

# CATHARTIC COMPLAINING AS A MEANS OF REDUCING CONSUMER DISSATISFACTION

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## ABSTRACT

Though catharsis (venting) plays a major role in psychotherapy, and has been reported to be the single most common reason for complaining in social interactions (Alicke et al. 1992), the effects of venting in consumer complaining situations has not previously been studied. An experiment conducted to test the effects of complaining by dissatisfied consumers on changes in consumer satisfaction, perceived product performance and purchase intention found that though complaining tends to cause decreased satisfaction in the short run, it increases satisfaction in the long run. The study also found that complaining benefits both the highly dissatisfied as well as the moderately dissatisfied individuals. The role of intensity of complaining in influencing the resulting improvements in satisfaction was also investigated.

## INTRODUCTION

For a long time now, marketers and academicians have known that consumer complaints are invaluable as a form of consumer-initiated market information that can be used to make strategic and tactical decisions (Kasouf, Celuch and Strieter 1995). By effectively responding to complaints, marketers can prevent customers from switching (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987). All of this led Plymire (1991) to argue that "the surest road to a customer-focused culture is through increased complaints." These benefits of complaining alluded to in the above statements are indirect benefits of complaining. The unhappy customer complains, which then leads the marketer to respond in a way that makes the customer less dissatisfied. However, can the act of complaining by itself help improve product evaluations, reduce dissatisfaction and increase future purchase intentions?

Richins (1980) noted that one of the psychic benefits of complaining is that it gives disgruntled consumers the opportunity to vent anger and frustration (also see Kolodinsky and Aleong 1990). She found evidence that suggested that dissatisfied consumers complain to avoid the guilt they would

otherwise experience by not complaining. Oliver (1987) has suggested that complaining is a dissonance releasing activity. Halstead and Page (1992) have attributed the positive relationship found between complaining and repurchase intention in the TARP (1979) studies to complaining induced reduction of the dissonance caused by product dissatisfaction. Kowalski (1996) suggested that one of the most common functions of complaining is to provide individuals a means of venting their frustrations and dissatisfactions, a fact empirically supported by the findings of Alicke et al. (1992) who found that the single most commonly reported reason for complaining in social interactions was to vent negative feelings. Venting as a function of complaining, is only now becoming the focus of research in psychology and marketing.

## VENTING AND SELF-DISCLOSURE

Venting has been defined in the Webster's New World Dictionary as "to relieve or unburden by giving release or expression to feelings". Upsetting or stressful events tend to induce a subjective sense of pressure, of something being bottled up, and individuals subject to such pressure tend to be preoccupied with their internal states, and this preoccupation tends to be reflected in their speech (Stiles 1987). However, when individuals attempt to suppress expressing their feelings of distress/ dissatisfaction, it could lead them to reflect upon the causes of their dissatisfaction, which in turn could help maintain or even increase their dissatisfaction (Kowalski 1996). Pennebaker and associates have found that failure to confide in others about traumatic events is associated with increased stress and long term health problems (Pennebaker and Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Hughes and O'Heeron 1987). It has been suggested that cathartic complaining reduces the feelings of distress by freeing individuals from ruminating about the causes of their dissatisfaction (Kowalski 1996). Kowalski, Cantrell and VanHout (1996) found that low propensity complainers felt better about a source of dissatisfaction after they had written about the dissatisfaction. Nyer (2000)

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found that compared to dissatisfied consumers who could not complain, consumers who complained evaluated the consumption experience more positively. Catharsis and self-understanding are the major benefits of disclosure in psychotherapy and the percentage of disclosure in patient speech has been shown to be highly correlated with experts' impressions of good therapeutic progress (Stiles McDaniel and McGaughey 1979). According to the fever model of disclosure, higher levels of psychological distress lead to higher levels of disclosure and the higher level of disclosure helps reduce distress through catharsis and by encouraging self-understanding (Stiles 1987; Stiles, Shuster and Harrigan 1992).

