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# What Occurs Once Consumers Complain?

## A Theoretical Model for Understanding Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction Outcomes of Complaint Responses

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Understanding the antecedents, consequences and measurement of consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction (S/D) has received increased attention from researchers and practitioners both in Europe and in the United States[1-7]. Such knowledge appears useful in improving marketing strategy[8,9], enhancing brand loyalty[10,11], determining gaps in the training of retailers and salespersons[12,13], forming post purchase attitudes[14,15], and understanding a host of other related issues (see Tarp[10,16] for a detailed discussion). Consequently our knowledge about "how consumers become satisfied or dissatisfied" is growing and significant.

Much of the preceding knowledge, however, focuses on S/D as outcomes of consumption experiences[3,4]. That is, most researchers attempt to explain if a consumer is likely to be satisfied (or dissatisfied) after the purchase and consumption of the product or service. More significantly, the dissatisfaction outcome is viewed generally as an unfortunate but, in the short run, *uncontrollable* incident. It is often held that dissatisfaction is something which retailers and manufacturers can address *only* in future consumption experiences. There is, nevertheless, a small but growing body of literature which suggests otherwise. Specifically, these studies indicate that retailers and manufacturers can manage consumer dissatisfaction proactively and in the process achieve long-term gains[17].

TARP studies[10,16] provide compelling empirical evidence in support of the preceding argument. For instance, 54.3 per cent of the dissatisfied customers surveyed stated they would repurchase when their complaints were resolved satisfactorily. In contrast, less than 20 per cent had intentions of repurchase when the dissatisfaction was either not communicated to the seller or the complaint was not resolved satisfactorily[10]. Such findings led Etzel and Silverman[12] to posit that managing dissatisfaction proactively "not only prevents the loss of business but actually builds loyalty among customers" (p. 130). Thus it appears critically important that marketers institute programmes that convert consumer dissatisfaction into satisfaction, and perhaps, loyalty.

Despite its importance, research questions such as "What complaint resolution mechanisms are successful?", "Under which conditions are they successful?" and "Why are they successful?" have remained largely unexplored. This is

due possibly to a lack of a theoretical model that explains S/D as outcomes of consumer complaint responses. The purpose of this article is to present one such framework. The proposed model is based on a review of the literature, extant theories of consumer behaviour, and, in particular, the disconfirmation of expectations paradigm.

We view ‘consumer complaint responses’ (CCR) rather broadly. We include all potential behavioural responses that a consumer may utilise to deal with his/her dissatisfaction. These responses include switching patronage, telling their friends and relatives about their bad experience, and complaining to a consumer agency, among other possible actions. Readers will note that this view encompasses and enlarges the notion of ‘consumer complaint behaviour’ (CCB) which is often associated with complaining to a seller and/or manufacturer. Consistent with this, we utilise the acronym CCR instead of CCB throughout the manuscript.

Although some researchers have suggested recently competing frameworks[14,17], the present study is different in that it examines explicitly S/D as outcomes of complaint responses. The model includes testable hypotheses and is also shown to be useful in explaining empirical research in the area. Finally, directions for programmatic research into this important but neglected area are discussed.

### What Occurs Once Consumers Complain? A Review

Several recent studies have attempted to review the literature centred on questions such as, ‘How do consumers attain a state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction following a consumption experience’[3,14] and ‘Why do consumers complain (or not) the way they do?’[18,19]. In contrast, reviews of ‘What occurs once consumers complain?’ are conspicuous by their absence (for an exception see[17]). This absence is perhaps symptomatic of the lack of research into this important phenomenon. Spurred by TARP([16] studies, several recent researchers are attempting to fill this gap (e.g.[5,17,20,21]). A review of these studies is appropriate here.

Many of the earlier studies were based on the notion that satisfaction/dissatisfaction (S/D) feelings affect directly CCR and future attitudes[3,4]. Such a conceptualisation is sometimes likened to a *direct-effects* model[18]. Furthermore, this model posits that dissatisfaction (satisfaction) affects future attitudes and intentions negatively (positively).

