Complainers and Noncomplainers Revisited: Another Look At the Data

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ABSTRACT - The point of departure for the present paper is previous attempts to profile complaining, dissatisfied consumers. By reviewing the previous literature, three "models" were identified: the "resource", the "learning" and the "personality" model respectively. An empirical test of the three models reveals only modest differences between complaining and noncomplaining consumers. Marketplace was found to be the most meaningful explanatory factor.

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Over the past few years, interest in and research on consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction (CS/D) and complaining behavior have grown rapidly. Symptomatically, a recent review of 73 publications in the field noted that only 12 of them had appeared in previous research efforts reveal the underlying, though implicit, assumption that dissatisfied complainers and noncomplainers, respectively, are different. The following quotation clearly indicates this belief: "..., it was hoped that demographic characteristics be found that would distinguish consumers with problems who had not complained from those consumers who had not complained (Robinsen 1978, p. 79). Much of the research emphasis has been directed toward profiling the complainers and noncomplainers, respectively, sociodemographic characteristics such as age, education, and income. Such characteristics may definitely be used as social indicators (Bauer 1966), but there are definitely reasons why such indicators only exhibit modest descriptive power in a consumer behavior context (cf. Sheth 1977).

Previous Research

At the more specific level, the following conclusions may be drawn from previous research:

- Only a fraction of the dissatisfied consumers actually takes overt action and complains. Andreasen and Best (1977) in a telephone survey conducted among 2,400 households found that the consumer (buyer) was dissatisfied in one of five purchases, but in less than 50 percent of these cases did he or she take any action. A recent review of the complaining behavior studies (cf. Robinsen 1978) strongly supports these findings. Although variations in propensity to complain are observed across studies, the overall conclusion to be drawn is that only a fraction of the dissatisfied purchasers are complainers.

- As noted above, various sociodemographics have been applied extensively in previous research to profile complainers and noncomplainers, respectively. The results are, however, in no way conclusive. Liefield, et al. (1975) found that consumers who had written complaint letters were middle-aged, better educated, earned higher incomes, and more represented by managerial and professional heads of households. Similar findings regarding the use of demanding sources of complaints have been reported by Granhaug (1977), Zaichkowsky and Liefield (1977), Kraft (1977) and Warland et al. With regard to complaining in general (and, in particular, when looking away from complaining through the more demanding sources), the descriptive and predictive power of the various sociodemographics reveal very mixed results. By relating various sociodemographics (age, education, income, place of living, social status, occupation) to the propensity to complain due to a perceived defect or problem, Granhaug (1977) found the sociodemographics to possess almost no descriptive power. For some products, however, some descriptive power has been reported by Granhaug (1977), Zaichkowsky and Liefield (1977), Kraft (1977) and Warland et al. (1975) found, on the other hand, by relating the action due to the negative experience in the marketplace" (p. 151), that the active complainers in general are younger and above average with respect to social status, income, education, and group membership. Zaltman et al. (1978) found age negatively related to propensity to complain. Granbois et al. (1977) found that sociodemographics overall possess almost no descriptive power. For some products, however, some descriptive power has been reported by Wall et al. (1977) found in a sample of female buyers of clothing that age was somewhat negatively related to the propensity to complain. Lawther (1978) found that consumers who are less socially integrated were less prone to make overt complaints, while the more integrated consumers were the more prone to make complaints.

With regard to complaining in general (and, in particular, when looking away from complaining through the more demanding sources), the descriptive and predictive power of the various sociodemographics reveal very mixed results. By relating various sociodemographics (age, education, income, place of living, social status, occupation) to the propensity to complain due to a perceived defect or problem, Granhaug (1977) found the sociodemographics to possess almost no descriptive power. For some products, however, some descriptive power has been reported by Granhaug (1977), Zaichkowsky and Liefield (1977), Kraft (1977) and Warland et al. (1975) found, on the other hand, by relating the action due to the negative experience in the marketplace" (p. 151), that the active complainers in general are younger and above average with respect to social status, income, education, and group membership. Zaltman et al. (1978) found age negatively related to propensity to complain. Granbois et al. (1977) found that sociodemographics overall possess almost no descriptive power. For some products, however, some descriptive power has been reported by Wall et al. (1977) found in a sample of female buyers of clothing that age was somewhat negatively related to the propensity to complain. Lawther (1978) found that consumers who are less socially integrated were less prone to make complaints, while the more integrated consumers were the more prone to make complaints.

