

## Beyond exit and voice

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# BEYOND EXIT AND VOICE: DEVELOPING AN INTEGRATED TAXONOMY OF CONSUMER COMPLAINING BEHAVIOUR

Dr Doga Istanbuluoglu, Dr Sheena Leek, Prof Isabelle Szmigin

**Purpose** The purpose of this paper is to help researchers and practitioners to understand and respond to consumer complaining behaviour (CCB) by developing a taxonomy that addresses the inadequacies of previous consumer complaining taxonomies and models, simplifies the terminology and covers both traditional and new ways of complaining.

**Design/methodology/approach** Based on a systematic review of 210 studies, a concept-centric analysis of CCB literature was conducted. Seminal taxonomies and models of CCB are revisited and a critical evaluation of these is presented.

**Findings** An integrated taxonomy of CCB is proposed which enhances understanding of complaining in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by clarifying the ambiguities and overlapping constructs in the previous taxonomies.

**Research implications** The integrated taxonomy of CCB eliminates the ambiguity of previous approaches and introduces more coherent constructs in relation to the theory of CCB. The taxonomy comprehensively defines and describes the range of complaining actions to provide a complete framework. As a result, our understanding of CCB is developed through a focus on complaining actions, their characteristics and what these actions afford companies in their attempts to deal with complaints (i.e. audience, amount of information available).

**Practical implications** Practitioners can use the integrated taxonomy of CCB to structure their complaint handling processes in order to obtain maximum customer feedback to improve their product/service and to retain customers through satisfactorily addressing their complaints.

**Originality/value** Although the literature on consumer complaining is mature, this is the first paper that offers a comprehensive taxonomy that explains CCB while addressing new developments in computer-mediated-communications.

**Keywords** CCB, complaints, dissatisfaction, voice, exit

**Article Classification** Conceptual paper

## **Introduction**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer is spoiled for choice; there is a vast amount of products and services available to choose from, there are many and novel ways to buy including online and mobile stores and also there are numerous ways to complain. Imagine a disappointed hotel consumer who wants to complain, they can do this by talking to the hotel management face-to-face, writing a letter, filling out a consumer satisfaction survey, phoning the hotel, talking to their friends, discussing it on online forums with strangers, writing an email to the hotel, posting an commentary on the hotel's own website, posting on their private Facebook page, posting on the hotel's Facebook page publicly, Tweeting about it, starting a boycott of the hotel, publicising their complaint through news media, asking for help from online or offline customer protection organisations, starting a petition, or going to court or through any combination thereof. As there is a great variety in the ways consumers can complain, taxonomies and models trying to explain complaining also differ in their approach, structure, and terminology and do not always encompass all potential options available to customers. There is currently no comprehensive taxonomy of complaining which encompasses new communication channels such as social media that previously are not considered in existing taxonomies. Through revisiting existing taxonomies and models of consumer complaining behaviour (CCB), this paper makes three distinctive contributions. Firstly, it clarifies ambiguous classifications of complaining behaviour present in existing taxonomies and models; it identifies the core constructs and defines them for ease of understanding. Secondly, it provides a comprehensive list of current complaining options. Finally, a taxonomy of consumer complaining is created that incorporates developments in channels available for complaining while synthesising existing theoretical foundations which will be useful both for practitioners and researchers in furthering the understanding of CCB. The

focus of this taxonomy is to consider the difference in the consumers' complaining actions; it does not address the reasons or motivations for these actions.

Complaining should be perceived as a constructive mechanism to enable businesses to improve. Companies' responses to complaints however could be better; in the USA complainant satisfaction in 2013 was lower than in 1976 (Grainer et al., 2013). Half of customers who experience problems do not even voice their complaint, a situation which has remained the same since the 1970s (Best and Andreasen, 1977; Siddiqui and Tripathi, 2010). In the long term, retaining existing customers is cheaper than acquiring new customers and therefore it is vital to address sources of dissatisfaction (Rosenberg and Czepiel, 1984). Complaints can enable companies to correct problems, improve the quality of their products and services and potentially turn dissatisfied customers into satisfied ones (Hart et al., 1990; Tax et al., 1998). When consumers perceive justice and effort during complaint handling, their post-purchase consumer satisfaction and customer engagement increases (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2015). Moreover, complaint handling strategies can also be used to protect businesses from the potential damage of negative word-of-mouth (WOM), secure the reputation of businesses and even create positive WOM and repurchase behaviour (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987; Shields, 2006; Nikbin et al., 2012). Recent advances in communication technologies, which have increased the channels through which to complain, have heightened the importance of CCB. Stories abound of consumers getting no response from a company for months who when they turn to Twitter, receive an immediate refund and often additional compensation immediately (Bachelor, 2012). Consumers use these new communication channels to complain in a variety of ways such as, creating their own websites and personal blogs, postings in forums, sharing information on social media and even creating their own complaining music videos (Ward and Ostrom, 2006). These complaints can be spread rapidly

to a potentially large audience of consumers and generate a ripple effect which means that online complaining is a significant problem for companies (Huang et al., 2011). One famous example of creative online complaining is Dave Carroll's online music video, United Breaks Guitars<sup>1</sup>. After eight months of trying to get compensation for his broken guitar, Carroll decided to write a song about his experience and share it on YouTube. Less than 24 hours after posting the video, the company tried to contact Carroll and offered compensation (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2010). In his book about this experience, Carroll estimates that his video has been watched by more than 150 million people across the world (Carroll, 2012). While there are studies which examine the phenomenon of online complaining (e.g. Mattila and Wirtz, 2004; Clark, 2013), they do not incorporate the existing taxonomies of consumer complaining, in contrast to this paper where it is the main focus. Development of such a taxonomy will identify the visibility and potential audience for each complaining action and help managers' awareness of consumers' complaining actions via various media.

We begin by examining the components of CCB, identifying key themes and highlighting gaps in the existing taxonomies. This is followed by a discussion of the paper's approach in developing the taxonomy. We, then, critically evaluate and combine existing CCB taxonomies before building an integrated taxonomy which defines complaining actions and identify their relationship with the company response. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications.

## **Definition of Consumer Complaining Behaviour (CCB) and its Components**

CCB is defined as 'an action taken by an individual which involves communicating something negative regarding a product or a service to either the firm manufacturing or

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<sup>1</sup> United Break Guitars: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YGc4zOqozo>

marketing that product or service, or to some third-party organizational entity' (Jacoby and Jaccard, 1981, p. 6). Complaints can be seen as a consumer's escape from or attempt to change the unwanted situation (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987). Critical to CCB are the sources of dissatisfaction (e.g. something negative, an unwanted situation), the dissatisfaction and the action type. These three components of CCB are examined below with the aim of developing a definition that will encompass complaining in the current context.

#### *Sources of Dissatisfaction*

Dissatisfaction can be prompted by negative feelings towards a company or particular attributes of a consumption experience. The focal cause of dissatisfaction may not necessarily be on the product or the service itself; it can be related to the manufacturer, retailer, sales person, delivery, or advertisement (Day and Landon, 1977). Dissatisfaction can also occur due to external factors that cannot be controlled by companies (e.g. inability of consumers to use a product's specific functions or adverse weather conditions) (Jacoby and Jaccard, 1981). Hence, the source of dissatisfaction should be acknowledged as a complex function of many variables and it is important to note that any part of the consumption experience might lead to dissatisfaction (Jacoby and Jaccard, 1981; Richins and Verhage, 1985; Maute and Forrester, 1993).

