



# Emotions and stability in telecom-customer relationships

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether or not emotions experienced in customer relationships – linked to actual behavior – could enhance understanding of their future development.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A number of individual-level relationships between customers and telecom operators are investigated. The empirical data consist of 113 switching stories reported during 81 interviews with telecom customers.

**Findings** – In the analysis, emotional experiences are related to customers' activity or passivity and to the stability (switching or not) in the relationships. The most important research contribution is the identification of different emotions related to actual behavior. Less stable customers are pessimistic about the operators and show nervousness, while stable customers may have initially been depressed in their relationships, becoming more relaxed and optimistic over time. Emotions do not seem to have the capacity in themselves to cause stability or instability, but they confirm through their connection to different types of trigger whether the relationship will be stable or unstable.

**Research limitations/implications** – The findings of the present study are based on a longitudinal empirical study, but only in one industry. Although, the telecom industry may provide a very fruitful context for the longitudinal study of stability in customer relationships because of the turbulence it has experienced during the last decade, the industry representation is narrow.

**Practical implications** – Customers do not sever their emotional ties with the previous relationship when they enter the new one. On the contrary, they linger in the switched-from relationship at least at first, which is indicated in the various emotional expressions they use. The present study takes some initial steps towards enhancing understanding of the dynamism in providing an insight into customers' differing emotional reactions connected to triggers during one and the same relationship.

**Originality/value** – Taking a longitudinal approach from the customers' perspective produces a set boundaries of customer relationships that may not coincide with the set boundaries seen from the service providers' perspective. According to the findings of the present study, it seems almost impossible to understand customer relationships without following customers on an individual level in both previous and current relationships. Despite the fact that dynamism in customer relationships is widely discussed in previous research, few studies have applied such a perspective.

**Keywords** Consumer behaviour, Customer relations, Telecommunications, Customer service management

**Paper type** Research paper



## Introduction

Emotions have been the focus in marketing literature for some time and has mostly been considered connected to customers' perceptions and evaluations of service providers' overall service or particular dimensions of the service (Liljander and Strandvik, 1997; Bolton, 1998; Stauss and Neuhaus, 1997; Yu and Dean, 2001) and to perceptions between customers and personnel (Smith and Bolton, 2002; Bagozzi, 2006; Dallimore *et al.*, 2007). Predominantly these perceptions and evaluations are considered as (dis)satisfaction in customer episodes, which commonly occur in the marketing literature representing the

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“affective summary response” towards the product or service consumed (Giese and Cote, 2000; White and Yu, 2005) meaning that the factor could be cognitive or affective.

However, the effect of experienced emotions in customer relationships considered as a factor of an affective and cognitive structure influencing outcome has not been discussed and empirically studied in marketing literature. Such a structure may in the telecom industry appear as certain emotions connected to specific situations. For example, Roos *et al.* (2008) report about a high frequency of expressed stress among customers switching between different telecom operators. Mapping the affective and cognitive factors in a configuration would enhance our understanding of the role and strength each concept has for the relationships (i.e. loyalty). Additional to that shortcoming is the importance of industry-specific emotion experiences that have not yet been addressed in previous research (Giese and Cote, 2000; White and Yu, 2005; Laros and Steenkamp, 2005). Emotional experiences are most likely quite different across industries and also different compared to the empirical perspective in many emotion studies where no “real customers” participate but artificial situations are being the setting. The context in the present study constitutes of telecom-customer relationships, which consequently fill both the gap of lacking industry-specific studies as also the lack of emotional studies with a relationship approach.

#### *Emotions linked to behavior*

Yet another important issue when studying customer emotional experiences is the link to behavior. Studies on emotions related to actual behavior are lacking in marketing literature (see behavioral tendencies in Zeelenberg and Pieters (1999)). Thus, in addition to the industry-specific and relationship approach; the present study also focuses on actual behavior meaning that the emotions are considered embedded in the actual-behavior approach where it is possible to study the effect of stability in customer relationships.

The longitudinal design of the present study enables the analysis to follow actual behavior as either “actual switching” or “actual not-switching” on the individual level. Smith and Bolton (2002) suggest according to their findings and White and Yu (2005) in their theoretical framework that the role emotions have on specific behaviors needs to be explored in depth before it is possible to know whether emotions are significant or not in a specific context. Other important aspects to be considered when studying customer-experienced emotions have been suggested in previous research (Roest and Pieters, 1997; Giese and Cote, 2000; Smith and Bolton, 2002; White and Yu, 2005). Giese and Cote (2000), for example, imply that time, focus, context, and aggregation are necessary features. In their study, focus was defined as the product/service, while time was related to the consumption, the authors Giese and Cote (2000) imply that emotional experiences may differ during different time periods and interactions although other circumstances are the same, which is most interesting for the present study because of the longitudinal design. Giese and Cote (2000) defined the context in their study as a catering company and the episode as the aggregation level (Liljander and Strandvik, 1995).

