



Emotional experiences in customer relationships – a telecommunication study

Inger Roos and Margareta Friman

Service Research Center, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims at deepening understanding of the role of emotion in customer switching processes and identifying the relative frequency of negative discrete emotions in terms of different triggers.

Design/methodology/approach – Customers of Swedish telecommunications services were interviewed about their switching processes. The interviews were analyzed according to switching path analysis technique, which divides relationships into different stages in accordance with their relevance to the relationship strength. The ultimate focus is on self-reported emotions embedded in the switching process.

Findings – The main finding was that the identified emotions were located in the trigger part of the relationship, and was expressed by the respondents during the switching process in form of annoyance, anxiety, disappointment, dissatisfaction, distress, depression, rage, stress and tension.

Research limitations/implications – The empirical study is conducted within the telecom industry which may influence the switching frequency because of the deregulations in the beginning of this decade. This interpretation of valence and activation was based on theoretical assumptions about where various discrete emotions are located on a continuum.

Originality/value – The paper offers insight into the role of emotion in customer relationship.

Keywords Consumer behaviour, Customer relations, Customer satisfaction, Telecommunications, Sweden

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Affect can be experienced from the start of consuming a service, or even beforehand, until the termination of the service process, even long after the consumption stage has ended. Oeters and Van Raaij (1988) and Oatley and Jenkins (1996), supported by Derbaix and Pham (1991), suggested using the term affect as a general descriptor of different affective phenomena experienced by individuals. Emotions as elements of affect are distinguishable from other elements in that emotional responses are often long-term, involve complex patterning across a number of different systems, and are difficult to control (Izard and Buechler, 1980).

Emotions are considered particular labels of affect, and according to Liljander and Strandvik (1997), may change for the worse, or for the better, during the service relationship. Previous research implies that they most probably influence the individual's decision processes (Leventhal, 1982; Hoffman, 1986; Westbrook, 1987; Pieters *et al.*, 2006). They have been distinguished as reactive and goal-directed (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1995, Koelemeijer *et al.*, 1995). Goal-directed emotions are aroused when the consumer consciously seeks to experience something, such as when going to the theatre or



getting married. Reactive emotions, in turn, are aroused by a service experience that either exceeds or fails to meet expectations – resulting in *positive emotions* in the former case and *negative emotions* in the latter. This paper focuses on the negative emotions that are experienced by customers in switching processes. The fact that the emotions are experienced in processes is a special contributory factor. Memory-based affective response may weigh heavily, but it is not considered until perceived and expressed in the switching process (Cohen and Areni, 1991; Pieters *et al.*, 2006). This paper does not actively deal with positive affect, but it does not exclude it either: it offers a disaggregated view of discrete negative affect. Unlike in many marketing-related articles, negative emotions are examined with a framework that allows a disaggregated view of emotions and related to a special stage of the customer relationship, the switching stage.

When customers terminate a relationship with a service supplier they have made a definite decision at some stage regarding whether to stay or leave (Keaveney, 1995). In contrast with the static view of switching decisions, it seems more appropriate to describe this as a process, something that has been confirmed in interviews with customers who describe it as entering a switching path (Roos, 1999a). Factors influencing customers' switching has been studied (Keaveney, 1995; Roos, 1999b; Ganesh *et al.*, 2000), but customer experienced emotions has been neglected in previous research (the terms switching process and switching paths are used synonymously in this study), even though it is likely to play an important role when customers decide to leave a specific service provider. When switching is studied as a process, relationships are considered in terms of three different aspects on the basis of their intrinsic roles regarding loyalty: the trigger, the process and the outcome (Roos, 1999a). The process aspect includes customer-perceived reasons for switching (what), while the trigger includes the factors that make customers perceive their reasons for switching (why). In other words, trigger factors influence switching processes.

Previous research has linked emotional reactions to how critical incidents are experienced (Friman, 2004; Friman *et al.*, 2006). These findings correspond to those of many other studies (Maister, 1985; Larson, 1987; Davis and Heineke, 1998) in that they point out that emotions often occur at an early stage of the service process. A shortcoming in previous research is that it neglects to explicitly study how individuals emotionally respond to and evaluate service relationships. Rather strong emotions are linked to critical incidents, which in turn are connected to reactional triggers, in accordance with how they are defined. Customers who experience reactional triggers often switch promptly, expressing emotions such as anger, disgust and humiliation (Roos, 1999a). Discrete emotions that are related to experiences during a specified stage in customer relationships have not been studied in the marketing context.

This study aims at deepening understanding of the role of emotions in customer switching processes, and at identifying the relative frequency of negative discrete emotions in terms of different triggers. The questions of whether valence alone, or in addition to activation, plays a role in service relationships, and whether different types of triggers relate to different or similar emotional processes, are also addressed.

A cross-sectional review of triggers and emotions in customer relationships

Triggers

Researchers do not usually define the significance of the trigger as suggested in the present study (Gardial *et al.*, 1996; Eby *et al.*, 1999; Edvardsson and Strandvik, 2000, 2004; Karpa and Dowhower, 2000; Schindehutte *et al.*, 2000; Paasche, 2001;

Supphellen and Nelson, 2001), whereby the trigger function is seen as a change in the nature of the relationship caused by typical factors that have a long-lasting effect. Focusing on specific customers is a change towards a more conscious and sensitive approach to all aspects of the relationship (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2002). In this study, three types of triggers are defined and presented: situational, influential and reactional triggers.

