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Self-service technology complaint channel choice Exploring consumers' motives

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore consumers' motives for their choice of complaint channel in the context of self-service technology (SST) failure. Traditional and evolving communication channels are considered.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative self-report data from consumers who had recently experienced dissatisfaction with SSTs were collected via an open-ended survey question. Three independent coders used a deductive and inductive iterative process to code the data.

Findings – The findings suggest that both consumer complaint behaviour (CCB) theory and media richness theory (MRT) help to explain consumers' motivation for channel choice. However, consumers' choice appears to be motivated to a greater degree by convenience rather than task-medium fit.

Research limitations/implications – This study was set solely in the SST context and explored consumers' hypothetical complaint channel choice, not actual channel use. Future research could examine the actual performance of complaint channels as perceived by consumers. Consumers' motivation to choose other emerging electronic complaint channels, such as complaint blogs and forums, could also be explored.

Practical implications – Understanding consumers' complaint channel choice is important for organisations to enable them to provide effective and efficient ways for consumers to complain. As complaint channels proliferate, it is difficult for organisations to know which channels to offer.

Originality/value – Choosing an appropriate channel for resolving a complaint is an important consumer decision, which the study of CCB needs to be broadened to include. The current study addresses this gap by, for the first time, integrating CCB theory and MRT. This is valuable because it is common for consumers not to voice their complaints to organisations. To facilitate voiced complaints, organisations need to determine which complaint channels will be most effective and efficient and in which situations.

Keyword(s):

Consumer complaints; Complaint channel; Consumer motivation; Media richness theory; Qualitative method; Self-service technology; Complaints; Self-service.

1. Introduction

Consumer complaint behaviour (CCB) is the focus of a large amount of existing research. Past studies generally address three key topics (e.g. Dube and Maute, 1996):

1. the types of CCB, namely voice, exit, negative word-of-mouth, third party action and (false) loyalty (e.g. Singh, 1988);
2. the antecedents of CCB, classified as organisational, situational, and personal (Lerman, 2006; Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002); and
3. the consequences of CCB, for example, consumer loyalty.

Surprisingly, however, the topic of how and why consumers choose which communication medium to use when voicing a complaint to an organisation (e.g. telephone or e-mail) is an aspect of CCB that has not been studied. This paper aims to address this gap.

Choosing an appropriate channel for resolving a complaint is an important consumer decision, which the study of CCB needs to be broadened to include for two key reasons. First, it is common for consumers not to take action to alleviate marketplace problems (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). If consumers choose not to report their problem to the organisation, it has no opportunity to identify and address the problem (Maute and Forrester, 1993). Organisational complaint facilitation is central to improving consumers' satisfaction. This is achieved by recovering consumer problems, preventing their recurrence in the future, and developing innovative service solutions based on consumer complaints (Tronvoll, 2007). If consumers are not provided with suitable complaint channels, this is likely to fuel their dissatisfaction, thereby resulting in negative types of complaint behaviour, such as exit, negative word-of-mouth and/or simply doing nothing.

Second, the provision of complaint channels is linked to organisational strategy. Organisations are encouraged to develop multi-channel complaint systems (Robertson and Shaw, 2009) because providing only one channel limits consumers' access and convenience in providing feedback to organisations. IBM is reported to have saved $1.5 billion by handling its consumers' complaints and queries electronically in the year 2000 (Agnihorthri *et al.*, 2002). However, some studies suggest that consumers prefer to complain face-to-face or via the telephone, rather than using remote channels, such as e-mail (Broderick and Vachirapornpuk, 2002; Walker *et al.*, 2002; Walker and Francis, 2003) and are more satisfied with interpersonal complaint communication (Shapiro and Nieman-Gonder, 2006). There is an increasing availability of complaint channels that can potentially be employed by organisations to improve the quality of their customer service (Murphy and Gomes, 2003; Neale and Murphy, 2007). The complaint channel mix needs to be designed with the consumer in mind, yet little is known about consumers' motives in choosing among alternative communication channels to complain (Neale *et al.*, 2006; Voorhees *et al.*, 2006). Organisations are, therefore, unable to determine which complaint channels will be most effective and efficient and in which situations.

Having established the importance of understanding consumers' complaint channel choice, this study aims to address the following research question: In respect to voiced complaints in the self-service technology (SST) context, which channel of communication do consumers prefer to use, and what motivates this choice? This study contributes to the CCB literature by

examining consumers' likely complaint channel choice when multiple channels, namely telephone (human service personnel), telephone (automated), e-mail, face-to-face, fax, letter, and web form, are available in the self-service technology (SST) context. The SST (e.g. machine-assisted and electronic services) context was selected because consumer dissatisfaction and CCB are prevalent in this setting (Harris *et al.*, 2006; Holloway and Beatty, 2003; Meuter *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, new complaint channels are proliferating in this context so that consumers increasingly face choices between several complaint channels.

