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Consumer Complaint Channel Choice in Self-Service Technology Encounters
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Abstract
Consumers’ choice of channel to communicate complaints, following the decision to voice to the organisation, has received very little research attention. This study contributes to filling this gap by exploring the drivers of consumers’ choice of complaint channel in the self-service technology (SST) context. Surprisingly, in this context, consumers have often chosen interpersonal complaint channels over electronic channels, resulting in some of the value of using SSTs being lost for consumers and organisations alike. Preliminary findings indicate that the perceived ease of use, the likelihood of organisational response, the desire for social interaction and the source of the SST-related complaint, might provide some clues as to the organisational strategies that can be used to encourage greater utilisation of technology-based complaint channels.

Introduction and Literature Review
Consumer complaint behaviour (CCB) has been the focus of much prior research. Past studies have examined the types of CCB, e.g., voice, exit, negative word of mouth, third party action and false loyalty (see, for example, Singh, 1988), the antecedents of CCB, which have been broadly classified as organisational, situational and personal factors (Lerman, 2006; Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002), and the consequences of CCB, e.g., consumer loyalty (Dube and Maute, 1996). However, despite this array of past studies on CCB, surprisingly, consumers’ choice of complaint communication channel (e.g., telephone, face-to-face, e-mail, Web form and letter), following the decision to voice to the organisation, is an aspect of complaining that has received very modest research attention. An exception to this is a recent study by Mattila and Wirtz (2004). Via an experiment, they found that consumers who were motivated to voice to achieve tangible compensation were more likely to perceive telephone and face-to-face channels as more effective in achieving their goals, while “remote” channels, such as e-mail and letter, were perceived as more appropriate when venting was the goal desired (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004). Findings also suggested that the personality characteristic of shame proneness could interact with channel choice, particularly where consumers desired to vent (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004).

The current study extends Mattila and Wirtz’s (2004) research in two key ways. Firstly, it aims to explore whether other underlying motives for consumers’ complaint channel choice exist in addition to the two variables selected for manipulation in their experiment. Indeed, as this is a relatively “new” area of CCB research, a deeper understanding of this phenomenon is required. Secondly, it extends the research to a “new” service context, namely the SST context where consumer dissatisfaction and CCB are prevalent (Holloway and Beatty, 2003; Meuter et al., 2000). The inherent characteristics of SSTs, such as a lack of interpersonal interaction between consumers and service personnel, are argued to have an influence on CCB and, therefore, CCB research in this context has been encouraged (for a more in-depth justification, see Robertson and Shaw, 2005).
Specific to the focus of the current study, despite the cited benefits of technology-based complaint channels, such as increased consumer anonymity and improved ease of voice, it has been reported that electronic complaint communication channels are not favoured widely by consumers (Ahmad, 2002; Snellman and Vihtkari, 2003; Walker et al., 2002). In the SST context, this is of particular concern, as some of the value of using SSTs is lost for consumers and organisations alike when consumers revert to human service personnel to lodge a complaint. Organisations with SST-based offerings would prefer to interact with consumers via the most effective and efficient means of communication, which arguably, are via technological channels. For example, McCartan-Quinn et al. (2004) reported on a study in the interactive voice response (IVR) context, where costs actually rose as customers “repeat phoned” to talk to a live person with questions about their initial IVR-managed query. Conversely, IBM is reported to have saved $1.5 billion by handling consumers’ complaints and queries electronically in 2000 (Agnihorthri et al., 2002). In the light of this, this study seeks to explore the drivers of consumers’ complaint channel choice in the SST context, with the view to promote complaining through technology-based channels.