Customer-experienced situational triggers are factors causing sensitivity for switching in customer relationships, the factors are related to customers' own lives and change from the customers' perspective the value-in-use of the service provided with implication for the relationship strength. Situational-triggers experienced customers are aware of the change and do actively search for new alternatives. Situational triggers reflect a change in the customer's own situation, a change provoking reconsideration of his or her relationships and service providers. Such changes may be provoked by:

- (1) a change in the customer's economic situation that results in a new way of evaluating the telecom operator's services;
- (2) the perception that the telecom operator's services do not suit as well as they did at the time that operator was chosen, possibly due to changed personal demographics within the family or to the portfolio of services;
- (3) customer resettlement, which affects the service portfolio; and
- (4) a change in the use of a particular service.

Thus, customers who perceive that a telecom solution does not fit their current life situation are gradually experiencing a situational trigger.

Customer-experienced influential triggers are market- or competitor-related factors causing sensitivity for switching in customer relationships. The factors are customer perceived (not objective) and can either cause customers to actively search for new alternatives or cause prompt unplanned switching (passive). Influential triggers reflect the market and the status of the industry. They have been defined as customer perceptions of competitors' actions. Unpremeditated comparison with the current customer relationships causes the switching, as in the following examples:

- (1) Customers bear a latent prejudice against the switched-from telecom operator.
- (2) Customers are tempted by lower prices.
- (3) Competitors suggest that they have the market's lowest prices and use the market leader's price levels as a standard of comparison.
- (4) Customers are attracted, through the media, by the competitors.
- (5) Competitors offer customers the opportunity to concentrate their subscriptions on one and the same operator.
- (6) The competitor offers monthly or annual fixed rates.
- (7) Co-customers trade new subscriptions with friends and fellow account holders.

The influential-trigger situation occurs when competitors use different marketing strategies to sway customers into switching to their products or services by offering more attractive solutions.

Customer-experienced reactional triggers are factors that cause sensitivity for switching in customer relationships because of a change (decrease) in the customers' trust

towards the service provider. The customer perceived deterioration in the relationships with the service providers can either be interaction-related or organization-related causing active search for alternatives. Reactional triggers are formed through critical incidents in service relationships (Edvardsson, 1988; Stauss, 1993), but they may also result from a slow deterioration in the level of service provided by the operator. They are thus not necessarily formed rapidly as a result of a critical experience. They result, for example:

- (1) when customers feel that the telecom operators' promises have not been kept;
- (2) when customers perceive a decline in the quality of the service, e.g. in the audibility or audible range;
- (3) for political reasons, e.g. customer irritation regarding the market dominance of the operator (not latent);
- (4) when the customer perceives disreputable business ethics;
- (5) when customers experience a critical incident, e.g. being humiliated; and
- (6) when customers feel insecure regarding functionality.

Customers experience a reactional trigger when the interaction between themselves and their telecom company does not function satisfactorily.

Thus, triggered customers are distinct and different in terms of their awareness of their service providers' services and products from customers who have not perceived a trigger.

Consequences of triggers

The long-lasting consequence of triggers as defined in this study thus differ from the trigger effect defined in previous research in terms of the influence of customer perceptions and evaluations of their relationships (Roos *et al.*, 2005). Triggers make customers more sensitive in their evaluation and more prone to switching, and could thus be described as a driving force in the relationship.

The static view of event consequences makes the categories appear to be detached elements in a relationship (Keaveney, 1995). When customers describe their switching behavior as a process they include emotions and changes in their perceptions as factors of their switching paths (Roos, 1999a). These factors describe the progress and nature of the paths, which characterize the customers and their sensitivity to switching. From a switching perspective, criticality is seen as causing a real change in behavior with subsequent implications for the relationship (Roos, 1999a; Edvardsson and Strandvik, 2000). Accordingly, when the behavioral change occurs, the reasons for it are revealed and derived not only from traditional critical incidents but also from other factors in both the relationship and its context. The traditional association between critical incidents and behavioral change is thus included in the trigger definition used in this specific study. In other words, the definition of a trigger is thereby extended from a precise location, associated with some critical incident causing an immediate change in perception, evaluation or behavior, to a more long-standing consequence that does not always have a direct influence on the relationship.

Ganesh *et al.* (2000) found that dissatisfaction amongst customers having switched service providers seems to differ significantly between customer groups regarding satisfaction and loyalty behaviors. Dissatisfaction as an emotion related to switching is interesting for the present study. The results of Ganesh *et al.* (2000) was comprehended

when looking at gaps in the literature regarding emotions and switching as having dealt with dissatisfaction as a static switching reason with implication for future relationships. Emotions has been addressed in previous studies on switching processes, but only in relation to reactional triggers (Roos, 1999a), and no empirical research has thus far been conducted with respect to situational and influential triggers. It has been shown that reactional customers care about their relationships; they complain more frequently in order to improve products and services (Roos, 1999a), and thus react more strongly when badly treated or neglected. For example, frequent switchers (i.e. customers acting in response to influential triggers) are more difficult to understand and their potentially emotional reports may increase insights into why they, seemingly without being dissatisfied, still switch from one telecom operator to another on a regular basis (Roos *et al.*, 2004).