Complaints and negative word-of-mouth behavior may be motivated by a desire to seek redress or to inform other potential customers (for example Day 1980). Such instrumental complaints (Alicke et al. 1992) are explicit attempts to change certain situations. However many complaints, especially negative word-of-mouth tend to be non-instrumental in nature. They may be motivated by other desires such as to obtain emotional release, to regain some semblance of control over a distressing situation (Alicke et al. 1992; Stilwell and Salamon 1990) or even to gain sympathy (Kowalski and Erickson 1997). Individuals may also voice their dissatisfaction to convey to others that they have high standards and thereby make themselves look superior (Jones and Pittman 1982), or to obtain sympathy and make excuses for behavior that falls short of expectations (Weiner 1992). Of the various reasons individuals have for complaining, the desire to vent frustration was by far the most commonly reported reason for complaining in social interactions (Alicke et al. 1992).

With the exception of Kowalski, Cantrell and VanHout (1996) and Nyer (2000), there very little empirical evidence in the marketing or psychology literature pointing to the effectiveness of complaining/ venting in increasing product evaluations, and reducing dissatisfaction, anger and frustration. Despite the deep-rooted belief that psychotherapists have in the effectiveness of disclosure by their clients, the evidence for its effectiveness is inconsistent or negligible (see Orlinksky and Howard 1986; Stiles 1987).

While the evidence for the beneficial effects of

catharsis/ disclosure is mixed, there is evidence suggesting that disclosure may cause a short-term *increase* in negative evaluations and emotions. Pennebaker (1990) found that in the short run, subjects who wrote about their traumatic experiences reported feeling sadder and more upset than those who wrote about superficial topics. These increased negative feelings dissipated after an hour or two and in rare cases after a day or two. Nyer (1997) reported that subjects who were given a chance to express their feelings about a dissatisfying product experienced higher levels of anger than subjects who were not explicitly given a chance to express their feelings. These findings are in line with Lazarus' model of coping, which suggests that anger is facilitated when the potential to cope through attack is appraised favorably (Lazarus 1991). Complaining and negative word-of-mouth can be viewed as one way by which dissatisfied consumers cope by 'attacking' the marketer. Therefore, it seems logical to believe that complaining will lead to a short-term increase in dissatisfaction and that this increased dissatisfaction will dissipate after a few days.

However, can non-instrumental complaining (i.e. complaining that is not directed at specifically changing the distress-causing situation) lead to increased product evaluations, reduced long-term dissatisfaction, and increased purchase intentions by facilitating the venting of dissatisfaction, anger and frustration? As mentioned earlier, the desire to vent frustration and anger was the single most frequently reported reasons for complaining in social interactions (Alicke et al. 1992). This finding leads one to suspect that the subjects participating in the Alicke et al. study had in the past experienced the beneficial cathartic effects of complaining, thereby leading to their belief in the effectiveness of venting.

If one were to assume that non-instrumental complaining has the effect of increasing product evaluations, reducing long term dissatisfaction, and increasing purchase intentions through catharsis, a few questions remain to be answered. First, will the beneficial effects of complaining be more for highly dissatisfied individuals compared to those who are only moderately dissatisfied? Second, will the beneficial effects of complaining depend on the intensity of the complaints? Stiles' (1987) fever model of disclosure suggests that the benefit of

cathartic disclosure depends on the extent and depth of the disclosure, which in turn depends on the intensity of the accompanying affect.

### HYPOTHESES

Based on the preceding review, it is hypothesized that:

H1. Compared to dissatisfied subjects who do not complain, dissatisfied subjects who complain will initially experience lower levels of perceived product performance, satisfaction and purchase intention.

H2a. Compared to dissatisfied subjects who do not complain, dissatisfied subjects who complain will experience higher levels of perceived product performance, satisfaction and purchase intention after two weeks.

H2b. Compared to dissatisfied subjects who do not complain, dissatisfied subjects who complain will experience larger increases in the levels of perceived product performance, satisfaction and purchase intention between the initial measurement and the measurement taken two weeks after the complaining behavior.

As mentioned earlier, Pennebaker (1990) had discovered that it took hours and in some cases a few days for the short term increase in dissatisfaction caused by complaining to dissipate. Therefore, the beneficial effects of complaining can be found after a few days at the latest. However, the time-period between the two sets of measurements had to be long enough to reduce the possibility that subjects would base their second responses on the recollection of their previous responses. For this reason, hypotheses H2a and H2b specify a two-week period between the complaining episode and the second set of measurements.