In seeking probable explanations for consumers' complaint channel choice, the current paper integrates CCB theory and media richness theory (MRT), which has not been done previously. This is the key theoretical contribution of this paper. According to the CCB literature, the likelihood that consumers will voice their complaints is influenced by several factors, some of which could have a dual effect, i.e. by also influencing consumers' choice of complaint channel. MRT might also be useful in explaining consumers' complaint channel choice because it is concerned with matching the most appropriate medium, or channel, to the communication task.

The structure of the ensuing paper is outlined as follows. First, the CCB and MRT literatures offer two theoretical perspectives that are reviewed. The researcher associates these perspectives with complaint channel choice, which has not been done previously. Second, the details of the method employed in the current exploratory study are presented. The results of the analysis are then reported. Finally, managerial implications based on the study findings are discussed, along with limitations and future research directions.

2. Literature review

CCB research to date has focussed on three key topics. First, the types of CCB have been examined. The CCB types of exit (i.e. defecting from the organisation), voice (i.e. directing complaints to the organisation), negative word-of-mouth (WOM) (i.e. speaking negatively to others about the organisation and the negative incident) and third party action (i.e. complaining to third parties not directly involved with the organisation, e.g. regulatory agencies) are those that appear most frequently in the literature (Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002). Non-behavioural responses, such as forgetting about the unsatisfactory incident and doing nothing, are considered increasingly as legitimate consumer complaint responses as well (Singh, 1988). Therefore, CCB is conceptualised as "a set of multiple (behavioural and non-behavioural) responses, some or all of which are triggered by perceived dissatisfaction with a purchase episode" (Singh, 1988, p. 94). Second, the antecedents of CCB have been studied. It has been established that consumer dissatisfaction alone is not a sufficient trigger for CCB to occur (Crie, 2003). The final manifestation of CCB does not depend directly on the initiating dissatisfaction, so researchers interested in CCB need to examine other antecedents of CCB. There are many precursors of CCB that have been proposed previously. These include (Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002):

1. organisational factors, such as the ease of lodging a complaint;
2. situational factors, such as attribution of blame, or the assignment of causality for service failure; and
3. personal factors, such as the psychographic profile of consumers.

Finally, the outcomes of CCB have been investigated, such as consumer loyalty (Dube and Maute, 1996).

As distinct from the many previous studies that have addressed these three topics related to CCB, the researcher is aware of only one study pertaining to consumers' choice of complaint channels. This study, by Mattila and Wirtz (2004), was an experiment focusing on consumers' complaint goal in respect to complaint channel choice. They found that consumers who complain to achieve compensation are likely to perceive telephone and face-to-face channels as more effective in achieving their goals. This perception is surmised because these channels provide interaction with service personnel, which increases consumers' perceived likelihood of being compensated. Alternatively, e-mail and letter, which they termed remote channels, are perceived as more appropriate for consumers when venting is the goal (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004). The Mattila and Wirtz (2004) study concludes that interactive versus remote complaint channels are used by consumers to achieve different complaint-related goals.

The current study aims to shed light on other consumer motives, as expressed by consumers, to choose a particular complaint channel over alternative channels, i.e. beyond the goal of their complaint that was manipulated in the Mattila and Wirtz (2004) experiment. According to CCB theory, the likelihood that consumers will voice to an organisation is influenced by a variety of factors. Some of these factors could have a dual effect, that is, by also influencing consumers' choice of complaint channel, though these factors have not been associated with complaint channel choice previously. The constructs of ease of complaining (Richins, 1987; Tax and Brown, 1998), likelihood of success in complaining (McKee et al., 2008) and complaint self-efficacy (Susskind, 2000) could plausibly influence not only consumers' decision to complain to the organisation, but also affect how they choose or prefer to communicate their complaint. It is feasible that consumers would select a complaint channel that is perceived to be easy to use and likely to gain the desired response (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004), and that they have confidence in using.