In the present study, time is being represented by the longitudinal approach, the focus is on the service provided by the telecom company, the context is the relationship between customers and telecom companies. The aggregation level is consequently the relationship history meaning that customers reported at least one relationship and up to three relationships in a row. In sum, the importance of behavior is in the present study taken into account as actual switching behavior which the longitudinal design

makes possible by following the customer relationships over a longer time span, including emotional reactions from a dynamic-behavioral and relationship perspective. The customers' contexts are accordingly monitored by following their actual behavior related to their emotional experiences.

*Emotions and customer context*

The implication of the theoretical framework reported by White and Yu (2005) is that time, object and context of a service are evaluated differently in an episode compared to when the context and aggregation level are taken into account as is done when studying customer relationships. Thus, the chosen perspective is of great importance and may have consequences for the results of the study. Would it be easier to define emotions in customer relationships if they were associated with other well-known and established factors and behavior? According to Menon and Dubé (2004) emotions experienced during the same service encounter may have different appraisals (reasons). Emotions may also emanate through each other, which make their origin unclear (Dallimore *et al.*, 2007). One such difficulty is put forward by Yu and Dean (2001) and White and Yu (2005) who state the difficulty in understanding whether customers experienced emotions are directed to themselves or to the service provider. As a solution, and to deepening our knowledge of emotions, these authors suggested that researchers should focus on positive and negative emotions related to behavior. The results showed (Yu and Dean, 2001; White and Yu, 2005) that customers' experiences of aggression and disappointment were clearly bi-directional which point to the complicatedness of studying emotions without taking the actual-behavior aspect into consideration. In accordance with others, Laros and Steenkamp (2005) suggest that research should pay attention to the context and to emotions related to customer behavior in order to cumulatively build on each other and to identify knowledge gaps. The knowledge gap identified is a lack of studies on the role of emotions for stability in customer relationships where emotions are related to actual customer behavior. Such a configuration of emotions, cognition, and actual behavior could be illustrated by customers' emotional expressions connected to stated reasons for switching or not. Therefore, the present study focuses on the role of emotions for stability in customer relationship; the context thus being the relationship between telecom provider and the customers.

The overall aim of this study is to investigate whether or not experienced emotions in customer relationships – linked to actual behavior – can deepen the understanding of the future development of the relationships. This imply that experienced emotions are hypothesized to discriminate between important factors, well-known and generally occurring in switching processes, situational, influential, and reactional triggers (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007).

**The configuration for studying emotions in customer relationships**

Actual switching behavior is the outcome of the switching processes leading to switching in telecom-customer relationships. The relationships have a special character where the sensitivity for switching is defined as situational, influential, and reactional triggers. Triggers in customer relationships are defined as groups of factors influencing customer perceptions with consequence for actual behavior (Roos *et al.*, 2006). Situational triggers are stemming from changes in customers' lives regarding economic or demographic issues, influential triggers being the impact of the market including competitors' actions

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for increased market shares, and reactional triggers divulging the perceived-critical incidents. These are all groups of triggers with different influence on subsequent behavior.

In a recent study, with a longitudinal design on customer relationships (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007) it was found that whether the customers are active or passive when switching makes a difference for future stability in relationships. Customers that actively searched for alternatives tend to be more stable compared to those that made unplanned switching. Thus, in accordance with previous research (Menon and Dubé, 2004; White and Yu, 2005), the robust configuration of factors for studying emotions in relationships should include:

- triggers (defined as degree of sensitivity in relationships);
- active and passive customers; and
- stable and unstable behavior (outcome of customer relationships).