H3. Subjects' initial dissatisfaction levels will moderate the effects complaining will have on increasing the levels of perceived product performance, satisfaction and purchase intention such that among complainers the

more dissatisfied individuals will show greater increases in perceived product performance, satisfaction, and purchase intention than those who are only moderately dissatisfied.

H4. The beneficial effects of complaining on perceived product performance, satisfaction and purchase intention will be influenced by the intensity of complaining.

### METHODOLOGY

Subjects were 128 undergraduate students who were recruited from various computer laboratories at a large midwestern university and were paid \$10 each to participate in this study. The subjects were also entered into a drawing to win two \$100 cash prizes. The cover story was that these subjects would be assisting the researcher in evaluating various computer models that were being considered for purchase for the university computer labs. The university, the cover story went, was interested in getting feedback from the students before making a commitment. Since the experiment was conducted over a period of two weeks, all instructions and manipulations were put down on paper to ensure uniformity across the 128 sessions.

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of four groups in a 2 (initial dissatisfaction - medium, high) x 2 (complaining potential - high, low) full factorial experimental design. They were seated in front of one of a few IBM compatible personal computers that had all brand markings covered. Subjects were then given a letter purportedly from the university computer service that repeated the cover story. The letter attempted to make the computer evaluation relevant to the subjects by pointing out that the expensive computers were being purchased with money from student tuition, and that the new computers would be purchased soon. Cognitive models of emotion suggest that the relevance of an emotion-evoking situation is a major determinant of the intensity of the resulting emotion (Lazarus 1991, Scherer 1984). For example, given that the computer's performance is perceived as being poor, the more relevant the computer is to the subject, the stronger will be the resulting negative emotion. Pilot studies had indicated that this manipulation was very effective

in evoking strong emotional responses.

Subjects were then familiarized with a benchmark software that was designed to look and sound like commercially available computer benchmark programs. The program, they were told, evaluated the overall performance of the test computer in running software programs that were commonly used by students. The benchmark program compared the performance of the test computer to those of other computers installed recently at other universities. The performance of the test computer was displayed as a percentile score, both numerically and graphically.

Subjects' initial dissatisfaction with the computer was manipulated through the results of the benchmark program. Depending on the experimental group to which the subjects were assigned, the benchmark software either indicated a percentile score around 53 (medium performance- moderate dissatisfaction) or 27 (low performance - high dissatisfaction). Subjects were then handed a feedback form which either included instructions to the subjects to express their feelings, thoughts, complaints, compliments or comments about the test computer (manipulation of high complaining potential), or contained instructions to the subjects to write about their past experience with various computer operating systems (low complaining potential). Subjects were given three minutes to complete the task, after which they were given a questionnaire that included measures of satisfaction/ dissatisfaction, perceived product performance and purchase intention. On completion of this task, subjects were paid and informed that they might be telephoned two weeks later for follow up questions.

Exactly two weeks from the day of the initial data collection, subjects were telephonically administered the follow up questionnaire which included measures of satisfaction/ dissatisfaction, perceived product performance and purchase intention. Subjects who were unavailable on the 15th day were called over the next three days until they were contacted. Five subjects who could not be contacted by the 18<sup>th</sup> day were dropped from the study reducing the effective sample size to 123.

## Measures

Satisfaction/ dissatisfaction was measured using three unipolar 9-point scales anchored on the words *satisfied*, *dissatisfied* and *contented*. Oliver's (1989) conceptualization of contentment as a satisfaction prototype led to the development of the contentment scale. These measures have previously been tested for validity and reliability (Nyer 1997). Perceived product performance was assessed using three bipolar 9-point scales anchored on the words *very high-very poor*, *superior-inferior* and *very good-very bad*. Subjects were asked to indicate whether they would consider purchasing the test computer if they were in the market for a personal computer. Responses were measured on two bipolar scales ranging from *definitely yes* to *definitely not*, and from *very likely* to *very unlikely*. The intensity of complaints in the comments written by the subjects in the high complaining potential conditions were independently coded by two associates. On a seven-point scale, 0 represented no complaint and 6 represented the highest level of complaint. Further, the comments were examined to determine whether the complainer attributed the poor performance of the computer to any particular entity.