In sum, the aim in the following is to study the trigger effect from a switching-process perspective, the triggers being defined and analyzed as situational, influential and reactional. This not only provides a distinct definition of a relationship, but also simultaneously prompts a segmenting function. Previous research suggests that emotions most likely concerns relationship factors that are related to critical incidents. Its connection with other factor types not included in the reactional-trigger context thus constitutes a gap in the literature. It would therefore be useful to explore the emotional reactions that constitute one of the consequences of triggers in customer relationships in order to find further explanations for possible similarities and/or dissimilarities between different switching processes.

Emotions

Emotions include three components:

- (1) a strong impulse to act;
- (2) a pattern of bodily change; and
- (3) a subjective evaluation commonly referred to as affect (Lazarus, 1991).

Our theoretical basis lies in the theory of emotion as proposed by Russell and Feldman-Barrett (1999) (Russell, 2003), who have recently suggested the concept of “core affect” as a useful unit of analysis for emotion-related phenomena. Core affect is defined as momentary, elementary feelings of pleasure or displeasure, and of activation or deactivation. It is inherent in all emotion-related concepts, and is similar to what others refer to as activation (Thayer, 1989), affect (Watson and Tellegen, 1985) and mood (Morris, 1989), and what are commonly called feelings (Russell, 2003). When people attribute their core affect to an object (an employee, an offer, for example), they experience it as “having an emotion” such as “anger,” “sadness,” or “delight.” There are short-lived responses that are about something (we become angry with *someone*, *afraid of something*, *greedy* for something). The concept of core affect enables us to start thinking theoretically about emotion-related phenomena because it is the “core” of all emotion-laden events: it is what makes an event “hot” or “emotional” (Russell, 2003). In this study, we focus on emotional experiences in customer relationships and more specifically in the switching processes.

Previous research indicate that emotions are present in switching (Ganesh *et al.*, 2000), but one of the shortcomings is that it neglects to study explicitly how individuals emotionally respond to and evaluate different stages in the switching process.

Furthermore, the findings have not been related to any particular emotional theory. In sum, there is a lack of structured empirical evidence upon which to build an understanding of how emotions influence the switching process.

It is necessary to understand the affective dimensions that individuals may experience before qualitatively different emotional categories can be linked to specific types of triggers. Previous studies of consumer experienced emotions have used Izard's (1977) differential emotion theory. Watson and Tellegen (1985) in their much more detailed theoretical approach however, proposed a model with two affect dimensions corresponding to positive affectivity and negative affectivity. High positive affectivity reflects pleasurable engagement, low depression and lethargy. High negative affectivity corresponds to unpleasant affective states such as anger and anxiety, whereas low negative affectivity implies calm and relaxation. More recent research (Larsen and Diener, 1992) has however shown that the labels of positive and negative affectivity are misleading because low values of positive affect are experienced as unpleasant states and low values of negative affect as pleasant. Thus, the circumplex model (Russell and Feldman-Barrett, 1999) of consciously felt emotions subsumes the positive and negative affectivity model.

The circumplex model distinguishes two dimensions on which all felt emotions can be plotted: unpleasantness-pleasantness (valence) and deactivation-activation (activation or arousal) (Figure 1). The unpleasantness-pleasantness (valence) dimension reflects the degree to which a person feels happy and satisfied, while the deactivation-activation (activation or arousal) dimension is a combination of activity (excited versus calm) and alertness (awake versus sleepy). In this study, the narratives of the respondents were analyzed on a set of emotional dimensions (i.e. valence and activation) drawing upon this theory. Our primary aim in this study is to explore whether or not emotions is evoked in relationships, and if it is, what form it takes. The theoretical frame of emotions serves as a guideline in our interpretation of the respondents self-reports of their emotional experiences. In other words, our objective is to establish whether there are any differences in emotional experiences to situational, influential and reactional triggers.

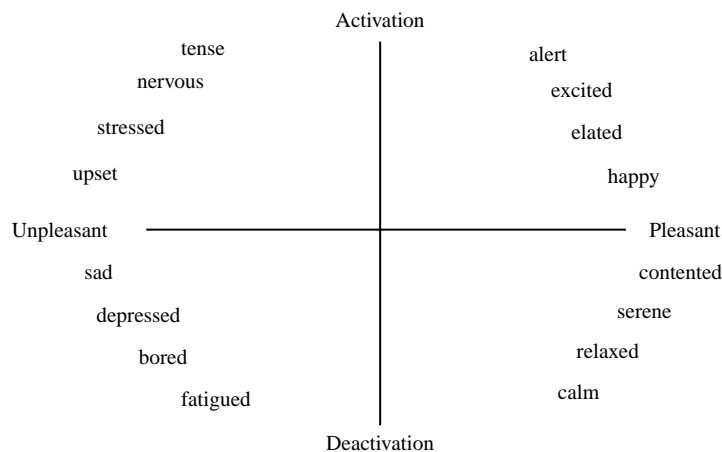


Figure 1.
The circumplex model

Source: Feldman-Barrett and Russell (1998)

Our theoretical framework incorporates the characteristics and consequences of triggers and of emotions. Switching is described as ranging from the static to the processual – in which triggers play a directive role. Previous research offers little insight into the emotional experiences, although they are likely to be characterized as negative (Roos, 1999a). For instance, customers who have experienced triggers evaluate a relationship more negatively than those who have not (Roos *et al.*, 2006).

