and interpersonal telephone communication. The impersonal and convenient nature of voicing complaints to organisations via technology such as the Internet would be expected to encourage voice via technology-based channels. Brown (1997) argued that through technology, customers would find it far easier to voice, as they can guide the whole process through their computer, and complaints can be made with a “click of a button”. However, surprisingly, Walker et al.’s (2002) and Snellman and Vihtkari’s (2003) research suggested that in SST encounters, voicing interpersonally is still preferred, despite the initial encounter being via a technological interface. A potential reason for this lack of desire to voice via technology may be that technology-based complaint channels are not perceived by customers to allow them to “vent”. Bennet (1997) argued that it may be a good idea to encourage customers to make forceful oral complaints, as opposed to written complaints. Bennet (1997) argued that making complaints orally provides customers with a direct opportunity to inflict discomfort on a victim, in this case the organisation, and thus relieve aggressive tension.

**H1:** There is a positive relationship between the need to vent and customers’ voice behaviour.

**The Need to Vent as a Predictor of Negative Word of Mouth in the SST Context**

Studies to date have referred to voice to the organisation as a means of venting anger, yet dissatisfied customers have other avenues, such as negative word of mouth, to vent anger and frustration (Nyer, 1999). Negative word of mouth behaviour, sometimes referred to as private
action, involves giving a warning to friends and family about a service failure (Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002). Alicke et al. (1992) suggested that if customers are reluctant or unable to confront directly the source of their dissatisfaction, complaining to a secondary source, e.g., friends and family via negative word of mouth, may reclaim some measure of control, by providing an alternative outlet to vent one’s displeasure. This is a particular concern in SST encounters where customers who are dissatisfied do not have the security or reassurance of service personnel to assist them, service personnel do not have the opportunity to prompt customers to voice their dissatisfaction, and customers need to initiate their own complaint response, in which case they may choose to spread negative word of mouth.

H2: There is a positive relationship between the need to vent and customers’ negative word of mouth behaviour.

The Need to Vent as a Predictor of Negative “Word of Mouse” in the SST Context

In the online environment, more customers are directing their complaints to Internet-based third party complaint sites, e.g., Complaints.com and Notgoodenough.com. These sites provide a forum for people to complain about anything they want, posting complaints for the world to see. The term negative “word of mouse” or negative “electronic word of mouth” refers to “negative statements made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). Customers can engage in negative “word of mouse” in various places online, in addition to Internet-based third party complaint sites, e.g., via boycott Websites, and news groups. However, Internet-based third party complaint sites are the most widely used places for spreading “negative word of mouse”. In an exploratory study, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) found that one of the motives for customers’ negative “word of mouse” on Internet-based complaint sites was to “vent negative feelings”. These sites are primarily geared to provide customers with a place to vent their frustrations and share their stories with others. Although many of these complaint sites do not offer any kind of resolution for customers, they do allow the customer to “vent”.

H3: There is a positive relationship between the need to vent and customers’ negative “word of mouse behaviour”.

The Need to Vent as a Predictor of Third Party Action in the SST Context

Third party action, otherwise termed public action, or amplified voice (Volkov et al., 2002), refers to complaining to third parties not involved directly in the service itself, such as formal or regulatory agencies, or the media. Fisher et al. (1999) suggested that once complaints intensify to a third party level, dissatisfied customers become “super-complainers” who want to “get even”. As noted by Richins (1982), those customers complaining to a third party tended to perceive complaining as more costly and organisations as less responsive. In SST encounters where customers are removed from the physical presence of human service personnel, they may be concerned that if they voice they might just be ignored (Dall' Olmo Riley et al., 2000), and, therefore, in the “need to vent”, they might turn to a third party.

H4: There is a positive relationship between the need to vent and customers’ third party action.

The Need to Vent as a Predictor of False Loyalty and Exit in the SST Context
The need to vent is expected to have a negative relationship with the final two complaint behaviours – false loyalty and exit – as neither of these responses involves any degree or depth of disclosure. False loyalty, otherwise referred to as “no response”, refers to customers staying silent and not reporting their dissatisfaction and remaining with the organisation. Exit, otherwise termed switching or defection, refers to the situation in which customers leave one organisation in order to purchase from another. As venting is associated with getting rid of anger and frustration by disclosing it, and describing one’s problem, the “need to vent” and the passive, festering response of false loyalty should be related negatively. So too, although exit behaviour is active, it is a silent response that does not involve expression or disclosure of one’s complaint, and, therefore, the need to vent would be expected to be related negatively to the exit response.

**H5:** There is a negative relationship between the need to vent and customers’ false loyalty behaviour

**H6:** There is a negative relationship between the need to vent and customers’ exit behaviour

The six hypotheses presented in this paper, also depicted visually by the conceptual model, provide a framework for understanding how customers’ need to vent influences the different types of CCBs in the SST context.

**Directions for Future Research and Potential Managerial Implications**

There are various avenues for future research in addition to testing empirically the conceptual model presented in the SST context. Firstly, an instrument to measure the construct of need to vent needs to be developed and validated. A starting point in developing items that measure this construct might be to look at the comments associated with the factor “venting negative feelings” as identified in Hennig-Thurau et al.’s. (2004) study. In addition to assessing need to vent as a predictor of CCBs in the SST context, other antecedents of CCBs should also be examined in this context. Although the antecedents of CCBs are well documented in the interpersonal services context, in the context of SSTs they have been subject to very little conceptual or empirical scrutiny. Therefore, CCBs need to be revisited with respect to SSTs due to their unique characteristics compared to interpersonal services. Other antecedents of CCBs that might be revisited in the SST context include ease of voice, attribution of blame and likelihood of complaint success. Given the many benefits of voice for organisations including customer retention and prevention of future problems, it is important that customers’ need to vent is expressed by voice. This is particularly so in the SST context where, in the face of customer dissatisfaction, exit might be more likely and negative word of mouth and/or “mouse” might spread more rapidly. In the SST context, it is important that customers perceive that they will be listened to if they complain, and this currently does not seem to be the case. As opposed to interpersonal services where complaints might be elicited by service personnel, e.g., by ensuring that they are visible, engaging and willing to listen, in the SST context, where service personnel are absent, this suggestion is difficult to implement. Therefore, SST providers need to adapt or develop new strategies to be perceived by customers as attentive to complaints in the SST environment.

**References**