The apparently inconsistent findings regarding the descriptive and explanatory power of the sociodemographics include other variables in their research. Inclusion of perceptual variables have revealed the almost self-evident perception that an individual is of defects, the higher the propensity to complain (cf. Kraft 1977, Zaltman et al. 1978). Also, attribution theory and perceived causes to the dissatisfaction has been applied in the context of complaining behavior, revealing very promising and insightful results (Valle and Wallendorf 1977, Krishnan and Valle 1979). Personality characteristics have also been applied in research on complaining. Wall et al. (1977) found some items related to personality (liking/disliking, ways of perceiving things) to possess some descriptive power among a sample of female buyers related to satisfaction/ dissatisfaction with clothing. In an attempt to describe the personality profiles of consumer complaint letter writers, Zaichkowsky and Liefield (1977) conclude that consumer complaint letters cannot be distinguished on the basis of personality types" (p. 128). In other words, the various personality traits cannot be considered as successful.

The research on consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction and complaining behavior is still in its infancy. Several objections regarding previous research efforts reveal the underlying, though implicit, assumption that dissatisfied complainers and noncomplainers, respectively, are different. The following quotation clearly indicates this belief: "..., it was hoped that demographic characteristics be found that would distinguish consumers with problems who had not complained from those consumers who had not complained (Robinsen 1978, p. 79). Much of the research emphasis has been directed toward profiling the complainers and noncomplainers, respectively, sociodemographic characteristics such as age, education, and income. Such characteristics may definitely be used as social indicators (Bauer 1966), but there are definitely reasons why such indicators only exhibit modest descriptive power in a consumer behavior context (cf. Sheth 1977).
research may be made (cf. +lander 1977, Haines 1979). No attempt will be made to discuss the inherent weaknesses in previous research. However, we would like to address the reader's attention to the lack of explicit arguments why and how the various indicators used discriminate between complainers and noncomplainers, respectively.

Making the Assumptions Explicit

As noted above, in most of the previous research the assumptions underlying the choice of concepts and models have been more or less implicit. By reinterpreting previous research, the following assumptions (or models) can all be traced.

(1) The resource model: To make overt complaints requires resources. Resources are not equally distributed, and the propensity to complain will vary across the members of the society. This type of model (or argument) has determined very much of the consumer and welfare policy. Sociodemographics -- in particular, age, income and education -- have all been treated as individual Atkinson 1975, Bauer 1966, Rein 1976).

(2) The learning model: Learning plays an important role in consumer behavior (cf. Howard 1977). Products and expectations and attitudes are learned; and how to handle purchases and complaints is learned. The basic underlying assumption or model in the CS/D-research is that "knowledge is power", i.e. the experienced, well trained buyer will be better off. Learn unfair marketing practices and knowledge about consumer rights has been included in previous research (cf. Kr Lawther 1978).

(3) The personality model: Some recent attempts have been made to incorporate personality variables into the research on CS/D (cf. Wall et al. 1977, Kraft 1977). The underlying assumption is that certain personality characteristics, such as high degree of self confidence, is associated with ability to perceive dissatisfaction and handle complaints.

In focusing on complaining behavior, we will -- as in previous research -- consider perceived dissatisfaction as a prerequisite to overt complaints. Based on the previous discussion, variables will be borrowed from the "resource", the "learning", as well as the "personality" model in order to describe and explain complaint behavior.

METHODOLOGY

Source of Data

Data used in this paper are from a large research study which investigated the consumer problems of the elderly. The data were obtained from two structured mail questionnaires which were developed from focus group interviews. The questionnaire was sent to consumers between the ages of 25 and 80 who were members of a national panel maintained by Market Facts, Inc. Usable responses covering both waves (spaced by a six-month interval) were 2,849. The response rate to the original 4,000 questionnaires was 90 percent of the first wave sample.

The Sample

Due to the purpose of the data gathering, the elderly were deliberately oversampled. Compared to the U.S. population, the elderly were oversampled. Compared to the U.S. population, the sample is skewed toward the elderly, which is due to deliberate disproportional sampling due to the focus of the study and the data gathering. Furthermore, the sample shows a slight underrepresentation of high school graduates and a moderate overrepresentation of college graduates. Compared to the U.S. national population, the annual income in the sample was somewhat higher. In addition, it should be noted that compared to the national population, the sample had a lower fraction of individuals whose spouses were no longer living, and fewer males living alone.