#### *Dissatisfaction*

It is important to acknowledge that the consumption experience does not end after the purchase or use of the product/service. Post-purchase processes such as evaluation of the after sales services are also part of the consumption experience (Gilly and Gelb, 1982). As long as the evaluation of the overall consumption experience is at least at the same level as the consumers' expectations, they should be satisfied. However, if their expectations are not

fulfilled by the actual experience, they feel dissatisfaction which can then lead to consumer complaining (Bearden and Teel, 1983; Blodgett et al., 1993).

### *Action Types*

Complaining actions are not always behavioural activities, they can be behavioural and non-behavioural (Singh, 1988). Any complaining action that conveys dissatisfaction towards the company (e.g. manufacturer, seller, retailer, service provider), third-parties (e.g. legal organisations, consumer protection organisations) or friends and family is a behavioural response (Singh, 1988). Non-behavioural responses occur when consumers are dissatisfied but do not want to or cannot engage in any active, visible complaining (Day et al., 1981; Mulcahy and Tritter, 1998; Cri , 2003). Factors such as attitudes toward complaining, emotional bonding with the company and criticality of the service differentiate behavioural and non-behavioural complaints (Ro, 2014). Dissatisfied consumers must expend physical and cognitive effort to complain and this affects their decision as to whether or not to complain (Huppertz and Mower, 2014). Other studies investigate non-complaining from a social psychology perspective; they discussing how impression management and self-presentation might affect consumers' complaining behaviour (i.e. consumers may not complain due to being concerned about projecting a negative image) (e.g. Halstead and Dr ge, 1991; Tojib and Khajehzadeh, 2014). Non-behavioural complainers may choose or are forced to continue their patronage despite feeling dissatisfaction. Therefore non-behavioural complaining should also be denoted as a legitimate CCB and explored as such (Day et al., 1981).

We now consider the various conceptualisations of behavioural response to dissatisfaction. Hirschman's (1970) seminal work identifies exit, voice and loyalty as consumers' responses when faced with dissatisfaction. According to this, exit (i.e. leaving) and voice (i.e.

communicating the complaint) are two complaining actions which are influenced by customers' loyalty towards the company. Exit is damaging for companies as it does not give the company any feedback. Some loyal customers stay supportive of the company and prefer to voice instead of exit. Other loyal customers do not engage in any behavioural action due to either neglect or patience (Ro, 2014). Patient consumers will vary in the degree of their attachment and be prepared to give the company further chances. The neglectful consumers, however, are dissatisfied customers who do nothing and continue their patronage. They may not know how or do not think it is worth complaining.

Day and Landon's (1977) dichotomy of CCB focuses on private and public complaining activities. This model first separates action and no-action responses and then categorises action responses into public and private complaining (see Figure 1). Private actions are not directly visible to the company, whereas public actions can be identified by the company. These categories encompass various complaining options available for consumers such as redress seeking in the case of public complaining and warning friends and family in the case of private complaining (Day and Landon, 1977). However, since this classification does not provide explicit rules for categorising complaining activities through newer communication channels, it is not useful when adopted in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**<Place Figure 1 about here>**

Day et al. (1981) list nine possible complaining action types which are shown in Table 1. These action types are each an option available to consumers for complaining as an individual and unaffiliated activity. Although these are separate activities, consumers can also choose more than one of the nine items on the list (Day et al., 1981). While their research aims to provide a comprehensive list of complaining actions available to consumers, it lacks flexibility to adopt new or novel channels and ways of complaining due to suggesting a finite list of complaining actions.



**<Place Table 1 about here>**

Perhaps the most complex categorisation of CCB is Singh's (1988) 'three-faceted phenomenon' (1988, p. 104) of voice, third-party and private actions (see Figure 2). This classification is based on the object toward which the complaining response is directed. According to Singh's (1988), objects could be the people, organisations and/or companies. Voice is directed to objects that are external to the consumer's social circle and directly involved in the dissatisfying exchange (i.e. the retailer, business or manufacturer). Here, no-action responses are included within voice as these reflect feelings toward the seller. Third-party actions involve external objects but these are aimed at organisations that are not directly involved in the dissatisfying transaction (e.g. the media, consumer agencies or legal firms). For private actions, the objects are the consumer's social circle, friends and relatives who are not directly involved in the negative experience. The main feature of this approach is that it focuses on the characteristics of the object toward which the complaining is directed, instead of focusing on the complaining action itself (Singh, 1988). In this way, the aim here is to use individual specifications of each complaining situation to classify complaining actions.

**<Place Figure 2 about here>**

More recently, Crié (2003) adopts Day and Landon's (1977) separation of 'action' and 'no-action' as the initial reaction for dissatisfaction, calling these 'behavioural' and 'non-behavioural' responses, and then distinguishes final actions into 'public' (i.e. seen by the company) and 'private' actions (i.e. not seen by the company) (see Figure 3). Rather than following earlier models that focus on the final *action* of complaining, this taxonomy highlights the *process* of complaining. It is suggested that consumers may use a mixture of different complaining actions over a period of time, because CCB 'is the outcome of a process of preliminary evaluations under the influence of initiating and modulating factors'

(Crié, 2003, p. 65). Here complaining activities are regarded as part of a process, and as an interaction of different variables. Consumers can display a variety of action types simultaneously, and the final actions are not always exclusive (Crié, 2003). Crié's taxonomy is important in understanding the many factors affecting how a consumer behaves in the complaining process. Building on Crié's taxonomy, Tronvoll (2012) presents CCB as a network of activities. Focusing on service dominant logic, Tronvoll (2012) states that consumers who experience dissatisfaction during the service process, can complain immediately; they do not need to wait until the transaction is complete. Hence, consumer complaining can occur anytime during the exchange of products and services until after the consumption experience is completed.

**<Place Figure 3 about here>**

#### *The Current Paper's Definition of CCB*

Recognising CCB as a dynamic process (Crié, 2003; Tronvoll, 2012), and that complaining can consist of one or more actions, performed simultaneously or successively, this paper defines CCB as *a consumer response to dissatisfaction regarding any part of the consumption experience, which may encompass behavioural and/or non-behavioural complaining actions.*

#### **Approach**

This paper uses a concept-centric review of the literature (Webster and Watson, 2002) where the structure of the framework is determined by concepts, as opposed to an author-centric approach where literature is presented as a list of works by individual authors. The paper provides a synthesis and evaluation of the accumulated knowledge in the CCB literature. The journal databases, Emerald Insight, Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, ProQuest and Web of Science, were searched with a list of keywords including '(consumer) complaining',

‘complaint(s)’, ‘CCB’, ‘product/service reviews’, ‘consumer response’, ‘dissatisfaction’, ‘dissatisfying’, ‘exit’, ‘voice’ and ‘negative WOM’. This process identified articles from a range of disciplines such as marketing, management, communications, psychology, and tourism and hospitality. Initial rounds of filtering were used to eliminate studies that were not published in peer-reviewed journals and studies whose main focus was outside of consumer complaining (i.e. patient complaints in medicine) which resulted in a total of 210 studies being selected.