Method and procedure

This study is part of a larger project aimed at deepening our understanding of switching paths in service relationships. The sample comprised 3,000 customers of a Swedish telecommunications company who had left it during the previous five years. From the initial sample of 3,000, the company provided us with the contact information of 600 customers, and we interviewed 101 of these during 2004 and 2005. The gender distribution was almost even, 51 male customers against 50 female. The sample was considered to meet the criteria for saturation after 101 interviews, or even before that. No new categories of emotions were found during the last 30 interviews. The information provided by the telecom company included details of the telecom company being switched from and its competitor being switched to, and also information about other switching behavior between different operators during the previous five years. As a consequence, we were able to compile details of up to four switching processes from one customer. We carried out new interviews one year later in order to find out more about the customers' subsequent switching behavior. In total, we obtained information about customers' subsequent switching behavior over a period of six years, with the respondents recalling 203 switching processes. The initial interviews carried out in 2004 covered five years of switching histories. In sum, new interviews were conducted during 2005, thus adding one year of switching behavior to the customers' switching histories, which spanned more than six years in total.

A qualitative research design incorporating focused interviews was adopted for the study, and a trained professional conducted all the interviews. The switching processes were analyzed using a qualitative switching path analysis technique (SPAT) model (Roos, 1999a). SPAT was chosen in order to facilitate analysis of emotions related to switching processes, as it makes it possible to position customers' emotional experiences in the relationship. The qualitative approach enabled us to distinguish between parts of the relationship that were important for telling about its stability (i.e. actual switching behavior). All the participants were asked two questions: "Which operator do you have an account with at the moment?" and "Can you tell me about your telecom operator accounts and any switching between operators you have done over the last five years?" The flow of the interview was then very dependent on the interviewee. Some of the respondents told long and detailed stories about switching between different telecom operators, including their reasons for switching, the factors influencing their decisions to switch, and the emotions, either directly expressed or identified by the analyst, connected to the switching processes. Those who gave short answers with unclear and imprecise accounts were asked directly about their reasons for switching.

When SPAT is used for analyzing switching processes, the general focus is on both the trigger and the process with a view to identifying the triggers and obtaining the customer's expressed reasons for switching. The point of departure for the analysis was the outcome (actual switching behavior). The process part is included for reasons

of confirmation. When the customer's perceived reason for switching was analyzed as belonging to the process part (switching determinant), it answered the question: what is the reason for switching?

On the other hand, analysis of the trigger part addressed the question of why that particular switching determinant resulted in switching. The difference between switching determinants and triggers thus illustrates the difference between *what* and *why*. The focus in this study was on the trigger part in the switched-from relationship. Identification of the trigger was important, although the main task was to identify and map trigger- or process-related emotional experiences. In other words, emotional expressions were highlighted regardless of whether the respondents experienced it in relation to the trigger or the process part in the switched-from relationship.

Accordingly, the analysis gave information on whether or not the respondent expressed any emotions when they were describing:

- (1) the reasons for switching (what); or
- (2) the factors causing him or her to focus on that particular reason (why).

The first step was to categorize emotional experiences, then the switching reasons, and subsequently the triggers. The analysis procedure therefore continued as follows.

- (1) The focus in the emotion analysis was on emotional verbal expressions during the switching process. Direct emotional and more silent expressions were categorized. An example of a direct statement was: "I'm angry". Silent expressions included more behavioral articulation or unwillingness. A silent expression could sound like this: "I would never switch back to that operator, never, because it did not keep its promises." Formerly held expectations had been violated so it was categorized as disappointment.

It is very important to capture the general atmosphere of the answers in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The interviewer and the analyst must be able to comprehend not only the expressed words but also the meaning of the information collected. Given the aim in the present study not only to identify emotional experiences but also to position them in a relationship, it was important not to put pressure on the interviewee. In the above example, it was absolutely clear that the customer was disappointed, although he never used that particular word and expressed it in many other ways. This is what we mean by silent expressions. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 269) put it in the following way:

The structured interview is the mode of choice when the interviewer knows what he or she does not know and can therefore frame appropriate questions to find it out, while the unstructured interview is the mode of choice when the interviewer does not know what he or she doesn't know and must therefore rely on the respondent to tell him or her. The degree of overt/covert ranges along a continuum, at one end of which the respondent is completely unaware that he or she is being interviewed about [whether structured or unstructured].

It could be argued that six years is too long a time for remembering and recalling emotional experiences. There are advantages and disadvantages with most techniques, however, and in our defense we refer to Flanagan (1954) on the advantages of the interviewee not being able to plan beforehand. In terms of remembering critical incidents he referred to the frequency of incidents as opposed to the number reported by the observer. He argued that if people were

interviewed on a daily basis, the number of incidents reported could be up to five times the number reported in weekly interviews. In the latter case, the memory may benefit from a facilitating configuration, an assumption based on his idea that daily interviewing could remind the interviewee to concentrate too much on the next interview. In other words, the respondent could plan his/her response beforehand, which could result in an unnaturally high number of incidents. There is a trade-off between remembering real incidents that remain in the mind because of their exclusiveness, and remembering many incidents, some of which may not be really significant to the respondent or, consequently, to the study.