## ANALYSIS

The dependent variables were tested for reliability and discriminant validity. The Cronbach  $\alpha$  for all the scales exceeded 0.80. Scales for the dependent constructs were formed by averaging the scores of the multiple indicators of that construct. The means of the dependent variables for all the experimental conditions are shown in table 1. The manipulation of initial dissatisfaction was assessed using the initial satisfaction ratings which indicated that the manipulation was very successful;  $F(1, 121) = 279.43$ ,  $p = 0.00$  with the means of satisfaction in the high and medium dissatisfaction conditions being 2.35 and 4.28 respectively. 78% of the subjects in the high complaining potential groups complained to some degree.

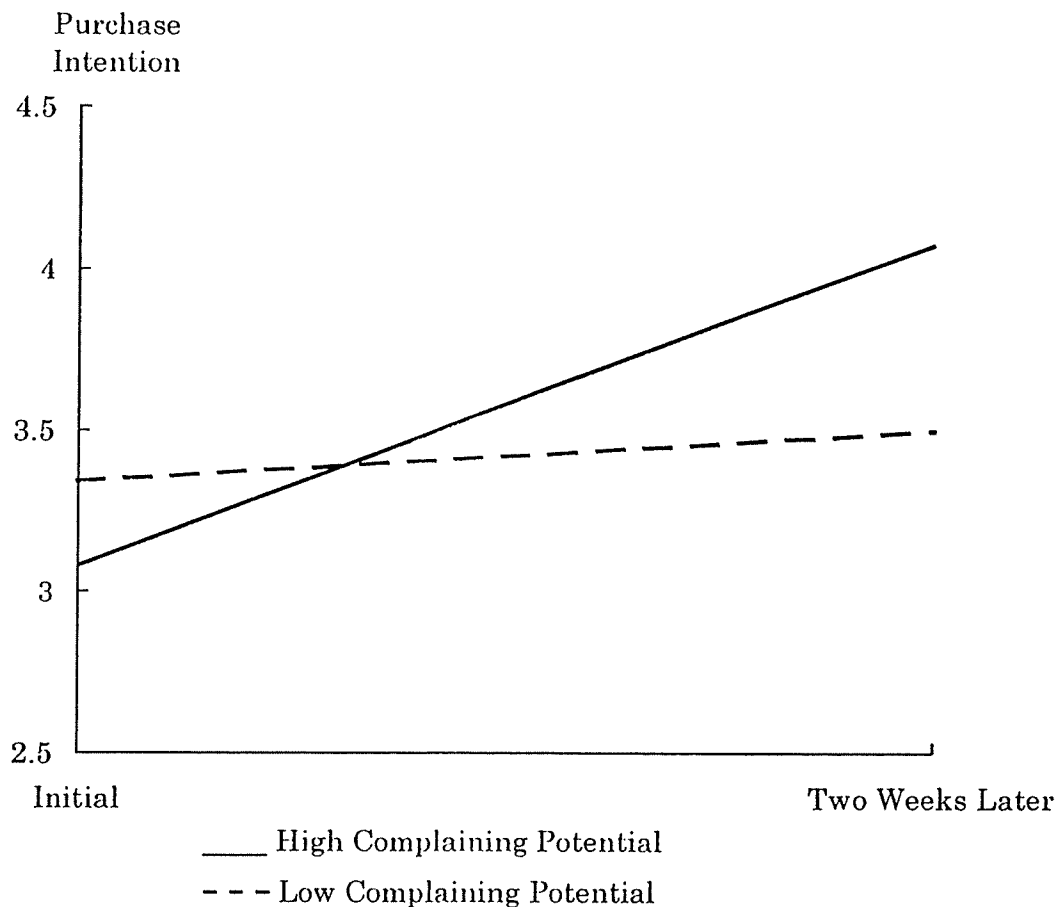
Among the 44% of the subjects in the high complaining potential condition who made attributions for the negative outcome of the test, all pointed to the incompetence of the personnel at the

**Table 1**  
**Means of Satisfaction, Perceived Performance and Purchase Intention**

Manipulations	Satisfaction		Perceived Performance		Purchase Intention	
	High Comp	Low Comp	High Comp	Low Comp	High Comp	Low Comp
High Initial Dissatisfaction	2.28, 3.17	2.42, 2.54	2.27, 3.29	2.68, 2.60	1.98, 3.28	2.39, 2.69
Moderate Initial Dissatisfaction	4.21, 4.80	4.35, 4.43	4.02, 4.63	4.32, 4.36	4.22, 4.90	4.30, 4.41

High Comp and Low Comp refer to high and low complaining potential conditions. The two numbers within each cell are the measurements taken initially and after two weeks.

