

# EFFECTS OF DISSATISFYING EXPERIENCES ON REPATRONAGE INTENTIONS AND NEGATIVE WORD-OF-MOUTH BEHAVIOR OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

While the effects of dissatisfying retailing shopping experiences on retail consumers' repatronage intentions and negative word-of-mouth behavior have been widely studied, much less research has been devoted to the study of the effects of dissatisfying experiences on university students. This study uses the framework developed by Blodgett, Granbois and Walters (1993) in a retailing situation to examine repatronage intentions and negative word-of-mouth behavior for university students who have encountered a dissatisfying experience. Results indicate the framework is a useful starting point for the study of dissatisfied university students, but other variables not included in the model also affect behavior, and need to be identified.

## INTRODUCTION

Student recruitment and retention are increasingly of concern to university administrators as changing demographics have reduced the pool of available college students. Administrators may increase retention by decreasing the extent to which students are subjected to dissatisfying experiences, and by successfully resolving potentially dissatisfying student experiences. Both of these actions may also decrease negative word-of-mouth behavior on the part of students. Negative word-of-mouth has been shown to have both an immediate and a long term effect on judgments by consumers (e.g., Arndt, 1967; Bone, 1995; Richins, 1983). Decreasing the extent of negative word-of-mouth about the university could reduce or eliminate the creation of wide spread and long lived negative perceptions about the university, which may be difficult to overcome (e.g., Griffin, Babin, & Attaway, 1991; Tybout,

Calder, & Sternthal, 1981).

Given the potential importance of the effects of dissatisfying experiences on present and potential students, an understanding of these effects could be of critical importance to university administrators. However, while research has examined general satisfaction and dissatisfaction of all students with the university experience (e.g., Hatcher et al., 1992; Hendershott, Wright & Henderson, 1992) and dissatisfaction of a specific university subgroup (e.g., Lapidus & Brown, 1993), there has been little research examining the specific consequences of dissatisfying experiences of students (Weir & Okun, 1989).

However, consequences of dissatisfying experiences of consumers in retail settings have been explored much more extensively. Blodgett et al. (1993) proposed a model integrating previous work in the area of dissatisfaction, complaining, and negative word-of-mouth behavior into a comprehensive model. They theorized that dissatisfaction may result in either negative word-of-mouth behavior (i.e., telling friends and acquaintances of the negative experience, or of the negative aspects of the retailer or product), or intentions not to repatronize the retailer. Negative word-of-mouth and repatronage intentions may also be affected by likelihood of successful redress (perceived likelihood that the retailer will solve the problem to the consumer's satisfaction), attitudes toward complaining (how likely the consumer is to complain if dissatisfied), level of importance attached to the product, and whether the consumer believes the problem to be stable (relatively long term in nature, as opposed to a temporary situation) or controllable (within the retailer's ability to affect). Besides their direct effects on repatronage and negative word-of-mouth, these variables may also have an indirect affect on repatronage and negative word-of-mouth through

their effects on perceived justice (if the consumers feel they have been treated fairly), which in turn affects negative word-of-mouth and repatronage behavior. Blodgett et al. found their model fit their data fairly well, with the independent variables explaining 49% of the variance of negative word of mouth, and 68.5% of the variance of repatronage intentions.

The Blodgett et al. model is a fairly comprehensive and integrative description of consumer dissatisfaction with retail interactions. Because this framework covers the basic interaction between consumers and providers of a product or service, it may be useful for the investigation of dissatisfied consumers in situations other than retailing.

Students at a university are engaged in an ongoing relationship with many possible experiences which may result in student dissatisfaction. Given the potential importance of the behavior resulting from this dissatisfying experience (i.e., negative word-of-mouth and refusal to repatronize the university), it is imperative that administrators are aware of factors affecting the relationship between dissatisfaction and negative word-of-mouth and repatronage. The Blodgett et al. model incorporates previous findings in the area of behavior of dissatisfied consumers, and thus provides a starting point for examining negative word-of-mouth behavior and repatronage intentions of students who reported having undergone a dissatisfying experience while at a university.

The items measuring each construct were modified to apply to a university setting, but the basic constructs were identical to those used by Blodgett et al.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Unit of Analysis

This study was exploratory in nature. The study was restricted to students who reported their most dissatisfying experience at the university.

