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# WHY NOT COMPLAIN? A PARADOXICAL PROBLEM FOR MOBILE SERVICE AND APPLICATION PROVIDERS

*Complete Research*

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## Abstract

*Complaints from dissatisfied users of information systems (IS) help service and product providers decrease user churn and switching, prevent negative word-of-mouth, and improve their services and products. However, many dissatisfied individuals do not complain at all; rather, they remain silent, switch, or quit usage. The dilemma is particularly relevant in the context of mobile services and applications, in which only a fraction of users has been found to complain after negative experiences, even extreme ones. Although researchers have studied the reasons for complaining, only a few have investigated the reasons why individuals **do not** complain. To our best knowledge, there are no studies explaining IS users' noncomplaining behavior. To address this gap, we developed a context-specific theory for mobile service and application users' noncomplaining behavior by applying the grounded theory (GT) approach. GT enabled us to discover eight issues influencing noncomplaining behavior, of which three have not been presented in the prior studies on the topic. Our attempt is to open the avenue for further noncomplaining research in IS and to assist practitioners in tackling the users' context-specific reasons for not voicing their complaints.*

*Keywords: noncomplaining behavior, complaining behavior, mobile services, mobile applications.*

## 1 Introduction

Customers who complain are not only a negative matter. In fact, complaints from service and product users can help service and product providers to decrease user churn and switching to competitors (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987; Stephens and Gwinner, 1998), prevent negative word-of-mouth (Davidow, 2003), and re-design their services and products to better fit the users' needs (Mensah, 2012). However, these improvements cannot be reached if the users do not actually complain about their negative perceptions and incidents (Andreassen and Streukens, 2013). Indeed, it has been found that most of the individuals facing dissatisfaction do not complain at all (Chebat, Davidow and Cudjovi, 2005). The issue is highlighted in the context of mobile services and applications, where only 6% of users have been found to complain after their negative critical incidents (Salo, 2013). In short, "insightful managers want to understand not only persons who voice their complaints but also those who do not" (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998, 172).

It is essential to distinguish complaining behavior, which has been studied to a great extent, from noncomplaining behavior. Stephens and Gwinner (1998, 173) noted already 15 years ago that "only a

few have considered the factors that lead dissatisfied persons to remain silent”; however, there still is “a void of knowledge in the noncomplaining behavior area” (Chebat, Davidow and Codjovi, 2005, 329) and “very little research exists that [has] specifically investigated noncomplainers” (Voorhees, Brady and Horowitz, 2006, 514).

A few researchers have investigated the reasons for noncomplaining behavior within the service industry in general (Voorhees, Brady and Horowitz, 2006), traditional purchases (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998), and traditional banking services (Chebat, Davidow and Codjovi, 2005). These studies provide valuable information, but they do not offer any context-specific insights on information systems (IS)-related services and products, whose usage has grown rapidly. IS-specific enquiries can be seen important for two main reasons. First, IS-related services and products are highly different from interpersonal services (Andreassen and Streukens, 2013; Robertson and Shaw, 2009). For example, with mobile services and applications, there are rarely any physical locations and service staff members, to whom or where a user could file a complaint. Second, IS-specific enquiries can uncover unique findings and make a difference to techno-social transformations by including the information technology (IT) component into the investigation (Benbasat and Zmud, 2003; Orlikowski and Iacono, 2001; Sarker, Xiao and Beaulieu, 2012).

To our best knowledge, there are no studies, let alone theories, that explain the context-specific reasons why the users of mobile services and applications do not complain about their negative perceptions and incidents. To address this gap, our objective is to develop a new *substantive theory*—a theory about a specific substantive area (Glaser, 1978)—that explains the context-specific reasons for mobile service and application users’ noncomplaining behavior by applying the grounded theory (GT) approach. GT fits the purpose of this study because of its potential in assisting researchers to build IS-specific theories instead of relying merely on its reference disciplines (Urquhart, Lehmann and Myers, 2010).

As a theoretical contribution, this study develops a new substantive theory for explaining the phenomenon, which consists of eight important issues affecting mobile users’ noncomplaining behavior. As for practical contribution, service and application providers can use this theory to improve their complaint management in order to prevent user churn, switching, and negative word-of-mouth by tackling the identified context-specific reasons for noncomplaining behavior.

## **2 Noncomplaining Behavior**

With GT, it is important to note the noncommittal role of the upfront (or preliminary) literature review (Urquhart and Fernández, 2013). As grounded theorists should develop theoretical sensitivity and should not remain blank slates (Glaser 1978; Urquhart and Fernández, 2013), our literature review informs about the prior research on related phenomena but does not outline any strict theoretical framework for the empirical part of this article. Thus, in this section, we present our review regarding three relevant topics: issues affecting complaining behavior, complaint channel choice, and noncomplaining behavior.<sup>1</sup>

There are recognized categorizations for complaining behavior in prior research (Gursoy, McCleary and Lepsito, 2007). Hirschman (1970) originally presented that dissatisfied consumers may exit by leaving the company, voice their dissatisfaction to formal or informal parties, and/or stay loyal to the company. Day and Landon (1977) concluded that dissatisfaction may or may not lead to action; in addition, if action does occur, it may be either public or private (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004; Singh, 1988;

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<sup>1</sup> This study focuses solely on *dissatisfied* users who do not complain (as *satisfied* users can also be defined as noncomplainers).