**Figure 1**  
**Effect of Complaining on Purchase Intention**



university's computer center. As discussed later, this information is significant in that it eliminates some of the competing explanations for the effects found in this study.

**Hypothesis 1**

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) conducted on the dependent variables measured soon after the manipulation of complaining

potential indicated that contrary to the hypothesis, the subjects in the high complaining potential group did not report significantly lower levels of perceived product performance, satisfaction and purchase intentions compared to subjects in the low complaining potential condition (see Figure 1 for a representation of the effect of complaining on purchase intention). The means for the three variables in the high and low complaining potential conditions and the corresponding F statistics from univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) were: PERF1 (3.13, 3.50;  $F(1,121) = 2.24, p = 0.14$ ); SAT1 (3.23, 3.39;  $F(1,121) = 0.58, p = 0.45$ ); and INT1 (3.08, 3.34;  $F(1,121) = 0.89, p = 0.35$ ). The numerical suffix after the variable label has been used to distinguish the variables measured at the initial data collection from those measured two weeks later. For example, SAT1 refers to the initial satisfaction measurement while SAT2 refers to the satisfaction measurement made two weeks later. Similarly, the PERF and INT variables refer to perceived product performance and purchase intention respectively.

#### **Hypothesis 2a**

MANOVA conducted on the satisfaction, perceived performance and purchase intention scores measured two weeks after the initial data collection indicated that, as hypothesized, subjects in the high complaining potential conditions experienced higher levels of all three variables compared to subjects in the low complaining potential conditions (see Figure 1 for a representation of the effect of complaining on purchase intention). The means for these three variables in the high and low complaining potential conditions and the corresponding F statistics from univariate ANOVA were: SAT2 (3.97, 3.48;  $F(1,121) = 4.08, p = 0.05$ ); PERF2 (3.95, 3.48;  $F(1,121) = 2.86, p = 0.09$ ); and INT2 (4.08, 3.55;  $F(1,121) = 3.17, p = 0.08$ ).

#### **Hypothesis 2b**

To test the hypothesis that complaining could lead to increases in perceived performance, satisfaction and purchase intentions, three new variables representing the changes in perceived performance, satisfaction and purchase intentions

over the two week period were computed and were labeled  $\Delta$ SAT,  $\Delta$ PERF and  $\Delta$ INT (e.g.,  $\Delta$ SAT = SAT2 - SAT1). MANOVA done on these new variables indicated that as hypothesized, subjects in the high complaining potential condition experienced larger changes in satisfaction, perceived performance and purchase intentions compared to subjects in the low complaining potential condition. The means for the three difference variables in the high and low complaining potential conditions and the corresponding F statistics from univariate ANOVA were:  $\Delta$ SAT (0.75, 0.10;  $F(1,121) = 12.27, p = 0.00$ );  $\Delta$ PERF (0.82, -0.02;  $F(1,121) = 23.79, p = 0.00$ ); and  $\Delta$ INT (0.99, 0.20;  $F(1,121) = 16.31, p = 0.00$ ).