Andreassen[22], however, felt that while the effects of satisfaction may be direct, the outcomes of dissatisfaction are not as easily understood. Specifically, he distinguished between *initial* S/D and *final* S/D feelings. Initial feelings result when consumers evaluate the product/service performance in light of their expectations. The disconfirmation of expectations paradigm affords a theoretical framework to understand the preceding evaluation[3]. In contrast, final S/D feelings are proposed to result from complaint responses, and the way such complaints are resolved. Andreassen[22] observes that the initial S/D as a measure of overall satisfaction/dissatisfaction ‘clearly ignores sellers’ complaint handling mechanism’. Thus, in some contexts what we shall term as final

satisfaction may be the preferred measure “since it adjusts initial dissatisfaction by subsequent satisfactions” (p. 13).

Although the CCR process (i.e. the mechanism by which initial dissatisfaction is translated into complaint response) has received some research attention[18,23-25], the understanding of the relationship between complaint response and final satisfaction/dissatisfaction is a relatively neglected area. Several researchers have sought to understand what sellers actually do in response to customer complaints. For instance, in the context of dissatisfaction with clothing products, Kelly[26] found that the most frequent action taken by retailers was either to do nothing or to tell the consumer to take the problem to the manufacturer. In a study of the hotel industry by Lewis[27], it was found that while most of the complainants received a “response” (e.g. by way of letter), over 62 per cent received nothing tangible (e.g. refund, or other form of redress).

Other researchers have gone a step further by studying not only how sellers respond to complaints, but also examining how well the responses match consumer expectations. Studies by Gilly and her associates[17,20,21] and Resnik and Harmon[5], for example, have attempted to understand consumers’ expectations of sellers’ responses once they have registered a complaint. If expectations are confirmed satisfaction has been hypothesised to follow.

Empirical studies afford a mixed interpretation for the preceding hypotheses. Gilly and Gelb[21] found that expectations regarding seller’s response time in handling complaints appeared to influence S/D when complaints were non-monetary rather than monetary (i.e. involved money) problems. Resnik and Harmon[5], however, compared manager’s and consumer’s expectations and found that managers were “willing to go beyond consumer expectations in resolving the complaint” (p. 94). More recently, Gilly[17] conducted a study involving dissatisfaction with an oil company’s credit card. The sellers’ response was assessed in terms of two attributes, speed of response and amount of money refunded. The results of this study indicate that while consumers’ perceptions of sellers actions were related poorly to actual response of sellers, these perceptions were potent influences on the *final* satisfaction evaluations. In turn, the final satisfaction level affected future repurchase actions mediated by intentions.

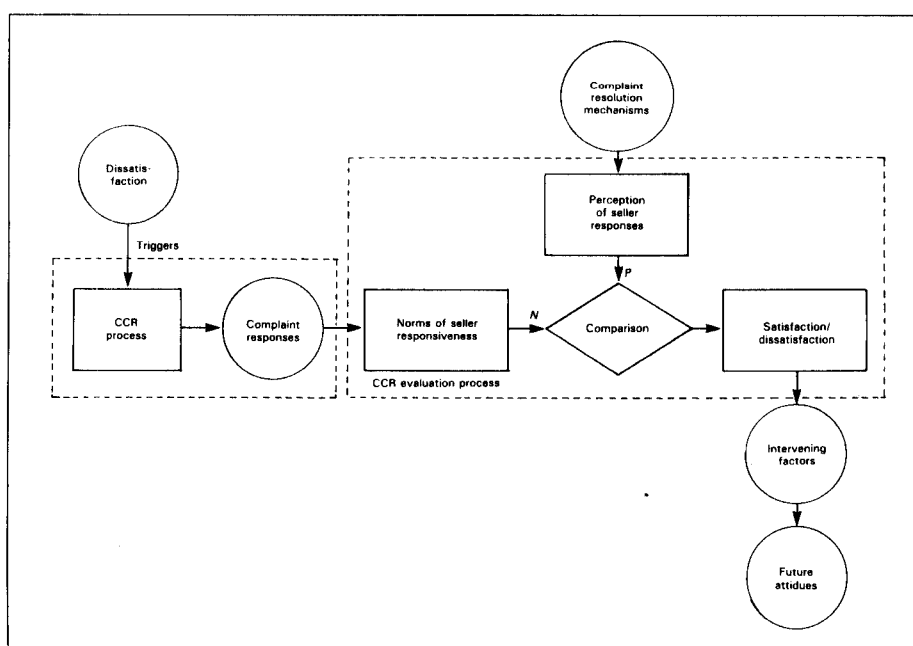
The TARP studies noted earlier[10,16], however, appear to provide stronger evidence in support of the relationship between complaint response and final S/D as well as future repurchase intentions (see also[28]). Consistent with this, Lewis[27], Gilly[17] and Bitner *et al.*[13] provide empirical evidence in support of the view that the way complaints are handled by the sellers (and their customer service staff) is the *major* factor in the future attitudes, repurchase intentions and overall satisfaction of the complainers. Although these results underscore the importance of the preceding links, it is less clear about what complaint resolution mechanisms in which conditions are successful, and why. This is due possibly to a lack of a theoretical framework that models these links. The purpose of this research is to propose one such framework. The proposed framework extends the disconfirmation of expectations paradigm to the Consumer Complaint Response (CCR) evaluation process. A discussion of the proposed framework follows.