In seeking other probable explanations for complaint channel choice, media richness theory (MRT) may be apt, although it has not been applied in respect to CCB before. MRT is used predominantly in organisational behaviour. It is concerned with matching the most appropriate medium, or channel, to the communication task. The task is characterised by equivocality (i.e. the level of ambiguity or confusion that occurs during the communication task, such as a consumer might experience when trying to comprehend the cause of a service failure) and uncertainty (i.e. communication tasks where there is a lack of information, such as where consumers require adequate instructions to troubleshoot a technology-related failure themselves) (Daft et al., 1987). The theory was developed in the context of traditional media, for example, face-to-face. As such, its suitability to non-traditional media, such as e-mail, is questioned (Dennis and Kinney, 1998). It is also acknowledged that while MRT could logically be applied to consumer complaint channel choice, the organisational contexts in which MRT has been previously tested differ considerably from the consumer complaint context. Furthermore, much MRT research has looked at frequency of communication and media used generally, rather than at the motivation behind selecting a given medium for a specific task (Ambrose et al., 2008), as in the current study of why consumers prefer certain media for complaining.

Equivocal situations are characterised by ambiguity, and consequently there is a need for them to be clarified or explained. Rich media, such as face-to-face and telephone, are proposed to be suitable for resolving equivocal situations because these channels provide immediate feedback capability, cues, personalisation, and language variety. For example, face-to-face communication offers vocal and non-verbal cues that embellish meaning and

social context (Bordia, 1997; Picard, 1997; Walther, 1996), which are less available in other forms of complaint communication, such as written letters. Lean media, such as letter, are proposed to be more suitable for reducing uncertainty in that they facilitate the exchange of large amounts of information, but carry fewer cues. However, people can try to incorporate cues in written letters, for example, by using capitals and bolding. The technology-based channels of e-mail and web form provide high-speed exchange of information, but are written and asynchronous, so are categorised as relatively lean media, falling somewhere between telephone and non-electronic written communication on the media richness continuum (Trevino *et al.*, 2000). Similarly, automated telephone, or interactive voice response (IVR), is rated somewhere between telephone and e-mail in respect to richness (Kishi, 2008).

In integrating MRT and CCB, which is the main theoretical contribution of the current study, it may be argued that consumer complaint situations are most likely to be reminiscent of equivocal conditions. Whether complaining to achieve compensation, or to vent, complaint situations often involve subjective views, including personal feelings, negotiation, and ambiguity stemming from multiple, conflicting interpretations of a situation. For example, where consumers find it difficult to use an SST due its poor design or a lack of clear instructions, they are likely to want immediate feedback from service personnel to rectify the problem. Furthermore, they would need to be able to explain their problem and express their frustration with the SST encounter. Therefore, in applying MRT, rich media appear to be better suited to complaint situations such as this. Rich media allow consumers to ask questions and indicate their beliefs and preferences (Ambrose *et al.*, 2008; Rockmann and Northcraft, 2008). They enable complainants to repudiate claims made by service providers or to argue points that cannot be achieved via lean media. Rich media also have the capacity for immediate feedback.

In integrating the CCB and MRT theories, a preliminary taxonomy is presented in Table I. It shows each of the theory's key "themes" that were deemed relevant to the context of complaint channel choice, including a definition of each theme and its source. In respect to CCB theory, ease of voice, likelihood of success and complaint self-efficacy were the antecedents (themes) of CCB thought to also be associated with consumers' complaint channel choice. For MRT, the task characterisation of equivocality and uncertainty was included, although it is anticipated that complaint tasks are generally more likely to be equivocal in nature rather than uncertain.

Finally, in respect to the SST context of the current study, technology facilitates new complaint communication channels (Froehle, 2006), as witnessed, in particular, in this setting where service encounters are technology-mediated. SSTs are technological interfaces that enable consumers to generate benefits for themselves, without the presence of the organisation's personnel (Meuter *et al.*, 2000). They include automated hotel check-in and check-out facilities, automated telephone banking, automated teller machines (ATMs), interactive voice response (IVR), self-serve kiosks, retail self-scanners and internet-based service.

Examples of complaint channels made possible by technology include web form, e-mail, blogs, and online forums. Complaining via these technology-based channels can avoid embarrassment and confrontation (Bodey and Grace, 2006; Goetzinger *et al.*, 2006; Holloway and Beatty, 2003; Marquis and Filiatrault, 2002) and increase the ease of complaining (Bordia, 1997; Brown, 1997), thereby encouraging consumers to complain.

Despite the touted benefits to consumers of such channels, however, these complaint channels, reportedly, are widely unfavoured by consumers. Rather, consumers prefer to complain personally, either face-to-face or via the telephone (Ahmad, 2002; Snellman and Vihtkari, 2003; Walker *et al.*, 2002). This preference to complain to a person even arises when the initial service encounter was via an SST where consumers are dependent on technology (Snellman and Vihtkari, 2003). There may be some good reasons for consumers not to favour technology-based complaining. Complaints made via technological channels are, generally, responded to poorly by organisations (Strauss and Hill, 2001). This indicates to consumers a low likelihood of a successful complaint outcome and a lack of their voice being heard, thereby reducing their likelihood of complaining via a technology-based channel. Furthermore, if dissatisfaction with an SST encounter is due to failed technology, consumers would doubt whether the technology would be capable of communicating their complaint successfully.