It was not in accordance with the purpose of the present study to ask direct questions about emotional experiences. Placing direct questions involving emotions would have revealed the direction of the location in terms of the trigger and the process, and would have hence led the interviewee and destroyed the chance of obtaining reliable findings for this qualitative study. We followed the arguments put forward in the above quotation from Lincoln and Guba (1985), our intention during the interviews being to focus on switching behavior in order to discourage the interviewees from concentrating on emotional expressions. The emotional expression was thus recalled during the interview.

In order to position emotions important to the stability of the relationships, the context of the emotion was located in one of the following two categories.

- (2) Switching determinants describe respondents' own perceptions of the reasons for switching. They are not analyzed further here since no emotional expressions were identified in this category. The context was the process part of the relationship.
- (3) Triggers describe the main influencing factor of the stated reason for switching, in other words what lay behind it. The context of the trigger part of the relationship includes the customer's private life, the competitors, and the market situation in addition to the interactions with the provider. The triggers were classified as follows according to the SPAT definitions set out in the theoretical framework of the study:
 - If the Why referred to the customer's private life (economic situation, work, demographical changes in the family) the trigger was categorized as situational:

X operator is the only operator that functions for us. The reason is simply that the other has poor audibility. We moved here only just and noticed we have to switch operator.
 - The impact of advertisements, TV or direct marketing is one kind of influential trigger, and the prejudiced state of customers another. The latter is passive and the former is active. Customers carrying a prejudice-type trigger often switch when they are contacted by competitors, and are thus labeled passive.

Someone from X operator phoned me and I switched immediately. He had phoned me before and I thought I'll switch so I get rid of him, I had not planned for switching. I am not sure it was a wise decision it just sounded good at the time. I do not switch to the market leader but I may switch again to another smaller operator.

- In addition to experiencing traditional critical incidents, customers perceive and develop reactional triggers as a result of unacceptable changes in the telecom operator's offering, such as the withdrawing of a service that was included in the account subscribed to.

We were really disappointed. According to what was presented when we chose this subscription the bills were not correct. We switched to another operator.

- (4) Once the position of emotions in the switching process was determined, the process of categorization began. The data analysis was carried out in four steps, described below. The method used in the present study enabled us to increase our understanding of the problem, that is, of emotional expressions in switching. In Step 1 of the analysis the researchers read the transcriptions of each participant in order to arrive at a good overview, understanding and sense of the material. Step 2 involved the identification of uniform expressions of emotions. During the third step, the researchers grouped uniform emotional expressions into summary formats. The categories were developed according to a process wherein repeated consultations of the raw data continued in a hermeneutic manner. The grouping was changed and refined until the descriptions in a given category were more similar to each other than they were to the descriptions in any other category. Finally, in Step 4, the researchers moved from the summary formats to a more general structure. The level of abstraction for the presentation of the results was decided upon, according to the principle that clarity should be attained without excessive detail. The purpose was to reflect a more abstract level.

In sum, direct questions about emotional experiences were rarely asked during the interviews. The questions only covered the respondents' subsequent switching behavior during the previous five plus one years as they were asked to describe their switching behavior with regard to telecom operators. The analysis of the triggers and switching determinants served the purpose of positioning emotions in the customer relationship. The aim of this study was to explore whether or not emotions is evoked in switching processes, what form these emotional expressions takes (i.e. in terms of valence and activation), and whether or not it is possible to relate these experiences to different triggers.

Findings

In the following we report the emotional categories we found in our analysis of different switching processes, which we then position in the relationships. Specific triggers are related to specific emotions.

The presence and relationship positions of emotions

The main finding of this study was that it was possible to identify emotional experiences in the switching paths. Furthermore, it was present in the majority of the switching processes. Its presence in the reactional-trigger process (Roos, 1999a) was not a surprise, but it was also evident in both the influential and situational triggers. Furthermore, all emotional expressions were traceable to the trigger part of the switched-from relationship. The significance of this finding is that not only was emotions identified in the switching paths, but also that its position in the relationship

indicates the high level of importance attached to continuing the process. It was not when they expressed their reasons (what) for switching (Process part of SPAT, Figure 1) that the respondents reported emotional experiences, but when they talked about why they articulated a specific switching reason.

Emotional experiences

The respondents described emotional experiences that were categorized as annoyance, anxiety, disappointment, dissatisfaction, distress, depression, rage, stress and tension during the switching processes, and in only three cases was there no evidence of emotions. Emotional expressions featured in 195 switching processes altogether, which is an important finding. Given the definition of a trigger, the combination of the reactional trigger and emotion was not surprising: it has been reported in previous research that the reactional trigger is often related to critical incidents (Edvardsson, 1992; Stauss, 1993; Roos, 1999b). An interesting and more surprising finding is the identification of emotional expressions during influential and situational switching processes. By definition customers experiencing influential and situational triggers have perceived a change in their personal lives or have reacted to competitors' marketing efforts, which have eventually influenced their relationships. Initially, this did not give rise to any hypotheses concerning emotions. Relating our findings to the circumplex model (Figure 1) reveal that the emotional expressions used by the respondents to describe their experiences most likely vary in their degree of activation and valence. For example, respondents described how they felt tensed (high activation) whereas other felt more or less depressed (low activation). The results indicated no sign of positive valence but differences in degree of negative valence (e.g. dissatisfaction versus disappointment). Descriptions of the customer emotional expressions are given in Table I, which is explained and exemplified with reference to quotations from the empirical material.