Son and Kim 2008). Singh (1988) further proposed that consumers might voice their dissatisfaction to companies and third parties or take private actions, such as via word-of-mouth communication. In this study, we focus on noncomplaining behavior related to companies (service or product providers) and third-party organizations, rather than on private actions, such as negative word-of-mouth communication.

## **2.1 Issues affecting complaining behavior**

In the context of traditional services and products, researchers have found several abstract issues that influence complaining behavior. The typical issues include individual characteristics, attitude, and propensity to complain (Bodey and Grace, 2007; Andreassen and Streukens, 2013), availability of alternatives (Hirschman, 1970), the nature of the customer relationship (Nimako and Mensah, 2012; Voorhees, Brady and Horowitz, 2006), and the complaint channel (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004; Robertson, 2012).

A few researchers have investigated complaining behavior in IS-related contexts. With self-service technologies (SST), the likelihood of complaining has been found to be influenced by the likelihood of complaint success, causal locus, SST self-efficacy, ease of complaining, SST powerlessness, and one's personal need to vent (Robertson and Shaw, 2009). In the context of Internet services and information privacy, Son and Kim (2008) conclude that complaining behavior is influenced by information privacy concerns and perceived societal benefits.

As there are differences in *complaint channels*, some researchers have investigated individuals' channel choice and the use of an online channel to complain. Robertson (2012) has found out that the primary motives for channel choice are the ease of the complaint channel, equivocal complaint task, comfort, likelihood of success, and complaint channel self-efficacy. Mattila and Wirtz (2004) distinguish interactive complaint channels (face-to-face and phone) from remote channels (letter and e-mail). They present that persons seeking redress tend to choose interactive channels, while the ones who like to vent their frustration go for remote channels. Andreassen and Streukens (2013) summarize that the intention to use online complaining is affected by technology beliefs, situational and individual characteristics, and attitudes toward online complaining.

## **2.2 Issues affecting noncomplaining behavior**

Because complaining and *noncomplaining* behavior are not the exact opposites of each other, we have found five studies that have distinguished these two types of behavior. First, in the context of traditional purchases, Stephens and Gwinner (1998) confirm and describe two coping strategies, adapted from prior studies, that lead to noncomplaining behavior: emotion-focused coping and avoidance coping. With emotion-focused coping, noncomplaining may be a result of self-blame, self-control, denial, or a desire for social support, while with avoidance coping, an individual leaves the situation and avoids the firm with which he or she is dissatisfied (Stephens and Gwinner, 1998). Second, with banking services, complaining (or coping) behavior has been found to deal with problem importance/magnitude and frequency, controllability, attribution, emotions, and a person's propensity for seeking redress (Chebat, Davidow and Codjovi, 2005). Third, in the context of the service industry in general, Voorhees, Brady, and Horowitz (2006) discovered a comprehensive set of explanations for noncomplaining behavior. These explanations include time and effort, service provider responsiveness/availability, personality factors, organization-initiated service recovery, late realization of the failure, loyalty, firm's good reputation, internal attributions, social factors, and alternative action.

Fourth, with mobile network operators, Nimako and Mensah (2012) have assumed that the following issues affect noncomplaining behavior: the perception that it is too late to complain, that nothing

would be done about the problem, that complaining will affect a company's reputation, a person is busy or does not have time, a person does not know where or how to complain, a person is loyal, shy, or afraid. Finally, by analyzing actual technology-based encounters, Snellman and Vihtkari (2003) have found a list of reasons for not complaining: ineffectiveness, time, hopeless situation, lack of seriousness, the person does not know where and how to complain, the problem was solved, user's own failure, and embarrassment.

Although these five above-mentioned studies have provided valuable information about individuals' noncomplaining behavior in general, we could not find any context-specific insights about IS or mobile users' noncomplaining behavior. For example, the most closely related studies on mobile network operators (Nimako and Mensah, 2012) and technology-based encounters (Snellman and Vihtkari, 2003) focus on several research issues simultaneously, thereby remaining at a rather abstract level in terms of noncomplaining behavior and not including any inspection of the IT artefact. Therefore, it is our aim to fill this gap by explaining context-specific reasons why dissatisfied mobile service and application users do not choose to complain.

