

# **Consumer Complaint Behaviour In Sport Consumption: A Theoretical Model**

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## **Abstract**

In this study, traditional consumer complaint behaviours (CCBs) are re-examined in an experiential context; specifically, the consumption of live sport. It is proposed that these behaviours are not motivated by the “traditional” antecedents, and further, that they are not enacted with the purpose of reducing dissonance. Instead, it would appear that traditional CCBs, such as private responses, direct voicing and third party action take on a more functional role in the sport consumption experience. The possibility exists that for some spectators, these CCBs, which have been traditionally classified as negative, actually contribute to overall enjoyment of, and satisfaction with, a sport consumption experience. A review of literature in the area is presented, and a theoretical model of CCB in the experiential context is offered.

## **Introduction**

Managing the complaint behaviour of consumers is vital for businesses (Tax, Brown and Chandrashekar, 1998) regardless of industry type or structure. Current research has found that identification and management of CCB improves consumer retention rates and negates the diffusion of negative word-of-mouth (Kim, et al., 2003). Further, although the existence of consumer complaints indicates that an economic system may be performing unsatisfactorily, they can also provide feedback to firms and can assist in planning consumer programs and activities (Best and Andreasen, 1977; Chiu, Tsang and Yang, 1987; Day, 1977; Fornell and Didow, 1980). Thus, understanding consumer complaints is necessary for both organisations and for business researchers.

This paper has three objectives; first, to briefly review established research in the field of CCB, second, to contextualise this research in the area of experiential consumption, specifically sport consumption and, third, to propose a testable model for future experiential research. This model is based on the proposition that there are generalisable differences between CCB in experiential consumption settings as compared to ‘traditional’ consumption models. Further, the roles of mood, identification, emotion and involvement in this model are considered.

## **Consumer Complaint Behaviour**

CCB involves the set of multiple, active behavioural responses to dissatisfaction during or following a consumption episode (Volkov, 2003; Volkov, Harker and Harker, 2002; Volkov, Harker and Harker, 2003). CCBs can be described as the set of all behavioural responses portrayed by consumers which involve the communication of negative perceptions relating to a consumption episode and, which are triggered by dissatisfaction with that episode (Bougie, Pieters and Zeelenberg, 2003; Day, 1984; Rogers and Williams, 1990; Singh and Howell, 1985; Volkov, Harker and Harker, 2002). It can be argued that this implies that CCB is

influenced by a multitude of situational, product and personal variables unrelated to, but triggered by, the intensity of consumers' dissatisfaction with the consumption episode.

Prior literature suggests that a dissatisfying consumption experience serves as the primary input into the CCB process (Day, 1984; Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). That is, those consumption experiences in which consumers' performance perceptions compare negatively to some standard (such as their previous expectations) and, therefore, are evaluated as dissatisfying, serve as the stressful event that is cognitively evaluated by consumers and leads to the complaint behaviour (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998).

With respect to the traditional understanding of complaint behaviour, consumers are said to have three behavioural options (In this paper we discuss *consumer complaint behaviour* to espouse the thought that "no action" or "exit" should be treated as a non-behavioural rather than behavioural response): private responses; direct voicing; and third party action (Day and Landon, 1977; Singh, 1988). Private responses are CCBs that are directed towards family, friends, acquaintances and the like through word-of-mouth communication. These responses are directed towards actors that are within the complainant's social network but these actors are not directly involved in the dissatisfying consumption experience. Direct voicing is CCB directed towards the seller, manufacturer, retailer, service provider and/or any other parties involved in the production and delivery of the product. Direct voicing is usually directed towards actors that are not within the complainant's social network (although, this is not always necessarily so) and who are directly involved with the dissatisfying consumption experience. In contrast, third party action is CCB that is directed towards third parties such as regulatory bodies, journalists, and legal representatives. Third party action is directed towards actors that are neither within the complainant's social network, nor are they directly involved with the dissatisfying consumption experience. Therefore, the network position of the actors and their involvement with the consumption experience are used to categorise CCB into the three categories of this taxonomy.

When considering consumers' post-purchase alternatives for action in a complaint situation, alternatives within the sport context can be explained as follows: A *private response* would involve consumers communicating a dissatisfactory experience concerning the league, team, player, stadium, etc. to family, friends or acquaintances to identify to them that the consumption experience led to the dissatisfaction (for example, a supporter complaining to their spouse regarding poor umpiring decisions during a sporting contest they attended). *Direct voicing* would be represented by consumers complaining directly to the league, team management, stadium manager, players, umpires, etc (for example, spectators yelling abuse at players of rival teams during a sporting contest). *Third party action* would occur when consumers enlist the support of third parties such as broadcast or print journalists, consumer protection agencies or industry regulatory or self-regulatory bodies to act on their behalf (for example, club membership holders instigating class action legal proceedings against that club's board of directors).

