Abstract

One of the most important complaint behaviour of dissatisfied consumers with a service is negative word-of-mouth. Despite the extensive literature on interpersonal communication, research on word-of-mouth in the context of unsatisfactory experiences still has certain limitations. This study aims to analyze the negative word-of-mouth process investigating the contribution of a set of variables such as level of dissatisfaction, likelihood of success in complaining and negative affects. So we analyze the causal relationships between these variables and we identify direct, indirect and mediators effects. The results were obtained from a sample of dissatisfied customers with restaurants and show dissatisfaction and affects have a direct and positive effect on negative word-of-mouth, while the effect of likelihood of success in complaining is indirect by dissatisfaction. These relationships represent significant business implications and new lines of research to advance the study of this type of response.

Key words: Word-of-mouth, Dissatisfaction, Affects, Likelihood of success in complaining and Restaurants.

JEL codes: M30 and M31.

1. Introduction

When consumers are dissatisfied with a product or establishment and do not complain, they might develop different behaviours simultaneously: no repeat pur-
chase, provider switching and/or bad comments about the company. Anyway, they are impeding the service provider the opportunity to correct their mistakes and recover the customer. In spite of the efforts done by companies to stimulate customer claims and the importance of the interaction between customers and service providers in satisfaction and their consequences (Menon and Dubé, 2000), recent studies show that there have been few changes in comparison to results of research in previous decades (Huppertz, 2007). For instance, in the study of TARP (1996), 70% of dissatisfied consumers do not complain and Andreassen (2001) observes 68% of customers do not communicate their problems to the company. Minor complaint rate is shown in the study Retail Customer Dissatisfaction Study (2006) which revealed that only 6% of dissatisfied customers expressed their complaints. However, at Spanish level, Consumer Satisfaction Index (2006) (National Consumer Institute) shows that the average percentage of people who complained about services of general interest\(^2\) is 65.2%.

Social influence plays an important role in various behaviors of individuals (Aronson, 1988). Informal talks between individuals are probably the oldest form of expressing and sharing opinions about products, services or brands. In this sense, word-of-mouth (WOM)\(^3\) reviews are one of the most frequent responses of dissatisfied customers. They are viewed as a source of transmission of information with great ability to influence the behavior of other individuals (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004). The academic research on consumer WOM is extensive and numerous studies highlight the importance of these communications in the acceptance or promotion of products and services (Lau and Ng, 2001). Besides, the origin of WOM has recently been examined from the establishment environmental variables (Raja et al., 2009). However, research on negative WOM has been relegated to the background and is more limited. In the literature on complaint behavior it has been proposed different antecedents that contribute in the formation of the various responses to dissatisfaction, whether public or private (Crié, 2003)\(^4\), there are relatively few studies that analyze why some dissatisfied consumers use WOM to express their discontent and what their determinants are.

In this line, our contribution focuses on the study of negative WOM nature to investigate the influence of several antecedents: dissatisfaction level, probability of

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(2) Services of general interest are those that have undergone a profound process of change in recent years following the liberalization of certain sectors, which include telephony, internet, transportation, financial and insurance services (Consumer Satisfaction Index of the National Consumer Institute - Ministry of Health and Consumption, 2006).

(3) Since the English term WOM is the most widely accepted to refer to the critical comments from consumers, in Spanish literature various terms are used, such as “word of mouth”, “mouth-to-mouth”, “mouth-to-ear”, or “mouth-ear”, we use the latter expression in the Spanish version of this work.