3. Research method and analysis

To study consumers' choice of complaint channel in the SST context, self-reports from consumers who had experienced dissatisfaction with SSTs were sought. This method is beneficial because the unsatisfactory experience is relevant to respondents and is not perceived as artificially constructed (Singh, 1990). The population of interest was defined as people 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 were on-campus and off-campus undergraduate and postgraduate business students enrolled at an Australian university. Students were recruited using both in-class announcements and pop-up announcements on an online teaching and learning environment. In addition to students being used in past research on complaining (e.g. Bodey and Grace, 2006; Kalamas *et al.*, 2008; Neale and Murphy, 2007), students are also likely to be more frequent users of SSTs (Bailey, 2004; Elliot and Hall, 2005; Yen, 2005), thereby presenting an appropriate sampling frame (Greenberg, 1987). 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). Purposive sampling (otherwise referred to as judgement or selective sampling) was employed, whereby respondents were screened to ensure that they met the study criterion.

A web-based questionnaire was employed, as open access to the web made it attractive for surveying students, and respondents have reported feeling that they can be more candid in their responses to online questionnaires (Zikmund, 2003). The link to the questionnaire was placed on the online teaching and learning platform. As the study was interested in SST users, the respondents were expected to have some level of comfort with the internet, which is a common form of SST (Rowley, 2006). 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 (Goritz, 2004). All respondents were unpaid volunteers who participated in the survey outside of classes (i.e. not for credit).

Two questions were included in the online questionnaire to investigate consumers' motives regarding likely complaint channel choice. The first question was worded as follows: "Assuming that you decided to complain directly to the organisation, please rank the following ways of communicating your complaint by placing a number from 1 to 7 beside each, where 1=most likely to use, and 7=least likely to use." Seven complaint channels were included, namely, telephone (human service personnel), telephone (automated), e-mail, face-

to-face, fax, letter, and web form. The complaint channels were selected based on a review of the CCB literature. Mainstream technology-based channels, that is, e-mail and web form, were chosen (Mattila and Mount, 2003; Nasir, 2004; Strauss and Hill, 2001). Respondents were asked to assume that all channels listed were available to them in the event that they had decided to voice their complaint directly to the organisation regarding their dissatisfactory SST encounter. The second question was worded: "Please explain the reason(s) for your ranking." This question was designed to gain insight into why respondents provided particular rankings for the various complaint channel alternatives, with the aim of exposing consumers' motives for likely complaint channel choice. Open-ended survey questions have the ability to provide a rich description of respondents' views and the capacity to elicit honest responses due to anonymity (Erickson and Kaplan, 2000).

In total, 111 questionnaires were completed, which was 42 per cent of all those who viewed the front page of the questionnaire. For those who completed the questionnaire, missing data were not an issue as a forced answering approach was used for the ranking of alternative complaint channels. However, 16 cases were omitted because they were inappropriate, that is, those who reported not having had an unsatisfactory experience and those who had simply typed in jumbled letters to get to the next screen. The sample size of 95 respondents permitted data saturation, where the collection of any new data was not expected to shed further light on the issue under investigation (Creswell, 2007).

The qualitative text data generally provided a broad indication of the main reason for respondents' preference of channel(s), with responses varying in length from a sentence to a paragraph. Two coders, who were trained researchers outsourced from an independent research firm, and so were not involved in the development of the taxonomy, coded the key reasons for channel choice independently. A coding manual that reflected the taxonomy, as presented in Table I, was provided to the coders. They were instructed to code the data using this manual, along with being permitted to add their own "new" codes and remove unused ones, based on their independent judgements of the latent meaning of the content contained in the responses.

A deductive and inductive iterative process generated and refined categories and subcategories in the taxonomy, similar to the approach adopted by Massad *et al.* (2006). This included an initial deductive approach to identify whether consumers' motives, as reported, fitted into a theme of the preliminary taxonomy. This process is followed by an inductive approach to add new themes and discard unused ones from the taxonomy as responses were analysed. The second coder had access to any supplementary codes created by the first coder, but not to the outcomes of the first coder's coding, and was permitted to employ any additional codes as deemed fit. A third coder then examined independently the discrepancies between the first two coders. The third coder examined each response in the light of the two coders' initial coding and made a judgement on the appropriate code.

