

THE IMPACT OF POST-COMPLAINT SATISFACTION WITH THE SALESPERSON, RETAILER, AND MANUFACTURER ON RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT

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Post-complaint satisfaction, formed after a complaint has been resolved with the marketer, is investigated with respect to multiple, simultaneous actors in a marketing relationship (salesperson, retailer, and manufacturer). The impact of post-complaint satisfaction on the consumer's commitment intentions is also explored. Results indicate that post-complaint satisfaction with the salesperson, retailer, and manufacturer all demonstrate a significant impact on the consumer's commitment to repurchase from the retailer. However, only post-complaint satisfaction with the manufacturer had a significant impact on commitment to repurchase from the manufacturer, suggesting the relationships between the customer and the salesperson or store hold less importance for loyalty to a brand.

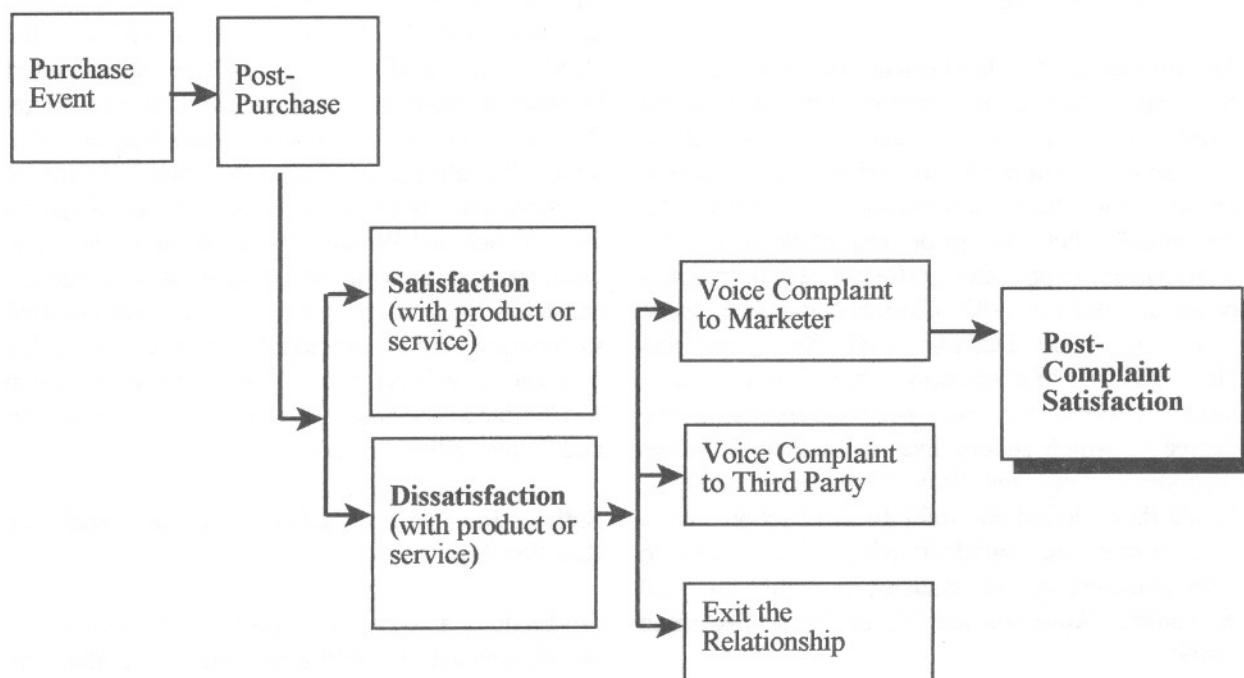
INTRODUCTION

This study explores the multiplicity of actors in marketing relationships (salespersons, dealerships, and manufacturers) and the concept of post-complaint satisfaction as it contributes to commitment to the future of the marketing relationship. The purpose of this study is to investigate the likelihood of consumers simultaneously forming post-complaint attitudes toward these multiple actors in a marketing relationship. These post-complaint attitudes are of satisfaction with the salesperson, retailer (dealership), and manufacturer of the product; however, not of satisfaction with the product itself. Further, this study examines the impact of this post-complaint satisfaction on future commitment to either the retailer (dealership) or the manufacturer. Finally, the paper addresses the implications of the findings for practitioners as well as suggestions for future research.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Customers play a vital role in the domain of marketing, yet a great deal remains unknown about how the relationship between a customer and a seller is formed, maintained, and enhanced. Previous studies of the consumer/marketer relationship have addressed the consumer buying process, extending it from the point of purchase to include post-purchase evaluations of the product or service and resulting manifestations of either satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Oliver 1980; Oliver and DeSarbo 1988). More recent research (Tax, Brown and Chandrashekar 1998; Backhaus and Bauer 2001; Taylor 2001) has specifically addressed those customers who are dissatisfied, examining the development of attitudes after a customer has voiced a complaint to a marketer and has experienced complaint resolution (see Figure 1). These post-complaint attitudes are important in expanding our understanding of the dyadic relationship between consumer and marketer, as well as offering insight for the practitioner in managing customer relationships. For example, previous studies have found when consumers experience satisfactory problem resolution, they tend to be more loyal (Gilly and Gelb 1982; Nyer 2000);

Figure 1
Model of Consumer Buying Process - From Point of Purchase



this leads to greater profitability since it is more costly to gain a new customer than it is to retain a current one (Blodgett, Hill and Tax 1997; Gustafsson and Johnson 2002).

Marketing relationships, as opposed to discrete transactions, can be multifaceted and complex; at times they may contain multiple actors that represent the marketer, such as the salesperson, retailer, and manufacturer. Numerous studies have examined consumers' attitudes toward a product, a salesperson, a retailer, and a manufacturer. However, few have addressed these multiple relationships in a single study. This study explores the customer's simultaneous formation of post-complaint satisfaction with a multiplicity of actors in a marketing relationship simultaneously.