Annoyance. This category was not perceived to be extremely strong, but it was strong enough to be associated with switching. The emotional response was often related to services or products that did not perform in the way advertised by the operator. Recurrent failure of the same or a different kind was often related to annoyance:

Example: My Internet connection didn't work. I complained many times and even waiting for Customer Service got me irritated. When, in addition to this, I had to argue with the customer-service rep. about whether I had a Mac or not, I really got irritated. The outcome was that I switched to another operator.

Emotions	Description
1. Annoyance	Relatively mild anger
2. Anxiety	Uncertainty, lost faith, ambiguity
3. Depression	Dejection, low spirits, sadness
4. Disappointment	Violates formerly-held expectations
5. Dissatisfaction	Unfulfilled expectations
6. Distress	Perceived degradation
7. Rage	Intense anger
8. Stress	Driven, rushed, harassed
9. Tension	Unease

Table I.
Descriptions of emotions identified in this study

Anxiety. Anxiety was expressed during switching processes in which the respondent felt that the telecom operator may have been in the wrong but he or she had no proof of it:

Example: Once I received bills for calls that were not made by me. I was obviously being charged for somebody else's phone calls. Right now, I feel very uncertain as to whether I'm getting the discount on phone calls, during specified times of the day, that they promised me in their special offer. I guess I don't trust my operator after the first lapse.

Depression. This category refers to dejection. Some respondents seemed to have lost their ability to resist switching to a new operator when contacted. They did not like the situation. In fact, they did not like being contacted or the fact that they had switched again. This kind of emotion was expressed in the following citation:

Example: Someone phoned me and insisted that he had the best and most discounted deal on the market. It sounded good, but I don't know. I didn't have any paperwork at hand to compare the two offers. He phoned and phoned, once a week for at least a month, until I gave up and opened an account with the new operator.

Disappointment. Disappointment seemed to originate when the respondents compared the outcome with what they expected:

Example: We had an account with this same operator a few years ago. But now they weren't telling us the truth. They were keeping some information from us. There were important pieces of information that they did not update during the phone call. When we saw the contract, we realized that this was not what we had agreed on. We immediately wanted to switch back again to the one we had before.

Dissatisfaction. Respondents experienced dissatisfaction upon realizing that they were not getting what they expected:

Example: I was totally dissatisfied with my telecom operator. It's the market leader and still it has the highest prices. I don't like that constellation, so I switched to a competitor. /- I think my previous operator is an extraordinarily strange one. It has high prices but offers very poor service. It didn't listen to me when I complained. It has tried to get me back now after I switched, but I won't go.

Distress. Distress seems to be strongly connected with the reaction "never return to that telecom operator". These respondents felt that the operator had let them down and did not want to deal with it again. They said that the operator had treated them in a degrading way:

Example: I was treated extremely badly by the Customer Service department of my operator. I inherited an account and a mobile phone. My operator thought I'd stolen the phone because I didn't have the code to unlock it. Even though I explained my situation, the customer-services rep. kept on humiliating me. She was very rude.

Rage. Some customers perceived some kind of injustice they found unacceptable. These respondents showed unmistakable anger, or used strong words indicating this type of reaction:

Example: [...] I'm so angry at them. I bought their shares and they were just crap. I'm really angry because I find it so unfair. They are in a monopoly situation and they almost forced us to buy their shares. It really gives bad vibrations.

Stress. Many respondents explained how they felt pushed, harassed or hard-pressed in their efforts to make the best deal. As soon as these stressed customers had switched to a competitor, they started to wonder whether this option was really the right and ultimate one. Not only did these customers actively hunt for the best deal, but they also took the opportunity to switch as soon they were offered a new alternative:

Example: I believed that the other operator would be less expensive so I switched. I don't think that I was successful because I still feel there are other operators offering even lower prices. /- We always seem to find ads that are cheaper than the account we have at the moment. My wife always finds these. Then we switch. /- It's amusing when different operators phone and tempt us with their cheapest prices. Once we have switched, the operator we've just switched from phones again and offers an even better deal. So we switch again/I just switch because I can't stand the constant calling from competing operators.

Tension. The emotional expression that we define as tension is a "deliberated" reaction that the customers were able to explain clearly. Those who had accounts that were activated a long time previously at some point started to become concerned as to whether these accounts represented the best deal. The affect that we labeled tension was a reaction to the misfit between the customers' own situations and the chosen account, such as the changed nature of the use of telecom services in comparison with the services and devices included:

We built our own home and had to keep track of every household expense. We noticed that it was easier to keep all our telecom services with the same operator. If we don't do this, we feel bothered and stressed and we want to get rid of that.

The results indicated that the adjectival expressions used by the respondents to describe their experiences reflected several emotional dimensions with a similar valence (i.e. negative), but varied in the degree of activation (according to the circumplex structure (Feldman-Barrett and Russell, 1998)). The switching processes appeared to consistently produce reports of changes, mostly in activation but also in negative valence. Thus, when the respondents had experienced one or two switching processes, they expressed negative emotions such as annoyance, distress, or anxiety. In conclusion, the emotional experiences in switching processes may be used to obtain information about customer relationships.