4. Results

The interjudge reliability was 0.86 (Perreault and Leigh, 1989), which is considered to be good. 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 Bachelors degree. Respondents indicated that they were most likely to use e-mail, telephone (human service personnel) and web form to lodge their SST complaints, followed by face-to-face communication, while fax, telephone (automated) and letter were reported to be the least

likely used complaint channels. This provides only partial support for those studies (e.g. Ahmad, 2002; Snellman and Vihtkari, 2003; Walker *et al.*, 2002) that suggest consumers' predominant desire is for interpersonal communication when making complaints in the SST context.

The most commonly described types of SSTs with which the respondents had experienced dissatisfaction were automated teller machines (ATMs) (21 per cent) and automated telephone services (18 per cent), while online retailers (6 per cent) and self-service vending machines (2 per cent) were the least reported. Consumers' unsatisfactory SST experiences were categorised as follows:

- SST design problem (42 per cent) (e.g. "Having to listen to the endless interactive voice response (IVR) menu and then still being confused about which button I should press to have my problem resolved, or which department would help me with my problem. It was not specifically listed in the menu of items to choose from.");
- unexpected outcome (37 per cent) (e.g. "Upon requesting a receipt, it did not print initially, and then in attempting to get it to print on a subsequent attempt, I was double charged."); and
- inaccessible service (21 per cent) (e.g. "Drove to X to use its ATM, but when I got there and parked (not easy!), the ATM was out of order."

Chi-square tests were performed to ascertain if an association existed between the type of unsatisfactory SST experience and consumers' complaint channel preference. No differences were found, with the exception of consumers' preference for using e-mail (Chi-square=49.9 [df=18], *p*=0.00). Almost 80 per cent of respondents were extremely or very likely to prefer e-mail as a complaint channel when they were dissatisfied with the design of the SST, for example, where inadequate help, such as instructions, was provided, where the SST was not user-friendly and/or where it was unable to customise to consumers' needs. For this type of unsatisfactory SST experience, consumers might not require the "problem" to be fixed and/or compensation to be provided, but rather they just want to vent about the poorly designed SST that has frustrated them. As per Mattila and Wirtz's (2004) study findings, e-mail is employed by consumers as a venting mechanism.

The final classification of consumers' motives for complaint channel choice is provided in Table II, including theoretical domain of the category, illustrative comments per category and both the frequency and percentage of responses per category. In respect to the initial taxonomy, the categories drawn from both MRT and CCB theory are relevant, with the exception of the MRT construct of task uncertainty, which the coders were unable to identify in the responses provided. An additional category was created that emerged during the coding process. This related to consumers' comfort with the given complaint channel, which, in total, account for 14 per cent of responses.

5. Discussion and managerial implications

The contribution of the current study to the CCB domain in the SST context is threefold:

1. it integrates CCB theory and MRT for the first time;
2. it demonstrates the applicability of these two theories, which have not been related to complaint channel choice previously, to elucidate consumers' main motivation for their likely selection of complaint communication mode; and

3. it reveals consumer comfort, a construct outside of CCB theory and MRT, as an additional motive for consumers' complaint channel choice.

The findings suggest that ease of voice, likelihood of success and complaint self-efficacy, which have previously been shown to be antecedents of CCB, have a "twin effect" in also influencing consumers' complaint channel choice. In terms of MRT, as was anticipated, equivocal complaint tasks were found to influence the selection of rich (interactive) complaint communication channels. The alternative task characterisation of MRT, namely uncertainty did not materialise in the current study. Finally, consumer comfort emerged as a "new" motive for complaint channel choice, outside of the original taxonomy presented in Table I.

As illustrated in Table II, the perceived ease of the complaint channel is the most frequently mentioned reason for consumers' likely complaint channel choice. This suggests that channel choice is more strongly associated with convenience than with task-media fit in the SST context. This is further supported by the lack of association apparent between the type of unsatisfactory SST encounter and consumers' complaint channel preference. In the SST context, this is perhaps unsurprising because convenience is the most important factor for consumers in choosing to use SSTs (Meuter *et al.*, 2000). This would be expected to carry over to the context of SST failure.

Respondents refer to the need for the complaint channel to be "easy" in that it: saves time (43 per cent) as exemplified by the following quote: "I would always choose the method that involves the least amount of my time; therefore, I prefer e-mail or telephone."; is convenient (36 per cent) (e.g. "E-mail is convenient. I can use it anytime when phones are not typically manned. I like e-mail because it suits my lifestyle."); is accessible (12 per cent), as per the following quote: "I have limited access to a computer, so phone is most likely."; and avoids hassle (9 per cent) (e.g. "It would be easier to communicate through e-mail without much bother."). E-mail and telephone are the most mentioned channels of complaint communication that are associated with "ease". Bordia (1997) and Brown (1997) argue that technological channels permit consumers to make complaints more effortlessly because they are convenient for consumers and provide greater accessibility to the organisation. This proposition is partially supported by the findings of the current study, which suggest that some consumers prefer e-mail as a complaint channel because it is easy to use. However, telephone was perceived equally as requiring low effort to use.