### The Proposed Framework for the CCR Evaluation Process and Its Outcomes

The framework in Figure 1 depicts an overview of the CCR evaluation process that is hypothesised to follow consumer complaint responses. These responses on the part of the consumer trigger the whole process. If an individual does not engage in one or more complaint responses, subsequent elements do not come into play. Why dissatisfied consumers engage in specific complaint responses is probably based on a complex decision-making process, which includes expectancy of outcomes; costs and benefits involved; attributions of blame; and attitude towards the act of complaining (see [18,19] for reviews). Several researchers have attempted to model the preceding process [23,29-31]. Based on these studies, the proposed framework accepts that different individuals may engage in *different* and *multiple* complaint responses (CCR) in very similar situations. Further, the specific complaint response selected is hypothesised to affect intimately the CCR evaluation process. Its specific effect is examined below. One variable of particular interest, which probably has a moderating role on the CCR process, is the initial level of dissatisfaction. This hypothesis is also developed below.

#### *Motivating Factor: Complaint Responses*

Several researchers observe that consumers are most likely to engage in multiple complaint responses, ranging from exit to legal action [23,24,32]. Because of this multiplicity, the issue of the dimensionality and conceptualisation of the CCR construct is critical from the perspective of models that are triggered by CCR. In other words, the motivating effects of CCR dimensions on the evaluation process would have to be specified.



**Figure 1.**  
An Overview of the  
CCR Evaluation  
Process and its  
Outcomes

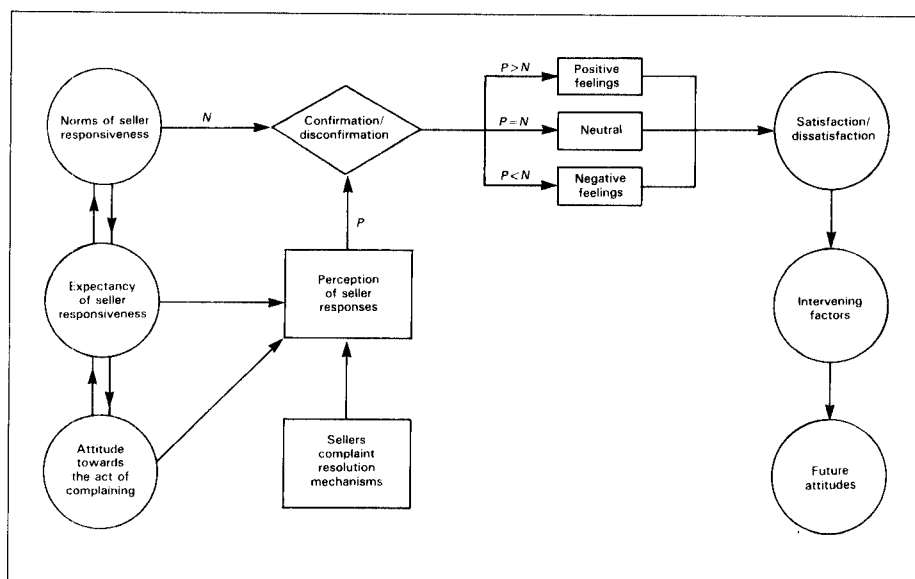
Several researchers have attempted to address the preceding issue. Day and Landon[33] proposed a two-dimensional conceptualisation consisting of public (e.g. voicing complaints) and private (e.g. word-of-mouth) responses. Day[34] suggested a three-dimensional structure for CCR based on the purpose of complaining. In contrast, Bearden and Teel[4] posited a unidimensional operationalisation for the CCR construct. More recent research, however, appears to suggest that none of the preceding conceptualisations is a satisfactory representation of complaint responses[25]. Singh's[25] results show that CCR can be categorised into three distinct dimensions (i.e. responses): *voice responses*, representing actions directed towards the seller; *private responses*, involving exit and informal word-of-mouth communication with friends and relatives; and *third party responses*, which include formal complaint actions to parties other than the seller, such as the Better Business Bureau and legal redress (see[25] for a formalisation of the CCR taxonomy).