Gronroos (1994) defines relationship marketing as earning customers' favor and loyalty by satisfying their needs and wants. Relationship marketing, in effect, is the activity involved in creating the entity of

a marketing relationship, which includes attention not only to those customers who are satisfied with the initial exchange but to those who experience dissatisfaction as well. Retention of current customer relationships, rather than new customer attraction, is a focal point of relationship marketing and marketing efficiency as well as profitability. To more fully understand the concept of relationship marketing, a consumer's attitudes toward relationship maintenance, addressed in this study as post-complaint satisfaction and subsequent commitment, as well as the targets of these attitudes, must be explored.

ELEMENTS OF RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

Both satisfaction and commitment have been shown to be important constructs in determining the overall propensity to remain in a relationship and have been defined as core constructs of marketing relationships in multiple studies (Raj 1982; Dwyer, Schurr and Oh

1987; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Moriarty, Gronstedt and Duncan 1996; Jap 2001; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner and Gremler 2002).

Satisfaction Defined

The term satisfaction has been used extensively in the consumer behavior literature to refer to a global attitude of a product or service post-purchase evaluation and to attitudes toward individuals. Based on expectancy theory, satisfaction is a function of the discrepancy between prior expectations by the consumer and experiential performance of the product or service (Oliver 1980; Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Oliver and DeSarbo 1988; Szymanski and Henard 2001). Satisfaction with services has also been defined as the consumer's perception of the degree to which sellers live up to their promises (Woodside, Frey and Daly 1989; Bitner 1990). While these definitions refer to satisfaction with a product or service, satisfaction has also been used to refer to evaluations of relationship quality for retail consumers (Anderson and Narus 1990; Grossman 1999).

Satisfaction with a Product, Store, or Service Provider

The focus of much of the literature on satisfaction refers to satisfaction with the performance of a tangible product (Anderson 1973; Swan and Combs 1976; Oliver 1977; Folkes 1984; Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha and Bryant 1996; Goff, Boles, Bellenger and Stojack 1997). Early studies established the satisfaction paradigm of expectancy disconfirmation through studies of tangible product purchase and post-purchase evaluations (Anderson 1973; Swan and Combs 1976; Oliver 1980; Bearden and Oliver 1985). Satisfaction has also been used to measure the customer's perception of the retailing establishment rather than the product or brand (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault 1990; Boles, Babin, Babin and Johnson 1996). Consumers have been found to form discriminant perceptions toward the product and the retailer that sold them the product (Crosby and Stephens 1987; Grossman 1999). The individual's satisfaction with the overall retail purchasing experience has been found to lead to

future purchase intent and long-term consumer retention in a marketing relationship (Boles et al. 1996; Brookman 1998).