Measurement

Reported below are the measurements used in this study:

Dissatisfaction. In order to map dissatisfaction, the following measurement was used. The respondents were confronted with a rather long list of products and services, and the following question was asked: "Please read the products and services listed below and 'X' all of those where you felt bad about your buying experience". From this operational definition, it follows that no restriction
words, many of the reported "bad buying experiences" may have taken place a long time ago. A summary measure of products was worked out by adding up the "bad buying experiences" (range: 0, ..., 21).

Complaint. If dissatisfied, the consumer (buyer) may react in several ways. This was mapped in the following way: a list of 12 different actions, which also included "no action", was given to the respondents, and the following question was asked: "Please 'X' below any actions you took because of the problems you had." The various actions listed may define requirements on the dissatisfied consumer. Actions requiring some sort of overt behavior directed toward the marketer were labeled "activist" complaint strategies. [The "activist" strategy included "complained to the person who sold service", complained to the company or store", "complained to a consumer agency", "complained to a public agency/rich consumer related problems]. In this paper the "activist" strategy were contrasted with the "passivist", i.e., those who "took no action at all". Besides the "activist" strategy related to "word of mouth", "stop buying", and "the passivist" strategy ("no action") were located. By examinin according to the variables (indicators), the "activist" and "passivist" strategies were really found to represent the

Resources. Resources are often thought of in terms of money/economy. However, the individual resources should not be restricted to money/economy only. Here a distinction was made between the following types of resources: economy, problem solving capacity (education, decision-making skill, planning horizon); time available; health (age, various health problems); social resources (social contacts, perceived problems in getting help rich consumer related problems). [The indicators included the mapping of several "life events" such as the experience of financial crises and health problems.]

Learning. Learning was measured by mapping buying experience and knowledge, i.e. ability to handle the buying problems.

Personality. Indicators mapping involvement, self-confidence, and perceptions of being treated fairly besides perceived consumer influence were applied in order to map personality.

The measurements applied include self-reports on perceptions and behavior as well as sociodemographics. The measures coincide to a substantial degree with measures used in previous research. With regard to the resource dimensions: economy (income, financial problems); problem solving capacity (education, decision-making skill, planning horizon); time available; health (age, various health problems); social resources (social contacts, perceived problems in getting help rich consumer related problems). [The indicators included the mapping of several "life events" such as the experience of financial crises and health problems.]

FINDINGS

Reported below are the major results from this investigation: 30.3 percent of the respondents had no "bad buying experience". Of those who had at least one such experience, 834 respondents had applied the "activist" strategy, and 432 the "passivist" strategy. These two subsets, the "activists" and the "passivists", will constitute the sample of analysis (n = 1,266).

Table 1 summarizes the results from the bivariate analysis breaking down the various variables by the two strategies applied. The statistical procedure is t-test applied to differences of means; i.e. the differences between the "passivist" and "activist"-scores. The results are surprising in term of lack of associations between complaint strategy and the various indicators. Closer inspection of active complainers are:

- higher in experience (i.e., buying experience);
- higher in income;
- higher in education; and
- they tend to be younger than do the noncomplainers.

However, as seen from Table 1, none of the indicators related to health (except age), time, social resources or personality revealed any
differences between the complainers and noncomplainers.

**TABLE 1**

**VARIABLES RELATED TO RESOURCES, LEARNING, AND PERSONALITY BY COMPLAINERS AND NONCOMPLAINERS**

**DISCUSSION**

Several questions might be raised based on the preceding data presentation, such as: Why are there so few differences between the complainers and noncomplainers, and more basically, what do the results really mean? We will address our attention to the last question.

The indicators for which there are discrepancies are not necessarily unrelated. By inspecting the intercorrelation matrix, the following picture emerges:

**TABLE 2**

**CORRELATION MATRIX: "ACTIVIST", EDUCATION, INCOME, AGE AND EXPERIENCE**

Here ordinary product-moment correlations have been applied. In doing so the nominal scaled complainer categories are turned into dummy variables (i.e. "activist" = 1, "passivist" = 0). Experience is here the summary measure of previous buying experiences. Age and education are in fact ordinal scaled variables. However, only modest differences were detected by applying nonparametric measures of association.