#### *Relationship context and customer emotions*

Richins (1997) and Smith and Bolton (2002) emphasize that emotions differ when the context change; buying a pair of shoes may not generally raise the same kind of emotions as do consumption where the amount of the monetary exchange is more considerable and may include risk. Thus, another industry that may be referred to as low-risk because of small-amount money exchange is telecom. The telecom-customer relationships are a specific context which not necessarily fit the validated scales regarding customers' emotional expressions. The importance of taking context into consideration when studying emotions is also raised by Laros and Steenkamp (2005). They developed a hierarchical model where positive and negative represented the highest level in the hierarchy. The positive/negative level is then separated into four negative and two positive emotions, which are finally divided into 42 different emotional expressions. The hierarchical model establishes a complexity regarding emotions and customer behavior, which the results of previous research (Oliver *et al.*, 1997; Laros and Steenkamp, 2005) indicate is partly context and behavior related. These findings describe the reasons and show the importance to relate emotions to already established configurations and thereby contribute to the literature on both customer relationships and emotions in a model.

#### *Telecom-customer relationships and emotions*

The telecom-relationship context means according to Laros and Steenkamp (2005) that different kind of emotions can be present in different kinds of switching behavior. On the individual level such situations (different kinds of switching behavior) occur when customers switch from one telecom provider to another. Customers may perceive diverse emotions during different switching processes, which may signal different messages regarding loyalty. In the telecommunication context, a customer might react to "price" and perceive it as a switching reason, becoming angry because of the high level. He/she therefore decides to switch to another telecom operator. "Price" has stimulated (given appraisal) to an affective response (anger), which in this case raises awareness (arousal), which results in a behavioral reaction (switching). Anger is an emotion and is, in the present study, considered a possible influencer on switching, because the literature states that emotions can be distinguished according to the specificity of their original stimulus target (Gardner, 1985; Pieters and van Raaij, 1988; Menon and Dubé, 2004).

Emotional expressions are not easy to interpret without knowledge of the specific context. It is known that customers experience affective feelings when switching in the telecom industry (Roos *et al.*, 2008). Roos *et al.* (2008) found that the most frequently expressed affective feeling when switching is “stress.” The analysis showed that “stress” relates to the pressure customers’ experience when trying to select “the best buy.” Customers in all industries do not recall the same kind of affective feelings, at least not to the same degree. Mathur *et al.* (1999) argue that controllable events of behavior may constitute coping strategies for customers to manage their stress in stressful situations. Switching behavior may thus play the role of such a coping strategy for telecom customers bearing in mind the fierce competition in the telecom industry during the last years.

Given the configuration of factors in customer relationships; sensitivity (triggers), stable and unstable behavior, active and passive customers, new insights regarding relationship dynamics may be revealed when emotions are related to the defined configuration, labelled the constancy-relationship model. The model serves as a profound basis for a deeper understanding of relationship development by including emotions for a holistic and context-based interpretation.

*The constancy-relationship model*

Cohen and Areni (1991) emphasize the necessity of cognitive appraisal in emotion generating. These appraisals may be automatic and immediate in some situations, and deliberate and elaborative in other. It is also found that, in many stimulus situations, the sequence of thought, emotion and behavior give rise to subsequent levels of activity. Three levels of cognitive appraisal are described: automatic, schema, and a third, which need higher appraisal and deliberation. However, the levels describe only the interaction which the dynamic character of the model is based on. The roles of the included factors for the dynamism of the model are missing.

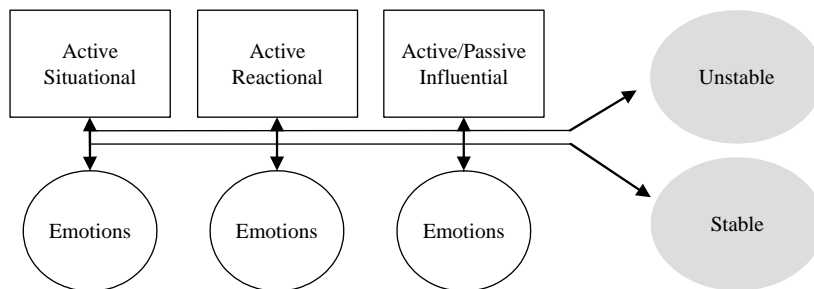
Cohen and Areni (1991) demonstrate the dynamism in their model by pointing to the interaction between affective and cognitive factors. However, their (Cohen and Areni, 1991) model does not reveal the fundamental order of priority between the included factors and behavior. The consequence is that the role and effects of the factors for behavior is not established. In order to include the role of emotions in customer relationships we use a validated model of dynamics in customer relationships where different categories of factors are defined with their hierarchical role for switching (Roos, 1999, 2002; Roos and Gustafsson, 2007). The compilation of the two (Roos, 1999, 2002; Cohen and Areni, 1991) means that not only the dynamics consisting of affective and cognitive interaction (Cohen and Areni, 1991) is theoretically described as in Cohen and Areni (1991). The cognitive is deepened and more precisely explained in terms of categories of sensitivity factors (triggers), divided into situational, influential, and reactional customers, derived from their behavioral differences in switching processes (Roos, 1999). Continued research on sensitivity in customer relationships has deepened the understanding of dynamics within various customer segments to not only include the aspects of:

- sensitivity in customer relationships, but to also consider differences between;
- active and passive customers; and
- stable or unstable relationships (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007).