Satisfaction with an individual, such as a salesperson or service provider, has formed the majority of the research on satisfaction in both the services and business-to-business literature. Studies have found that consumers and business customers form attitudes toward the salesperson distinct from their perceptions of the company or organization (Crosby and Stephens 1987; Singh and Widing 1991). Whether the study used satisfaction with the salesperson as a distinct construct, or a shared one, there is evidence that satisfaction with an individual salesperson has either a direct or indirect impact on customer retention (Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Geyskens, Steenkamp and Kumar 1999; Jap 2001).

Satisfaction with Multiple Entities and the Relationship

Studies have also found support for the premise that satisfaction can be multi-directional. The literature provides numerous examples of customer satisfaction with different entities in a marketing relationship including the product or brand, the retailer or service provider, and the salesperson. However, satisfaction with these multiple entities within a single study has been addressed by only a few. Some have found evidence to support multi-directionality with constructs of product, retailer, and salesperson satisfaction (Boles et al. 1996; Goff et al. 1997). Multi-directionality has also been assessed by evaluating the core service, institution, and contact person (Crosby and Stephens 1987; Singh and Widing 1991; Langerak 2001), or with the relationship, product satisfaction, and store (Grossman 1999).

The recent emphasis on relationship marketing has also turned satisfaction researchers toward an investigation of not only the tangible entities of product, retailer, and salesperson, but toward the overall relationship as well. When customers are satisfied with a marketing relationship, they are likely to be committed to that business (Raj 1982; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner and

Gremler 2002). One of the earlier examinations of satisfaction with an on-going relationship was Andreassen's (1977) research into satisfaction as a cumulative phenomenon over time. Andreassen identified "initial satisfaction" as a distinct attitude from "final satisfaction" which has been modified by complaint satisfaction. Other studies have addressed the cumulative nature as an attitude of overall satisfaction, based on the total purchase and consumption experience over time (Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990; Garbarino and Johnson 1999). The importance of building and maintaining marketing relationships rather than discrete transactions has forced us to look at not only the initial satisfaction of a product, salesperson, or retailer, but at the cumulative satisfaction a customer forms over time, particularly as a result of a problem-resolution experience.

Commitment

The construct of commitment to a person or entity is at the core of Morgan and Hunt's (1994) theory of relationship marketing. In the marketing literature commitment has been conceived as repurchase intention (Hirschman 1970; Oliver and DeSarbo 1988; Bitner, Booms and Tetreault 1990) and as membership in a long-term business-to-business relationship (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987). While brand loyalty is often associated with commitment, it is not necessarily addressing the attitude of commitment, but rather the multiple repurchase behavior (Raj 1982). Often the terms loyalty and commitment are used interchangeably when referring to customer retention in marketing relationships at various levels. However loyalty and commitment have been defined as different types of constructs, one behavioral and one attitudinal. Loyalty, the behavioral construct, is the continued repurchase or membership in a relationship even if the participating party is dissatisfied (Hirschman 1970). Consumers can be loyal to a brand for various reasons other than satisfaction, such as paucity of available choices or social pressure. Commitment, the attitudinal construct, implies a satisfactory psychological attachment to a product, person, or organization (Raj 1982; Morgan and Hunt 1994). Commitment to a marketing relationship is developed over time and can

be strengthened through satisfactory resolutions of conflict between the buyer and seller. Commitment implies the psychological intent to remain in the relationship and to contribute toward its maintenance (Morgan and Hunt 1994).