Table II depicts the emotions experienced by the respondents during the switching processes. The frequencies indicate how often each emotion occurred in different triggers. The total number of emotional expressions was 203 (198 + 5), thus exceeding the number of switching processes. The reason for this is that on five occasions customers expressed two kinds of emotions in connection with the switch, and on three occasions no emotions were expressed. The results suggest that stress was a common response to switching experienced by the respondents, and occurred in more than half of the switching processes. The distribution between the other kinds of emotions was fairly even, except for dissatisfaction, distress, tension and rage.

Triggers

Analysis of the narratives concerning triggers concentrated on why the customers expressed the switching reasons that they did. The addition of emotions to the existing definitions of triggers referred to in the theoretical framework (Roos, 1999a; Roos *et al.*, 2005) is illustrated in Table II. We added the two most frequent emotional categories to

Table II.
The link between the
switching processes and
emotional experiences

Triggers/emotions	Anxiety	Amoyance	Depression	Disappointment	Dissatisfaction	Distress	Rage	Stress	Tension	No emotions	In total
Situational	2	0	2	2	10	0	0	6	9	1	32
Influential	2	3	8	2	7	0	0	113	3	2	140
Reactional	3	7	0	6	6	1	2	1	5	0	31
In total	7	10	10	10	23	1	2	120	17	3	203

the definition of each trigger. We incorporated dissatisfaction (10) and tension (9) into the situational trigger, stress (113) and dissatisfaction (7) into the influential trigger, and annoyance (7), dissatisfaction (6) and disappointment (6) into the reactional trigger.

Expanding the trigger definitions to include emotions makes them more comprehensive. Despite the fact that dissatisfaction is included in all of the definitions, it is possible to distinguish its nature by considering other and separate expressions of affect. Tension is typical of the situational trigger, while stress is typically embedded in the influential trigger and annoyance in the reactional trigger.

Triggers and emotions during switching processes

The matrix in Table II illustrates the linkages between emotions and the switching process which can be considered the result of the analysis.

The focus of Table II is the connection between triggers and emotions. Competition is fierce in the telecommunications industry, and the implications in terms of emotions are clear. Customers experience negative stress while hunting for the best-price solution. Influential triggers were combined with stress during 120 of the switching processes analyzed, which could be an indication of the underlying power of the very intense level of competition.

Stress, dissatisfaction, and tension were common to all of the switching paths. The influential trigger was the most emotional-ridden, while the situational and reactional triggers evoked it to the same degree. The strength of the emotion will greatly depend on how stress is positioned in the switching path.

Its frequency of occurrence, in combination with the different triggers, justifies the addition of emotion to the trigger definitions.

In sum, customers undergo emotional experiences in switching processes. In terms of the different parts of the relationship (the trigger or the process), emotion is positioned in the driving, or trigger function. The definitions of the triggers are extended accordingly.

Situational triggers, to the four dimensions defined based on the literature on triggers a fifth dimension is added: (5) customers typically perceive dissatisfaction and tension.

Influential triggers, seven dimensions are identified based on the results from other trigger studies. The contribution from the results of the present study is an eighth dimension: (8) Customers typically perceive stress, depression and dissatisfaction.

Reactional triggers, have been defined based on six dimensions, the present study adds a seventh dimension: (7) Customers typically perceive annoyance, dissatisfaction and disappointment.

Discussion

It was stated in the result section that a significant finding was the presence of emotions in the trigger part of the switching process. The fundamental characteristic of the trigger in customer relationships is that it determines future stability. It is therefore obvious that understanding the nature of the trigger fully presupposes an understanding of customer emotional experiences. Thus, emotions constitute a special dimension of customer relationships. A switching perspective was adopted, which in combination with SPAT (Roos, 1999a) offers the possibility not only to identify emotional experiences but also to position it in the relationship – in the trigger part. Thus, identified, it could be prioritized

in terms of its effect on switching behavior according to the frequency of occurrence. All customers included in this study revealed emotions that, to some extent, drove their relationships with the telecom operators. The analysis thus showed that emotion is an additional dimension of the trigger part of the relationship, which drives it and gives it energy and direction (Roos, 1999b). These customers' relationships were on a switching path and emotion constituted one component of the trigger. Triggers have several dimensions, and the contribution of this study was to add emotions. Emotional expressions were categorized as annoyance, anxiety, disappointment, dissatisfaction, distress, depression, rage, stress and tension.

Previous research has shown that influential triggers cause frequent switching. The related emotion (i.e. stress) was of a highly activating character (Feldman-Barrett and Russell, 1998), which explains the switching eagerness among customers on this switching path (influential/trigger customers). Depression, on the other hand, is fairly deactivating and the results of the present study also suggested that depression rarely influences customers: it does not seem to be associated with switching as frequently as stress does. Disappointment and dissatisfaction were found in the reactional-trigger customer segment. Whether or not it was the emotional experience that was the dominating factor causing the switching is impossible to say, but at least it was one of the dimensions driving (trigger) the switching.

The telecommunications market is not traditionally considered to be a high-involvement industry in which customers deeply deliberate on their relationships (Roos *et al.*, 2005). The eagerness to switch was not a problem initially because the entire industry was characterized by national regulations that excluded private alternatives. The easing of those regulations at the beginning of the new millennium escalated customer eagerness to switch to competitors. As it has matured as a deregulated industry its nature has changed. However, it is clear from the results of this study that frequent switchers still dominate the telecommunications industry in Sweden. Emotion is a concept that seems to contribute to our understanding of switching in this industry. It is difficult to argue that stress is associated with switching in the same way in other service companies because of the special nature of telecommunications as a recently deregulated industry. However, the phenomenon of frequent switching is something it has in common with other industries, such as insurance and power generation (Roos *et al.*, 2004).