For service providers, these findings mean ensuring that their complaint channels enable consumers to lodge their grievances simply and quickly. In the SST context, e-mail and telephone complaint channels seem to be most strongly associated with "ease". Service providers in general need to fully promote the complaint channels that they offer consumers to facilitate ease of complaining. It is pointless to offer a complaint channel if consumers are unaware of it or cannot locate it. For example, the perceived ease of using e-mail as a mode of complaint communication is expected to be reduced, particularly in respect to accessibility, where consumers report being unable to locate the e-mail addresses of offending service providers (Strauss and Hill, 2001). Service providers also need to market the "stress-free" nature of their complaint channels. For e-mail and other electronic channels, for example, benefits associated with "ease" can be touted, such as being able to complain from the comfort of one's home and the ability to contact the service provider out of hours. Service providers can use such promotional efforts to steer consumers toward using more cost-effective electronic channels. However, it is noted that e-mail and telephone appear to be

complementary channels. If the SST complaint can be simply formulated by the consumer then e-mail might be suitable, while for more complex problems it could be easier for consumers to complain via telephone so that the issues may be discussed. Therefore, SST providers should not discount the traditional complaint communication channel of telephone and, for example, make available a free-call telephone service through which consumers can complain. Operationalising "ease" appears to entail service providers offering multiple complaint channels given consumers' varying perceptions of a particular channel being "easy" to complain via.

The consumer motive receiving the second highest proportion of overall mentions (at 15 per cent), although less than half of those for "ease", is associated with the equivocal nature of the complaint task. The consumer task of complaining appears to be generally equivocal in nature, rather than uncertain, with no mentions of uncertain tasks within the data. Respondents refer to the need to explain their SST problem and express their dissatisfaction to the service provider, as exemplified by the following quotes:

It is better to speak directly with people who work within the organisation so that you can explain your problem clearly.

I prefer to deal directly with service staff when making a complaint to ensure that they get the message that I am not happy.

Respondents indicated that this requires rich media, that is, oral/interactive channels, such as telephone, which is in line with MRT. According to MRT, rich media facilitate explanation, discussion and clarification of points, the expression of emotion and access to immediate feedback.

Perhaps the uncertain task characterisation did not materialise in the current study because service failures by their very nature are ambiguous, thus reflective of equivocal tasks. This is particularly so in the SST context where failures are predominantly outcome failures where the core service is not delivered (Mattila *et al.*, 2009). In these situations, consumers need to be able to explain their problem and get immediate feedback to have it resolved. It might also be that uncertain tasks would be more likely in the context of consumers using complaint channels geared toward their own self-recovery that were not included in the current study. For example, in the case of text-based complaint forums, such as customer support communities, large amounts of information need to be available to consumers to solve failures themselves.

The implication of this finding for service providers is that they need to provide the option of a rich, interactive channel for consumers to lodge complaints via, such as telephone, acknowledging that complaint tasks generally appear to be equivocal in nature. Although not a complaint channel included in the current study, the electronic channel of synchronous online chat is a type of interactive channel that could be offered by SST providers. It is considered to be a rich channel in terms of the immediacy of feedback (Rockmann and Northcraft, 2008) as messages are relayed in real time. Whatever the interactive complaint channel offered by the service provider, it should allow consumers to come together with well-trained and empowered service personnel who will empathetically listen to their problems, answer their questions, and recover service failures. Service providers can also try to make leaner, technology-based channels more attractive to consumers in equivocal complaint situations by improving their perceived richness. Using avatars, that is, the embodiment of human beings virtually, can improve the richness of technology-based

channels, for example, via facial expressions (Lee *et al.*, 2009). As Lee *et al.* (2009) assert, lean media, when supplemented with rich communication features, are perceived as rich media. It has also been argued that as consumers gain experience with technology-based complaint channels, they are likely to perceive them as richer (Pollach, 2008). Service providers could offer consumers technology complaint channel training to assist in this regard.

The third most-mentioned category (at 14 per cent) relates to consumers' comfort with the complaint channel. This was an additional category of motive that emerged from the data during the coding process. Consumer comfort refers to a psychological state wherein consumers enjoy peace of mind and their anxiety is eased (Spake *et al.*, 2003). Consumer choice decisions, in this instance the choice of complaint channel, relate commonly to emotional states, including comfort (Spake *et al.*, 2003). Some respondents expressed that they are in their "comfort zone" using a particular channel due to habit and/or because they feel less anxious. Consumers enjoyed the peace of mind of using a particular complaint channel, as illustrated by the following quote:

It would be more stress-free using the internet to solve a problem that I faced on the web.