**Exploratory Study**

In order to start to explore the drivers of consumers’ choice of complaint channel in the SST context, the researchers sought to obtain self-reports from consumers who had actually experienced dissatisfaction with SSTs, who would arguably provide more reliable responses than respondents presented with a scenario (Dabholkar, 1996) as in the Mattila and Wirtz (2004) study. Therefore, the population of interest was defined as males and females aged 18 years or over, living in Australia, who had recently (within the last six months) experienced, and could recall, an unsatisfactory encounter with an SST. The sampling frame was on-campus and off-campus undergraduate and postgraduate business students enrolled at an Australian university. Students are likely to be users of SSTs (Bailey, 2004; Elliot and Hall, 2005; Yen, 2005) and they comprised a major proportion of the relevant population. Furthermore, the behaviour and experiences of students as consumers and other types of consumers are likely to be similar in the instance of service failures (Craighead et al., 2004). The sample was selected using convenience sampling given the exploratory nature of the study. Students were invited to participate in the survey if they could recall a recent (within the last six months) unsatisfactory encounter with an SST. A “closed” Web-based questionnaire was employed. Free access to the Web made it attractive for surveying students, the Web-based administration was consistent with the study context, and respondents have reported feeling that they can be more candid in online questionnaires (Zikmund, 2003). Furthermore, because the study was interested in SST users, the respondents were expected to have some level of comfort with the Internet, which is the most common form of SST, including their experience with online learning and teaching methods. Potentially to improve the response rate, an incentive was offered to respondents in the form of a random drawing for five $100 online gift vouchers from www.wishlist.com.au.

Two questions were included in the online pilot questionnaire to explore the use of consumers’ complaint channel choice. In the first of these questions, respondents were asked to rank various complaint channels in order of their likelihood of using them (assuming that all channels listed were available to respondents in the instance that they had decided to voice their complaint directly to the organisation). The channels listed included telephone (human service personnel), telephone (automated), e-mail, face-to-face, fax, letter, and Web form. The second question was an open-ended question related to the first rank order scaling question,
worded as: “Please explain briefly the reason(s) for your ranking.” This question was designed to gain insight into why respondents provided particular rankings, in the hope of uncovering consumers’ motives for using particular complaint channels. A total of 111 questionnaires were completed, this being 42 per cent of all those who looked at the front page of the questionnaire. Missing data were not an issue as a forced answering approach (Zikmund, 2003) was used. However, four cases were omitted based on their questionable nature, as these cases had reported not encountering dissatisfaction with an SST, yet had still completed the questionnaire, which was required to relate to an unsatisfactory SST experience.

Analysis

Given the nature of the first question, viz., the rank order scaling type question, percentages were used to display the likelihood of use for each channel. For the second question, the data were qualitative text data in the form of brief open-ended questionnaire responses. Given the sparseness of these data, as compared to interview transcripts (Jackson and Trochim, 2002), words were used as the coding unit of analysis (Pujari, 2004), allowing the data structure to emerge into larger themes. The “free list” characteristics of this type of data lend themselves well to word-based approaches, which can recognise words and patterns easily (Jackson and Trochim, 2002). The researchers noted keywords in the data, recording synonyms that appeared in the same context, and grouped these together. The list of words was then searched using the Microsoft Word “find” option, and the case (respondent) number at which each word appeared was recorded, and if it appeared more than once at each case. Each of the words was then checked for context appropriateness by looking at the sentence in which the words appeared (Pujari, 2004), removing cases where the context of the word was not appropriate. The researchers then grouped the words together under larger themes, keeping separate the sub-categories under each theme. This approach is an adapted version of that employed by Mossholder et al. (1995).

Results, Discussion, Managerial Implications and Future Research

Given the student sample employed, not surprisingly, the typical respondent was male and aged 25 to 34 years, whose highest level of education achieved was a bachelor degree. Figure 1 presents the likelihood of use for each complaint channel, indicating that e-mail, telephone (human service personnel) and Web form were the most likely to be used, while fax, telephone (automated) and letter were reported as the least likely to use channels of voicing complaints. These initial findings provide partial support for those studies (see, for example, Ahmad, 2002; Snellman and Vihtkari, 2003; Walker et al., 2002) that have suggested consumers’ desire for interpersonal communication when making complaints.

For the open ended question, as per stage one of the semantic analysis, keywords, and their synonyms, were identified, as follow: a) talk, speak, oral, express, communicate; b) interact; c) direct; d) action, response, feedback; e) convenient, accessible; f) easy, simple; g) time; h) quick, fast, speedy, immediate, instant; i) ignored; j) explain, clarify; k) same; and l) problem. Using the Word “find” option, these keywords were counted and then their context appropriateness was reviewed. The results of the Word-based analysis of this open-ended question are presented in Table 1.
Figure 1: Likelihood of Complaint Communication Channel Use