As concepts rather than authors or publication date were used to organise findings, the result was an uneven distribution of publication years due to seminal works in this field such as Hirschman (1970) and Singh (1988) being published predominantly in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, a significant portion of the recent studies focused on particular aspects of complaining without conceptualising complaining behaviours. Papers such as Warren and Kan’s (2015) paper on humorous complaining, Ogbeide et al.’s (2015) study on complaint management in the hospitality industry and Zhang et al.’s (2013) study on online user reviews were not included because they were not relevant in terms of developing the integrated taxonomy of CCB.

### **A Critical Evaluation of the Existing CCB Taxonomies and Models**

Using the above definition of complaining, this section critically evaluates the five aforementioned taxonomies- Hirschman’s (1970) theory of exit, voice and loyalty, Day and Landon’s (1977) dichotomy, Day et al.’s (1981) conceptualisation of consumer responses to dissatisfaction, Singh’s (1988) taxonomy, and Cri  s (2003) diachronic approach- and identifies main problems with these.

Terminology. One problem with the existing taxonomies is how they differ in their terminology to describe the same issue. For example, in distinguishing whether consumers

complain or not, Day and Landon (1977) use the term action and no-action whereas Singh (1988) and Crié (2003) use behavioural and non-behavioural. Hirschman (1970) describes not complaining as loyalty, and Day et al. (1981, p. 88) explain it as ‘Doing nothing. Makes no change whatever in subsequent behaviour as a result of unsatisfactory experience’.

Non-complaining. The description and categories of non-complaining also vary. Most taxonomies have a single category for not complaining and view it as a silent response to dissatisfaction that does not include a visible act (Day and Landon, 1977). The taxonomies and models explain the reasons behind non-complaining differently such as inability to complain or neglect. For Hirschman (1970) loyal customers, despite feeling dissatisfaction, remain supportive because they have an emotional bond with the company. However, he does not consider loyalty as a complaining action, but as a factor that explains the choice to either complain or leave the company. This is similar to Ro’s (2014) ‘patience’ a response from loyal customers who have a special bond with the company and who tolerate the problem despite feeling dissatisfaction. On the other hand, neglect, is defined as a response from consumers who do not voice or exit despite feeling dissatisfaction. Non-complaining where consumers feel dissatisfaction, but do not show it in a visible manner, is identified through ‘no-action’ (Day and Landon, 1977), ‘Does nothing’ (Day et al., 1981) and non-behavioural complaining (Singh, 1988) while Hirschman (1970) does not classify not complaining as an action.

Structure of the taxonomies. The structures of the taxonomies vary in terms of both the actual variables and the number of variables used. For example, Singh (1988) uses two variables, external/not external and involved/not involved whereas Day and Landon (1977) use three variables, action/no-action, public/private and the function. Most taxonomies categorise complaining activities by their characteristics. However, Singh’s (1988) categorisation is

based on the characteristics of what he calls the object of the complaint (i.e. entity towards which the complaining activity is directed). As it is possible to interpret characteristics of objects differently, this might actually lead to differences of categorisation. For example, Singh (1988) categorised 'intention not to re-purchase' (i.e. exit) under the 'private responses' category, suggesting that this is an internal and a non-involved situation. However, it could also be interpreted that exiting from a company reflects feelings towards the seller, which is actually external to the customer's social circle and represents direct involvement of the company. Hence, using Singh's taxonomy, it is possible to classify 'intention not to re-purchase' as 'voice' as well. This typology depends on interpreting the characteristics of the complaining action instead of the action itself, therefore contradictory classifications of CCB could emerge (Maute and Forrester, 1993).

Exit. The majority of the frameworks that explain consumer complaining specify a category which entails the consumer actively choosing not to put themselves in the same purchase situation again (e.g. Hirschman, 1970; Day et al., 1981; Singh and Pandya, 1991; Tronvoll, 2012). These include exit (Hirschman, 1970), stopping patronage (Day and Landon, 1977), and personally boycotting the product class, brand or seller (Day et al., 1981). Singh (1988) does not have a separate category, but discusses exit behaviour under his category of 'private responses' along with negative WOM. Unlike others, both Hirschman's (1970) and Day et al.'s (1981) explanations of exit are detailed, for example Day et al. (1981) say that consumers may stop purchasing from the specific retailer, manufacturer, brand or product class. Hirschman (1970) again uses the concept of loyalty as an explanation for exit by stating that consumers who are not loyal are unlikely to purchase again.

Voice. Voice may cover all informative, constructive and direct responses to the company (Hirschman, 1970). The consumer provides an opportunity for the company to fix the

problem or improve the situation by confronting the company with their complaint (Hirschman, 1970). The presence of loyalty may actually increase the likelihood of voice, as loyal consumers would hope and seek improvement instead of abandoning the company (Hirschman, 1970). Others make finer distinctions between complaining actions using the function of the complaint. Day and Landon (1977) and Day et al. (1981) both consider redress seeking as such an objective. Whereas Day and Landon (1977) have a single category of redress seeking for the company, Day et al. (1981) have two separate redress seeking activities directed to either the seller or the manufacturer. Consumers contacting a third-party for their redress seeking are considered by both but whilst Day et al. (1981) have three categories, Day and Landon (1977) have two: seeking legal action and complaining to third-parties which are distinct from the public action of redress seeking from the company. Within the category of redress seeking these models use different audiences to further refine the categorisation. Singh (1988) has two complaining categories which focus on different audiences (i.e. voice to the seller and third-party responses) where consumers complain to seek redress. Whilst redress seeking is a specific function of complaining there is also a different broad complaining category in Day et al. (1981) which encompasses multiple functions such as influencing the actions of manufacturers and retailers, influencing legislation, seeking the influence of regulatory bodies, warning the public or expressing the dissatisfaction. They are the only one to identify this range of complaining objectives.

Public vs. Private. Current taxonomies also vary in whether they distinguish complaining actions as private or public. Some separate private and public actions (Day and Landon, 1977; Singh, 1988; Cri , 2003) while others do not (Hirschman, 1970; Day et al., 1981). Private actions are the activities that are not directly visible to the company, whereas public actions are identifiable as complaints to the company. Singh (1988) does not use the terms of

public and private to distinguish but instead uses ‘external’ and ‘non-external’. However, he has another category that he calls private to specify complaining actions that are not-involved and non-external. Both Day and Landon (1977) and Singh (1988) make further distinctions within public actions based on audience, separating complaints directed at the company and third-parties such as legal representatives and consumer bodies.

Involved vs. Not-involved. Only one of the taxonomies uses involvement with the complaint to distinguish the type of complaint (Singh, 1988). If the object of the complaining action is directly related to the source of the problem, Singh (1988) regards it as an ‘involved’ object (e.g. engaging in a complaining activity that involves the company), and as a ‘not-involved’ object if the complaining action is not directly related to the dissatisfying exchange (e.g. engaging in a complaining activity that involves friends and family).