In sum, the configuration idea proposed by Richins (1997) suggesting that research should build on previous results regarding emotions in order to come closer to the effects and roles of emotions for customer behavior rather than concentrating on separate preferences of exclusive emotions, resulted in the constancy-relationship model. In the model-modification process the suggestion for future research proposed by Richins (1997) and further by Laros and Steenkamp (2005) and Cronin (2003) has been taken into consideration by pointing to the fruitfulness of combining and adding emotions to known configurations of customer behavior in order to comprehend the contextual influence on behavior. The model in Figure 1 consists of factors that all are parts of other models; interaction between cognitive and affective (Cohen and Areni, 1991), customers grouped according to their sensitivity for actual-behavior change in customer relationships (Roos, 1999, 2002; Roos and Gustafsson, 2007). For the present study the included constructs are included for testing and comprehending the understanding of emotions for loyalty. In the present study, this means that we search for differences based on emotions amongst the identified customer groups regarding actual behavior (switching).

Figure 1 consists of an assumed connection between cognition (situational, influential, and reactional, representing the sensitivity in customer relationships) and affect (emotions) according to Cohen and Areni (1991). Based on Roos and Gustafsson (2007) two different categories of cognitive groups were identified with consequence for actual behavior, active and passive, which were included in the cognitive boxes together with the three cognitive categories. Based on the same study (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007) where telecom relationships were defined as configuration of factors with different consequences for behavior (actual switching) the outcome in Figure 1 was divided into two categories of actual behavior (stable or unstable).

The first point of summary, the theoretical framework used in the present study is accordingly and originally built on the dynamic-behavior model described by Cohen and Areni (1991). The model (Cohen and Areni, 1991) is based on the interaction between affective and cognitive systems in customer perceptions telling that emotions influence subsequent cognitive activity consequential for behavior. In a study on switching behavior (Roos, 1999) the dynamic-behavior model (Cohen and Areni, 1991) was modified, compared, and discussed in terms of emotions and switching determinants. The role of emotions for loyalty was not determined only the presence of emotions in customer-switching processes. In the present study that modification is used and developed and represents the theoretical contribution of the present study. Second, Roos and Gustafsson (2007) found triggers (situational, influential, and



**Figure 1.**  
The constancy-relationship  
model

reactional) to be related to the activity by customers when switching. Some customers searched actively for new alternative while other passively waited for a phone call offering them new alternatives, which in Figure 1 is present as combinations of active and passive and triggers. Third, in the same way triggers were related to the stability of relationships enabled by the longitudinal nature of data where a row of switching are described. The implication of the theoretical framework depicted in Figure 1 is that the role of emotions for loyalty becomes more comprehensive because of the linkage to actual behavior (stable and unstable). The ultimate theoretical contribution of the present study is accordingly a development of a constancy-relationship model embedding emotions where behavior is regarded as actual behavior; either stable or unstable customers. The dynamism in Figure 1 unfolds interplay between the cognitive and affective factors; triggers (cognitive) and emotions (affective).

### **Method**

Richins (1997) has raised some doubts regarding how it is possible to really understand consumption-based emotions due to the limitation of the often used scales (Izard, 1977; Plutchik, 1980; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). These scales seem to ignore some of the emotions that customers are familiar with in favour of emotions and expressions that are unfamiliar to most customers (Richins, 1997). For example, emotions such as “contemptuous”, “sheepish”, “revulsion” are not part of the everyday vocabulary of most people, at least not in connection to consumption. In addition, the pleasure-arousal-dominance scale (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) uses differential items in which the two anchor points are not always clear opposites (e.g. bored and relaxed; cared for and in control), which may cause confusion amongst customers. The analysis in the present study links the emotional reactions to factors of customer relationship configurations identified in earlier research (Cohen and Areni, 1991; Roos, 1999; Roos and Gustafsson, 2007). By adding the emotions to the configuration it may:

- enhance the understanding of the relationship; and
- show whether there is a support or not for the existing configuration.

This should point to the appropriateness of the included emotions in the questionnaire in a customer relationship context.