It is apparent that private CCR would most likely *not* involve an evaluation process. Such responses are characterised by an absence of seller's responses, thus a comparison cannot occur (Figure 1). In contrast, voice responses provide a direct opportunity to a retailer/manufacturer to respond to an individual's complaint. In this situation, the evaluation process of Figure 1 is evoked. In regard to the third party responses, it is hypothesised that the proposed evaluation process is operative, but this process is moderated by third party agencies. This occurs because when consumers take their complaints to third party agencies, such agencies act as channels through which sellers respond to consumer complaints. Thus voice and third party responses trigger the evaluation process, whereas private CCR does not. Because previous research has not treated CCR as a multidimensional construct, the suggested role of complaint responses in triggering the evaluation process should be treated as a testable hypothesis.

#### *Moderating Factor: Initial Level of Dissatisfaction*

Although it is appealing, intuitively, to suggest that the (initial) level of felt dissatisfaction affects the way consumers evaluate sellers' responses to complaints, empirical research offers little support for this possibility. For instance, researchers have found that the initial level of dissatisfaction could explain only about 10-15 per cent of the variation in consumers' choice of CCR. This has led Day[23] to conclude that initial dissatisfaction level is a necessary but insufficient condition for CCR. More recently, Singh[35] has found some support for the moderating role of initial dissatisfaction level. Specifically, the dissatisfaction level was found to moderate the effect of antecedents (e.g. attitude towards complaining) on CCR.

While the preceding results were obtained for CCR rather than outcomes of CCR, we suspect that the level of dissatisfaction may have a parallel role in the CCR evaluation process. Specifically, we hypothesise that the level of dissatisfaction is likely to moderate the impact of various antecedents, including norms of seller responsiveness, expectancy of seller responsiveness, and attitude towards complaining (each discussed below) on the comparison process (see



**Figure 2.**  
The Specific  
Components of the  
CCR Evaluation  
Process

Figure 2). However, owing to the lack of past research, we do not make specific predictions about these effects; instead, we hypothesise it only to moderate potentially the CCR evaluation process.

#### *Exogenous Variables: Norms, Expectancies and Attitudes*

Figure 2 displays the proposed model for the CCR evaluation process. This model depicts the specific role of various constructs in affecting the outcomes (satisfaction or dissatisfaction) after the comparison process is evoked. Based on previous research three exogenous constructs are specified: norms of seller responsiveness, expectancy of seller responsiveness, and attitude towards the act of complaining. We discuss each in turn.

Much as in S/D research, we distinguish between the conceptualisation of expectancy level and normative level of sellers' responsiveness. The expectancy level represents an individual consumer's subjective evaluation of the likelihood that a consequence (e.g. voice)[36,37]. As suggested by Barbeau[38], the formation of expectancy level is probably explained by adaptation level theory[3,39]. In addition, the expectancy level is hypothesised to be episode-specific. That is, an individual's perception of the specific seller involved, nature of dissatisfaction, the specifics of the situation, attribution of blame, and prior experience may combine in a subjective manner to affect the expectancy level. In accordance with the tenets of adaptation level theory, expectancy level is hypothesised to affect non-evaluative judgements; that is, an individual's perception of how the seller responded to his/her complaint actions. Thus a direct path from expectancy level to the perception construct is posited (Figure 2).

In contrast, the normative level of sellers' responsiveness is rooted in the comparison level theory[40]. The normative level is conceptualised as an

individual consumer's cognitions about how a retailer or manufacturer *should* respond to specific complaint responses. As suggested by the comparison level theory, the normative level is not necessarily a function of a specific complaint episode. In fact, the normative level is hypothesised to represent an individual's perception of a "desired" or "deserved" level of seller's response. This definition differs significantly from the conceptualisation of the expectancy level construct.

Comparison level theory suggests that the normative level acts as a "benchmark" for evaluative judgements. Because of this "benchmark" notion, the normative level is hypothesised as the level ( $N$ ) with which perceptions of seller's actual response ( $P$ ) are compared. Therefore, Figure 2 shows a direct path between the normative level and the comparison process. The specifics of the comparison process are discussed below.