Table 1: Reason for Likelihood of Use of Complaint Channel Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Explanation of Category</th>
<th>Keywords</th>
<th>Illustrative Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ease of channel</td>
<td>Ease of channel was the</td>
<td>convenient, accessible, easy,</td>
<td>Case 86: “E-mail is by far the most convenient form of communication available.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>largest category. When</td>
<td>simple, quick, fast, speedy and</td>
<td>Case 42: “I would use the easiest means of communication via e-mail or Web form to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the complaint channel</td>
<td>immediate</td>
<td>lodge a complaint, because face-to-face and other methods are too much bother.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>was perceived as “easy”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to use, it was viewed as</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>quick, convenient,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>accessible, and simple.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E-mail and telephone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>were perceived as the</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“easiest” channels of</td>
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<td></td>
<td>complaint</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>communication.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of response</td>
<td>Likelihood of response</td>
<td>action, response, feedback,</td>
<td>Case 18: “I personally believe, even in this electronic age, employees tend to respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>refers to consumers</td>
<td>immediate, instant and ignored</td>
<td>better when a client has a problem in a face-to-face situation and will immediately react</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>choosing the channel of</td>
<td></td>
<td>if you are in their face, rather than an invisible voice via email. The second best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>communication, which</td>
<td></td>
<td>way to get some sort of immediate reaction would be by phone as it’s easier for staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>they believed would lead</td>
<td></td>
<td>to interact with the customer.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to a response from the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>organisation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Case 86: “E-mail is by far the most convenient form of communication available.”

Case 42: “I would use the easiest means of communication via e-mail or Web form to lodge a complaint, because face-to-face and other methods are too much bother.”

Case 18: “I personally believe, even in this electronic age, employees tend to respond better when a client has a problem in a face-to-face situation and will immediately react if you are in their face, rather than an invisible voice via email. The second best way to get some sort of immediate reaction would be by phone as it’s easier for staff to interact with the customer.”
**Level of interaction**

Two sub-categories were identified: 1) **Desire for interaction with human**, often because oral communication was perceived to be clearer and allowed for explanation of the problem, and 2) **Desire for no interaction with human** (a very small category) often to avoid perceived confrontation.

**Keywords**

talk, speak, oral, express, communicate, interact, explain and clarify

**Illustrative Comments**

Desire for interaction with human

*Case 69:* “In the first instance I would like to talk to someone to ensure that they understand the problems that I am experiencing. This is easier to do in a conversation than via written form as all of the points can be clarified.”

Desire for no interaction with human, *Case 25:* “E-mail avoids conflict that happens when complaining face to face.”

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**Initial encounter**

Two sub-categories were identified: 1) **Avoid use of complaint channel with which the initial problem was experienced**, and 2) **Desire to use complaint channel which is the same channel as initial encounter**.

**Keywords**

problem and same

**Illustrative Comments**

Avoid use of complaint channel with which the initial problem was experienced

*Case 3:* “The Web is where this organisation seems to have its major problems, so I would have to avoid using this avenue.”

Desire to use complaint channel, which is the same as initial encounter

*Case 2:* “Using the Internet for the service should also allow me to use the same format for the complaint.”

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These preliminary findings provide some clues, further to those provided by Mattila and Wirtz (2004), as to the drivers of consumers’ choice of complaint channel in the SST context. In order to promote the use of electronic complaint channels, service providers need to ensure that consumers perceive them as easy to locate and use. Service providers can also build consumers’ confidence in electronic channels by providing training, built-in help facilities, clear instructions and guarantees for service recovery. Organisations should also look to mimicking the interpersonal communication of complaints in electronic channels. On the other hand, the anonymity of technology-based complaint channels can also be promoted. Finally, given that the consumers’ initial encounter was with technology, the commonsense aspect of using technology to complain could also be stressed. This is reflected in the sentiments expressed by the following respondent: “I had to ring the hotel to complain. This defeats the whole purpose of booking online” (Case 92). However, given the exploratory nature of this study, further research is needed. A more exhaustive qualitative study is one way forward, using in-depth interviews to probe consumers at a deeper level as to their motives for channel choice. Furthermore, quantitative measures of the proposed antecedents of channel choice could also be tested in a predictive model. Indeed, with the growth in SSTs, and the inevitable consumer dissatisfaction with this mode of service delivery, understanding CCB in this context, including the neglected area of complaint channel choice, is vital.
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