(4) Public responses refer to complaints addressed to the parties involved in the transaction, i.e. manufacturers or retailers, and complaints to third parties such as consumer protection agencies, mass media and legal measures. Private responses include exit behavior and WOM reviews, being communications in web sites recently added (Blodgett et al., 2006).
success of the complaint and negative affects. We aim to analyse the causal relationships between these variables in order to identify direct, indirect and mediating effects. Our empirical application is developed in the context of unsatisfactory experiences with restaurants to obtain an approximation of the factors underpinning the negative WOM from consumers dissatisfied with this type of services.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

2.1. Importance of WOM

One of the consequences of the evaluation of a shopping and/or consumption experience is interpersonal communication. For several decades research has recognized that the impact of person-to-person information transmission, called WOM, on consumer behavior is greater than the information generated by enterprises through mass media (Hogan et al., 2004). In this sense, Lau and Ng (2001) emphasize that WOM is direct, personal, and contains an independent message from the company more real and believable. Moreover, this form of communication is the most common medium for rumors’ reception since the most consumers use WOM to spread unverified and unconfirmed stories (Kimmel, 2008).

It is also accepted that WOM is both a condition and a consequence of consumer decisions (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004). In the pre-purchase stage, consumers seek information from others as a risk-reduction strategy. WOM is especially important in some types of services due to the difficulty to be evaluated before their acquisition and the perceived risk that exists in comparison to physical products is higher (Mangold et al., 1999). In the post-purchase stage, consumers use WOM for several purposes such as helping others, revenge, letting off stream or reducing dissonance, among others (Halstead, 2002). After the purchase, negative WOM has also more influence on switching behaviour than complaint response (Malhotra et al., 2008).

In addition, technology development has boosted online WOM (or e-WOM) with different characteristics to traditional WOM (Sen, 2008) and poses major challenges and opportunities for service providers (Duan et al., 2008). Despite the importance that it is acquiring this kind of WOM for business some recent works show that information from virtual WOM has less impact than face-to-face experience of traditional WOM (Sen and Lerman, 2007).

Literature states that dissatisfied consumers tend to tell their experiences more often than satisfied consumers (Baker Retail, 2006). Consumer negative WOM has more effect on attitudes, decisions and judgments of other consumers than positive WOM (Laczniak et al., 2001). In spite of this importance, research on WOM is still scarce and shows some conceptual and measurement limitations (Mazzarol et al., 2007). In general, WOM has been defined as oral person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale (Lau and Ng, 2001: p. 164). In the
context of unsatisfactory experiences, the definition of Richins (1987) of negative WOM stresses that this interpersonal communication damages both product, service or brand and company. Traditionally it is accepted the bidimensional nature of WOM in the literature since it is a behavior that contains an evaluative dimension, related to the degree of information goodness (from more positive to more negative) and a conative dimension, reflected in the behavior of information dissemination to others (Swan and Oliver, 1989). These dimensions have been considered in more recent studies such as Harrison-Walker (2001), Halstead (2002) or Duan et al. (2008) who define the concept of WOM from the valence and the activity or volume, respectively.

2.2. WOM antecedents

Several variables have been analyzed in the literature as antecedents of WOM such as service quality and perceived value (Harltline and Jones, 1996), emotional responses and equity (Westbrook, 1987) or service recovery attempts (Maxham III and Netemeyer, 2002). It has also suggested WOM determinants of cultural type (Liu and McClure, 2001, Ngai et al., 2007), individual type such as consumer personality, product or service knowledge, or involvement in the purchase process (Theng and Ng, 2001) and social type such as the level of individual integration (Richins, 1987) or the desire to share information and help others (Walsh et al., 2004).

It can also identify several variables that the literature suggests as antecedents of the different responses to dissatisfaction and therefore negative WOM. For example, the studies of Crié (2003) and Moliner (2007) provide collections of determinants that explain these responses, from environment-related factors (degree of competition or culture), company-related factors (accessibility or image) and product/service-related factors (durability or tangibility) to consumer-related determinants. These variables can be grouped into general and individual-specific variables of the unsatisfactory situation. General variables include socio-demographic characteristics of consumers (Sarabia and Parra, 2001), attitudes toward the complaint (Blodgett et al., 1997) and level of information and experience in complaints (Berry et al., 2002). Among the variables that characterize the unsatisfactory experience, level of dissatisfaction (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004), perception of the probability of success of the complaint (Morel et al., 1997) and affects (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998) are the most important determinants in the literature about the origin of responses to dissatisfaction. These variables are going to be considered as WOM antecedents in our paper.