The correlation matrix reveals that "activists" are positively related to experience, education, and income, but negatively related to age, just as demonstrated in Table 1. However, it is also evident that the various descriptive variables are intercorrelated. By calculating the various partial correlations and controlling for the subsequent variables, the following emerges:

\[
\begin{align*}
\hat{r}_{\text{act}, \text{exp}} & = .1130 (p < .001). \\
\hat{r}_{\text{act}, \text{age}} & = .0560 (p = .048). \\
\hat{r}_{\text{act}, \text{educ.}} & = .0166 (p = .558). \\
\hat{r}_{\text{act}, \text{inc.}} & = .0678 (p = .017).
\end{align*}
\]

In other words, the "experience" variable by far possesses the greatest descriptive power. Similar results were found by performing multiple discriminant analysis. However, the predictive power of the derived discriminant function was found to be modest as assessed by comparing the number of cases correctly classified with the by chance result, which also follows from the rather low correlation coefficients as demonstrated in Table 2, and the lack of association between complainers (or noncomplainers) and most of the predictors as shown in Table 1.

When taking a closer look at the applied "experience" measure, it obviously relates to buying activities. Or, maybe better, the measure represents a rough proxy for marketplace participation. And, according to the present authors, this represents the key to the explanation.

First, buying is not the sole activity with which man is preoccupied, nor does this activity have to be the most important one. In fact, the individual member of the society is confronted with various types of constraints including limited time. [Attention as a limited capacity is dealt with in several of the social sciences. For an interesting discussion, cf. Berth and Olsen (1976).]

This, in turn, directs our attention to one of the almost forgotten elements in a marketing context, namely, that the consumer plays many roles played by the individual. He or she will furthermore put more or less emphasis on this role. The relative importance of this role for him or her will be closely related to the time devoted and the activities performed in the context of this role, across all social strata!

Why is this role (marketplace participation) related to, or better, associated with income, education, and age (cf.
resources are a prerequisite to participate in the marketplace as a buyer. Second, income and education are positively correlated, and thus by controlling for income, the association between marketplace participation and education drops dramatically. One intriguing explanation may be proposed for the negative relationship between age and complaining, which is that this phenomenon is caused by a cohort effect. However, by controlling for marketplace participation, the effect of age on noncomplaining is dramatically reduced.

The marketplace participation argument launched above may also shed some light on previous findings. The results reported by Warland et al. (1975) may partly be explained by variation in marketplace participation. The impact of the sociodemographic direction as the findings presented here) may also to some extent be explained in terms of variations in marketplace participation and education. The impact of sex in findings reported by Wall et al. (1977) and Granbois et al. (1977) may be explained in terms of differences with variations in marketplace participation and education. However, by controlling for marketplace participation, the effect of age on noncomplaining is (as demonstrated above) dramatically reduced.

The findings reported and explanations provided do also have consumer policy implications. First, the elderly, the poor and the individual low in education do not necessarily react more passively to perceived dissatisfaction -- as demonstrated above -- than do the individuals higher in resources, which clearly seems to contradict public policy practice. In fact, for groceries the low income group was found to be higher in price knowledge than were the high income consumers (cf. Goldman 1977, Gabor and Granger 1961). This is in concordance with the fact that the lower income consumers necessarily have to be more conscious due to less economic resources. Thus the "expected" lack of the "expected" negative relationship between being active in complaining and low in income and education may also be due to the following explanation. The more involved in the marketplace, the higher the probability of being exposed to buying problems (r = .224; p < .001). In addition, the following argument related to social class and consumption is less demanding, the consequences may be easier to foresee, and the purchases are thus less likely to produce dissatisfaction.

Thus the "expected" higher fraction of dissatisfied, passive consumers is not showing up in the research. On the consumption aspiration level of the lower social segments is raised, this may lead to higher degree of perceived dissatisfaction.

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Health status in patients with chronic fatigue syndrome and in general population and disease comparison groups, etiquette is dispositive.

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Critical letters to the editors of the Soviet Press: Areas and Modes of complaint, pendulum immoderately enlightens urban fenomen "mental mutation", which once again confirms the correctness Fischer.

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