Service providers need to encourage consumers to choose the complaint channel that they are most comfortable with. They need to be mindful that heterogeneous target markets are likely to have unique complaint channel preferences. In respect to technology-based complaint channels, it is argued that for some consumers, the impersonal nature of complaining via technology is more comfortable than complaining interpersonally because of the ability to avoid confrontation (Bodey and Grace, 2006; Goetzinger et al., 2006). Service providers that promote this aspect of electronic complaining might be able to encourage a new segment of consumers to voice who previously felt uncomfortable doing so interpersonally.

The next category (at 9 per cent) relates to motivation to use the channel that is most likely to result in a positive response to the failure from the SST provider, for example, fixing the problem. Invariably, making complaints via interpersonal means is thought to increase the likelihood of complaint success, as illustrated by the following quote:

I find it more effective to complain directly to a person rather than leaving a message and hoping for the best. I like to have issues resolved quickly and receive verbal assurance that the problem will be fixed.

Respondents fear being ignored by SST providers if they complain via e-mail or web form, which are media that symbolise low priority (Trevino *et al.*, 2000), as exemplified by the following quote:

Web form is the way that I will be least likely to complain because I am afraid that my complaint will not be given attention and the organisation may be slow in taking action.

This is in line with Mattila and Wirtz's (2004) findings, which suggest that when consumers seek redress, interpersonal complaint channels, namely, face-to-face and telephone, are preferred over remote channels, such as e-mail. To reduce consumer concern over being ignored if complaining via a technology-based channel, SST providers could attach a service guarantee to these complaint channels to help build consumers' trust in them and to communicate that such channels of communication are a priority for the provider. For example, the guarantee could promise that the service provider will respond within 24 hours of the complaint being lodged via a channel such as e-mail.

The final reason for complaint channel choice was related to complaint channel self-efficacy, or consumers' perceived ability to use a complaint channel to make a complaint effectively, that received only 4 per cent of mentions. These respondents refer to their confidence in using the complaint channel successfully and that they are more confident in using traditional media, such as telephone, to complain, rather than newer channels, such as e-mail. The role of consumers' experience and skill is important for newer communication technologies (Trevino *et al.*, 2000). As face-to-face interaction and telephone are traditional complaint channels, consumers are socialised in using these media, in comparison to e-mail and web form that are relatively new, and norms for their use are less well established (D'Urso and Rains, 2008). To boost consumers' confidence in using technology-based channels, SST providers need to ensure consumers' socialisation in these channels through the provision of mechanisms such as training, built-in help facilities and clear instructions (Anitsal and Paige, 2006).

Table III presents the top two preferred channels per motive type. E-mail and telephone are the preferred channels when consumers are motivated by the perceived channel ease and comfort, while telephone and face-to-face channels are preferred when consumers' channel choice is motivated by the equivocal nature of the complaint task. As these are the top three consumer motives for complaint channel choice identified in this study, these findings suggest that it is important for SST providers to offer consumers e-mail and telephone (human personnel), and to a lesser extent face-to-face means, to lodge a complaint in the SST context.

6. Limitations and research directions

The implications of this study are tempered by several limitations. First, the exploratory nature of this investigation should be acknowledged, although qualitative research is ideal for understanding new phenomena (Zikmund, 2003). Second, respondents in this study are students who tended to be younger, more highly educated and more likely to be accustomed to adopting new technologies than the general population; yet given that students are more active users of SSTs, they represent a fitting sampling frame. Third, this study examined consumers' hypothetical complaint channel choice, not actual channel use. In certain use situations, some complaint channels might not be available, whereas in the hypothetical context of the current study, respondents were asked to imagine that the SST provider offered all of the seven channels studied. Fourth, open-ended items on a questionnaire might result in less thorough qualitative responses, relative to those gleaned from in-depth interviews. This is due to the participant effort required to complete open-ended questions and the inability to probe respondents (Reja *et al.*, 2003). Fifth, consumers' complaint channel choice is examined only in the SST context. Finally, this study only considered consumers' main motivation for complaint channel choice.