Regarding dissatisfaction, since WOM information is based on the evaluation of a shopping and/or consumption experience, one of its antecedents is the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction (Anderson, 1998; Gremler and Brown, 1999). There are numerous studies that have investigated the effect of these judgments on different
responses to dissatisfaction (Singh and Wilkes, 1996; Johnston, 1998). In the context of services, different proposals show the contribution of dissatisfaction on negative WOM (Oh, 2004, 2006). Some authors also suggest that dissatisfaction has greater effect on WOM than on complaint actions (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004; Moliner et al., 2008), since a complaint is influenced by other factors that may have more importance than dissatisfaction (Huppertz, 2003). In our context, we understand that the more the consumer is dissatisfied there is greater probability of developing a negative WOM, both in terms of behavior and intentions (Mittal and Kamakura, 2001; Oh, 2006). Thus we state the first research hypothesis:

\[ H_{1a} = \text{Level of dissatisfaction with service will directly and positively cause negative WOM behaviour.} \]
\[ H_{1b} = \text{Level of dissatisfaction with service will directly and positively cause negative WOM intentions.} \]

The likelihood of complaint success can be defined as the consumer perceptions about the possibilities to solve his problem if he expresses a complaint (Singh, 1990). Several studies have shown that the intention to express a complaint is higher when the consumer believes the company can solve it (Morel et al., 1997, Kim et al., 2003; Oh, 2003, 2006, Moliner et al. 2006). In this line, Blodgett et al. (1995) and Blodgett and Anderson (2000) also conclude that it is more likely that consumers seek a solution when they perceive a high probability of complaint success. We therefore assume that the greater the perceived likelihood of complaint success the lower the intention to negative WOM, stating the following hypothesis:

\[ H_{2a} = \text{Likelihood of success in complaining will directly and negatively cause negative WOM behaviour.} \]
\[ H_{2b} = \text{Likelihood of success in complaining will directly and negatively cause negative WOM intentions.} \]

According to Huppertz (2007), the likelihood of complaint success is based on the cost-benefit assessment made by the dissatisfied consumer. Before choosing the complaining option, consumers anticipate not only whether the complaint will have a positive impact but also whether it is worth presenting it, i.e. whether the benefits to be gained outweigh the effort. Several studies have proposed employees’ authority (Homburg and Furst, 2005), consumer’s troubles (Davis et al., 1998) and company accessibility (Varela, 1992, Tax and Brown, 1998) as factors influencing the probability of complaint success.

Other authors associate this variable with the volume of complaints in the sector (Blodgett and Granbois, 1992) and the potential personal and social benefits (Singh and Wilkes, 1996, Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). Blodgett and Anderson (2000) also suggest that consumer loyalty, retailer type and attitudes towards complaints
increase the perception of the likelihood of complaint success. Given all these influencing factors, we can also relate this variable with the level of dissatisfaction experienced by the consumer and their affective responses. Although there is no empirical evidence about it, we can assume that the higher the consumer’s perception about the possibility that the company solves the problem, the lower the levels of dissatisfaction and negative affect, enunciating the following hypothesis:

\[ H_{3a} = \text{Likelihood of success in complaining will directly and negatively cause level of dissatisfaction.} \]

\[ H_{3a} = \text{Likelihood of success in complaining will directly and negatively cause negative affects.} \]

Since the eighties, affective responses are also considered in the literature as antecedents of the level of dissatisfaction and its responses (Oliver et al., 1997; Liljander and Strandvik, 1997; Maute and Dubé, 1999). Although traditionally it has been understood that satisfaction has a cognitive and an affective component (Oliver, 1989), the importance of affects has grown considerably. In general the emotional component of satisfaction has been analyzed both conceptually (Giese and Cote, 2000) and empirically (Smith and Bolton, 2002; Bigné and Andreu, 2004). In the context of services, the role of emotions has received special attention due to the interaction of consumers in the process of service delivery (Wirtz and Bateson, 1999). Although the literature provides some differences between affects, emotions and moods (Andreu, 2003), most of studies consider affects as a set of mental processes that generate emotions and moods. The proposals of affect typologies include positive, negative and neutral affects (Izard, 1977; Richins, 1997) and different types can simultaneously exist in the same evaluation of a service (Oliver, 1993).