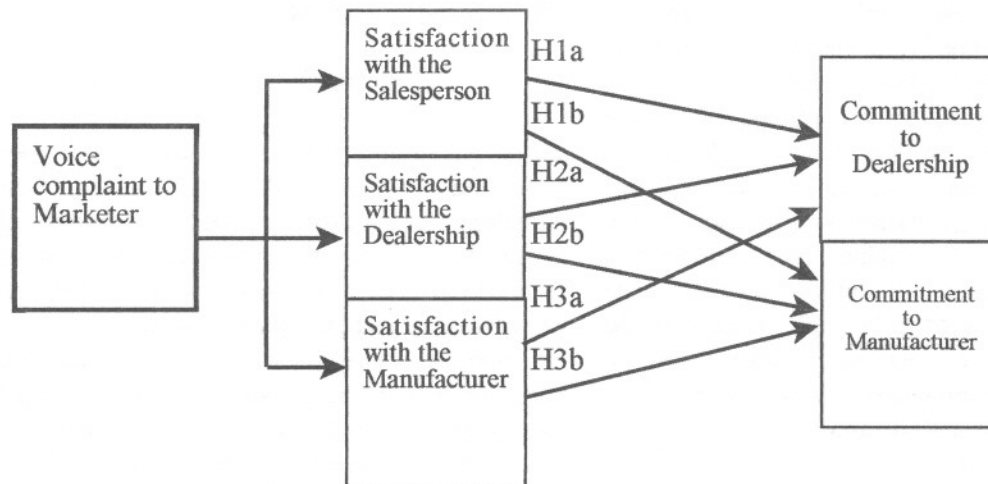
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To further our understanding of the complex nature of marketing relationships, this study investigates both cumulative satisfaction, defined as satisfaction after a problem-resolution experience (a customer-initiated complaint voiced to the salesperson, dealership, or manufacturer, and the subsequent outcome), and the multi-object conceptualization of the satisfaction construct within a single study. Figure 2 describes the particular section of the consumer buying process that we are addressing as well as the hypothesized relationships. Our study investigates only those consumers who have experienced a problem with their product and have voiced a complaint directly to the marketer. Consumer complaints that have been directed to third parties have not been considered since this activity does not offer the opportunity for a marketer to redress the situation and hopefully contribute to a satisfied customer.

This study also explores the separate and potentially discriminant constructs of overall satisfaction with the salesperson, dealership, and manufacturer (see Figure 2) using consumers' actual experiences rather than student samples or vicarious scenarios (e.g., Boles, et al. 1996; Grossman 1999; Smith, Bolton and Wagner 1999). These attitudinal constructs are further investigated to determine their possible impact on the consumer's level of commitment, defined as the psychological intent to remain in the marketing relationship.

An objective of this study was to investigate the likelihood of consumers forming post-complaint attitudes toward multiple actors in a marketing relationship simultaneously. To meet this objective, participants were asked about their level of satisfaction with the salesperson, retailer (dealership), and manufacturer in a single marketing relationship. A second objective was to examine the impact of this

Figure 2
The Impact of Post-complaint Satisfaction on Commitment



post-complaint satisfaction on future commitment to either the retailer (dealership) or the manufacturer. The following section describes the concepts of post-complaint satisfaction and commitment, as well as our research hypotheses.

HYPOTHESES

Post-Complaint Satisfaction

Post-complaint satisfaction is defined here as satisfaction after a problem with the product or service has occurred and the consumer has sought redress with the marketer. Satisfaction has a temporal nature in that the attitude can be developed shortly after a purchase when the consumer's expectations are compared to the experienced performance and evaluations of either satisfaction or dissatisfaction occur (Oliver 1980). If the consumer experiences dissatisfaction and voices a complaint to the seller there is an opportunity for a second type of satisfaction to be developed, the final, or post-

complaint satisfaction (Andreasen 1977). While the customer's satisfaction with a marketing relationship is likely to be an ongoing evaluation, the satisfaction measures in this study are of the post-complaint attitude, after the customer has voiced a complaint and completed the redress process.

Consumer satisfaction has been measured as an attitude toward a product (Oliver 1980; Gustaffson and Johnson 2002), an attitude toward an individual salesperson (Crosby and Stephens 1987), an attitude toward a retailer (Grossman 1999), and an attitude toward a manufacturer (Goff et al. 1997). In this study, the consumer's attitude toward the salesperson, dealership (retailer), and manufacturer are measured at a single point in time. The discriminant nature of the attitude of satisfaction as it is formed toward these multiple actors will be analyzed with confirmatory factor analyses. Product satisfaction was not considered since this study is primarily interested in the relational or non-tangible targets of satisfaction.

Commitment

While commitment and loyalty have been used interchangeably to address the likelihood of repurchase, commitment as defined here is the psychological attitude of attachment to a relationship with the retailer or manufacturer. Thus, satisfaction with a product, service, or organization is an antecedent of commitment to the product, salesperson, or retailer (Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Geyskens, Steenkamp and Kumar 1999). Satisfaction with a salesperson has also been linked to overall satisfaction with the organization (Crosby and Stephens 1987; Langerak 2001). Therefore, we hypothesize that post-complaint satisfaction with a salesperson is an antecedent of commitment to a selling organization, in this study, the dealership and the manufacturer. Formally stated:

- H_{1a}: Post-Complaint Satisfaction with a salesperson will be positively related to commitment to the dealership.
- H_{1b}: Post-Complaint Satisfaction with a salesperson will be positively related to commitment to the manufacturer.