### Method

A total of 177 surveys concerning student satisfaction and ratings of various aspects of the

university experience were distributed to students in a random sample of classes at a small, midwestern university. All students receiving the survey completed the survey. Students were asked to describe and answer survey questions concerning their "most dissatisfying experience at the university." This wording was used to ensure that students reported on an experience that was important to them. A total of 77 of the students responded to the questions concerning their most dissatisfying experience while a student at the university, and thus their responses were used for this study. Due to the small sample size, regression analysis was used, rather than the structural equations analysis used by Blodgett et al. (1993) in their study.

### Descriptive Statistics

Of the 77 respondents, 61% were female and 39% were male. Approximately 39% were between 18 and 24, 38% were between 25 and 29, 9% were between 30 and 34, 9% were between 35 and 39, 4% were between 40 and 44, and 1% were between 45 and 49. In terms of hours worked each week, approximately 16% worked up to 9 hours per week, 6% worked 10-19 hours per week, 23% worked 20-29 hours per week, 16% worked between 30-39 hours per week, 27% worked 40-49 hours per week, 8% worked 50-59 hours per week, and 4% worked over 60 hours per week. The demographics indicate that the students were somewhat older than traditional university students, and most of the students worked part-time or full-time, which is typical of students at this university.

All students sampled were taking courses in the business curriculum. Core business courses had four or five courses as prerequisites, while elective courses had at least one core course as a prerequisite. Thus, these students were taking classes which would be taken by students involved in a degree granting program, rather than classes which might be taken to acquire "general knowledge." There were few alternative universities available for the students to attend if they left this university. However, because most of the students were employed, the degree was not necessary to many students in order for them to obtain a job. Thus, the students might be more

likely than non-working students to not repatronize the university if dissatisfied. However, the students would lack the wide range of alternatives available to retail consumers if they refused to repatronize a particular store. Given the phrasing of the question regarding dissatisfying experiences, a variety of dissatisfying experiences was expected to be reported by the students. However, the dissatisfying experiences reported all seemed to be rather major, and most fit into three major categories. Approximately half of the dissatisfying experiences dealt with interaction with administrators and staff concerning payment for classes, and/or receipt of financial aid. Approximately 35% of the dissatisfying experiences concerned registration for classes, and attempting to gain entrance into certain classes. Approximately 10% of the dissatisfying experiences concerned interactions with instructors. The remaining 5% of the dissatisfying experiences were widely varied, involving such experiences as rude treatment by administrators, faculty, and staff in a variety of circumstances. Thus, the dissatisfying experiences seemed to be fairly similar in seriousness as perceived by the students. Problems in payment for classes, receipt of financial aid, and interactions with instructors all would seem to be key components affecting the satisfaction of students with the university experience.

### Measures

Scales were taken from Blodgett, et al. (1993). Slight changes were made in wording to make the phrases more meaningful to students in a university setting. The variables were measured using 5 point (strongly agree=5, strongly disagree=1) scales, except for the response to "number of friends told about your dissatisfying experience", which was open ended. The average number of friends told about a dissatisfying experience was 7.3 people (with a 95% confidence interval of 5.5 to 9.0). Eighty-three percent of the respondents told at least one person of their experience.

### Constructs

Likelihood of success referred to the students'

perceptions concerning the likelihood that a problem would be handled in a satisfactory manner by the university. Attitude toward complaining referred to how the students felt, in general, about complaining when they encountered a problem. Product importance measured the level of importance the students attached to receiving a degree from the university. Stability/controllability referred to the degree to which students felt that the dissatisfying experience was something that happened on a regular basis at the university, and whether the university could have prevented the dissatisfying experience from occurring. (Following Blodgett et al., the controllability items were each multiplied by a stability item. These items were then summed to get a value for the construct.) Perceived justice measured the extent to which the students felt they were treated fairly by the university regarding their dissatisfying experience. Repatronage intentions measured the extent to which the students would enroll in another degree program at the university, as well as whether they would have enrolled in the first place if they knew then what they know now, and whether they would recommend the university to a friend. This construct had to be rather broad, because many students may not have had an interest in another degree program before the dissatisfying experience. However, the other two items capture the idea of repatronage by phrasing the behavior in terms of coming again to the same university if they had it to do over again, or recommending the university to a friend. Negative word-of-mouth behavior was measured by responses to the question "How many friends or relatives (not living in your home) have you told about your dissatisfying experience at \_\_\_\_\_?"

Reliabilities were fairly high for exploratory research with a relatively small sample. Reliabilities, as measured by Cronbach's Alpha, ranged from .63 to .88 for each construct (see Table 1 for a list of the constructs and reliabilities).

