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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction
A possible neglected area in the consumer complaint behavior (CCB) area is the potential effect of other customers on an individual’s complaint behavior. More specifically, it is possible that the mere presence of and/or interaction with acquainted or unacquainted others at the time of service failure may influence consumers’ complaint decision-making processes and, ultimately, their complaint behavior. Although no known research has directly investigated this issue, there is evidence to suggest such a proposition. For example, the importance of social significance in consumer satisfaction was mentioned by Day (1977). Folkes (1984) also acknowledged the possible influence of others’ presence on consumer reactions to product failure.

The objective of this study is to determine whether there may be effects of the presence of other customers in a complaint behavior setting with a focus on both acquainted and unacquainted customers. This exploratory study examines CCB from a social-psychological perspective. In addition to precepts from CCB literature, the present investigation utilizes the interpersonal influence literature (McGrath and Otnes 1995) and theory of social facilitation effects (Zajonc 1965) as a framework.

Literature Review
Interpersonal Influence
The importance of social influence has been addressed in the field of consumer behavior with the focus on interpersonal influence from acquainted consumers, such as family and peers. Researchers have also recognized interpersonal influence from unacquainted consumers (e.g., McGrath and Otnes 1995). McGrath and Otnes (1995) studied stranger interaction in the retail setting and concluded that interactions among unacquainted consumers can either help or hamper shopping experiences in various manners.

Social Facilitation Effects
Social facilitation theory recognizes the importance of social environment on individuals’ behavior. According to Zajonc (1965), theoretical tenets predict that the mere presence of others affects individual behavior and performance. Empirical research in retailing found that the presence of others extends the length of stay and, thus, increases purchases (Sommer and Sommer 1989). Therefore, this study proposes that the presence of other customers influences consumers’ complaint behavior.

Method
Undergraduate students majoring in business-related programs were recruited to participate in the study and required to recall past experiences regarding complaint behavior, including the situations and possible factors that encouraged and/or discouraged their decisions to make complaints. More specific questions were posed to ensure sufficient information regarding the role of others in a complaint behavior setting would be obtained.

A total of 97 respondents were recruited, resulting in 97 incidents. Of the 97 incidents, 34 were in the context of restaurants, 20 in airlines, 11 in phone services, 13 in retail services, and the balance in automobile rental, hotel, and other service industries. Of the total sample, 27 respondents were dropped from further analysis due to the fact that no relevant information regarding other customer(s) was mentioned, culminating in 70 usable incidents.

Data collection and analysis was based on critical incident technique (CIT) and involved several stages. First, each of the researchers carefully read and sorted the incidents into categories. The critical incidents were reviewed for similarities and differences that pertained to the influence of other customer(s) in reported experiences. Second, the researchers compared the results of the initial stage of analysis. Differences in categorical results were discussed until a consensus on categories was achieved. Interjudge agreement on the assignment of incidents into categories was 87%. Third, the researchers labeled categories through further discussion.

Findings, Conclusions, and Limitations
Two major categories emerged from this study. The first category, Acquainted Customers, consists of three subcategories: (1) Encouragement/Confidence/Support, (2) Embarrassment Avoidance, and (3) Obligation. The second category, Unacquainted Customers, encompasses eight subcategories: (1) Confidence/Support, (2) Embarrassment Avoidance, (3) Altruism, (4) Problem Awareness through Service Comparison, (5) Leadership, (6) Diffusion of Responsibility, (7) Accessibility, and (8) Revenge.

One of the major findings is that the mere presence of other customers appears to have an impact on consumers’ decisions to complain. Specifically, the presence of other customers, acquainted and unacquainted, either encourages the consumer to voice the complaint (e.g., obligation or altruism) or deter complaint actions from occurring (e.g., embarrassment avoidance).

Regarding the influence of acquainted customers, this study reveals that close relationships with and/or concerns about acquaintances may provide strong triggers to complaining behavior. However, under similar circumstances related to relationships and concerns, it may be that acquaintances of those individuals who wish to avoid the spotlight may have the effect of dampening the tendency to complain. In terms of the influence from unacquainted customers, the results suggest that these strangers may characterize more types of influences than acquainted customers. A consumer may complain in the presence of unacquainted customers out of concern for their welfare or to hurt the service provider’s business by raising surrounding customers’ awareness of poor service received.

Although the focus of this research was on other customers who are present at the time of service failure, this study found that both acquainted and unacquainted customers not present at the time of service failure may also have an impact on consumers’ decisions to complain. Therefore, further research is warranted to explore the influences of other customers who are not physically present.

Several limitations of this study should be stated. First, the researchers asked directly how the presence of other customers may have affected the subject’s complaint decision process. Although not every participant acknowledged the influence of other customers, a potential demand effect may have occurred. Second, this research employed modified CIT based on retrospective reports. Information regarding the subjects’ unsatisfying experiences may be underreported due to temporal issues, or overemphasized because of dissatisfaction; recall bias may have occurred. Third, most research studies involved with CIT-collected data are associated with relatively large samples (Gremler 2003); however, this study’s sample size was relatively small. The small sample size raises concerns about generalizability of findings, the large number of
construct emergent categories, and frequency counts of the categories. Future work is warranted to determine the representation of this study’s results.

References