### *Sample*

A sample of 81 telecom customers was interviewed about their emotions in 113 switching processes. Their mean age was 37 years in a range from 20 to 83 years, 51 women and 30 men. The respondents were obtained from a long-term project whose object was to study customers' switching processes not only from the telecom company's perspective that provided the contact information but between all telecom operators of the country. The long-term character of the qualitative study that had continued for several years was to relate factors of switching processes to actual switching behavior. However, for the present study only the quantitative part was analyzed.

### *Procedure*

A semistructured questionnaire was used and data was collected through telephone interviews. In the introductory part of the interview, the interviewee was told the aim of the study. The interviewees were thereafter asked some background questions and to state

their current relationship with the company. Then questions were asked to describe the existing relationships and the switching behavior leading to the current telecom provider. In the second part of the interview, the respondents were asked to check 12 affective scales to describe the affective reaction they experienced when they decided to switch. All the ratings were numerical and made on a scale ranging from 1 to 9.

### Measures

The affect measure consisted of 12 bipolar adjective scales (see Västfjäll *et al.* (2002), for a more detailed description). Scales defined by the adjective pairs (translated from Swedish) sad-glad, depressed-cheerful, displeased-pleased, sleepy-awake, dull-peppy, quiet-energetic, pessimistic-optimistic, indifferent-committed, bored-interested, tense-serene, anxious-calm, and nervous-relaxed were included in the questionnaire. The participants were also asked to state their reasons to switch. The stated reasons were then categorized into three different triggers (situational, influential, and reactional) according to the theoretical framework (see Roos *et al.* 2008), for further details).

### Analysis procedure

Actual switching behavior was possible to determine because of the long-term character of the sample being the source for a longitudinal qualitative study (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007). As a result, the respondents were categorized as stable or unstable customers at the beginning of the analysis. Stable customers had not switched since the last interview, which is during the last year. Customers that had switched during the last years were categorized as unstable customers. When the customer had made several switches and also stated they clearly remember each occasion, the interviewer repeated the list of emotions during the interview. Therefore, the number of switching processes exceeds the number of interviewees.

### Results

Table I describes means and standard deviations for the affect scales in each trigger and in unstable/stable relationships. The results indicate that respondents in general

	Stable		Unstable		Situational trigger		Influential trigger		Reactional trigger	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Passive-active	6.39	1.84	6.07	2.63	7.03	1.62	5.93	2.25	5.82	2.50
Sad-happy	6.03	1.66	5.84	2.06	6.19	1.73	5.76	1.63	6.05	2.36
Sleepy-aroused	6.47	1.72	6.70	1.95	6.32	1.70	6.59	1.73	6.86	2.15
Stressed-calm	6.30	1.89	5.88	2.04	6.43	1.92	5.70	1.74	6.73	2.29
Bored-enthusiastic	6.03	1.90	6.35	1.86	6.16	1.66	6.02	1.74	6.45	2.52
Depressed-cheerful	5.71	1.77	5.86	1.86	5.95	1.22	6.04	1.81	4.82	2.28
Nervous-relaxed	7.06	1.66	5.95	2.08	6.89	1.81	6.54	1.87	6.45	2.15
Pessimistic-optimistic	6.87	1.82	6.02	2.42	6.62	1.95	6.43	2.10	6.73	2.39
Unhappy-pleased	6.56	2.10	5.88	2.59	6.14	2.35	6.65	2.15	5.73	2.60
Dull-awake	6.24	1.70	6.33	1.66	6.05	1.35	6.48	1.81	6.14	1.83
Indifferent-engaged	6.77	1.69	6.37	2.19	6.86	1.29	6.61	1.97	6.23	2.51
Tense-serene	6.93	1.76	6.28	1.91	6.65	1.77	6.67	1.67	6.77	2.35
<i>n</i>	70		43		37		54		22	

**Table I.**  
Mean and SD  
corresponding to elicited  
affect



experienced a variety of affective reactions in their relationship with the telecom company.

*Affect scales*

The affect scales were analyzed using separate one-way analyses of variances (ANOVAs). It was found that there was a significant effect of the independent variable triggers on the dependent variable passive-active ( $F = 3.57$ ,  $df = 2, 110$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Consequently, the Bonferroni corrected  $t$ -test was used to compare pairs of group means in order to assess where the differences lie. It was found at the 5 percent level of significance, that respondents experiencing situational triggers ( $M = 7.03$ ) felt more active than respondents experiencing influential triggers ( $M = 5.93$ ).