Attitude towards the act of complaining is conceptualised as an overall effect towards the "goodness" or "badness" of complaining to sellers[34,41]. Consistent with previous research, the model treats the attitude construct as global effect which is not specific to a particular seller or complaint episode. In the proposed model, the effect of attitudes on perceptions of sellers response is supported by cognitive consistency arguments. That is, perceptions of how a seller reacts are affected by feelings (i.e. attitudes) about what happens when one complains. Such feelings do not include a "deserved" or "desired" notion. Thus, a direct path from attitude to the perception construct is hypothesised.

Although the three exogenous constructs have independent effects, the proposed model posits that these constructs are themselves related. Beliefs about sellers' responsiveness and attitude towards complaining are expected to be related positively owing to cognitive consistency hypotheses[42]. Similarly Woodruff *et al.*[43] suggest that the relationship between expectancy level and normative level is conditional upon the frequency and extent of an individual's exchange interactions with the specific seller. For instance, a consumer who shops frequently at a local grocer may reflect a positive association between the expectancy and the normative level. These relationships, however, have not been examined empirically and should be treated as testable hypotheses.

#### *Comparison Process: Confirmation/Disconfirmation*

The comparison process is modelled after the confirmation/disconfirmation of expectations paradigm[3,14,44]. This paradigm represents a systematic integration of comparison level theory[40], adaptation level theory[39] and assimilation contrast theory[45]. How this paradigm can be applied to the CCR evaluation process is discussed below.

Before a dissatisfied consumer engages in one or more complaint responses, the consumer has some cognitions about how the seller should respond to the complaint. As indicated above, this normative level of sellers' responsiveness is based on prior consumption and complaining experiences, individual characteristics and other factors rooted in comparison level theory. Obviously, if the specific seller responds in a manner that exceeds (or equals) the normative level (how the seller *should* respond), the consumer would most likely be satisfied with that specific seller. This satisfaction occurs despite the earlier dissatisfaction (which led to complaint responses) in regard to the same seller[14].



After taking one or more complaint responses, an individual consumer would note how a seller responds: Did the retailer take the complaint seriously? Was complaint validity doubted? Was a refund made only after much difficulty? Such perceptions of the seller's complaint resolution mechanism are perhaps cognitive processes, since consumers presumably have some idea of specific benefits or actions which sellers must provide in response to their voiced complaints (compare [2,3,47]). However, perceptions of seller responsiveness on specific occasions may or may not coincide with objective reality. Clearly, the seller's actual complaint responses are key inputs to consumer perceptions; nevertheless, attitude towards the act of complaining and expectancy of seller responsiveness (e.g. due to prior experiences) may bias their perceptions. Therefore, it is of interest to measure consumer *perceptions* of the seller's complaint responses and not the *actual* complaint response mechanisms that were employed by the seller.

In notational form, the CCR comparison process can be expressed as:

$$D_{ij} = (P_{ij} - N_{ij})$$

where:  $D_{ij}$  = discrepancy or the degree of confirmation or disconfirmation of seller  $i$ 's perceived response to complaint action  $j$  compared with the normative response value;  $P_{ij}$  = perceived response of seller  $i$  to complaint action  $j$ ; and  $N_{ij}$  = normative level for response for seller  $i$  to complaint action  $j$ .

Three possible states for  $D_{ij}$  are proposed (Figure 2). When the two levels ( $N$  and  $P$ ) are equal, the normative response is said to be confirmed. Further, a distinction is also made between positive and negative disconfirmation, if the perceived response is higher than or lower than normative level respectively.

However, based on assimilation-contrast theory, a perceived response within some interval around a normative level is likely to be considered equivalent to the reference. This interval has been called the zone of indifference (compare [47]). Consistent with Oliver[3], it is proposed that perceived seller responses which are above or below the reference, but within the indifference zone, lead to confirmation. Positive and negative disconfirmation result when perceived response levels are outside the zone. The zone is expected to vary in width across individuals. More importantly, the width may also vary across different dissatisfaction episodes for the *same* individual. Factors such as importance of the product, prior experience, and frequency of the interaction with the retailer may explain such differences.