Process of Complaining. In examining the structuring of the taxonomies and models, it is clear that there is a lack of consideration of the process consumers go through when complaining. Some do not specify a structure (Hirschman, 1970; Day et al., 1981). Others have a more detailed hierarchical structure (Day and Landon, 1977), however it is not clear whether consumers move through the hierarchy to make one type of complaint or whether they can move down multiple pathways to make a number of complaints. As a result, the taxonomies vary in the number of final complaining categorisations: Hirschman (1970) has two, Singh (1988) has three, Day and Landon (1977) have five and Day et al. (1981) have nine complaining actions. Crié (2003) addresses these issues through suggesting that final actions are not always necessarily stand-alone activities. He suggests that consumers may mix and connect different types of responses instead of adopting only one.

## A Combined Taxonomy of CCB

We have brought together the taxonomies of CCB to develop a comprehensive taxonomy which takes into account the criticisms highlighted in the previous section (See Figure 4).

<Place Figure 4 about here>

As with all the taxonomies and models discussed, the complaining process is initiated when the consumer feels dissatisfaction. The initial phase of the complaining process occurs when a consumer decides between taking action or no-action (Day and Landon, 1977; Singh, 1988). The action and no-action variable identifies those who actively complain and those who are dissatisfied but do not engage in a complaining activity. That is, *no-action* signifies silent responses that do not include a visible act (Day and Landon, 1977) and provide no feedback to the company. Action identifies those who actively complain.

The taxonomy then separates complaining actions into two categories of *exit* and *voice*. This variable is important as it discriminates between those consumers who stay with the company (voice) and those who may leave without providing the company an opportunity for retention. Both exit and voice are active responses where consumers engage in a particular action as a response to dissatisfaction. In this context, exit represents consumers leaving the patronage of a specific retailer, manufacturer, or brand and voice refers to the consumers who vocalise their complaints to an audience.

Voice responses are classified based on the relationship between the consumer and the audience of the complaint. The audience of the complaint is a useful classification variable as it will influence the reach and dissemination of the complaint. For example, a consumer voicing the complaint to their friends will potentially create more adverse feeling than if they solely address the company. Here, *public* represents voice directed to the company or third-parties which can include regulatory bodies, consumer organisations, legal companies or



other consumers external to family and friends. *Private* represents voice specifically towards friends and family.

The objective of the complaint has also been used to make distinctions. One objective that has been identified is *redress seeking*, this represents the direct cost to company of compensating the consumer. Other complaining objectives, *publicly complaining*, are not individually defined in the literature. This distinction, however, identifies a group of consumers who will require some form of compensation while others need to be listened to for other purposes such as venting their complaint. Actions aimed at obtaining redress do not always address the company; third-parties such as consumer protection agencies or legal institutions may also be used by consumers for this purpose. Similarly, consumers who want to publicly complain might address their complaints to the company or use third-parties such as the media (See Figure 4). We now move on from examining the various elements of previous taxonomies and their contributions to developing an integrated taxonomy of CCB.

### **An Integrated Taxonomy of CCB**

Our integrated taxonomy builds on the combined taxonomy of CCB discussed above taking into account technological developments that have led to new channels for complaining. Its aim is to both clarify the terminology and the structure, and comprehensively cover the activities consumers engage in. The amount of information available about the complaint and the companies' potential actions in response to the complaint are also considered (Figure 5). The focus of the taxonomy is the complaining actions available to consumers; the objectives and motivations of the complaints, such as redress seeking or venting, can relate to any of these complaining actions in the taxonomy.

**<Place Figure 5 about here>**

The taxonomy consists of seven complaining actions which have been differentiated through applying several variables. The first variable used in this taxonomy is action and no-action.

*Inertia* encompasses consumers who are dissatisfied but do not take action and continue to purchase. These consumers do not publicise their complaint to any audience. In the integrated taxonomy of CCB, inertia is not further separated using neglect, patience or loyalty as these signify motivations of no-action as in highlighted in the previous research, because the main aim of the taxonomy is to consider company perspective and the companies cannot be able to identify consumers' motivations for inertia. The taxonomy, then, uses two variables, visibility of the complaint to the company and the intended or potential audience, to further discriminate the complaining actions. *Inertia* and some forms of *Exit* do not have an audience and these actions are not visible to the company. When the audience is immediate family and friends, the complaining actions will take the form of *Exit*, *Negative WOM* or *Exit with negative WOM*. These actions are largely not visible to the company. Recent technological advances have led to the development of communication channels such as social networks which enable consumers to reach their extended social circle (i.e. acquaintances as well as immediate friends and family). Complaining actions in regard to this wider audience include *Negative WOM* and *Exit with negative WOM* both of which are largely not visible to the company depending on the channel consumers use to complain. Third parties can also be the audience for the complaint resulting in the actions of *Public complaining via third parties* or *Exit with public complaining*, both of which will be highly visible to the company. Finally the company may be the intended audience resulting in either *Public complaining to the company* or *Exit with public complaining*.

The visibility of the complaint to the company will determine how much information is available to them. Obviously the company will have a high degree of information when complaints are addressed directly to them or via third-parties. Consumers who complain (i.e. take action) may do so in a way which varies in its visibility to the company depending on

whether they have an intended audience for their complaint and the communication channel they chose. In particular, technological developments have made it easier for the complainant to reach an extended social circle and the public more quickly. The visibility of complaints via new communication channels to the company may depend on the privacy settings; whilst some groups may be accessible to the general public, for others an invite to join is required restricting the visibility of content.

The integrated taxonomy of CCB can be used by companies to assess their complaint management systems' coverage of the available complaining channels. They can identify the degree of information available to them for each complaining action. This subsequently determines how the company may act either to pro-actively gather information on complaints they may be unaware of, or react to address existing complaints. The company is better equipped to satisfactorily resolve the problem when they have the necessary information.

An in-depth explanation of each complaining action follows, and an outline of these is provided in Table 2.

*Inertia.* Inertia is used to describe consumers who are dissatisfied but do not actively express their dissatisfaction through a complaining action. These consumers do not provide information regarding their dissatisfaction to the company. The complaint is not visible to the company and therefore any potential feedback from these dissatisfied but non-complaining customers is lost (Day et al., 1981). One example could be a consumer realising a product they have just bought has a defect after they arrive home and do not want to travel back to the store to complain. Inertia is a very damaging type of response to dissatisfaction for the companies. In the integrated taxonomy, inertia is not further divided into categories such as Ro's (2014) neglect and patience because ultimately the impact of both of these categories on the company is the same. This paper is focused on the company's perspective and the

company will experience inertia in the same way whatever the consumers' motivations might be. However, the companies may be able to pro-actively identify these customers if they have continuously sought customer feedback and encouraged consumers to complain which may enable them to address their dissatisfaction. They might also need to determine whether the existing channels for complaining are sufficient and easy to use.