Consumers also form attitudes toward the retailer separate from the product, brand name, or salesperson. An individual's positive evaluation of an organization leads to commitment (Tax 1993; Boles, et al. 1996). Therefore, we hypothesize that post-complaint satisfaction with a retailer or manufacturer is an antecedent to commitment to either the retailer or the manufacturer. Formally stated:

- H_{2a}: Post-Complaint Satisfaction with a retailer (dealership) will be positively related to commitment to the dealership.
- H_{2b}: Post-Complaint Satisfaction with a retailer (dealership) will be positively related to commitment to the manufacturer.

- H_{3a}: Post-Complaint Satisfaction with a manufacturer will be positively related to commitment to the retailer (dealership).

- H_{3b}: Post-Complaint Satisfaction with a manufacturer will be positively related to commitment to the manufacturer.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The data for this study were gathered from a mail survey of current owners of new automobiles and light trucks. The sample, which was commercially available through the R. L. Polk Company, included individuals from thirty-two states in the U.S. who had purchased and licensed vehicles twelve months previously. The sample included a total of 1,000 individuals divided equally from four manufacturers - Nissan, Toyota, Ford and Saturn. All vehicles remained under warranty from the manufacturer at the time of the data collection. The sample was selected from a single month to maintain consistency in the length of time the vehicle had been owned by all potential respondents and to give the owner sufficient time to experience a problem with the vehicle while it was still within the manufacturer's warranty. Surveys were distributed by mail, and two hundred thirty-two usable responses were obtained for a response rate of 24.8 percent. These responses were from individuals who had either (1) experienced a problem with their vehicle and had sought redress, or (2) who had not yet experienced a problem requiring redress. Since this study was interested in the consumer-marketer relationship after a problem-resolution experience, a total of 108 of the respondents who had encountered a problem were used.

The respondents' average age was forty years, with forty-eight percent being male and fifty-two percent female. The average household income was \$45,000. In order to assess non-response bias, t-tests were used to compare "no-problem" and "experiencing-problem" respondents, as well as a comparison of early and late respondents. No significant differences were found for the early and late respondents or for the

problem/no problem groups based on demographic characteristics.

Measurement of Key Constructs

This research utilized existing measurement instruments, which were modified slightly for the specific purposes of this study, however scrutiny was employed to maintain integrity and purpose of the original scales. The respondent's satisfaction with the relationship actors was measured through the use of the Satisfaction scale, a three-item, five-response Likert scale (Crosby and Stephens 1987). This scale was selected due to its development for use in determining satisfaction with either a salesperson, product, or organization. Satisfaction was measured for three different relationships, (1) with the salesperson, (2) with the dealership, and (3) with the manufacturer.

The respondent's commitment to his/her relationship with the dealership and manufacturer was measured with a scale developed by Tax (1993). Commitment in this study refers to the respondent's intention to remain in the relationship with the dealership, i.e., consideration of the purchase of either a vehicle or services from the dealer in the future, and his/her commitment to the manufacturer, i.e., the respondent's intent to consider the purchase of the same brand vehicle in the future.

The differentiation between the relationship with the salesperson, dealership, and manufacturer for all three measures was subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis, recommended for instruments which have previously shown evidence of reliability and validity (Bagozzi 1988; Joreskog and Sorbom 1992). These analyses included the overall fit of the measurement instrument and component fit of each construct separately. The reliabilities and other results from the confirmatory factor analyses listed in Table 1 suggest that consumers do form distinct attitudes toward multiple actors in a marketing relationship, namely, the salesperson, dealership (retailer), and manufacturer.

ANALYSIS RESULTS

All hypothesized relationships were tested using regression analysis, with significance at the .05 level (see Table 2 for results). Figure 3 is a pictorial representation of the significant relationships. Hypothesis 1_a states the greater the customer's level of satisfaction with the salesperson, the greater is his/her level of commitment to the dealership. The results report a significant relationship ($t=2.816$, $p=.0079$), therefore Hypothesis 1_a is supported. Hypothesis 1_b states the greater the customer's level of satisfaction with the salesperson, the greater is his/her level of commitment to the manufacturer. The results did not report a significant relationship with commitment to the manufacturer ($t=.896$, $p=.3774$), therefore Hypothesis 1_b is not supported.