### **3 Method**

GT is an inductive, empirically grounded method for developing a theory. It has been applied within many disciplines due to its advantages in promoting both rigor and relevance (Urquhart and Fernández, 2013). GT is also well fitted with our aim, as it is useful for explaining a previously uncovered phenomenon and providing context-specific, rich insights on selected IS topics (Orlikowski, 1993; Urquhart, Lehmann and Myers, 2010). Context-specific approaches are encouraged by Venkatesh, Thong, and Xu (2012, p. 158):

“Compared to general theories, in more recent years, theories that focus on a specific context and identify relevant predictors and mechanisms are considered to be vital in providing a rich understanding of a focal phenomenon and to meaningfully extend theories.”

There are different variants of GT. We followed the approach by Glaser (1978) because it emphasizes flexible discovery of a theory from empirical evidence, in contrast to structurally forcing the empirical evidence to take the form of a theory (Urquhart and Fernández, 2013). The process of GT starts with anecdotal evidence or a hunch, continues with simultaneously collecting and analyzing slices of empirical evidence to saturate categories and their relationships, and finishes with positioning the resulting theory with extant findings (Urquhart, Lehmann and Myers, 2010). Simultaneously, it is suggested to involve a three-staged literature review: preliminary, thematic, and theoretical review (Urquhart and Fernández, 2013). We describe our research process with the help of these phases as follows.

#### **3.1 Phase 1: Anecdotal evidence and preliminary literature review**

We discovered from our earlier critical incident technique survey that only a fraction of Finnish mobile service and application users (5/89, 6%) had complained after their outstandingly negative experiences. This finding led us to this particular area of enquiry. Because we found no existing IS-specific findings or theories for noncomplaining behavior, we conducted a preliminary literature review on the closest relevant topics to inform about the research problem and its nature.

#### **3.2 Phase 2: Empirical evidence, category formation, and thematic literature review**

We collected two different slices of empirical evidence from a total of 32 mobile service and application users. The descriptive characteristics of the informants are described in Table 1. To collect

the first slice, we sent open-ended follow-up questions by email for those survey respondents (Finnish mobile service and application users) who had not complained after their outstandingly negative experiences and had given us permission to ask further questions by email. The questions were: “Which reasons have affected you not to complain to the service or application provider?” and “How did it affect you that the service or application in question is mobile and not another type of a service or product?” After approaching 36 users, we received 22 responses (entailing half a page of written text on average). To deepen the insights with the second slice, we utilized a more interactive approach by carrying out 10 individual interviews with Finnish mobile users. In order to reach a rich variety of perceptions about noncomplaining behavior, we gathered interviewees varying in terms of age, gender, employment status, field of business, IT use experience, and general propensity to complain. We applied an open interview scheme (available upon a request) and supplemented it with explanatory categories as they emerged in order to follow theoretical sampling. The interviews, lasting between 36 and 68 minutes, were recorded and transcribed for the relevant parts.

	Gender		Age				Primary status		
	Male	Female	≤ 24	25-34	35-44	≥ 45	Employed	Unemployed	Student
<b>Slice 1 (N=22)</b>	14	8	3	10	8	1	N/A		
<b>Slice 2 (N=10)</b>	6	4	3	3	2	2	6	1	3

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the informants (mobile service and application users).

The analysis took place simultaneously with the collection of the evidence. In the beginning, we constructed initial categories as well as their properties and relationships by using open and selective coding with the NVivo software. A coded incident (or indicator) typically reflected a set of words, a sentence, or a set of sentences. We also created hand-written memos to sketch the relationships between the categories. Importantly, we constantly compared whether newly collected evidence supplemented, modified, or challenged our previous analyses (Glaser 1978; Urquhart, Lehmann and Myers 2010). Coding examples are available upon request. The corresponding author mainly responsible for the analysis discussed the interpretations drawn from the evidence with the co-author and two other scholars several times. During the analysis process, we used a thematic literature review to assist and enrich the formation of categories as suggested by Urquhart and Fernández (2013). We carried out interviews until the main “gap in [the] theory, especially in [the] major categories, [was] almost, if not completely filled” (Glaser and Strauss, 1974, 61).

With this prospective conference article, we decided to focus particularly on open and selective coding in order to support our main aim of providing context-specific findings (as done also by e.g., Sarker and Sarker, 2009). Thus, we deliberately left further theoretical coding on an abstract level for the potential journal publication with less restrictive page length restrictions.

### 3.3 Phase 3: Theoretical integration and theoretical literature review

Finally, after the analysis, a theoretical literature review helped us to integrate our findings with extant studies. The aim of theoretical integration is to position and extend existing theories by a comparison of “a number of diverse theories which touch upon various aspects and levels of the emerging theory” (Glaser, 1978, 38). Therefore, we compare our resulting theory with previous explanations for noncomplaining behavior in the Discussion section.