#### *Outcomes: Final Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction*

Emotional feelings of satisfaction/dissatisfaction are hypothesised to be the outcomes of the CCR evaluation process. Specifically, a perceived level within the zone of indifference is posited to result in satisfaction ( $P=N$ ) and reinforcement of the normative level, expectancy level and the attitudes construct. Unusually good or bad perceived levels, which lies on either side of the zone of indifference would have a greater likelihood of resulting in strong emotional feelings. Positive disconfirmation ( $P>N$ ) would yield a strong satisfaction feeling, whereas negative disconfirmation ( $P<N$ ) would result in

a strong dissatisfaction state. Oliver[14] refers to such feelings as elements of "surprise". Typically, S/D feelings are not global but specific to a context (e.g. seller and situation).

Indeed, these "surprise" feelings of S/D are hypothesised to be assimilated into an individual's attitudes, resulting in either reinforcement of previously held beliefs, or an attitude change[44,48]. Disconfirmation is expected to be associated with attitude change, and in the direction of surprise. Thus negative (positive) disconfirmation is proposed to influence a negative (positive) attitude change towards the focal product/seller.

### Testable Hypotheses

Although there are many testable hypotheses implied by the model, the following seem particularly central to the claim that the model explains satisfaction/dissatisfaction outcomes in situations that involve complaint responses:

- (1)  $FA = f(FSD)$
- (2)  $FSD = f(P, N, D)$
- (3)  $D = f(P - N, Z)$
- (4)  $P = f(E, A, RM)$
- (5)  $N = f(NR)$
- (6) Potential moderator = initial level of dissatisfaction
- (7) Motivating factor = voice and third party complaint responses.

Stated verbally, the first hypothesis posits that future attitudes towards the focal product/seller ( $FA$ ) are a function of final feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction ( $FSD$ ). As indicated earlier, the direction of the effect is positive (negative) when the outcome of the evaluation process is satisfaction (dissatisfaction). It should be highlighted, however, that several factors (e.g. situational effects or habit) might intervene between  $FSD$  and  $FA$ . These intervening factors might include new customer complaint policies, communicated through advertising by the seller; the entry of new competitors or changes in existing competitors' policies, as well as other sources of attitude change.

The second proposition proposes that final feelings of satisfaction/dissatisfaction ( $FSD$ ) are a function of  $P$ ,  $N$  and  $D$  which are, respectively, the perceived level of sellers' response, the normative level of response and the extent of disconfirmation (or confirmation). Positive disconfirmation (or confirmation) is postulated to enhance directly satisfaction ( $P > N$  or  $P = N$ ), whereas negative disconfirmation ( $P < N$ ) relates to dissatisfaction.

The third hypothesis states that disconfirmation ( $D$ ) is itself a function of the difference between the perceived and normative level of sellers response ( $P - N$ ), and the width of the zone of indifference ( $Z$ ). ( $P - N$ ) differences that exceed  $Z$  result in disconfirmation, otherwise confirmation is hypothesised. The fourth proposition proposes that the perceived level of seller's response ( $P$ ) is formed by the individual's expectations about the seller's responsiveness ( $E$ ), attitude

towards the act of complaining (*A*), and the seller's actual complaint resolution mechanisms (*RM*).

The fifth hypothesis states that the normative level of comparison (*N*) is a direct function of an individual's norms about seller's responsiveness that have been derived from outcome experiences across dissatisfaction episodes (*NR*). The degree to which *N* is a function of *NR* versus other factors (e.g. personal characteristics) is an empirical question. The sixth proposition suggests that the initial level of dissatisfaction may act as a moderator of the CCR evaluation process. The specific role of this moderator is difficult to define because of the paucity of previous empirical and theoretical work. Finally, the seventh proposition posits that voice and third party complaint responses motivate the underlying process.

Although the suggested model of CCR evaluation process attempts to understand the relationship between the CCR evaluation process and future attitudes link by applying well developed theories, several questions remain. Does the framework provide insights into issues that have so far remained intractable? Can the model affect future research significantly? To address these issues we first analyse past findings. Then we identify specific gaps that the proposed model can fill.

### **Analysing Past Findings Using the Proposed Model**

The CCR comparison process and its effects on repurchase attitudes and intentions have received little attention in the marketing literature. A study by Gilly and Gelb[21], however, does reflect some common research findings. Consumers who had registered a complaint with a major oil company were asked about the degree of satisfaction with the company's response to both monetary and non-monetary complaints. Complaint files provided the amount of loss claimed and the response time in handling the complaint (i.e. time elapsed between the date of the complaint and when the file was closed). For all complaints, the relative amount of refund (to actual claimed) was related to satisfaction, but response time was not. For non-monetary complaints only, consumer satisfaction would be greater if response time were quick. In contrast, satisfaction could be higher for monetary complaints *only* if the relative amount of refund is higher.