Implications

In the context of customer relationships and the behavioral effect of emotions, the question of criticality is an interesting one. Does it imply a trigger effect with long-term consequences on the stability of the relationship, or does it imply a frequent effect? In other words, do customers return rather quickly to the switched-from operator when the trigger was influential/stress-related, or do they become stable at the switched-to operator? Now that the trigger definitions have been enlarged to embed emotion, comparison can be made with the general literature on emotions in terms of the role of triggers in customer relationships. Previous studies on switching behavior show that customers who are influenced by reactional triggers often experience strong emotional experiences such as anger and humiliation, and rarely return to their switched-from service provider (Roos, 1999a). The present study indicates that the majority of switchers experience influential triggers, which relate to stress. Which emotional

experiences are more critical as far as relationships are concerned – those causing irrevocable switching or those causing the most frequent switching? In other words, this combination of switching processes and emotions has produced a new constellation in which the implications for the criticality of customer relationships are obvious.

Accordingly, it appears that the telecommunications industry is associated with frequency rather than commitment (Reichheld, 1996). Habitual choice processes need to be taken into consideration in determining why customers exit or change their purchase patterns when they do. Many certainly subscribe to the same operator by force of habit. Frequency and habit are concepts that are related to transactional marketing (Howard and Sheth, 1969), while commitment is related to relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Hughes, 2003). However, recent research (Roos *et al.*, 2005) has shown that frequency is not only a sign of habitual behavior, but in the light of our deepened knowledge of customer relationships, it appears to have an impact on loyalty in a special way. In terms of switching, it would be interesting to find out what can interrupt habitual patronizing. In terms of switching behavior, research results have shown the same developmental pattern from the static (Keaveney, 1995) to the processual (Roos, 1999a). Connecting the concepts of frequency, commitment and switching behavior with that of emotions gives an interesting picture.

In terms of understanding the frequency effect on customer relationships (Roos *et al.*, 2005), the fact that stress turned out to be a frequent emotional expression in the present study makes it an important additional factor for understanding frequent switching. The majority of customers included in the sample had perceived stress in their relationship, and the stress was connected to influential triggers. One dimension of the definition of the influential trigger was “Prejudice” against the switched-from operator. The combination of stress because of a seemingly unfavorable price and prejudice gives a clearer picture of the force that drives frequent switching. In other words, many scholars who have attempted to develop general emotion typologies (Westbrook, 1987; Russell, 1980; Russell and Feldman-Barrett, 1999) have not considered contextual concerns, and have only focused on clusters of emotions perceived during certain circumstances. Dissatisfaction, for example (Ganesh *et al.*, 2000), has been considered a static state constituting a source for future evaluation, and its role as an additional dimension of the driving force in customer relationships has not been focused on.

The limitations of the study

The focus of this study was on emotions in telecom customer relationships, from a switching perspective. These customers have been switching frequently for a few years now, but the willingness to switch may differ between industries. One reason for making such an assumption is that deregulation may have affected the enthusiasm for switching in telecommunications. One limitation of our study is that it only concerns this industry.

Analysis showing that a particular emotion was connected predominantly with a particular trigger would have been a desirable result. It was not possible to successfully carry out this kind of discriminatory analysis given the sample and analytical tools we had available. Our interpretation of valence and activation was based on theoretical assumptions about where various discrete emotions are located on a continuum.

Suggestions for future research

The natural extension of this research is to further study how emotions during switching processes might possibly enhance our general understanding of customer relationships. For example, it would be interesting to generalize emotions identified in a qualitative study in a quantitative study in order to position the emotions in the circumplex model (Feldman-Barrett and Russell, 1998). This could advance the discussion on criticality related to customer relationships.

The combination of triggers and emotions could offer interesting paths of research for the future. Criticality represents such an area of interest. The definitions of triggers given in the theoretical framework incorporate implications for loyalty. It would be fruitful to conduct a longitudinal study in order to follow the trigger/emotion combination regarding switching, and to find out what combinations of stress, dissatisfaction and rage are most critical from a particular telecom operator's perspective. Literature on stress, for example, predominantly belongs to the field of medicine, where it is considered an influencing factor related to sleep and the development of different kinds of diseases (Richardson, 1993). Stress related to behavior in marketing has not been researched to any great extent. The data gathering for the present study took place during a period of time when competition in the telecommunications industry was fierce. Hard competition and frequent switching seem to be related and linked to stress. Stress was identified and defined here as a negative emotional experience. The question remains whether it is always negative in combination with switching behavior: it may be experienced as positive in less intensely competitive times. According to Larsen and Diener (1992), low levels of negative emotions may be perceived as pleasant. In terms of switching, it might be interesting or even exciting to switch when the constant pressure from the operators' contacts eases off. Customers currently perceive such relentless pressure as negative stress.

The literature on emotions is extensive, but there is virtually no evidence of its connection to the sensitivity of customer relationships, or to its discriminating effect on loyalty. This therefore offers fruitful opportunities for future research.

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Corresponding author

Inger Roos can be contacted at: inger.roos@ihroos.fi