In Table 2, we summarize our reflections with the criteria presented by Sarker and Sarker (2009).<sup>2</sup>

Aspect of the study	Our approach and actions
<u>Collection of Evidence</u>	
<i>Choice of informants</i>	For the first slice of evidence, we approached mobile service and application users that had undergone outstandingly negative experiences but had not complained about them. For the second slice of evidence, we interviewed a diverse group of mobile service and application users to reach a variety of reasons for noncomplaining.
<i>Conduct of the interviews</i>	We aimed to maintain theoretical sampling, appear trustworthy and diplomatic, keep the discussion on track, and stay sensitive to seizing on relevant issues.
<i>Researcher involvement</i>	The authors collaborated and additionally engaged two other researchers in phrasing questions, selecting interviewees, conducting interviews, coding the evidence, drawing interpretations, and developing the theory.
<i>Empathetic neutrality</i>	We emphasized to the interviewees that there are no right or wrong answers and that we are interested in their genuine opinions. Also, we empathized with the interviewees' negative experiences yet showed interest in hearing more about such experiences with a neutral approach.
<u>Analysis of Evidence</u>	
<i>Constant comparison and saturation</i>	We simultaneously analyzed and collected evidence to challenge and modify the emerging categories, as Glaser (1978) advises. Finally, the major categories were saturated enough.
<i>Triangulation</i>	The main categories and their properties emerged from both types of evidence (open e-mail questions and interviews) and were mentioned by multiple users.
<i>Being suspicious</i>	To avoid the possible "say one thing, act according to another" bias, we aimed to ground the users' perceptions on actual experiences that they had lived through.
<i>Member checking</i>	We aimed to confirm our interpretations by checks ("Did I get it right?").

Table 2. Our reflections on the criteria presented by Sarker and Sarker (2009).

## 4 Results

In this section, we present the eight issues that we found to influence mobile service and application users' noncomplaining behavior. By applying and extending the broad categorizations by Day and Landon (1977) and Singh (1988), we have positioned these eight issues under three different types of noncomplaining behavior: 1) no complaining intention, 2) complaining intention but no action, and 3) alternative action. According to our empirical evidence, users do not even intend to complain because of *unimportance of mobile services*, *low sacrifices & expectations*, *updates as a solution*, *personal & device uncertainty*, or *personal characteristics*. At times, they do intend to complain but do not take any action because of *confusing channel & consequence* or *poor device-complaining fit*. When the users choose to take alternative action instead of complaining, they perceive *service switching as an easier option*. It may also occur that the behavior type 3 originates from the behavior type 2. Our findings are summarized in our new research model (Figure 1) and described in more detail as follows.

<sup>2</sup> We chose not to include the aspects that are relevant only in the contexts of organizations, not with individual users.