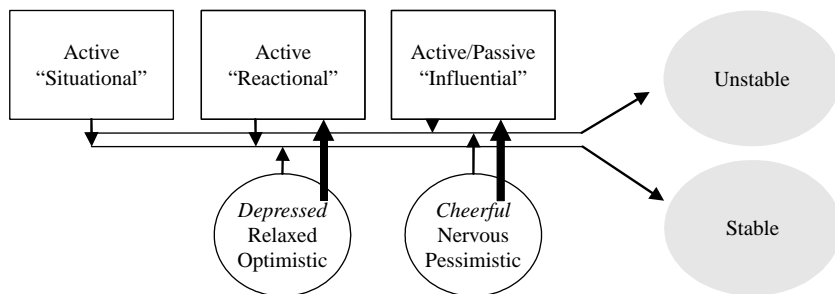
A significant effect of the independent variable triggers were also detected on the dependent variable depressed-cheerful ( $F = 4.07$ ,  $df = 2, 110$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In analysis by Bonferroni corrected  $t$ -test it was found, at the 5 percent level of significance, that respondents experiencing influential triggers ( $M = 6.04$ ) was more cheerful than respondents experiencing reactional triggers ( $M = 4.82$ ).

ANOVA showed a significant effect of the independent variable stable/unstable on the dependent variable nervous-relaxed ( $F = 9.69$ ,  $df = 1, 111$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Consequently, the Bonferroni corrected  $t$ -test was used to compare pairs of group means in order to assess where the differences lie. It was found at the 5 percent level of significance, that respondents experiencing a stable relationship felt significantly more relaxed ( $M = 6.66$ ) than respondents experiencing an unstable relationship ( $M = 5.31$ ).

A significant effect of the independent variable triggers were also detected on the dependent variable pessimistic-optimistic ( $F = 4.50$ ,  $df = 1, 111$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). A Bonferroni corrected  $t$ -test was used to compare pairs of group means in order to assess where the differences lie. It was found at the 5 percent level of significance, that respondents experiencing a stable relationship was significantly more optimistic ( $M = 6.44$ ) than that respondents experiencing an unstable relationship ( $M = 5.28$ ).

*Development of the suggested configuration*

The constancy-relationship model in Figure 1 was modified based on the findings. The modified model in Figure 2 depicts the differences between the three triggers regarding customer-expressed emotions, which are added to already known linkages as shown in Figure 1. One such link is the connection between active customers, situational trigger, and stable customer relationships. The findings in this study did not add anything new to that configuration. However, it was possible to add the relaxed, optimistic



**Figure 2.** Emotions included in the constancy-relationship model

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emotional experiences to the configuration active customers, reactional triggers, and stable customer relationships. Particularly, depression was related to the reactional trigger (bold arrow in Figure 2). Findings from previous studies (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007) have already identified the relationship between influential trigger and active/passive customers. However, findings in the present study show that pessimism, nervousness, and cheerfulness are important affective reactions. Cheerfulness was found to be particularly important related to the influential trigger.

The theoretical contribution of the study is a constancy-relationship model (Figure 1) which contains a configuration of different constructs related to stability and instability in customer relationships. The configuration of constructs represents sensitivity (situational, reactional, and influential), activity and stability (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007). Figure 2 again is a modification of that model (Figure 1). Figure 2 includes the empirical evidence from the present study and has accordingly added emotional and contextual aspects to the configuration. The most important research contribution is the identification of different emotions related to actual behavior in customer relationships. Such emotions are connected to different types of triggers, which eventually seem to determine whether the relationship will be stable or unstable and also point to the fact that emotions do not seem to alone have the capacity to cause stability or instability in customer relationships. Accordingly, a specific emotion, like feeling depressed or nervous, is not in general enough to cause switching behavior in telecom-customer relationships.

#### *Emotions in the specific context*

This section contains a description of the specific context where the emotions in this particular study have been analyzed. It is easy to understand the dynamic situation for the customers when looking at the telecom industry during the last decade. Fierce competition and deregulation has resulted in fluctuation in telecom companies' customer bases. There are several possibilities when studying customers in their current relationships: they may have switched to the telecom provider more recently or some time ago and they may or may not switch again in the near future. Customers carry previous experiences from former relationships with them, which may be used as reference points in current relationships. These experiences aggregate to a certain degree of sensitivity in customer relationships. Such experiences can be of different kinds and are called triggers (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007; Roos *et al.*, 2008). Triggers are important elements in customer relationships; how they are defined depend on the context. The results depicted in Figure 2 reflect the dynamism in the telecom context indicating a constantly changing context, e.g. new service being introduced and various price-offerings communicated to the customers.