Hypothesis 2_a states the greater the customer's level of satisfaction with the dealership, the greater is his/her level of commitment to the dealership. The results show a significant relationship with commitment to the dealership ($t=8.171$, $p=.0000$), supporting Hypothesis 2_a. Hypothesis 2_b states the greater the customer's level of satisfaction with the dealership, the greater is his/her level of commitment to the manufacturer. This hypothesis was not supported since satisfaction with the dealership did not report a significant relationship with commitment to the manufacturer ($t=1.056$, $p=.2993$).

Hypothesis 3_a states the greater the customer's level of satisfaction with the manufacturer, the greater is his/her level of commitment to the dealership. Hypothesis 3_b states the greater the customer's level of satisfaction with the manufacturer, the greater is his/her level of commitment to the manufacturer. Both of the independent variables reported a significant relationship with the level of commitment. Satisfaction with the manufacturer reported a significant relationship with commitment to the dealership ($t=2.195$, $p=.0349$), and satisfaction with the manufacturer reported a significant relationship with commitment to the manufacturer ($t=4.363$, $p=.0001$) therefore both H_{3a} and H_{3b} are supported. It appears that customers do not transfer their level of satisfaction with how the complaint was handled by one entity, to their level of commitment to the other

Table 1
Measurement Results

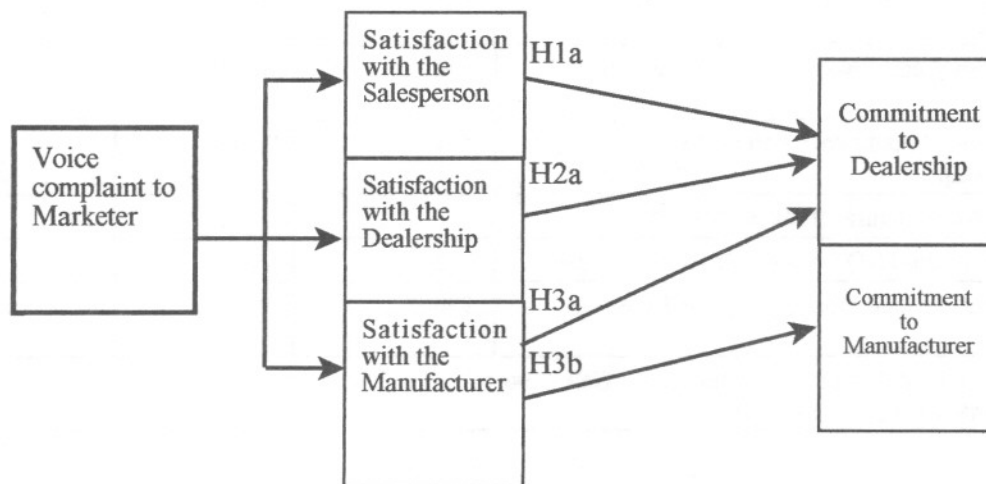
Construct Title	Estimates	Parameter t-values	Variance Extracted
Satisfaction Constructs			
Satisfaction with Salesperson (Reliability = .95)			.87
Overall, satisfied with the person	.887	11.583	
Overall, favorable feelings	.932	12.603	
In general, am pleased	.978	13.753	
Satisfaction with Dealership (Reliability = .97)			.92
Overall, satisfied with this dealership	.932	12.652	
Overall, favorable feelings	.976	13.750	
In general, am pleased	.962	13.403	
Satisfaction with Manufacturer (Reliability = .95)			.87
Overall, satisfied with the manufacturer	.901	11.855	
Overall, favorable feelings	.966	13.372	
In general, am pleased	.927	12.429	
Chi-square = 42.73 d.f. = 24 p-value <.011 GFI = .92 AGFI = .85 RMSR = .03 RNI = .96			
Commitment Constructs			
Commitment to Dealership (Reliability = .95)			.80
If I needed to buy a car, I would probably buy at this dealer	.960	13.090	
I want to continue doing business with this dealer	.968	13.280	
I will probably buy other products/services from this dealer	.811	9.876	
If I needed to buy a car, I would NOT consider this dealer	.924	12.195	
If I had an option, I would have switched to another dealership	.784	9.383	
Commitment to Manufacturer (Reliability = .85)			.74
If I need a car, I would NOT buy one from this company	.792	8.345	
If I needed a car, I would probably buy one from this company	.920	.9853	
Chi-square = 15.69 d.f. = 13 p-value .267 GFI = .96 AGFI = .92 RMSR = .02 RNI = .95			