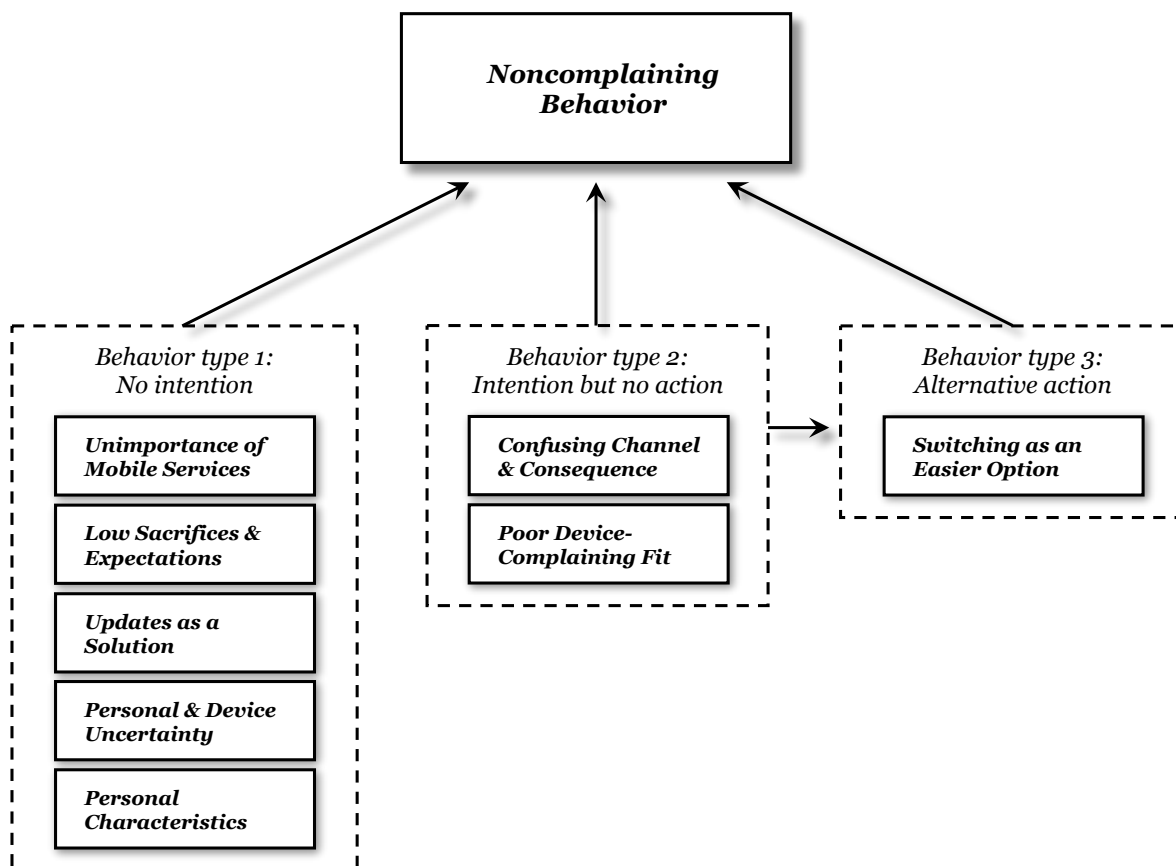


Figure 1. The resulting research model: mobile users' noncomplaining behavior.

#### 4.1 Unimportance of mobile services and applications

Even though the interviewed mobile users reported many frustrating and enraging experiences (occasionally even accompanied with curses), the users often paradoxically downplayed the importance of mobile services and applications in their lives. It appeared to us that such perceived or pretended unimportance makes users not bother to think about complaining when dissatisfaction occurs. For example, two users stated that their main reasons for noncomplaining were that “[the application] doesn’t affect my life too much” and “I don’t appreciate applications as much as I perhaps should.” Some of the users justified the insignificance by the temporary nature of mobile services and applications and their willingness to be independent of them, contrary to desktop computer software:

“My mobile applications are just ‘temporary.’ If [an application] doesn’t function, I’ll remove it from use—I can live without mobile software. Phone as a phone. But [desktop] computer software is completely a case apart.”

Alternatively, some of the users treated their mobile usage only as unimportant leisure entertainment:

“Because this is a leisure-related application, which I’ve selected by myself and use it. Therefore, a complaint wouldn’t perhaps be the first thing to do.”

In sum, as one of the users expressed it: “Small applications, small worries.”



## **4.2 Low sacrifices & expectations**

According to our evidence, users' investments of money, time, and effort influence their expectations, which further shape their intentions to complain. As "downloading an application doesn't usually require anything," many users seem to settle for imperfect services and applications. We found that such settling can relate both to mobile services specifically but also to IT in general. The following quotations represent these two views:

"If it's only about, for example, convenience of use and not about an actual flaw in the application, I simply don't bother [to complain] but rather settle for what I get, or I'll find another application."

"Maybe [noncomplaining] is due to accepting shortages in technology sort of automatically. It's just specifically rooted in your mind that you can't ask for first-class [technology]."

The most pessimistic opinions indicated users' general disbelief in mobile applications. For instance, one user said that he "perhaps somehow already assumed that [applications] don't function, at least in the way they are supposed to."

The price does matter for many users (although not for all): free services are often treated with the lowest expectations. However, the reported threshold for an increased likelihood of thinking about complaining ranged from 10 to 100 euros among the users. Interestingly, for some users, the relationship between invested money and threshold to complain seems to be highly different with mobile services and applications than with other services and products:

"Q: Where's your personal limit if you had to name it? A: 50 euros... 40 euros... Let's say, if a chocolate bar worth of one euro tastes weird, I'd rather give feedback about that than about [mobile] applications."

"Why would I bother to complain about an application worth two euros when the payment has flashed from some PayPal or Neteller [account] and, in that sense, does not have any link with my regular spending habits."

## **4.3 Updates as a solution**

Some users reported that they do not intend to complain because of constant software updates, which are typical for mobile services and applications. Those users tend to, rather, wait for the updates than complain because they assume that updates solve at least some of their problems. According to our evidence, it is not uncommon for the users to perceive mobile services and applications as iteratively developing entities that are often launched to markets in their early stages. Hence, users do not find mobile services and applications to be finalized and polished. For example, one user described:

"I've had some problems with applications, but in my mind I've seen it as a cause of such a fresh and developing environment... If I download an application and it's poor, I haven't [complained]... I've [sympathized] with it being so fresh and in its early stages. And [the applications] have improved through updates... Advancement through updates has an effect."

A set of users has faith in other users' eagerness to complain. Therefore, those users feel that they do not need to complain because of the assumption that other users face the same problems and complain about them. The assumption is particularly linked with services that reach a large share of users. Such users further believe that complaints from other users serve as inputs for forthcoming updates and improved versions. Two users describe the aspect as follows:

"I've the experience that even poor ones will improve after waiting a couple of months... Perhaps sometimes I am optimistic [that] someone else will complain and I'll try to remember with the next time it'll update."

"Why would I open up about something that so many others surely have already given feedback on?"