These findings raise several interesting questions. For instance, the proposed model of CCR evaluation suggests that satisfaction/dissatisfaction outcomes are dependent on three sources of variance: norms of seller responsiveness; perception of sellers' responses; and extent of the discrepancy between the two. Regarding the study by Gilly and Gelb[21], several pertinent issues can be raised. Do consumers with monetary complaints have different norms of seller responsiveness than those consumers who have predominantly non-monetary problems. Do *all* consumers with non-monetary complaints have identical seller response time norms? Do consumers differ in their perceptions of how a seller has responded to their complaints? Are customers dissatisfied more because they have different norms, different perceptions, or is it due to variability in zones of indifference around the neutral discrepancy?

Considering the accumulation of evidence in support of complaint resolution-satisfaction-repurchase-loyalty relationships[8,10], it is important to identify and understand the complaint resolution responses which result in satisfaction under various conditions. These issues remain unexplored largely, mainly owing to the absence of a guiding theoretical model. The model of the CCR evaluation process proposed here attempts to fill this gap.

Our purpose in the analysis of extant research is to suggest the next steps for research in post-purchase phenomena. This entails exploring the effects of different complaint responses and their influence on repurchase attitudes/intentions. As with all behavioural science models, testing the proposed model and framework will pose some research design and measurement problems. However, the problems appear tractable to usual research procedures and, therefore, programmatic research in this area can be mapped.

### **Directions for Programmatic Research**

The synergistic effect in treating complaint responses and the consequences of such responses in a well-specified model provides rich ground for research. However, further investigation would be most rewarding if it follows a well-defined programme of research. This section attempts to suggest such a programme by examining specifically three basic issues: conceptual, measurement and research design.

#### *Conceptual Issues*

Several conceptual issues need to be examined in a systematic manner. Perhaps the most important issue involves the complexity/usefulness trade-off. The proposed framework of CCR evaluation process and its outcomes, though very testable, is relatively complex. Is the complexity useful in the explanation and prediction of S/D outcomes of consumer complaint responses? Future empirical investigations could help answer this question. However, even if the proposed model is supported empirically, the issue would have to be examined from a conceptual standpoint as well. That is, the proposed model of CCR evaluation process and its consequences should be evaluated against the null hypotheses of the direct effects model. Such a procedure would provide a stronger test of the model's usefulness than the normal procedure for setting up the null hypothesis as a "no effects" model.

Another conceptual issue involves the appropriate approach to test the proposed model empirically. Most previous research in CCR attempts to study the phenomenon by asking respondents to recall a dissatisfying experience and report what they think/feel/do[18,19]. Although this approach may be suitable for understanding complaint responses, it is not as satisfactory for studying S/D outcomes. Because S/D is an emotion which transforms into one's attitude[14], the use of recall experiences do not appear to afford independent measurements of the initial and final satisfaction constructs. Two alternative approaches are recommended. First, experimental designs may be employed. Such designs could be conceived by considering the different types of seller's resolution mechanisms as the treatment variable, and the level of dissatisfaction

as the blocking construct. In addition, a longitudinal experimental study could be conducted so that final S/D and future attitudes are measured after appropriate time gaps.

A second option is based on the use of scenarios. Langmeyer and Langmeyer[49] provide several guidelines for the development of scenarios for CCR research. The nature of the product or service, the extent of problem, and other situational characteristics (e.g. type of seller) could be varied conveniently by an appropriate choice of scenarios. Typically, respondents provide responses to various constructs assuming that the given scenario actually happened to them on their next shopping visit. By introducing systematically different seller responses, a scenario based study can be used to investigate the model presented in Figure 2.

### *Measurement Issues*

Several guidelines can be suggested for the operationalisation of the key constructs in the model. Day *et al.*[32] and Day[23] provide several items for the measurement of the multidimensional complaint response construct. Categorisation of these responses into voice and third party actions may be achieved using the criteria developed by Singh[25]. Further, Richins[41] has suggested an operationalisation for the attitude towards the act of complaining construct, although she does not report its psychometric properties. While future researchers may wish to develop further the attitudes measures, Richins[41] operationalisation may serve well for initial research studies.