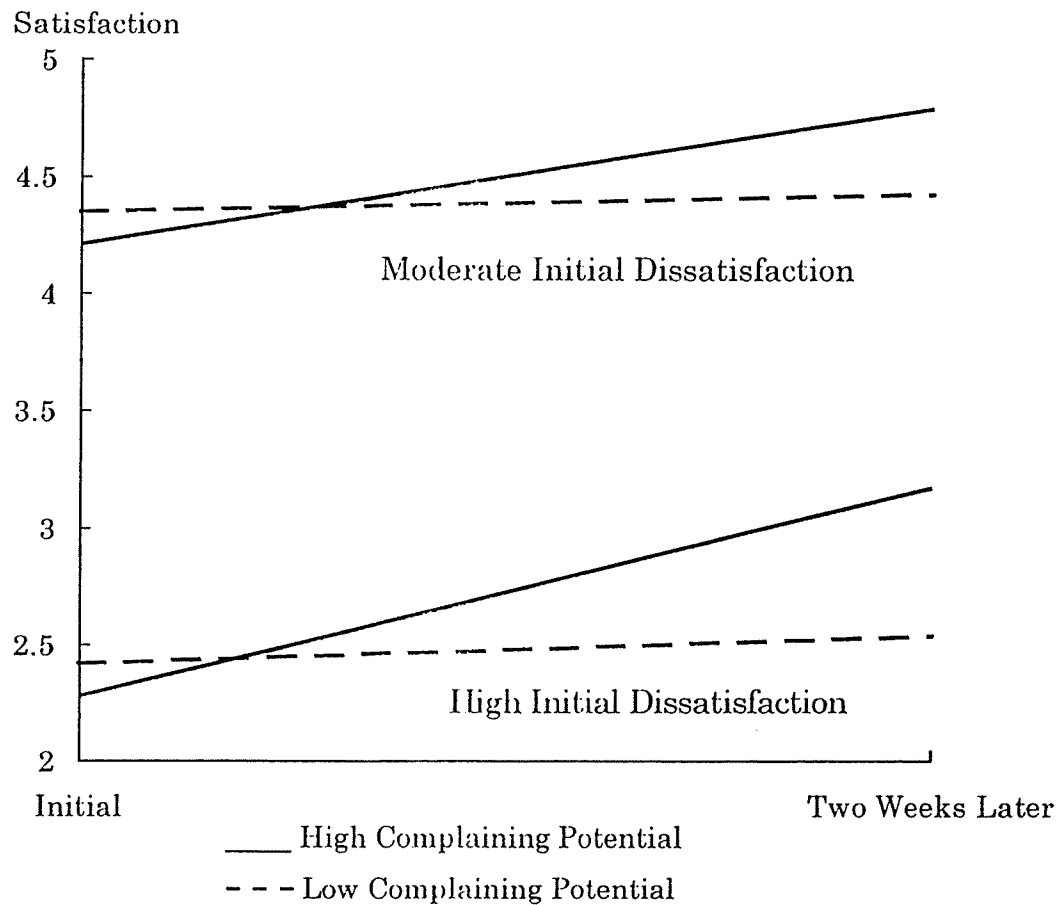
#### **Hypothesis 3**

Data from the subjects in the high complaining potential conditions were used to conduct MANOVA to test for the effects of the intensity of initial dissatisfaction on the three difference variables  $\Delta$ SAT,  $\Delta$ PERF and  $\Delta$ INT (described in the previous section). As hypothesized, subjects in the high initial dissatisfaction condition (who experienced lower product performance) reported larger increases in satisfaction, perceived performance and purchase intention compared to subjects in the moderate initial dissatisfaction condition. Univariate ANOVA results indicated that except in the case of  $\Delta$ INT, these differences were not significant. In other words, complaining led to increased satisfaction, perceived performance and purchase intention for both subjects in high and medium initial dissatisfaction conditions (see Figure 2) and the difference across the two conditions were not significant except for the change in purchase intention. The means for the three difference variables in the high and medium initial dissatisfaction (i.e. low and medium product performance) conditions and the corresponding F statistics were:  $\Delta$ SAT (0.89, 0.60;  $F(1,121) = 0.93, p = 0.34$ );  $\Delta$ PERF (1.02, 0.61;  $F(1,121) = 2.67, p = 0.11$ ); and  $\Delta$ INT (1.30, 0.67;  $F(1,121) = 6.83, p = 0.01$ ).