*Exit.* Exit occurs when consumers terminate their relationship with the company, product, service, brand or retailer. Examples might include individual cases such as a consumer switching to a competitor's product and brand, or company and product boycotts. Some consumers can be vocal about their exit behaviours and encourage others to exit too (i.e. Exit with negative WOM and Exit with public complaining), but other individuals prefer to exit silently. Such are unlikely to have a specific audience for such behaviours in mind; however, in some cases others around them might know that they have left and sometimes they might even know reasons for their exit. Since, the integrated taxonomy identifies the parties who can have information on the complaining action as the potential audience; there can be two types of audience for exit: no audience and the immediate family and friends, albeit unintentional. In both of these cases, however, exit will not be directly visible to the company. Consumers abandon the company and do not communicate their dissatisfaction, hence, exit is also an extremely harmful complaining action (Day et al., 1981). Companies may be aware of their consumers exiting if they monitor consumer data and/or sales, but they may be unaware of the details of the complaint, so there is only a limited degree of information available. If the company keeps consumer data records (e.g. loyalty card programs), they can then identify consumers who have exited and pro-actively seek customer feedback in order to identify sources of dissatisfaction. They may incentivise further purchase

with the help of vouchers or discounts, whilst this may not help to obtain feedback, it may lead to customers returning to give the company another chance.

*Negative WOM.* One of the early and common definitions of WOM is ‘oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product or a service’ (Arndt, 1967, p. 3). When such communication is negative in nature, it is known as negative WOM and defined as consumer communications that denigrate, complain or advise against a product, service or organisation usually due to an unpleasant experience (Kimmel, 2010). However, this definition should be modified to take into account recent technological developments; as well as being oral such communication can be conducted via computer-mediated-communication channels for instance via email, instant messaging and social networking sites. These channels all enable one-to-many communication, not just one-to-one communication.

Consumers may complain to their immediate family and friends either through private communications channels such as face-to-face, the phone or through online conversations such as instant messaging. As these consumers do not communicate their complaints via channels visible to the company or the public, these activities are essentially limited to the consumers’ private circle of connections rather than being publicly available. Therefore, the company will only have a limited degree of information about the problem available to them such as customer databases. In order to identify who is complaining and what they have said, the company can pro-actively seek customer feedback, and encourage consumers to communicate their complaints to the company by making it easier to complain.

Negative WOM can also be directed to individuals’ extended social circle which encompasses not only close family and friends but also acquaintances. Technological developments such as social networking sites have enabled individuals to maintain a

significantly greater number of relationships with others than has been possible in the past which helps negative WOM to be disseminated more widely. Online communication also increases the speed of dissemination; for example if a Facebook user posts their complaint as a status on their Facebook profile, this complaint can reach their entire extended social circle immediately. In this context, negative WOM is defined in a particular way to emphasise that the audience of such behaviours is only those who have access to the social media channels used for complaining, but not the public or the company. Hence, these are sometimes labelled as private negative WOM activities in the literature.

*Exit with Negative WOM.* Consumers can share the reasons for their exit with both immediate friends/family and their extended social circle through private offline or online communication-channels. These negative conversations combined with consumers' leaving are likely to be detrimental for the company. Companies cannot directly obtain information from these actions and may only be able to gain a limited level of information about the problem. In such cases, if the company actively seeks customer feedback or monitors customer data to identify those exiting, they can obtain further insight.

*Public Complaining to the Company.* Public complaining to the company encompasses communications aimed directly at the company. This traditionally involves consumers voicing their dissatisfaction through company owned or managed one-to-one communication channels. The Internet has enabled the development of a number of channels for communicating complaints directly to the company including through official website or social media channels or email. Consumers can, for example, use the retailer's website to register complaints in the form of product reviews regarding products that they have recently purchased. Hence, the company will be fully aware of the situation and should have all the information about the problem. With these public complaints, the company will have to take

a reactive stance which will entail the implementation of their official complaint handling procedures which may be in place. Online complaining is a significant problem for companies but it is visible to the company and a high degree of information about the complaint will be available.

*Public complaining via Third-parties.* Consumers may publicly complain via third-parties such as legal organisations, consumer protection organisations or social media. This can be conducted through traditional methods such as writing letters to a newspaper or websites specifically set up for complaining. For example, Epinions<sup>2</sup> is a website where consumers can leave reviews about products and services to help others decide on a purchase. The company in question sometimes may be informed of complaints via the third-party and can react accordingly. In some of the cases, third-parties might negotiate a resolution with the company which may involve legal or regulatory jurisdiction. The company may address these voluntarily or be legally obliged to resolve these complaints. In other cases, consumers use third-party channels that are publically accessible and if the companies proactively monitor these, they will be aware of the situation and even obtain a high level of information that can be used to investigate and solve problems.

*Exit with Public Complaining.* Consumers can also complain and state their exit behaviour or intentions to exit to the company or third-parties. Consumers may complain to the company and discuss exit through various channels such as a face-to-face interaction with staff within a store, on the company's website or via their social media. These activities can be personal exit behaviours or part of more generic boycott behaviours such as Amazon Anonymous that used a number of channels to encourage shoppers to boycott Amazon because of tax avoidance and treatment of its employees (Flood, 2014). With regard to third-parties,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.epinions.com/>

similarly the consumer may take the complaining action in a face-to-face situation, for example with a representative of a Trading Standards Authority or through these bodies' websites and social media channels. Companies should pro-actively monitor their channels which should enable them to obtain a high degree of information which can be used to resolve the problem. The company may monitor third-parties' publicly available media, so they are aware of any complaints. The information obtained can be used to address the individual issues or develop public relations material; however this could be very resource intensive.

Table 2 provides an outline of the seven consumer actions that have been introduced in the integrated taxonomy of CCB.

**<Place Table 2 about here>**

## **Discussion**

### *Theoretical Contribution of CCB Research*

The existing CCB taxonomies and models suffer from differences in their structure, often using a different number of variables to construct the taxonomies and models which lead to a variety of complaining actions. Our critical evaluation of the variables differentiating the complaining actions in previous taxonomies enables us to identify variables and incorporate them into an integrated taxonomy of CCB. This integrated taxonomy utilises the variable action/no-action (Day and Landon, 1977; Singh, 1988), to develop the initial stage of the complaining taxonomy. Then visibility of the complaint to the company is used, which evolved from Day and Landon's (1977) public/private distinction. Finally, we use audience of the complaint which is developed from both Day and Landon (1977) and Day et al. (1981). The number of audiences are rationalised to cover four key groups, the company, third-parties, extended social circle and immediate family and friends.



A problem with past CCB taxonomies has been the lack of clarity in definitional terms. A major contribution of the integrated taxonomy of CCB is greater clarity in the terminology used. The definitions of past variables used in the taxonomies have been critically evaluated, this has led to some variables (e.g. Day and Landon's (1977) action/no action) being used unchanged, others being modified (e.g. Day and Landon's (1977) public/private) and others being rejected (e.g. Hirschman's (1970) loyalty). Similarly, in previous research, complaining on the Internet has been identified with interchangeable terms such as electronic or online (negative) WOM and online complaining (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Yeh and Choi, 2011). This has led to lack of precision in the previous research which is eliminated in the integrated taxonomy as the channel of the complaint is not a variable used to define the complaining actions. Instead, the taxonomy is adaptable to encompass both online and offline complaining activities using the same criteria which increases its clarity.