#### **4.4 Personal & device uncertainty**

We also found that personal and device uncertainty influenced users' intentions to complain. Personal uncertainty refers to situations in which users suspect that dissatisfaction occurs due to their own mistakes or inabilities, and thus they do not consider complaining. Perhaps contrary to general beliefs, experienced persons also can feel uncertainty with mobile services and applications. For example, one interviewee, having been working and having educational experience in IT development, described that he wants to be "100% sure [before complaining]" that the negative experience does not occur due to his own fault. Another user described:

"It is often also my own uncertainty that affects. When problems occur or the application doesn't function or anything else, it comes to my mind that maybe it's my own fault and not the application's."

Device uncertainty relates to situations in which users doubt their own mobile device and, therefore, do not complain. It may prevent complaining intention if the user is not "sure whether the flaw was in [one's] own phone or its compatibility with the application." Some of the users also described a negative lifecycle issue, according to which mobile devices become outdated in a few years and, thus, are unsuitable for the newest services and applications. In such cases, users may not intend to complain because they feel that they should buy a new device, as illustrated in the following quotation:

"It feels, specifically with mobile applications, that time overrides old applications at lightning speed. So if some problems occur, I immediately think that it's just a result from [my] overly old phone, that I should buy a new one if I wanted the application to function. There are no updates anymore for existing applications and their new versions don't operate with the old [operating system]. In that case it feels pointless to contact the service provider."

#### **4.5 Personal characteristics**

The intention to complain depends also on personal characteristics. Each individual seems to have a unique propensity to complain about services and products in general. It appeared to us that the propensity derives from one's habits and culture. Indeed, a set of users affiliated low propensity to complain with "a Finnish mentality." For instance, one user further elaborated:

"General passiveness with [complaining] seems to come from Finnish upbringing and education, according to which it's better to settle for what you got, or that you can't eventually influence many things you don't properly understand."

In line with low propensity, some users expressed high persistence and motivation in "trying one more time" or fixing the problems by themselves: "I guess I'm that much stubborn that I have to beat my head against a stone wall once more." Those users seemed to relate persistence with many things in life, but they appeared to highlight it particularly with IT. A few users admitted that they actually might enjoy devoting a significant amount of time and effort in solving IT-related service setbacks. One interviewee described the issue as follows:

"A: I'm that much of a technology freak that I want to trace [the problem] myself if I have any chances. Q: Only after that comes the feedback or complaining? A: Yes, yes. A careful detection of what might have went wrong. Q: [Why do you, by the way, wish to do that?] A: My curiosity, if I could [fix] it on my own. Q: Challenge? A: Exactly. Yes, that [outcome]: I managed to solve it!"

#### **4.6 Confusing channel & consequence**

When users come up with the intention to complain, it may never result in taking action because of a confusing channel and consequences. At worst, it may lead to service switching. Many users either "don't know where to file a complaint," "haven't found a reasonable feedback channel," "are

unwilling to communicate in foreign language,” or “don’t simply bother digging around and googling [the complaint channel].” The main confusion stems from the presence of three potential complaint channels: application marketplace, service provider, and service developer. Users find it “easy to write a review” in the application marketplace, but “it is necessarily not so simple to give actual [complaint] for the developer.” The reviews in the application marketplace “are rather for other users,” and “[the application marketplace] does not make it easy to build interaction between the developer and [the user].”

At times, users do not believe in their “own possibilities to make a difference” and, when changes occur, they find it “useless to fight against the change.” According to the users, the expected consequences of a complaint depend on the perceived resources of the company responsible for providing the service or application. The users draw conclusions about the resources on different grounds, such as the company’s size, nationality, clientele, investments, and success:

“The company has put so much money into the system that it doesn’t fix it due to a few complaints.”

“It feels useless to send [any complaints] especially to foreign [companies], because they don’t react to complaints coming from a small country.”

“And with larger companies... The received feedback, it initially arrives to one group [in the company], which forwards it to another group, which briefs and presents it to somebody, and not until then it reaches the developer. The original [feedback alters on the way there].”

#### **4.7 Poor device-complaining fit**

Poor fit between mobile devices and complaining activity comprises another issue that may prevent a complaining intention to proceed into action or trigger a service switch. We found the following difficulties related to a mobile device: typing descriptive or formal text, seeing the typed text as a whole, searching for contact information, and opening or using several applications simultaneously to go through the complaining process. The following quotation demonstrates the complexity of mobile complaining:

“It’s nasty to change the view or open another view, and perhaps launch some email [application], and start a separate writing process and so forth.”

One user compared the differences between mobile devices and desktop computers:

“I definitely don’t bother tapping feedback on the mobile phone ;) But then if I’m on the [desktop] computer, the threshold [to complain] is dozens of times lower, email will be sent just like that.”

Mobile devices are often advertised to fulfil any task at any given time; ironically, however, users highlight that the situation “on the move” and “in a hurry” does not fit at all with filing a complaint. In short, “it feels extremely inflexible to perform any task that is more challenging than basic usage.”