#### **Hypothesis 4**

To test hypothesis 4, step down analysis using

**Figure 2**  
**Effect on Satisfaction of Complaining by Subjects with High and Moderate Initial Dissatisfaction**



**Table 2**  
**Step-Down Analysis (p values of multivariate F-test statistic)**

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Experimental Effect	Dependent Variables $\Delta$ , CI; Covariate None	Dependent Variables $\Delta$ ; Covariate CI	Dependent Variable CI; Covariates $\Delta$
Complaining Potential	0.00	0.32	0.00
Product Performance	0.19	0.22	0.78

Note:  $\Delta$  refers to the variables  $\Delta$ SAT,  $\Delta$ PERF and  $\Delta$ INT, which represent the change in satisfaction, perceived performance and purchase intention. CI denotes COMPINT - complaining intensity.

multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted (see Bagozzi and Yi 1989 for details of this technique). To establish that intensity of complaining influences the beneficial effects of complaining on perceived performance, satisfaction and purchase intention, the following steps have to

be undertaken. First, the experimental manipulations should be shown to have significant effects on the dependent variables  $\Delta$ SAT,  $\Delta$ PERF,  $\Delta$ INT and COMPINT where COMPINT is the complaining intensity score. Second, the experimental manipulations should be shown to

**Table 3**  
**Regression Analyses**

Ind. Variable	Dependent Variables		
COMPINT	$\Delta$ SAT	$\Delta$ PERF	$\Delta$ INT
$\beta$	0.49	0.36	0.39
R <sup>2</sup>	0.24	0.13	0.16
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.22	0.12	0.14
F (1,57); p	17.66; 0.00	8.58; 0.01	10.47; 0.00

Note:  $\Delta$ SAT,  $\Delta$ PERF and  $\Delta$ INT represent the change in satisfaction, perceived performance and purchase intention. COMPINT is complaining intensity.

have no significant effects on  $\Delta$ SAT,  $\Delta$ PERF and  $\Delta$ INT once the effects of COMPINT have been covaried out. Finally, the experimental manipulations should be shown to have significant effects on COMPINT even after the effects of  $\Delta$ SAT,  $\Delta$ PERF and  $\Delta$ INT are covaried out. This final step is used to eliminate the alternative model where complaining intensity is caused by (rather than be the cause of)  $\Delta$ SAT,  $\Delta$ PERF and  $\Delta$ INT. As indicated in Table 2 that summarizes the results of the step-down analysis, the above three conditions were satisfied, thereby providing support for hypothesis 4.

To further quantify the effects that complaining intensity has on changes in perceived performance, satisfaction and purchase intention, data from the subjects in the high complaining potential condition were used to run regression analyses with  $\Delta$ SAT,  $\Delta$ PERF and  $\Delta$ INT as dependent variables and COMPINT as the independent variable. The results (see Table 3) indicate that COMPINT accounts for significant variance in the complaining induced change in perceived performance, satisfaction and purchase intention.

## DISCUSSION

Hypotheses 2a and 2b that examined the effectiveness of complaining in increasing perceived product performance, long-term satisfaction and purchase intention received strong empirical support. As hypothesized, subjects in the high complaining potential groups reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction, perceived performance and purchase intention after two weeks compared to subjects in the low complaining

potential conditions. Thus, even though high complaining potential and low complaining potential subjects experienced statistically similar levels of initial satisfaction ( $M = 3.23$  vs.  $3.39$ ), after two weeks the high complaining potential subjects experienced higher levels of satisfaction ( $M = 3.97$ ) compared to the low complaining potential subjects ( $M = 3.48$ ). In other words, high complaining potential subjects exhibited significantly higher increases in the level of reported satisfaction ( $M = 0.75$ ) compared to low complaining potential subjects ( $M = 0.10$ ) in the two week period between measurements. Similar effects were reported for perceived performance and purchase intention (see figure 1 for a representation of these effects on purchase intention).

The above reported effect of complaining in increasing perceived product performance, satisfaction and purchase intention levels is more pronounced for individuals who were very dissatisfied initially than for individuals whose initial level of dissatisfaction was only moderate. For example, the complaining induced increase in purchase intention ( $M = 0.99$ ) was significantly greater for individuals who were highly dissatisfied initially (from 1.98 to 3.28 for a net increase of 1.30) than for subjects who were only moderately dissatisfied initially (from 4.22 to 4.90 for a net increase of 0.67). Similar effects for satisfaction and perceived performance were not statistically significant. For instance, complaining caused the reported satisfaction for highly dissatisfied individuals to increase from 2.28 to 3.17 for a net increase of 0.89 while moderately dissatisfied individuals saw an increase from 4.21 to 4.80 for a net increase of 0.60. What this seems to suggest



is that while highly dissatisfied consumers may exhibit greater cathartic effects of complaining, even individuals with moderate dissatisfaction may experience increased levels of long term satisfaction as a result of complaining.