In respect to future research, given that research on consumer complaint channel choice is relatively new, 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. In-depth interviews are likely to uncover several reasons for consumers' complaint channel choice, rather than focusing on their main motivation, as in this study. MRT and CCB theories might in fact provide complementary rather than alternative explanations for channel choice, which needs to be considered in future research. Applying alternative theoretical frameworks, such as the technology acceptance model (TAM) (Davis *et al.*, 1989), which is used to predict consumers' technology adoption, might also be fruitful in explaining

consumers' choice of technology-based complaint channels. Future research could also incorporate experimental methods to move beyond descriptions and towards causal explanations. Examining the interactions between the various motives identified in this study is also of interest. Using a more representative sample of the general population would add further weight and credibility to the findings of the current study. Another direction for future research could be examining the actual performance of various complaint channels in respect to issues such as consumers' communication satisfaction and perceived quality. Consumers' use of multiple complaint channels is also a topic worthy of exploration, particularly where consumers are dissatisfied with their original channel choice, for instance, where they received no response from an organisation via e-mail, so followed up with a complaint via telephone. Finally, as this study examines only the technology-based channels of e-mail and web form, future research could explore consumers' motivation to choose other emerging electronic complaint channels, such as complaint blogs and forums, social media, e.g. Twitter, technical support customer communities where help can be received from other customers, and live chat sessions with service representatives. As technology-based channels such as these proliferate, understanding consumers' motives to adopt them would be of value.

Literature	Theme	Definition	Source
Consumer complaint behaviour	Ease of voice	Consumers' perception of the effort or trouble it will take to lodge a complaint with an organisation. When complaining is perceived as easy, the process is straightforward, convenient, simple and quick	Richins (1987); Tax and Brown (1998)
	Likelihood of success	Consumers' perception of the organisation's willingness to remedy the problem without hassle. Remedying the problem could include correction of the problem leading to the failure, providing a monetary reimbursement, replacing the product, and offering an apology	Hirschman (1970); Tax and Brown (1998)
	Complaint self-efficacy	Consumers' perceived ability to produce a complaint effectively in a way that is clear in purpose to the recipient of the complaint	Susskind (2000)
Media richness theory	Equivocal task	Such tasks are characterised by ambiguity, and consequently there is a need for clarification and explanation. Rich media, such as face-to-face and telephone, are proposed to be suitable for resolving equivocal tasks because these channels provide the ability to relay immediate feedback, include cues such as body language, customise the message, and transmit feelings or emotions of the communicators	Ambrose *et al.* (2008); Daft *et al.* (1987); Rockmann and Northcraft (2008)
	Uncertain task	Such tasks are associated with a lack of information. Lean media (written media) are proposed to be more suitable for reducing uncertainty in that they facilitate the exchange of large amounts of information	Daft *et al.* (1987)

Table I.
Preliminary taxonomy of motives for consumers' complaint channel choice

***Table I** Preliminary taxonomy of motives for consumers' complaint channel choice*

Category	Theoretical domain of category	Explanation of category	Illustrative comments (including participant case number)	n	%
Ease of complaint channel	CCB	When the complaint channel was perceived as easy to use, it was viewed as quick, convenient, accessible, and simple	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"	55	58
Equivocal complaint task	MRT	Equivocal complaint tasks require consumers to explain, discuss and clarify points, express emotion and obtain immediate feedback	Case 7: "I prefer talking to a human when making a complaint since it allows me to explain my problem clearly" Case 61: "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"	14	15
Comfort	Outside of the domains of CCB and MRT	A psychological state wherein consumers enjoy peace of mind and their anxiety is eased in using a particular complaint channel	Case 46: "I feel most comfortable dealing with the problem via telephone or face-to-face" Case 23: "E-mail avoids the conflict that can occur when you complain face-to-face. I'd be less anxious complaining via e-mail"	13	14
Likelihood of success	CCB	Consumers choose the channel of communication that they believe will lead to a positive response from the organization, e.g. fixing the problem	Case 17: "… 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 the e-mail" Case 79: "I find it more effective to complain directly to a person rather than leaving a message and hoping for the best. I like to have issues resolved quickly and receive verbal reassurance that the problem will be fixed"	9	9
Complaint channel self-efficacy	CCB	Consumers' perceived confidence in using the complaint channel effectively	Case 68: "I prefer face-to-face complaining more than other channels because I can express myself with confidence" Case 83: "I am more confident expressing a complaint via the telephone because I am a foreigner and I have some problems with written language"	4	4
Total				95	100

Table II.
Consumers' primary motives for complaint channel choice

Table II *Consumers' primary motives for complaint channel choice*

Motive type	E-mail	Telephone (human personnel)	Web form	Face-to-face	Fax	Telephone (automated)	Letter
Ease	✔	✔					
Equivocal complaint task		✔		✔			
Comfort	✔	✔					
Likelihood of success		✔		✔			
Self-efficacy		✔		✔			

Note: The symbol ✔ denotes the top two preferred channels per consumer motive type

Table III.
Preference for channel by motive type

Table III *Preference for channel by motive type*

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