The integrated taxonomy of CCB eliminates the ambiguity of previous taxonomies' complaining actions. It introduces distinct and coherent complaining actions in relation to the theory of CCB. This results in seven separate and distinct consumer responses to dissatisfaction which specify the complaining activity: 'inertia', 'exit', 'negative WOM', 'exit with negative WOM', 'public complaining to the company', 'public complaining via third-parties' and 'exit with public complaining'. Hence, the integrated taxonomy comprehensively defines and describes the range of complaining actions to provide a complete framework for CCB.

The integrated taxonomy of CCB acknowledges that consumers can undertake single or multiple complaining actions, sequentially or simultaneously. For example, one consumer may start with private negative WOM and move on to exit with public complaining whilst another consumer may prefer to engage with these simultaneously. Most previous taxonomies

show the structure of the complaining activities in a sequence, suggesting that there are certain routes for consumers to take when they complain.

Previous taxonomies and models are varied in their perspectives which have been one of the reasons for confusion. Most of them (Day and Landon, 1977; Day et al., 1981; Crié, 2003) create categories of complaining actions which is the perspective adopted by the integrated taxonomy of CCB. It does not incorporate Hirschman's (1970) use of loyalty which is inadequate for explaining complaining actions or Singh's (1988) classification by the object towards which the CCB is directed because this is also too ambiguous and open to interpretation. Instead, the integrated taxonomy emphasises the complaining actions and takes the perspective of the company in terms of highlighting the availability of information and the potential actions. This perspective has not been considered by any previous taxonomies and models.

The integrated taxonomy of CCB has been developed taking into account new technological advances, acknowledging that consumers' complaints can now rapidly reach an extended social circle using new channels of communication. Previous taxonomies and models were constructed prior to these advances and therefore do not take into account the variety of new communication channels for complaining.

#### *Contributions to Managerial Practice*

The integrated taxonomy of CCB can be used to inform complaint handling processes. Firstly, it can be used to determine through which complaining actions they can obtain customer feedback in order to improve their product/service. The integrated taxonomy of CCB enables practitioners to recognise the routes through which dissatisfaction can be expressed, determine the visibility and the potential audience of the complaint and the amount of information available about the complaint. Complaining actions to the company

will enable the company to gain insight into the effectiveness of their company-owned channels for conveying customer dissatisfaction. As these channels will provide the highest amount of information and the greatest opportunity for customer retention, it is vital that the companies ensure customers are fully aware of them and utilise these appropriately. Understanding the different types of complaints and whether or not the company has information on them can help the companies to decide how to respond and where to focus their efforts. The efficacy of new communication channels such as Twitter and Facebook, for complaint handling is yet to be determined. For example, a company may consider whether to set up a specific Twitter account for complaints as complaining content may be uninteresting and demotivating for general consumer (Burton and Soboleva, 2011). In such cases, it may be better to maintain a special account for complaints and queries. Similarly if Facebook is a favourite medium for the companies' customers they can search user-created groups on Facebook for the purpose of catching complaints.

Complaining actions to third-parties can provide a high degree of information to the company particularly if legal bodies are involved. Ideally, if the company managed complaint channels are effective then customers should not have to complain through these channels. The use of third-parties implies the company has been unwilling for some reason to help the customer, which may be particularly damaging to their reputation. Companies might also need to consider whether they can obtain value through monitoring channels outside of their control. For example the taxonomy can be used to reflect whether a company receives significant insights into their consumers' behaviour through regularly reading a third-party website designed to address consumer complaints. This might help to increase the retention of customers, reducing the amount that would otherwise have to be spent on gaining new ones.

Complaining behaviour on social media can provide varying degrees of information depending on the channels used and their visibility to the company. The ability to reach various audiences has become easier through recent developments in communication channels; consumers can write blogs, set up consumer groups on the Internet, create videos to place on YouTube, or simply post on their private social networking accounts. Through these channels consumers can generate substantial adverse publicity (e.g. United Break Guitars video on YouTube), therefore companies need to carefully consider whether resources should be allocated to monitor these novel channels. The sheer volume of potential communication channels can make it difficult for the company to decide what to monitor. The company can be proactive in regularly garnering customer feedback to anticipate problems or highlight minor problems and resolve them before they develop. Companies can also use customer data to identify individuals which may have exited and communicate with them to identify and resolve any problem which led to this behaviour. Since the visibility of such information varies, the amount of information that can be obtained and its value needs to be weighed against the cost to the company.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

Future research could identify the goals and motivations for each of the seven complaining actions. It could also identify which ones are the most damaging to the company. This information would enable companies to further develop their complaint handling processes to help the most damaging types of complaints are rapidly resolved.

The integrated taxonomy of CCB takes into account new technological developments. Baron et al. (2014) stated that future research is required on preventing and minimising the effects on online complaining behaviours. Further studies could investigate the speed of dissemination of complaints through various new communication channels. Companies could

then identify which channels to allocate resources to for monitoring thus improving their complaints handling procedures.

## **Conclusion**

The integrated taxonomy of CCB builds on previous attempts and in so doing makes a number of theoretical contributions. The terminology used is clearly defined and simplified which has enabled the variables used and the structure to be refined. It acknowledges that customer complaining can encompass single or multiple actions conducted sequentially or simultaneously. The integrated taxonomy emphasises the complaining actions and how the company can effectively monitor amount of information available to the company and identify either pro-active or reactive potential actions. This taxonomy has the ability to encompass new communication technologies used for complaining such as social media. Previous taxonomies were generated prior to these advances and cannot readily accommodate the resulting changes. The integrated taxonomy of CCB can be used by practitioners firstly to elucidate the number of complaining actions and secondly to assist them in determining which ones they should focus in order to optimise their complaint handling processes.

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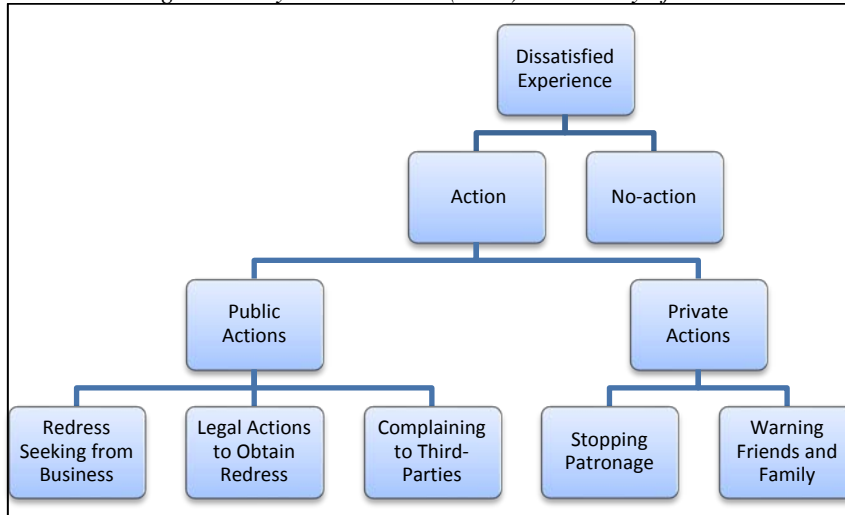
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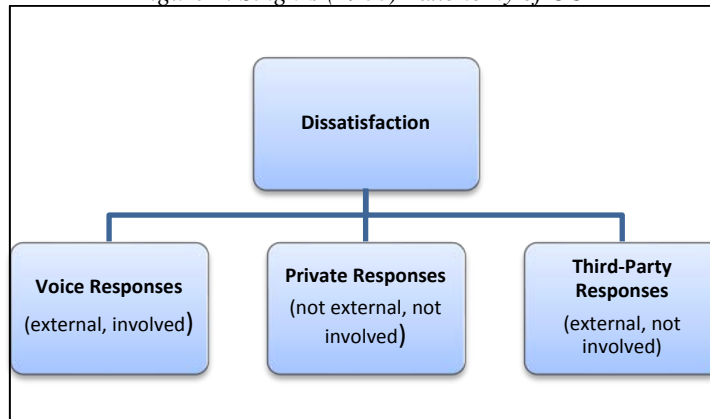