### **Experiential Consumption**

There has been an important shift in the attention of researchers towards the experiential aspects of consumption (Holbrook, *et al.*, 1984; Hopkinson and Pujari, 1999) in an attempt to understand consumers' behaviours in a more holistic sense (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Holbrook, *et al.*, 1984; Lofman, 1991). Within the broad discipline of consumer behaviour,

experiential consumption deals with goods and services that consumers choose, buy and use purely to experience and enjoy (Cooper-Martin, 1992). Sport consumption, therefore, constitutes a relevant area of research as the consumption of sport is an end in itself and serves as the primary benefit in use (Holbrook, *et al.*, 1984) and constitutes an area that requires further attention (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook, *et al.*, 1984; Hopkinson and Pujari, 1999).

Since the late 1970s, researchers identified that consumer behaviour involved more than mere information processing in order to reach a purchase decision, or to solve a particular problem (Olshavsky and Granbois, 1979; Sheth, 1979). Elements including fantasy, fun, imagination, feelings, pleasure, emotions and the like, have also been known to have a role in some consumption experiences (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook, *et al.*, 1984; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). This extension of consumer behaviour theory indicates that research should not always assume that consumers will behave as rational decision makers and that marketers need to understand this phenomenon in order to more fully understand their consumers (Addis and Holbrook, 2001).

With regard to experiential consumption, the core function of the product as a good or service takes on less relevance, whilst, the product's role in symbolism increases (Addis and Holbrook, 2001). When considering a product in the experiential consumption realm, the relative weight of the objective features of the product is lower than one would expect if considering the process from a more rational or utilitarian framework (Addis and Holbrook, 2001). As such, consumer decisions and behaviours rely on fast, intuitive consideration of the relevant information and how that makes them feel (Dube and Mukherejee, 2003). Far from being purely rational decision-makers, during an experiential consumption episode consumers rely on their intuitions and emotions associated with prior experience of the situation more so than on logical, rational decision processes based on facts (Dube and Mukherejee, 2003).

An example of such an experiential product is sport. The differences between the utilitarian and experiential views of consumption assist in rationalising the need to adopt two different views of consumer behaviour (Addis and Holbrook, 2001). The experiential perspective indicates that in a sport consumption experience, consumers consume in order to create feelings, experiences and emotions, rather than merely to solve a problem (Mowen, 1988). The consumption of sport as a spectator (and, therefore the viewing of sport) results in emotion-related components of the consumption experience predominating. That is, these facets of consumer behaviour relate to the multisensory aspects of the consumer experience (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982).

Given the special nature of experiential consumption, the behaviour of consumers is likely to be different due to the relatively greater emotional processing, more activity and evaluation, but relatively less cognitive processing (Cooper-Martin, 1992; Lofman, 1991). The differences arise due to the understanding that consumers in experiential consumption settings do not act as rational decision makers as they have been portrayed in 'traditional' product consumption settings and as such, their behaviours (including complaint behaviour) are unlikely to fit with the extant view (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Hoffman, Kumar and Novak, 2003). Specifically, these models do not allow for the influence of emotion, identification, mood and involvement, all of which have been shown to be relevant and critical constructs in sport research.

The research question posited in this study is:

### ***What are the antecedents of consumer complaint behaviour exhibited during the experiential consumption of sport?***

The consumer behaviour and services literatures have indicated that mood, emotion, identification and involvement may be important predictive variables when analysing CCB in an experiential setting (Johnson Morgan and Summers, 2003). Research has indicated that the greater the level of affiliation felt by the fans with the respective sporting combatants, the greater the levels of emotion and the more vocal the fans are (Wann, Carlson and Schrader, 1999). This affiliation, or identification, with the fan's chosen team enhances the feeling of solidarity amongst groups of supporters, and is a key preoccupation of the individual's self with the team's values marrying with those more established foci of support of the fan (Giulianotti, 2002). The team, however, reciprocates in the relationship by providing a complex and evolving representation of the fan's public identity (Giulianotti, 2002). Such a relationship provides the fan with a strong, obligatory, collaborative motive to support their chosen team. Therefore, based on an analysis of the sport consumption literature, identification with the team may influence CCB.