## RESULTS

OLS regression was used to examine relationships in the data. The first regression equation regressed negative word-of-mouth on

**Table 1**  
**Cronbach's Alpha for Each Construct**

<b>Likelihood of Success</b>	<b>.70</b>
-..... encourages students to get the most satisfaction from their university experiences.	
-When I began taking classes at ....., the university had a reputation for "Satisfaction guaranteed!"	
-If any problem occurred, I was confident that the university would handle it to my satisfaction.	
<b>Attitude Toward Complaining</b>	<b>.67</b>
-If I do not like something about ..., I usually keep quiet rather than talk to someone about it.	
-I am usually reluctant to complain to someone at ... regardless of how bad a situation is.	
-In general, I am more likely to complain about dissatisfying experiences at ... than most people I know.	
*(reverse scored)	
<b>Product Importance</b>	<b>.79</b>
-I depend upon getting a degree at ... a great deal.	
-This degree means a lot to me.	
-Compared to other personal expenditures that I make, this degree is fairly important for me to get.	
<b>Stability/Controllability</b>	<b>.63</b>
-This type of thing probably happens all the time at ....	
-This university hardly ever makes mistakes. *(reverse scored)	
-.... could have taken steps to prevent this problem from occurring.	
-If the school had just paid more attention to what it was doing, the problem would never have happened in the first place.	
<b>Perceived Justice</b>	<b>.66</b>
-I was very dissatisfied with the university's response to my problem! *(reverse scored)	
-Overall, I think that the university treated me fairly regarding my complaint.	
-When I complained to the university about this problem, I got pretty much what I asked for (regarding policies or procedures, etc.)	
<b>Repatronage Intentions</b>	<b>.88</b>
-Knowing what I do now, if I had to do it all over again, I would not go to .....	
-Because of what happened, I will never enroll in another degree program at ....	
-I would recommend to a friend that he/she take classes here. *(reverse scored)	
<b>Negative Word-of-Mouth</b>	<b>Average = 7.3</b>
-How many friends or relatives (not living in your home) have you told about your dissatisfying experience at .....	
_____ people	

likelihood of successful redress, attitude toward complaining, level of importance attached to the service, and whether or not the student believed

the problem to be stable or controllable.

Likelihood of success ( $b = -1.10$ ,  $p = .004$ ) and attitude toward complaining ( $b = -.86$ ,  $p = .010$ ) were both significantly related to negative word of mouth. The independent variables together explained 20% of the variance, with an adjusted  $r$  squared of .18. Thus, the higher the perceived likelihood of success of complaining behavior, the less negative word of mouth behavior was undertaken by the consumer. In addition, the less likely a consumer was to complain about a dissatisfying experience, the less negative word-of-mouth the consumer engaged in. Neither stability/controllability nor product importance was significantly related to negative word of mouth.

The direct effects of these same independent variables on repatronage were then examined. Stability\controllability ( $b = .07$ ,  $p = .042$ ) and likelihood of success ( $b = -.56$ ,  $p = .000$ ) were related to repatronage, and product importance ( $b = -.26$ ,  $p = .051$ ) was marginally related to repatronage. The  $R$  squared was .41, with an adjusted  $R$  squared of .39. Because the repatronage construct was reverse scaled (i.e., measured in terms of not repatronizing), the greater the likelihood of success when complaining, the lower the likelihood of not repatronizing. Similarly, because stability/controllability was measured in negative terms, those who felt the dissatisfying experience was due to a more stable and more controllable cause were less likely to repatronize the university. The more important the degree was considered by the student, the less likely was the student to not repatronize in the future.

Perceived justice was found by Blodgett, et al. to be an intervening factor in the decision as to whether to engage in negative word of mouth or repatronize. To see if perceived justice was an intervening variable in this situation, the previously discussed independent variables were regressed on perceived justice. Stability\controllability was the only one of the four constructs significantly related to perceived justice ( $b = -.09$ ,  $p = .000$ ). This construct explained 20% of the variance in perceived justice, with an adjusted  $R$  squared of .19. The more stable and controllable the student felt the dissatisfying experience was, the less perceived justice the student was likely to feel.

Perceived justice was then regressed separately on repatronage ( $b = -.68$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $R^2 = .20$ ), and negative word of mouth (N.S.). Thus, the fairer the student felt he or she was treated, the more likely was the student to repatronize. Surprisingly, the perceived justice had no effect on negative word-of-mouth, contrary to the Blodgett, et al. (1993) findings.