Various studies confirm the influence of affect in satisfaction and dissatisfaction judgments (Chebat and Michon, 2003; Bigné and Andreu, 2004). Even some studies suggest that in certain situations, affective responses have greater contribution than cognitive appraisal of the disconfirmation of expectations (Jun et al., 2001). In general, contributions conclude that positive affect of the consumer in an experience has a direct positive relationship with satisfaction, while negative affects are related to dissatisfaction (Wirtz et al., 2000). Therefore we formulate the following hypothesis:

\[ H_4 = \text{Negative affects will directly and positively cause level of dissatisfaction with service.} \]

Besides the influence of affect on the level of dissatisfaction, there is also empirical evidence on its contribution in subsequent responses (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998; Maute and Dubé, 1999). According to these contributions, the emotional state generated by the experience evaluation is what motivates a customer to place a complaint, make WOM and/or exit behaviour, and not the level of dissatisfaction. Also some studies have shown that different responses to dissatisfaction may develop as
a consequence not only of different kinds of emotions but also of different valence or degree of affect (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004; Laros and Steenkamp, 2005).

Recent contributions suggest that the emotions generated by an unsatisfactory experience lead to develop behaviors to seek support in others (Menon and Dubé, 2004). In this line several contributions have related positively some negative affects such as anger or disappointment with negative WOM behaviour (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 1999; Bougie et al., 2003; Mattila and Ro, 2007). There are also empirical evidences about causal effect of hedonic experiences on WOM (Raajpoot et al., 2009). We consider that negative affects of a dissatisfied consumer has a significant influence on negative WOM behavior and intentions, and we formulate the following hypothesis:

\[ H_{5a} = \text{Negative affects will directly and positively cause negative WOM behaviour.} \]
\[ H_{5b} = \text{Negative affects will directly and positively cause negative WOM intentions.} \]

The proposed hypotheses are shown in Figure 1 and refer to the direct relationships between the variables under analysis. These relationships allow us also to establish hypotheses about the mediating effect exerted both level of dissatisfaction and negative affect. We therefore consider that level of dissatisfaction mediates the effect of the probability of success of the complaint and negative affects on WOM behavior and intentions. Probability of success and these affects influence both directly and indirectly on WOM through dissatisfaction. Furthermore, negative affects would also mediate the relationship between likelihood of complaint success and level of dissatisfaction. Likelihood of success of the complaint also would affect directly and indirectly on dissatisfaction through negative affect. Thus the hypotheses that we propose are:

\[ H_{6a} = \text{Likelihood of success in complaining will indirectly and negatively cause negative WOM behavior through level of dissatisfaction with service.} \]
\[ H_{6b} = \text{Likelihood of success in complaining will indirectly and negatively cause negative WOM intentions through level of dissatisfaction with service.} \]
\[ H_{7a} = \text{Negative affects will indirectly and positively cause negative WOM behavior through level of dissatisfaction with service.} \]
\[ H_{7b} = \text{Negative affects will indirectly and positively cause negative WOM intentions through level of dissatisfaction with service.} \]
\[ H_{8} = \text{Likelihood of success in complaining will indirectly and negatively cause level of dissatisfaction through negative affects.} \]
3. Methodology

3.1. Information collection and measurement scales

Hospitality sector has been chosen for the study, specifically the restaurants context. Many studies on dissatisfaction have used this type of scenario in the last decade (Palmer et al., 2000; Liu and McClure, 2001; Mattila and Ro, 2007). It is a wide sector in terms of number of users and incidents, unsatisfactory experiences are easily generated in relation to individual level of involvement, and users have a critical perception and evaluation of the service results (Palmer et al., 2000). The social component is one of the keys to this type of service due to the high degree of contact between employees and customers (Butcher, 2005). In addition, in this context consumers can choose the restaurant taking into account affective criteria with the aim of experiencing different emotional states (Wirtz et al., 2000).