#### **4.8 Switching as an easier option**

Many users consider it much easier to switch to another alternative than to complain and stay with the service causing dissatisfaction. With mobile services and applications, switching is particularly easy because there are very few unique ones, and there are typically a great number of alternatives. Downloading and installing them from application marketplaces take only a few minutes, and users are often uncommitted to a single service or application. For instance, a user expressed that “very few applications are truly unique and irreplaceable: it’s not worth the effort to complain, since I can just try the next [application].” For some users, these aspects have caused specific habits for unrestrained trialing and switching of services and applications, described as follows:

“It’s more like quick trialing of free versions, and if even a little irritation occurs, just delete [the application]. You can always replace it with a new one!”

It is impossible for service or application providers to remove their rivals or hinder application marketplace processes, but they can promote user involvement. User involvement may result in increased willingness to cope with the service or application:

“My own history attached to [the application] is that long, so I don’t easily switch. At one point, there were pretty severe problems in order to keep it running... They fixed it [later].”

At the same time, dissatisfying mobile service experiences can cause a switch to desktop versions, too. It appeared to us that many users do not tend to rely on mobile devices and services but rather keep alternative options—a laptop or a desktop computer—in mind. As the following quotation indicates, users may accept the failures with a mobile service, but they would complain if the problem occurred also with the desktop version of the same service:

“Q: Have you approached the service provider, have you thought about complaining? A: No, I’ve just cursed and opened a beer. ...Somehow I accept the destiny... I’ve then done [the task] with another device, [desktop computer]. ...I guess my threshold [to complain] surpasses when it doesn’t function on the [desktop computer] either. ...Apparently, if the mobile version doesn’t function, I’ll accept it.”

## **5 Discussion**

Our study contributes to current knowledge by introducing a substantive, context-specific theory (including a research model) that explains mobile service and application users’ noncomplaining behavior. Previously, such behavior has remained unexplained within IS, even though the topic reflects obvious business opportunities: proper complaint management can assist companies to reduce user churn and negative word-of-mouth as well as to improve their services and products. Our substantive theory, therefore, can provide new avenues for researchers to inspect the topic further and can assist practitioners in tackling the users’ fundamental reasons for noncomplaining behavior.

### **5.1 Theoretical implications**

In the Table 3, we summarize the position of our substantive theory among the findings from prior noncomplaining studies. Three of the eight discovered issues have not been presented previously. *Updates* are a unique issue that influences noncomplaining behavior with mobile services and applications, as users may prefer to wait for improvements before even intending to complain. Currently, many mobile users anticipate a constant stream of updates, which will improve the services and applications and solve some of their problems. This finding is somewhat contradictory to another IS context, free open source software, in which updates also form an essential issue, even though users have concerns and uncertainty about forthcoming technical support (Gwebu and Wang, 2010).

*Poor device-complaining fit* appears to be a crucial issue that may prevent filing a complaint. Even if users intend to complain, the mobile device does not seem to give them enough support to navigate through the complex complaining process. This finding is in line with the theory of task-technology fit that aims to explain IT utilization and performance (Goodhue and Thompson, 1995). Even though task-technology fit has been widely applied in the studies on IT usage, our findings suggest that it only partially covers the issues that explain noncomplaining behavior.

Mobile services and applications are affiliated with *low sacrifices* because of their low prices and easy availability as well as unnoticeable spending. Such perceived low sacrifices tend to generate *low expectations*, which may prevent the formation of complaining intentions. Additionally, a general disbelief in perfectly functioning IT also affects users’ expectations. In the context of human behavior

with interface agents, Serenko (2007, 300) presented similar findings and concluded that users do not tend to complain because they “expect computers to be imperfect.”

<b>Issue in our theory</b>	<b>Relevant categories in extant noncomplaining studies</b>	<b>Main findings regarding IT-specific characteristics</b>
<i>Unimportance of Mobile Services</i>	Problem importance [1], lack of seriousness [3]	Desired or pretended independence from IT
<i>Low Sacrifices &amp; Expectations</i>	<b>Not presented in extant noncomplaining studies</b>	Pessimistic view of IT, unique mobile spending habits
<i>Updates as a Solution</i>	<b>Not presented in extant noncomplaining studies</b>	Rapid update cycles, unfinished nature of mobile services
<i>Personal &amp; Device Uncertainty</i>	Self-blame [4], own failure [3], internal attributions [5]	Blaming the device, device-mediated self-blame
<i>Personal Characteristics</i>	Propensity for seeking redress [1], personality factors [5], self-control [4]	Enjoyment of the “self-fix your IT” challenge
<i>Confusing Channel &amp; Consequence</i>	Do not know where [2][3], required effort [5], ineffectiveness [2][3]	Three prospective complaint channels (marketplace vs. provider vs. developer)
<i>Poor Device-Complaining Fit</i>	<b>Not presented in extant noncomplaining studies</b>	Simultaneous use of multiple applications, poor writing support
<i>Switching as an Easier Option</i>	Alternatives [5], loyalty [2][5]	Amplitude of alternatives, lack of unique services, unusually low switching costs

[1] = Chebat, Davidow and Codjovi (2005); [2] = Nimako and Mensah (2012); [3] = Snellman and Vihtkari (2003); [4] = Stephens and Gwinner (1998); [5] = Voorhees, Brady and Horowitz (2006)

Table 3. Our theory compared to extant studies on noncomplaining behavior and IS-specific findings.