The correlation between repatronage and negative word of mouth was  $r = .31$ . Thus, those who were less likely to repatronize the university were also more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior with more people.

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study show that the consumer complaining behavior process model of Blodgett et al. (1993) was an appropriate starting point in beginning to understand the effects of dissatisfying experiences on students at a university. However, while perceived justice was a key intervening variable in the consumer retailing situation, it was much less important as an intervening variable in the university situation. Perceived justice was significantly related to all four independent variables in the Blodgett et al. (1993) study, and was also significantly related to both repatronage intentions and negative word-of-mouth behavior. In this study, perceived justice was significantly related to only one independent variable, controllability/stability. In addition, while perceived justice was significantly related to repatronage intentions in this study, it was not significantly related to negative word-of-mouth. Thus, perceived justice may be a less important factor in a university situation than in a retailing situation.

The differing effects of perceived justice on retail consumers and student consumers may be related to the situational differences between student consumers and retail consumers. Retail consumers typically shop by themselves. If they encounter a dissatisfying experience, they may have no friends nearby to express immediate dissatisfaction to. They may then wait for a resolution of the situation before deciding whether they have been treated fairly or not. After they ascertain whether they have been treated fairly (i.e., the perceived justice of the situation), they

then decide whether to engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior, and also whether or not to repatronize. Thus, both dependent variables are affected by perceived justice. A different situation faces the student as a consumer. The student would often be in contact with other students on campus. Thus, it would be likely that a student would encounter other interested students shortly after a particular dissatisfying experience. The dissatisfied student might immediately engage in negative word-of-mouth, before even attempting to gain redress. Thus, perceived justice would not be related to negative word-of-mouth. However, the decision concerning repatronage would typically be made at some more distant time. Thus, the student would have an opportunity to seek redress, and determine if the complaint had been successfully handled before making the decision whether or not to repatronize. This would explain the relationship between perceived justice and repatronage. The significant relationship between perceived justice and repatronage intentions shows that if university students have the perception that their complaint has successfully been resolved by the university, they will be more likely to repatronize the university in the future. However, if the complaint is not resolved in a satisfactory manner, students are more likely to refuse to patronize the institution in the future.

However, because perceived justice has no effect on word-of-mouth behavior, while successful complaint resolution may encourage student return, it may not affect student negative word-of-mouth behavior. The decision to engage in negative word-of-mouth is independent of perceived justice for university students. In the Blodgett et al. (1993) study, only likelihood of success and product importance were directly related to negative word-of-mouth. In this study, only likelihood of success and attitude toward complaining were directly related to negative word-of-mouth. Similarly to consumers in a retailing situation, those students who perceived that their complaint would be resolved engaged in the least negative word-of-mouth behavior. Thus, if universities develop an atmosphere where students have confidence that potential problems will be successfully resolved, this may greatly reduce the problems of negative word-of-mouth.

In contrast to the results for retail consumers,

those students who were more likely to complain, in general, were also more likely to engage in negative-word-of-mouth behavior, regardless of perceived justice. Based on these results, it may be important for university administrators to target those frequent complainers who are in fact prospective "opinion leaders," in order to ensure that they are satisfied with the resolution of their complaints. The handling of the complaints of frequent complainers may be of crucial importance in stemming the flow of negative word-of-mouth.

One limitation of the research is the fact that the model only explained approximately 20% of the variance of negative word-of-mouth. Thus, the model may be missing some important constructs related to negative word-of-mouth behavior.

While the Blodgett et al. (1993) study found only stability/controllability to be directly related to repatronage intentions, this study found stability/controllability, likelihood of success, and product importance to all be directly related to repatronage intentions. Again, a key difference between the retailing study and this study of university students is the diminished effect of perceived justice as an intervening variable.

Altogether, the variables explained 41% of the variance in repatronage (with an adjusted R squared of .38). Students who perceived the cause of their dissatisfying experience to be relatively stable and controllable were more likely to not repatronize the university than those who perceived the cause as relatively unstable and uncontrollable. Thus, students seem to be able to understand that certain occurrences may be quite rare and/or beyond the power of the university to control. These dissatisfying experiences do not cause the students to leave the university and not return. However, if the cause of the dissatisfying experience is under the control of the university, and is a frequent occurrence, the students will express their dissatisfaction by exiting the university, and not returning. It is important to realize that the sample of students at the university under study consisted of mainly part-time students, many of whom were employed on a full time basis. These students may be much more likely to exit before completion of their degree requirements than students at more traditional universities, who need a degree to obtain a job. Thus, administrators with more non-traditional students

should make every effort to be aware of possible dissatisfying experiences, and take immediate steps to reduce their frequency, or eliminate them altogether. Administrators should also be sure to inform students of temporary problems, or problems that are out of the university's control that might result in dissatisfying experiences for the students. This procedure could significantly reduce student dropouts.