Table 2
Regression Results for Commitment to Dealership
and Commitment to Manufacturer - Regression Coefficients

	Commitment to Dealership	Commitment to Manufacturer
	N = 108	N = 108
Independent Variables: b (sig. t)*		
Satisfaction with the Salesperson	.21 (.007)	.10 (.377)
Satisfaction with the Dealership	.73 (.000)	.17 (.299)
Satisfaction with the Manufacturer	.15 (.034)	.55 (.001)
R ²	.88	.65
Adjusted R ²	.87	.61
Std Error	.42	.66
F (significance)	88.26 (.000)	18.29 (.000)

*significant at p<.05

Figure 3
The Impact of Post-complaint Satisfaction on Commitment - Results of Supported Relationships



entity. If a customer is dissatisfied with how the dealership handled the complaint, he/she could still be committed to the manufacturer.

DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Previous studies indicate that consumers form distinct attitudes of satisfaction for different objects through the testing of one or two individual satisfaction constructs, i.e., a specific salesperson, retailer, or product. While these studies help us to understand the role of satisfaction in marketing, the multiplicity of actors in consumer marketing relationships requires that we explore the potential discrimination between the constructs of a consumer's satisfaction with the salesperson, dealership, and manufacturer in a single marketing relationship. With that as an objective of this study, results indicate consumers do form separate attitudes of satisfaction toward the salesperson, the dealership, and the manufacturer within a single marketing relationship. This suggests the complex nature of a consumer marketing relationship requires simultaneous assessment at these three levels within the organization and should be of interest to any member of the marketing channel, from producer to retailer.

The individual's overall satisfaction with the salesperson, dealership, and manufacturer all demonstrate a significant impact on the consumer's level of commitment to repurchase from the dealership. However, with regard to the level of commitment or repurchase from the manufacturer, only the individual's overall satisfaction with the manufacturer had a significant impact. Neither the individual's satisfaction with the salesperson nor his/her satisfaction with the dealership had a significant impact on his/her commitment to the manufacturer. This suggests that satisfaction with the manufacturer may have a significant impact on repurchase from the dealership or the manufacturer, while satisfaction with the dealership impacts only a commitment to repurchase from that same dealership. This signifies the importance of understanding the relationship between each of the multiple actors and the consumer.

Overall, this study indicates that manufacturers cannot rely on the salesperson or the dealership to resolve complaints or assume responsibility for overall consumer satisfaction. The manufacturer must take an active role in resolving consumer complaints as well as contributing to the consumer's overall satisfaction and commitment to repurchase. From the retailer's perspective, the consumer's satisfaction with all members of the channel, including the salesperson, the retailer, and the manufacturer, has an impact on whether or not the consumer would be likely to make another purchase from them. It is of utmost importance to the retailer then to take an active role in both resolving complaints and in training any sales representatives who may be their agents.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are factors in this study which should be accounted for when drawing conclusions and making suggestions for practitioners. First, this study uses a sample of one type of marketing relationship, that in the automobile industry. While many studies have addressed this industry and it is a product that the majority of American households own, the findings may not be transferable to other types of marketing relationships. Another limitation of this study is the possibility of some halo effect attributed to satisfaction with the product, which could impact the relational satisfaction dimensions.

While this study adds to the knowledge of relationships involving durable products with high service components, replication of this study's results in other industries and service situations would yield important insights into problem resolution and consumer marketing relationships. These studies could address (1) the possibility of multi-directional attitudes toward different actors in service industries, and (2) satisfaction with the handling of the specific service complaint and how it relates to overall post-complaint satisfaction.

Longitudinal studies, with the collection of data both before and after a problem-resolution experience, would also be important for the study of long-term relationship development, maintenance, and

enhancement. Longitudinal studies of this type would enable us to better isolate the effects of the problem-resolution process on the consumers' attitudes of satisfaction and commitment.

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