As far as the other issues are concerned, our study extends prior knowledge on noncomplaining behavior with IT-specific findings. First, prior studies have provided valuable information about complaint channels and consequences (Andreassen and Streukens, 2013; Mattila and Wirtz, 2004; Nimako and Mensah, 2012; Robertson, 2012; Snellman and Vihtkari, 2003; Stephens and Gwinner, 1998; Voorhees, Brady and Horowitz, 2006), but none of these studies have examined or explained the complexity of complaint channels in the mobile context. We found out that the availability of three prospective channels (marketplace, provider, and developer) confuses users, and users treat each channel with different expected consequences. Second, users expressed that many mobile services and applications just do not matter very much to them. However, we found this to be paradoxical, since users admitted that they have had frustrating and infuriating mobile experiences. This may suggest that these times mark a watershed for many users, and it is a question of time when more and more users begin to fully rely on mobile services and applications with their daily routines. Third, we found out that users may be uncertain not only about themselves (Snellman and Vihtkari, 2003; Stephens and Gwinner, 1998; Voorhees, Brady and Horowitz, 2006) but also about their devices. Our evidence allowed us to discover device-mediated self-blame, according to which users may accuse themselves for not having purchased a brand new phone and, thus, do not see any sense in filing complaints. Fourth, with personal characteristics, we found that some users have atypical persistence to self-fix IT problems before complaining—and they might even enjoy such challenges. Fifth, dissatisfied mobile users tend to rather remain silent and switch, rather than complain. This is due to the availability of numerous alternatives, unordinary low switching costs, and the lack of user commitment.

## **5.2 Practical implications**

Our categorization regarding the types of noncomplaining behavior helps companies to identify the most beneficial issues to focus on. For the service providers and application developers, we believe that the biggest concerns are the behavior types 2 and 3: users that have intentions to complain but take no action or switch to an alternative. These are also the types of behaviors to which the providers and developers could likely influence. Thus, we suggest providers and developers to tackle the issues of *confusing channel & consequence*, *poor device-complaining fit*, and *switching as an easier option*.

First, it may be particularly harmful for customer relationships when users wish to complain but are not able to do so because of a confusing channel and consequence. The complexity of different complaint or feedback channels confuses users since they can potentially approach the application marketplace, the service provider, and the developer(s). Also, users have a variety of different impressions about their chances of making a difference and the resources of the companies. Thus, service providers and developers could solve the dilemma by informing the users of the desired complaint channel and describing their capabilities in responding and reacting to users' complaints.

Second, we found that the users' intentions may not proceed to actions if they feel that the device restricts formulating a proper complaint. Unfortunately, at the moment, users may have to be highly initiative, invest effort, and use multiple applications, such as browser and email, in searching for the contact information and writing unstructured complaints. Providers and developers could overcome the poor device-complaining fit by offering structured feedback forms, error reports, automatic error tracking (although it may involve privacy concerns), or other lightweight feedback options.

Finally, companies can influence users' prospective alternative action. According to our evidence, the lack of commitment is one of the reasons that make it easy for the users to switch. Therefore, mobile providers and developers could carefully aim to commit users to their services and applications. It appeared to us that this may be done by engaging users through documented use history, profiling, or involving add-on devices (e.g., a heart rate monitor). If a user invests personal information, time, effort, or money in a mobile service or application, we assume that he or she is less likely to switch to an alternative service and more likely to seek a solution through voicing a complaint.

## **5.3 Limitations and future topics**

There are certain limitations regarding this study. First, our substantive theory and the implications relate specifically to mobile services and applications and may not be fully generalizable to other IS contexts. Therefore, we encourage researchers to raise the level of abstraction and create a formal theory about the topic in the future. This can be done, for example, by applying an extant meta-theory as a broad theoretical lens (Urquhart and Fernández, 2013). Second, our informants were Finnish. Some of the discovered issues relate to culture and nationality, so in the future, researchers could study cultural differences regarding IS users' noncomplaining behavior. Third, as GT studies often generate comprehensive theories that acknowledge all instances in the empirical evidence, we did not focus on comparing the relative influence of the eight issues on noncomplaining behavior. Hence, forthcoming studies could investigate the predictive power of the discovered issues with a quantitative approach.

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