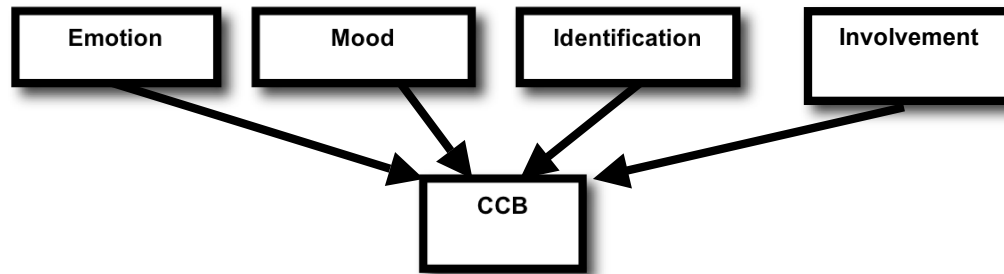
When sport is considered, emotion becomes an important construct (Halvena and Holbrook, 1986; Holbrook, *et al.*, 1984; Oliver, 1996; Westbrook and Oliver, 1991). Particularly, the extreme emotions and violence displayed by some sport fans at sports events is testimony to the passion of the spectator and the power of the sport (Strychacz, 1994). Thus, emotion appears to have an influential role on the identification felt by sport fans and in turn is likely then to impact on the level and type of complaining that occurs.

Experiential consumption researchers have long advocated a shift in focus from the 'degree of involvement' (low versus high), to the 'type of involvement' (engagement of cognitive responses versus orientation reaction involving arousal) (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) which will allow researchers to consider involvement in terms of the degree of activation or arousal during the experience (Johnson Morgan and Summers, 2003). This approach would suggest that there is potential for involvement to change during an experience to influence the effect of other factors such as emotion, mood and identification (Johnson Morgan and Summers, 2003) - a phenomenon alluded to by Moneta and Csikszentmihalyi (1996), who hinted at this dynamic role of involvement with experience, emotion and mood. Thus, this research examines the effect of involvement in the sense of the orientation reflex and will consider involvement to act as an antecedent to CCB.

Mood is considered to be a critical dimension of experiential sport consumption with research identifying that optimal experience is in part defined by mood (Chalip, *et al.*, 1984; Johnson Morgan and Summers, 2003). Further, Chalip *et al.* (1984) state that conditions conducive to optimal experience are accompanied by states of high positive moods. Following such research, it has been identified that consumers regulate their expectations, satisfaction and verbalisation aspects of a consumption experience depending on their mood before and during the experience (Johnson Morgan and Summers, 2003). Therefore, the addition of mood as an influence on CCB has some justification.

Due to the sport consumption experience being so unpredictable because of the uncontrollable elements of competition, mood, involvement, identification and emotion have been identified as antecedent factors in the sport consumption experience (Johnson Morgan and Summers, 2003) and this is depicted schematically in Figure 1. The consumer, influenced by their type of involvement with the sporting experience, their level of identification with the sporting

'combatants', their mood and their level of emotion may trigger CCB following a particular experiential incident and the consumer would respond (or not respond) in a certain manner. If dissatisfied with the on-field sport incident, the consumer may exhibit one or more CCBs. Whether the consumer does or does not exhibit CCB following an experiential incident, this will nonetheless mediate the consumer's future response to any further experiential incidents.



**Figure 1: Experiential consumer complaint behaviour model**

### **Conclusion and Further Research**

This paper has achieved the three objectives set; first, to bring together established research in the field of CCB, second, to contextualise this research into the general area of experiential consumption, specifically sport, and third, to present a theoretical model for future experiential research investigating the proposition posited by the authors that there are generalisable differences between CCB in experiential consumption when compared to 'traditional' consumption models. The theoretical model presented displays marked differences from 'traditional' CCB models. First, anger is not considered to be a driver of CCB in experiential consumption situations as consumers may not be angry following a sport incident but may actually be constructing part of the overall experience through their behaviour. Second, the effect of the antecedent variables (identification, emotion, involvement and mood) has not been investigated in previous studies. Further, these variables (identification, emotion, involvement and mood) may in fact be dynamic, and vary in an experiential consumption setting prior to and post a sport incident. Therefore, it may be necessary to include both an *a priori* and an *experiential* measurement for these constructs. These are just a few of the propositions that must be investigated in the next stage of this research which will involve the use of phenomenological methods as data collection tools. Such methods may include phenomenological focus groups, ethnographic studies and observation and immersion techniques. As such, an exciting program of research has been presented.

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