The configuration depicted in Figure 2 includes the constructs that, based on the findings of the present study, is important for the relationship when the outcome is actual-switching behavior. Customers have expressed that they felt depressed, relaxed, optimistic, nervous, pessimistic, and cheerful when switching to another telecom operator. Telecom-customer relationships are contexts where these specific elements are embedded indicating how the process proceeds and changes. For example, the whole configuration changes if the stable situation changes to an unstable situation. The next section describes changes in the configuration.

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Figure 2 shows how emotions in customer relationships assist the already-established understanding of the dynamic process leading from stability to instability or reversely from instability to stability. Based on the findings it is still impossible to determine an exact starting or end point of these processes. Regardless of not being able to define start and end; emotions add much to the understanding of the stability in customer relationships.

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#### *Stable telecom-customer relationships*

Situational triggers maintain stability in the switched-to customer relationships. In this study, specific emotional reactions were not found to be related to situational triggers. Nonetheless, activity amongst the customers for stability was assured and emotional reactions related to stability were relaxation and optimism. One conclusion is that when the customers search for new alternative relationships they feel optimistic and when they have found a new alternative influenced by situational triggers (job situations, demographical, and/or economic changes) they feel relaxed. Repeated interviewing of the same customers in the present study revealed that customers stayed in their switched-to relationships for a longer time when the situational trigger had influenced the switching process.

Reactional triggers influencing customers experienced a disturbance in the interaction with the telecom company, also support stability in customer relationships. Relaxation and optimism are related to stable customer relationships indicating that these emotions occur during an early stage of the relationships whereas feelings of depression are related to the late stage. Depressed emotions are noted only in the reactional-switching process. The fact that these customers were active (Figure 2) indicates that they searched for new alternatives depending on the sensitivity caused by the reactional triggers. When the switch was satisfying the depressed emotions gradually declined and turned into feelings of relaxation and optimism which is also supported by Ganesh *et al.* (2000) who state that emotions felt by customers during the initiation and maintenance of a new relationship differ depending on the emotions connected to the switch.

#### *Unstable telecom-customer relationships*

The theoretical contribution of the present study put forward that influential triggers are related to instability in the telecom-customer relationships. The empirical findings show that customers feel more nervous and pessimistic in unstable customer relationships. Furthermore, customers experiencing influential triggers were feeling more cheerful. Moreover, customers engaging in switching behavior affected by influential triggers were predominantly more passive since only a few were active. Previous research (Roos *et al.*, 2008) implies that it is most likely that customer in relationships with an influential-trigger, impact experiences a stress that is hard to define as either positive or negative. Roos and Gustafsson (2007) found that passive customers contacted by competitors are frequent switchers. They experienced some kind of reward from the switching situations. In these situations it is most likely that customers feel cheerful. When the customers feel that they are forced to find a better buy (active-influential customers, Roos and Gustafsson, 2007) during an ongoing relationship they will most likely feel nervous and pessimistic.

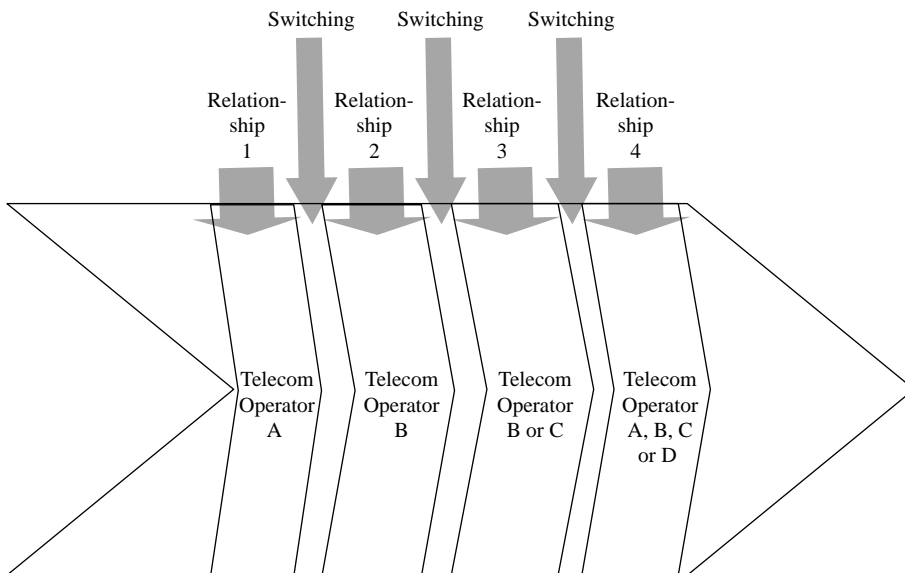
**Discussion**

The overall aim of the study was to investigate whether customer-experienced emotion in relationships can deepen the understanding of the stability in future relationships when the focus is on differences regarding emotions and sensitivity (triggers). The establishment of the role of emotional experiences have enhanced the level of understanding regarding the dynamics in customer relationships and also increased the understanding of future stability in customer relationships.