Unlike the attitude construct, the expectancy and norm constructs are specific to a given incident of dissatisfaction. A measurement of these constructs would first require an identification of potential consequences of voice (or third party) complaint responses. Examples of such consequences include: seller listens to complaints but does nothing; seller apologises and provides refund; and seller thanks the consumer for complaining. Focus groups of consumers may be employed as vehicles for identifying such consequences. Given these consequences, the expectancy construct may be operationalised as the likelihood of occurrence for each of the possible consequences. In contrast, the norm construct should be assessed by asking respondents to rate the desirability of the identified consequences. A “definitely should do — definitely should not do” scale may serve as an appropriate measurement format. As suggested by Oliver[14], a “worse than expected — better than expected measure”, again for each of the consequences, may be utilised for operationalising the disconfirmed expectations construct.

Although many of the constructs would not pose great difficulty for operationalisation, certain aspects need careful attention. Woodruff *et al.*[43] address the controversy surrounding the measurement of dissatisfaction/satisfaction emotions. They contend that available measurement scales do not differentiate explicitly between (1) “alternative measures of confirmation/disconfirmation or (2) the emotional response to confirmation/ disconfirmation”. The proposed model of CCR evaluation process and its consequences impose yet another condition (in addition to the above). That is, it would be necessary

to develop a valid measurement of the difference between initial dissatisfaction and final satisfaction/dissatisfaction. While the first condition specified by Woodruff *et al.* [might] be satisfied by improving the composition and scaling of questions, the second condition would perhaps be best addressed with longitudinal designs. Nevertheless, future researchers should examine carefully this measurement problem before attempting to test the complete model.

#### *Research Design Issues*

Both longitudinal and cross-sectional designs would have to be employed to investigate systematically the proposed model. Initially, selected portions of the model could be tested. Perhaps, cross-sectional designs would be a reasonable starting-point to investigate empirically the “goodness” of the individual components. This initial stage might also aid in improving the overall model. Following this, the complete model of CCR evaluation process and its consequences could be tested. The investigation of the complete model would involve measurement of initial dissatisfaction, the complaint actions undertaken, the process gone through, and the resulting final satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Considering the time-related sequence of effects involved, a longitudinal design seems desirable. The two-step approach to the empirical investigation would allow for a programmatic way of testing the proposed theory.

#### **Conclusion**

Several marketing theorists have argued for increased attention to theory development for understanding marketing phenomena[50-52]. For instance, Anderson[53] observes, “what is required in marketing is a greater commitment to theory-driven, programmatic research, aimed at solving cognitively and socially significant problems” (p. 28). Not unlike other areas, research into satisfaction/dissatisfaction outcomes of complaint responses has suffered owing to the lack of a theoretical model to guide empirical studies.

The purpose of this article has been to fill this gap by providing a theoretical model. The model is shown to be consistent with extant consumer behaviour theories, and in particular the disconfirmation of expectations paradigm. This theory-based approach can address several deficiencies potentially in previous research. Our analysis of some of the earlier findings suggest that these studies fail largely to address the central question: what complaint resolution mechanisms, under which conditions, are successful and why? Programmatic research based on the proposed model can help address this deficiency.

The proposed model affords several implications for managers and researchers. From a managerial standpoint, the theoretical model can help managers identify effective resolution mechanisms. In addition, different consumer segments (e.g. elderly) may have different expectancies and norms of seller responsiveness in very similar dissatisfaction situations. A knowledge of these differential cognitions can improve customer service effectiveness potentially. For instance, TARP studies[10,16] suggest that some consumer segments may want their complaints to be considered seriously and carefully, rather than just receiving

a refund or the replacement of a defective product/service — that is, how companies respond to consumers' complaints may be just (if not more) as important as what they do. To institute effective programmes of customer service, managers need to know what customers expect in order to be satisfied. The proposed model can help managers gain this knowledge.

From a theoretical perspective, the model attempts to contribute to the growing area of post-purchase phenomenon. Most previous research treated dissatisfaction from consumption experiences passively. That is, dissatisfaction is expected to influence future attitudes and intentions negatively. The proposed model attempts to describe a process oriented framework that explains how initial dissatisfaction might be converted into final satisfaction. Studies by TARP[10,16] indicate that such conversions do indeed occur. Our model explains why.

We consider the proposed model, however, to be only a starting-point for further theory development into this important but neglected area of research. Several directions to help guide future programmatic studies were provided. Research along these lines can help improve the model further, as well as increase our understanding significantly about customer satisfaction as an outcome of complaint responses.

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