The information was obtained from a sample of individuals who had had an unsatisfactory experience. This methodology has often been used in recent decades to investigate dissatisfaction and complaining behavior (Johnston, 1995; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002; Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004). Following this method, individuals have to remember clearly a specific unsatisfactory situation which has served as a point of reference to evaluate the variables.

Information was collected using a quantitative research method with a self-administered ad-hoc survey based on a structured questionnaire. A pilot test of the questionnaire was done to verify that it functioned correctly. The resulting definitive questionnaire comprises a set of scales selected from different contributions and adapted to the restaurant context (Table 1).
Why do restaurant customers engage in negative word-of-mouth?

Table 1. Measurement scales used in the questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Scale items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Likelihood of success in complaining         | - Likeli1: How likely is it that the restaurant would take appropriate action to deal with your problem?  
Adapted from Blodgett et al. (1993: p. 414) and Singh (1990: p. 7) | |
| Negative affects                              | - Affect1: Angry  
Adapted from Izard (1991, 1977) | |
| Dissatisfaction                               | - Dissat1: This is one of the worst restaurants I have ever been to  
Adapted from Bigné and Andreu (2002: p. 502) | |
| Negative WOM behavior                        | - WOMbehav1: Approximately, how many people have you told about your experience to?  
Adapted from Halstead (2002: p. 6,7) | |
| Negative WOM intentions                       | - WOMintent1: I would tell my friends and relatives my bad experience  
Adapted from Liu and McClure (2001: p. 72) | |

The reference population was individuals in a Spanish city between the ages of 20 and 64. The response rate was 96%. From a convenience sample, 388 completed questionnaires were collected; those with a high number of unanswered questions were excluded to give 345 valid questionnaires. The socio-demographic profile of the sample and the most important experience characteristics are shown in table 2.

(5) Likelihood of success in complaining was measured with 5 points from “very unlikely” to “very likely”. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure negative affects, dissatisfaction level and negative WOM intentions. Finally, negative WOM behaviour was measured with two items: valence or goodness level, from 1 (very positive WOM) to 5 (very negative WOM) and volume or extension, from 1 (if the individual tells his bad experience to 1 or 2 people) to 5 (if the individual tells his bad experience to more than 15 people).
3.2. Measurement scale reliability, dimensionality and validity

The preliminary study on dimensionality and possible refinement of the scales was conducted by an exploratory factor analysis (Maximum Likelihood Method with Varimax Rotation), using the criteria of eigenvalues greater than 1 (Hair et al., 1999). In terms of the dimensionality structure, all the scales proved to be unidimensional. In terms of scale refinement, one item of negative affect scale was eliminated since the alpha reliability indicator considerably increased (Affect2), and one item of WOM behaviour was eliminated in view of the insufficient loading (WOMbehav1). Finally, the levels of reliability showed good internal consistency over 0.7 (Nunnally, 1987). This initial dimensionality proposal was confirmed after confirmatory factorial analysis with software EQS 6.1. (Table 3). The measurement model was estimated with the robust maximum likelihood method (Bentler, 1995), using the covariance matrix from the outset (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1996).

First we calculated internal consistency of the dimensions considering two indicators: composed reliability coefficient with a minimum threshold of 0.7 (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Bagozzi and Yi, 1988) and the variance extracted for each scale, whose value must be over 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). These indexes, shown in Table 3, were acceptable for all the factors. Finally we analysed scale construct validity (convergent and discriminant) for the factors which make up the latent variables. Convergent validity was confirmed for the unidimensional scales as all the variables have significant and high loadings (t>2.58) (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Discriminant validity, that is, verification that each factor represents a separate dimension, is analysed through the standardised linear correlations or covariances between