The result of the step-down analysis lends support to the hypothesis that complaining induced increases in satisfaction, perceived product performance and purchase intention were influenced by the intensity of complaining. The significant effects of the experiment on the dependent variables disappeared once the effects of complaining intensity were covaried out. The regression analyses (see table 3) showed that complaint intensity was a significant predictor of complaining induced increases in satisfaction, perceived performance and purchase intention.

The findings in this study suggest that encouraging dissatisfied consumers to complain may cause increased levels of satisfaction, perceived product performance and purchase intention. This is in line with the findings from the TARP (1979) studies that reported that even customers whose complaints were not satisfactorily resolved, reported higher levels of repurchase intention compared to those who did not complain at all. Does this mean that marketers should merely encourage complaints without attempting to address the complaints or the causes of the complaints? Certainly not. Goodwin and Ross (1990) suggest that encouraging consumers to express their feelings may be perceived as fraudulent if their expressions of feelings do not result in positive response. Providing consumers with a chance to vent or even offering them an apology may not compensate for failure to provide them with a refund or exchange if that is what the dissatisfied consumers desire. It was noted earlier that not all complaints are instrumental in nature and therefore are not directed at obtaining specific and tangible changes in the distress causing state of affairs. What this suggests is that the marketers' response to complaints should be based on an understanding of the complainer's motives. The cathartic benefits of complaining should be seen as an added incentive to encourage complaining behavior.

It should be noted that though this study has looked at complaining (to the marketer) as a means of venting, dissatisfied consumers have other

avenues, such as negative word-of-mouth, to vent their anger and frustration. Negative word-of-mouth usually has lower costs (time, effort, psychic costs etc., see Richins 1980) compared to complaining to the marketer and may be the preferred route for venting especially if the dissatisfied consumer has non-instrumental motivations. However negative word-of-mouth is a poor substitute to complaints made to the marketer from the marketer's point-of-view. Marketers should make it easier for dissatisfied consumers to complain by reducing the costs involved with making complaints.

### Limitations

While this study has found evidence for the beneficial effects of complaining in reducing dissatisfaction, some issues remain to be resolved. It is unclear whether the beneficial effects of complaining were caused solely through catharsis, or whether other mechanisms such as improved perceived justice, enhanced self-understanding, increased perceived control over the situation or some other form of cognitive coping may have operated concurrently with catharsis. Since the effects of complaining were found for satisfaction, perceived performance and purchase intention, it makes it unlikely that the complaining induced increases in these self-reported measures were merely due to subjects' higher perceived control over the computer evaluation process. Higher levels of satisfaction with the evaluation process does not necessarily lead to higher levels of satisfaction with an inferior product, nor does it cause the inferior product to be evaluated more positively. However, this does not rule out other mechanisms by which long term dissatisfaction may have been reduced. For example, the short-term increase in dissatisfaction caused by complaining may have encouraged increased cognitive processing. This may have caused subjects to generate counter-arguments; i.e. cognitions where the subject defends the choice of the computer. Another mechanism that could have produced reduced dissatisfaction is increased levels of perceived justice. Providing customers with an opportunity to make their voices heard could lead to higher levels of procedural/ interactional justice and that could have led to lower levels of

dissatisfaction (Blodgett and Tax, 1993). Further research is required to more closely investigate the relative contributions of the diverse mechanisms that could account for the beneficial effects of complaining on satisfaction, perceived product performance and purchase intention.

For reasons explained earlier, in this study the measurement of the beneficial effects of complaining was conducted two weeks after complaining. As noted earlier, the beneficial effects of complaining may occur in a few hours after complaining or after a few days at the latest. Further research needs to be done to fully understand the timing of the onset of the beneficial effects of complaining.

The experiment in this paper involved student subjects having to evaluate a product which was to be purchased by someone else, and over whose purchase the students may have had very little perceived control. As such the situation does not mirror most consumer purchase decisions. Despite the fact that pre-testing had shown that the situation was highly involving, further research employing real consumers making actual purchases would be necessary to validate the findings reported in this paper.

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