Figure 1. Day and Landon's (1977) Dichotomy of CCB



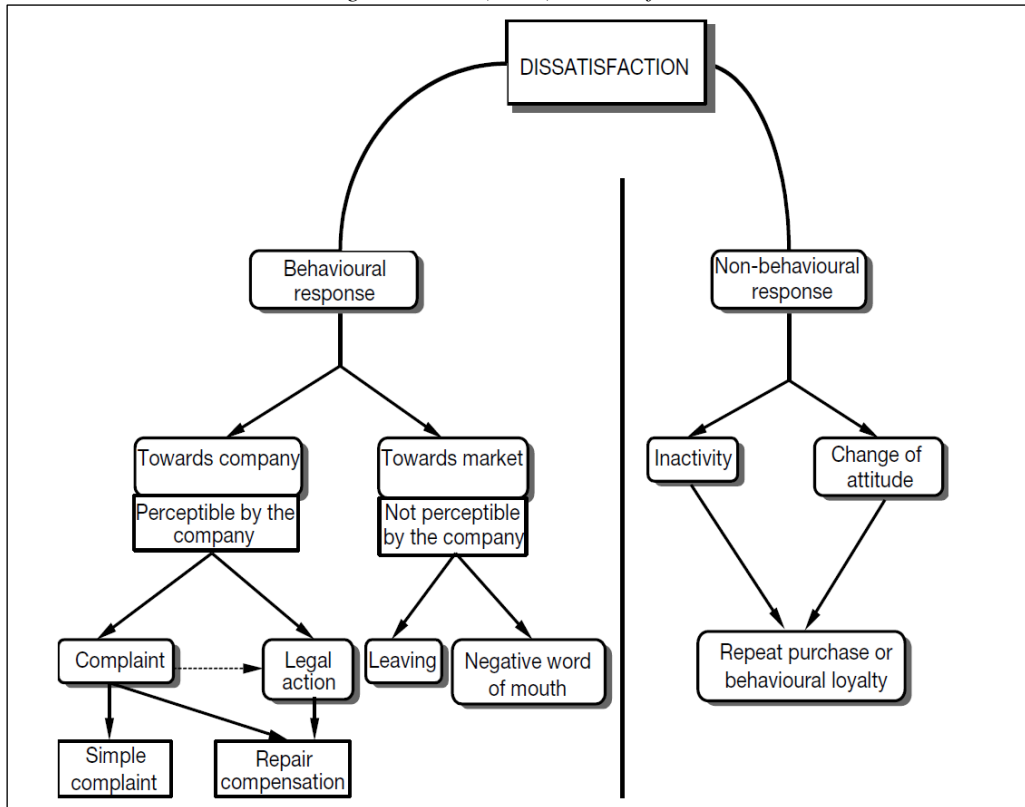
Adapted from Day and Landon (1977)

Figure 2. Singh's (1988) Taxonomy of CCB



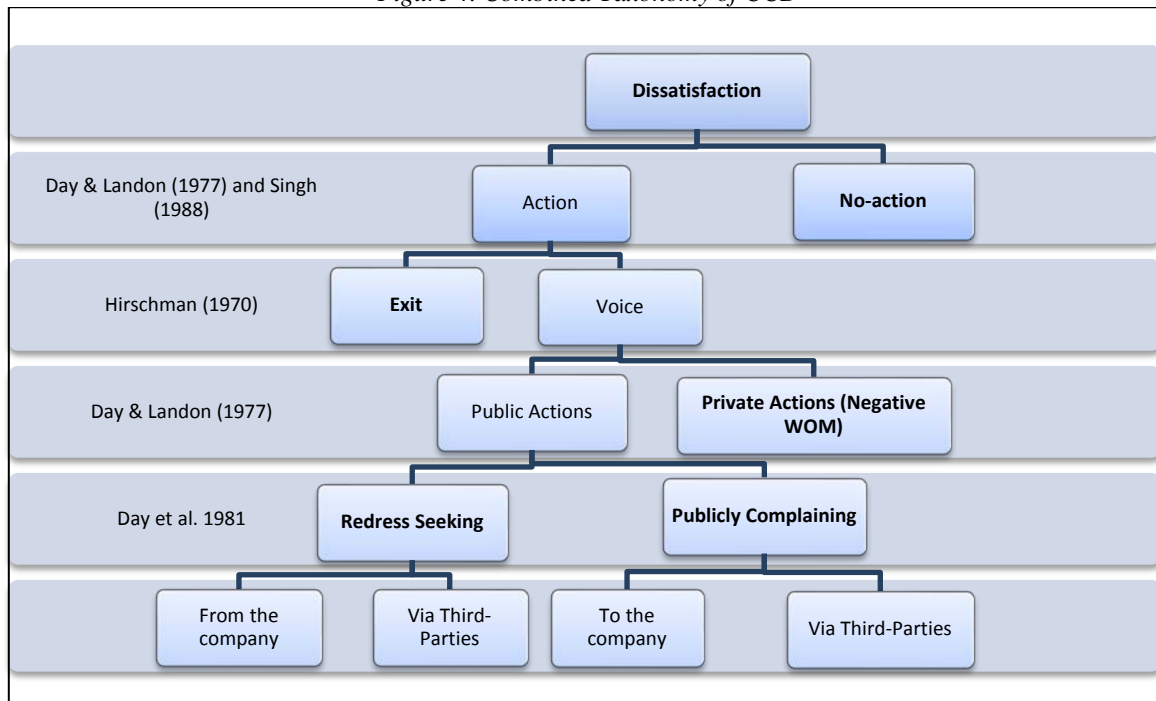
Adapted from Singh (1988)