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Income</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Primary education 4.7%</td>
<td>The lowest 0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Secondary education 16.3%</td>
<td>A bit lower 8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University diploma 24.2%</td>
<td>Medium 62.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate 46.8%</td>
<td>A bit higher 27.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PhD 7.9%</td>
<td>The highest 0.8%</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Time that has happened from the experience</th>
<th>Restaurant category</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Less than 1 week 3.7%</td>
<td>Social restaurant 9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 25 and 34 45%</td>
<td>Between 1 week and 1 month 8.5%</td>
<td>Home delivery 0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 35 and 44 19.7%</td>
<td>Between 1 and 3 months 18.6%</td>
<td>Theme restaurant 38.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 45 and 54 5.5%</td>
<td>Between 3 and 6 months 15.4%</td>
<td>Familiar 31.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Special events 9.8%</td>
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<td>Very usual 5.5%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usual 22.8%</td>
<td>Medium 62.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little usual 16.6%</td>
<td>A bit higher 27.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sporadic 33.8%</td>
<td>The highest 0.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Very sporadic 21.4%</td>
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</tr>
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Table 2. Socio-demographic profile and unsatisfactory experience characteristics
latent factors of scales. These values showed signs of discriminant validity as they took values away from 1, which in all cases was indicative of discrimination between the different dimensions analysed (Bagozzi, 1994). After being squared, they were lower than the variance extracted and therefore we were able to guarantee discriminant validity in the latent variables. To analyse this type of validity in depth, it was verified that the confidence interval for the correlation between each pair of latent factors did not contain the value 1 (Table 3), showing that these factors represent significantly different concepts (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

Table 3. Measurement model (scale dimensionality, reliability and validity)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Standardised factor loads</th>
<th>Correlation$^2$</th>
<th>(IC at 95%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Likeli1</td>
<td>0.800</td>
<td>Likeli- Affect=0.000</td>
<td>(-0.082; 0.082)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeli2</td>
<td>0.973 (19.80**)</td>
<td>Likeli-Dissat=0.081</td>
<td>(-0.015; 0.177)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeli3</td>
<td>0.811 (17.69**)</td>
<td>Likeli-WOMbehav=0.036</td>
<td>(-0.044; 0.116)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeli-WOMintent=0.042</td>
<td>0.022; 0.106</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeli-Dissat=0.113</td>
<td>(0.029; 0.197)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeli-WOMbehav=0.091</td>
<td>(0.021; 0.161)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeli-WOMintent=0.182</td>
<td>(0.122; 0.242)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeli-WOMinten=0.158</td>
<td>(0.106; 0.210)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeli-Dissat=0.197</td>
<td>(0.127; 0.267)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeli-WOMinten=0.319</td>
<td>(0.245; 0.393)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeli-WOMbehav-WOMintent=0.158</td>
<td>(0.106; 0.210)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeli-WOMinten=0.739</td>
<td>0.729</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeli-WOMinten=0.754 (7.69**)</td>
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</table>

Global measurement model fit measurements: Chi$^2$ Sat.(d.f.=56)=74.01 (p-value=0.0538); RMSEA=0.030; CFI=0.989; BB-NFI=0.957; BB-NNFI=0.984; GFI LISREL = 0.946; AGFI LISREL = 0.923

**$: t$-statistic values between brackets (p-value<0.01)
The fit indexes obtained in the measurement model estimation showed that the variables measured converge perfectly towards the factors established in the exploratory factor analysis (Table 3). The robust Chi-Square statistic test allowed us to state that global fit was correct with a confidence level of 95%. This was further corroborated by the other global fit indicators (RMSEA < 0.08; GFI and AGFI greater than 0.9; CFI > 0.9; and BBNFI and BBNNFI greater than 0.9).

4. Results of causal model estimation

After checking the reliability and validity of the proposed scales, we proceeded to verify the hypotheses by analysing a causal model (Figure 2). Fit quality, analysed by different measurements of goodness, was acceptable. Bearing in mind the clarification on the Chi-square difference test (Bentler and Bonett, 1980; James et al., 1982), we have considered other goodness indicators of global fit. We can therefore conclude that the causal model shows a satisfactory fit.