Those students who feel they have a high likelihood of success of having their dissatisfying experience taken care of are also more likely repatronize the university in the future. Thus, the university that has a reputation for taking the time to satisfy students will both encourage repatronage, and decrease negative word-of-mouth.

For the university students, the more important the degree is, the more likely the student is to repatronize the university, despite the dissatisfying experience. If the degree is very important to students, the students may be reluctant to exit the university before completion of the degree. Thus, administrators should stress the importance of the university degree to students to encourage repatronage by students who may have had a dissatisfying experience.

Contrary to the situation found by Blodgett, et al., (1993), only stability /controllability had an indirect effect on either of the dependent variables. Stability/controllability had a significant effect on perceived justice, which in turn had a significant effect on repatronage. Thus, the more the students perceived the cause of the dissatisfying experience to be stable and controllable, the less was their sense of being satisfied with the university's response to the problem. The students perceived that the problem could have been addressed by the university, and that the problem had been rather long term in nature. Therefore, the students believed that the university had the ability and the time to resolve the problem, but had not.

One key finding of this study is that for students in a university setting, attitude toward complaining and likelihood of success are key predictors of negative word-of-mouth behavior. These results indicate that university administrators should be very aware of those students who frequently complain, and attempt to address their concerns, to lessen negative effects of word-of-mouth on other students or potential students. In

addition, it is imperative for administrators to ensure that students realize that problems will be addressed and corrected.

Stability/controllability, likelihood of success, and product importance all have significant direct effects on repatronage, and stability/controllability also has a significant direct effect on perceived justice, which has a significant direct effect on repatronage. Contrary to what might be thought to be the case, repatronage can be affected by university response to problems at a university with a large number of non-traditional, part time students. Administrators should be certain to make students aware of problems which are out of the university's control, or of problems that are temporary in nature. As previously noted, administrators should be responsive to student problems, and make this responsiveness known. Further, the university should stress to students the importance of a degree. Those students whose degree was more important to them were more likely to repatronize the university.

This study also shows the usefulness of applying models across very different consumer purchase situations. Although the purchase of a product from a store and the purchase of an education from a university seem to be very different situations, the Blodgett et al. (1993) model proved to be a very useful first step in beginning to understand student dissatisfaction and complaining behavior. In both the retailing and university situations, the repatronage model explained about 20% more of the variance than the negative word-of-mouth model. In addition, three of the four independent constructs from the retailing model were found to have significant or marginally significant direct effects on repatronage in a university setting, and two of the four independent constructs from the retailing model were found to have significant direct effects on negative word-of-mouth behavior in a university situation. Moreover, the stability/controllability construct had both a significant direct and indirect effect on repatronage in both the retailing situation and the university situation.

This study also shows how, while some major factors made be similar across contexts, specific effects of constructs may be altered due to situational differences.

This study was exploratory in nature, with a

relatively small sample size, and was limited to students at a single university. Thus, the results may not be generalizable to other universities. Future researchers should apply this model to different universities to see how relationships in the model might be affected if characteristics of the university and the student body differ.

In addition, the percentage of the total variance explained by the independent variables was relatively low for both repatronage intentions and negative word-of-mouth behavior. Future research should seek to uncover variables not included in the model which might affect repatronage intentions and negative word-of-mouth behavior. Such variables might include number of courses already taken (investment in education), whether the student was full or part time, the student's general attitude toward the educational experience, the student's expectations concerning a university education, and similar variables.

In addition, use of a larger sample size would allow use of a structural equations model, which would allow for more direct comparisons to the Blodgett et al. model.

As the issues of student recruitment and retention become ever more critical to university administrators, administrators need to be more aware of the possible effects of dissatisfying experiences on students' repatronage intentions and negative word-of-mouth behavior. This exploratory study should give administrators some insight into possible approaches for reducing negative word-of-mouth behavior and increasing the likelihood of repatronage of students.

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