Figure 3. Crié (2003) Model of CCB



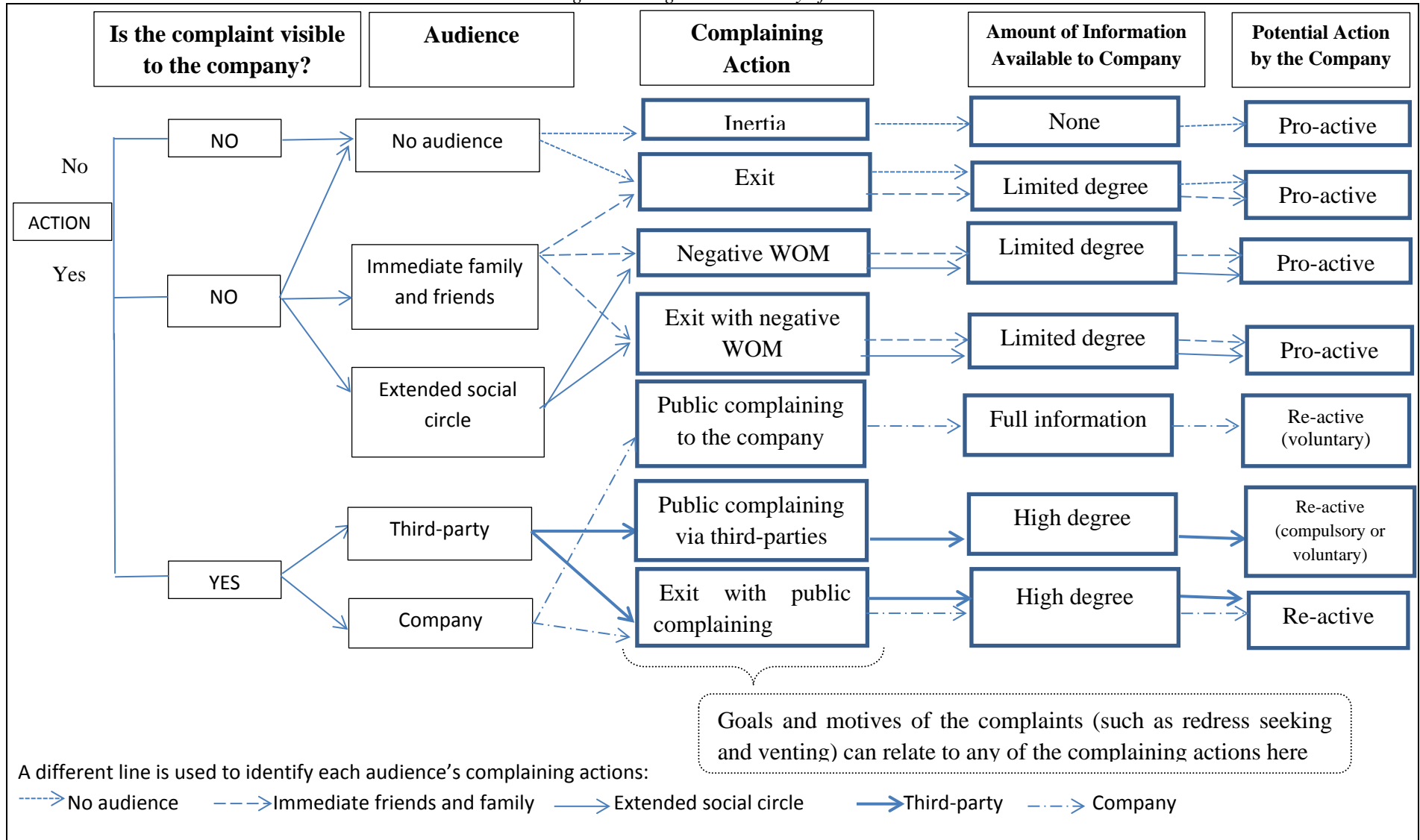
Source: Crié (2003, p. 63)

Figure 4. Combined Taxonomy of CCB



Developed using Hirschman (1970), Day and Landon (1977), and Day et al. (1981)

Figure 5. Integrated Taxonomy of CCB



*Table 1. - Day et al.'s (1981) List of Complaining Actions*

1. Does nothing. Makes no change whatever in subsequent behavior as a result of unsatisfactory experience.
2. Personally boycotts the product class. Chooses to quit using that kind of product.
3. Personally boycotts the brand. Chooses to use other brands.
4. Personally boycotts the seller. Discontinues patronage of the retailer or direct marketing firm from which the purchase was made.
5. Privately complains (adverse WOM). Tells family, friends and acquaintances of the bad experience and warns against using that store, brand or type of product or service.
6. Seeks redress directly from the seller: specific remedy such as replacement of the item, refund or other financial adjustment or free repairs.
7. Seeks redress directly from the manufacturer
8. Seek redress through some third party. Joins consumer advocate, consumer protection agency or the courts to seek redress.
9. Complains publicly, using any communications of a public nature for reasons other than seeking redress such as to influence future actions of retailers and/or manufacturers to influence legislation or seek action by regulatory agencies to seek action by consumer advocates, to warn the public or “just to get it off my chest.”

Source: Day et al. (1981, p. 88)

Table 2. Outline of Complaining Actions

Name	Complaining Actions	Amount of information	Potential Action by the Company
Inertia	Consumer will continue patronage but they are dissatisfied. There is no communication with company or other parties.	Company is unaware of customer dissatisfaction.	Company can pro-actively seek customer feedback and find ways to make it easier to complain (by decreasing the consumer effort to complain). They need to identify why customers do not complain and also the problems that they have. In this way, they can find solution to both non-complaining (inertia) and the problem.
Exit	Consumer stops patronage and might switch to competitors. There is no communication with company or other parties.	Company may be aware of customer dissatisfaction if they monitor consumer data.	Company can pro-actively seek customer feedback to identify why consumers left. Also, they can use consumer data (e.g. loyalty cards) to identify who exited, and communicate to encourage them to return by showing how their complaints are rectified. Company might need to give incentives to encourage customers both to return and to voice dissatisfaction.
Negative WOM	-Consumer complains to family and friends through private communication tools (e.g. face to face or phone conversation) -Consumer complains to a wider social circle via online private communication tools (e.g. personal/restricted profile on social media).	Company is largely unaware of customer dissatisfaction.	Company can pro-actively seek customer feedback to identify who are the complaining consumers and what they have said. This approach will have to be general as they may be unable to specifically target consumers who complain to their friends and family. Company can also encourage consumers to communicate their complaints to the company by making it easier to complain.
Exit with negative WOM	Consumer states exit behaviour or intentions to family/friends or their extended social circle, through private communications (e.g. face to face, telephone, letter, restricted profile page on social media).	Company is largely unaware of customer dissatisfaction.	Company can pro-actively seek customer feedback to identify why they left and what they have said about the company. This approach will have to be general as they may be unable to specifically target these consumers. The company can also use consumer data (e.g. loyalty cards) to identify who exited. Company can also encourage consumers to communicate their complaints to the company by making it easier to complain.
Public complaining to the company	Consumer complains directly to the company using official channels (e.g. face to face in store, telephone, and company website).	Company is aware of customer dissatisfaction.	Company will have to take a reactive stance to the complaints identified.
Public complaining via third-parties	Consumer complains to third-parties face to face, or with letter, email, and public social media channels etc.	Company will become aware via third-party or if they monitor social media.	In some cases, company will be informed of complaints via the third-party and have to take a reactive stance. The company may address these voluntarily or be legally obliged to resolve these complaints. In the other cases, they can identify complaints by monitoring public channels.
Exit with public complaining	Consumer states exit behaviour or intentions on a company or third-party owned website or social media (e.g. company's own Facebook page, boycott or petitions websites).	Company is aware of the dissatisfaction or can monitor social media to be aware of it in case of third-party websites.	Company is more reactive, may be able to directly address dissatisfied individuals (e.g. through the Facebook page) or they may have to address at a more general level through PR.