Figure 2. Estimated causal model

Chi² Sat. (d.f. = 57) = 77.264 (p-value = 0.0382); RMSEA = 0.032; CFI = 0.988; BB-NFI = 0.955; BB-NNFI = 0.983; GFI LISREL = 0.964; AGFI LISREL = 0.942

**: t-statistic values between brackets (p-value < 0.01)
Regarding the estimated coefficients between the latent factors, the results showed that the most relationships between independent variables and dependent variable are significant. Likelihood of success in complaining and negative emotions contribute significantly to the level of dissatisfaction. While emotions influence positively, likelihood of success in complaining exerts a negative effect, that is, dissatisfaction increases when negative effects of experience are higher and when consumer perception about likelihood of success in complaining is lower. So we can verify hypothesis \( H_{3a} \) and \( H_4 \). However, there is no significant relationship between likelihood of success in complaining and negative emotions, so emotions would not be a mediating variable in dissatisfaction process. Therefore, these results do not provide support to assumptions \( H_{3b} \) and \( H_4 \).

Regarding the impact of dissatisfaction on subsequent responses, the coefficients show that dissatisfaction has a positive influence on negative WOM intentions and behavior, verifying hypotheses \( H_{1a} \) and \( H_{1b} \) respectively. This would involve that dissatisfaction would play a mediating role between likelihood of success in complaining and negative emotions and both WOM responses. Therefore we also find support to hypotheses \( H_{6a}, H_{6b}, H_{7a} \) and \( H_{7b} \).

Finally, regarding the effects of likelihood of success in complaining and negative effects on negative WOM behavior and intentions, the coefficients confirm that only negative emotions play a positive influence on those responses, supporting hypotheses \( H_{3a} \) and \( H_{3b} \) respectively. Since the influence of the likelihood of success in complaining is not significant on WOM behavior and intentions, we can not confirm hypotheses \( H_{2a} \) and \( H_{2b} \).

5. Conclusions, implications and future research

This paper focuses on the study of negative WOM in consumer unsatisfactory experiences with services. Literature on consumers WOM in buying and/or consumption situations is quite extensive; however, research on the negative comments is still limited and represents an area with multiple opportunities to improve knowledge on dissatisfaction and its consequences. Our objective is to determine the contribution of three of the variables most investigated in the literature on complaining behavior: likelihood of complaint success, negative affect and level of dissatisfaction. The results obtained show direct and indirect relationships between these variables and may help to understand the motivations of customers when expressing negative WOM about the company. Next we highlight the most relevant conclusions and implications in practice.

First, likelihood of complaint success is negatively affecting the formation of the level of dissatisfaction, i.e., consumers who perceive that the company can solve their problems will be less dissatisfied. These results indicate that in addition to the vari-
ables that the literature suggests as antecedents of dissatisfaction\(^6\), probability of complaint success could also be a factor with an important role in the formation of these judgments. No significant and direct relationship has been found between this variable and negative WOM, but an indirect relationship through dissatisfaction. A high probability of complaint success does not involve fewer negative WOM behavior and intentions. According to the empirical evidence that indicates that probability of complaint success motivates the individual to express their complaint (Blodgett and Anderson, 2000; Oh, 2006), we could assume that this variable negatively affects negative WOM. However, our results show that consumers do not stop making negative WOM when they perceive high probability of complaint success.

Therefore restaurant managers should be aware of the importance of facilitating customers’ complaints so that they feel that their problems can be solved satisfactorily. A high probability of complaint success would reduce the level of dissatisfaction with the experience and, since it would not diminish negative WOM, it would encourage customers to communicate their dissatisfaction and therefore offer an opportunity for the company to gain customers back. In this regard, several studies suggest that, in certain occasions, satisfaction and intentions of positive WOM and repeat purchase when the complaint is resolved are higher than satisfaction in absence of problems, thus supporting the so-called “paradox of service recovery” (McCollough et al., 2000; Magnini et al., 2007).

Second, negative affects influence judgments of dissatisfaction and this relationship is in line with other contributions that find a positive and direct relationship between both variables (Writz et al., 2000, Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2004). Also, these negative affects increase the likelihood of developing negative WOM behavior and intentions, as demonstrated by some recent studies such as Boogie et al. (2003) and Mattila and Ro (2007). Therefore, negative affects have a both direct and indirect influence, through dissatisfaction, on negative WOM. In our context, the results have shown that customers who feel upset, angry and disgusted with the situation, experience higher levels of dissatisfaction and express more negative comments about the company. In this regard, it is imperative that restaurants understand the impact of customer emotional responses on service evaluation and their subsequent responses (Chebat and Slusarczyk, 2005). Avoiding this kind of negative emotions by improving levels of service quality could be used to provide greater consumer confidence and reduce negative WOM.

In summary, the results of this research can be useful for companies in this industry that are interested in implementing a marketing philosophy oriented towards customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction management. Bearing in mind the danger that negative WOM represents in customer portfolio and the opportunity of a complaint to recover an unsatisfied customer, companies should be able to initiate actions to

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\(^{6}\) The most researched antecedents of dissatisfaction in the literature are: disconfirmation of expectations (Oliver, 1980), causal attributions (Folkes, 1984), equity (Swan and Oliver, 1989) and affects (Westbrook, 1987).
improve satisfaction levels and complaint management programs. Efforts for recovering dissatisfied customers by restaurants should go beyond the most simple actions (e.g. replacement of a defective product) and focus on high impact strategies, such as offering free services, discounts or the involvement of the restaurant manager (Susskind, 2005). It is also recommended an adequate training of employees to enable them to have autonomy for solving problems and to detect the type of emotions experienced by the customer (Mattila and Ro, 2007).

Despite the exploratory nature of this study, the results provide interesting data to continue this line of research going deeper into the origin of negative WOM of dissatisfied consumers. Conceptually, it could be investigated the influence of other variables recently studied as antecedents of responses to dissatisfaction: level of consumer involvement (Theng and Ng, 2001), perceived value (Kim et al., 2003), perceptions of fairness (Blodgett and Li, 2007) and attributions of causality (Oh, 2006; Mattila and Ro, 2007). We also propose to add moderating variables that might alter these relationships, such as consumer personal characteristics (personality, gender or age) (Mazzarol et al., 2007) or type of retailer (Blodgett and Anderson, 2000).

From the methodological point of view, it would be interesting to improve systems to measure the variables under study. For example, given the importance that it is acquiring online WOM (Sen, 2008), the measurement of negative WOM could be improved by adding other dimensions of this variable, such as the way of disseminating comments and message content. Also this study could be applied in other contexts where the interaction with the service provider is lower in order to identify differences in relationships according to the type of service or shopping experience. Therefore, we propose the study of negative WOM process in financial or telephony services, which show high levels of dissatisfaction due to the high number of queries and complaints (National Consumer Institute, 2007).

Finally, future research should use random samples to allow more representative results. The use of retrospective data may also represent a research limitation. The fact that the majority of respondents had recalled an unsatisfactory experience occurred over three months (Table 2) may be a problem for realistic evaluations. Therefore we propose in future research to limit memories to more recent situations.

References


Beatriz Moliner Velázquez and María Fuentes Blasco


Why do restaurant customers engage in negative word-of-mouth?


**Notes on Contributors**

Name: Beatriz Moliner Velázquez  
Position: Assistant Professor of Marketing  
School / Faculty: Faculty of Economy  
University: University of Valencia  
Address: Avenida de los Naranjos, s/n, 46022 Valencia  
Telephone: 961625381  
Email: beatriz.moliner@uv.es

Name: María Fuentes Blasco  
Position: Departamento de Dirección de Empresas  
School / Faculty: Faculty of Economy  
University: Pablo de Olavide University  
Address: Edificio N° 3, Conde de Floridablanca. Ctra. de Utrera, km. 1. 41013 Sevilla  
Telephone: 954977328  
Email: mfuemb@upo.es