First, contribution to customer relationship and emotion literature: enhanced understanding of the progress of the relationships ending either in stable (non-switching) or in unstable (switching) situations.

Figure 3 depicts the nature of a dynamic perspective which summarizes our theoretical framework, the findings of this study with regards to the longitudinal sample. When a customer switches from telecom operator A to operator B, by active action because of an advertising campaign by operator B (influential trigger, active) or by reacting to a competitor’s action (passive), customers may feel cheerful or nervous. The experience of direct opposite emotions illustrates the dynamism as well as the development and progress of the switching process with implication for the next relationship, which has been indicated in previous research (Ganesh *et al.*, 2000).

To be nervous in the relationship with operator A can change to a feeling of cheerfulness if the customer wants to switch to operator B simply because he/she was contacted by B and decided to switch, not because of a planned decision but because of a prompt conviction of a better buy. In the new relationship the feeling may come back again when, for instance, if the expectation was not fulfilled. The customer may once again feel nervous when entering yet a new switching process to operator C. If the switch, to operator D or back to A, is active and deliberate because of personal-situation changes (situational trigger) the customer is more likely to be stable in that relationship. Furthermore, the empirical analysis shows that yet another customer with almost an identical switching



**Figure 3.**  
The perspective of the  
sample and findings

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history but which continues the switching because of bad treatment (reactional trigger) and searches actively for new alternatives, differs regarding emotional experiences. Such switching histories contain descriptions of depressed feelings but nevertheless the switched-to relationship stays stable. Once a new switching is made, the emotional experience can once again change in a more relaxed and optimistic direction. The reactional sensitivity for stability in the relationship is related to emotions such as feeling relaxed, optimism, and depression. Switching due to a difficult situation produce depressed feelings which later can change to feelings of relaxation and/or optimism in the new relationship.

Second, contribution to customer relationship and emotion literature: enhanced understanding of customer evaluation of their relationships through expressed emotions related to actual behavior.

The degree of satisfaction did not significantly differ between the configurations in the present study. At first this was a surprising and unexpected result based on findings in previous research (Liljander and Strandvik, 1997; Bolton, 1998; Stauss and Neuhaus, 1997; Yu and Dean, 2001; Smith and Bolton, 2002; Bagozzi, 2006; Dallimore *et al.*, 2007). One conclusion is that the result is due to missing emotions in situational triggers. When customers evaluate a service provider the rating is routinely made when it comes to satisfaction. When customers rate a pleased-displeased continuum they do not seem to take into account the degree of stability of the relationship. It is more likely that they use such a scale to state their attitude toward the operator. Yet another interpretation of the lack of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the differences between triggers regarding emotional expressions is that the difference really does not exist. Such a statement implies that satisfaction and dissatisfaction may not embed customers' deep elaboration regarding emotional expressions. When actual behavior is the departure of the perspective of the configuration leading to either stable or unstable relationships, customers seem to use more precise emotional expressions, which also is in line with the literature on other differences between actual behavior or behavior as intention (Foster and Newman, 1998; Frei and Harker, 1999; Combe and Botschen, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The results are the same regardless of different triggers.

A more fruitful issue is whether the emotional states during the relationship changes along with the sensitivity and stability, which has been debated in previous studies on switching behavior (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007). To that question the present study provides a positive answer. Emotions related to, for example, a reactional trigger shows a possible change in degree of sensitivity since feelings of relaxation and optimism relate to a continuing relationship (stable) and stability to reactional triggers whereas depressed feelings relate more specifically to reactional triggers as shown in Figure 3.

Another issue seems to be the verbal expressions, which not necessarily correspond to the ones used in customers' daily rounds. Nervousness and pessimism, for example, may correspond to the emotional expression "stress" in the qualitative study (Roos *et al.*, 2008), where "stress" was found to be the most common emotional expression connected to the influential trigger in the same way as nervousness and pessimism are in the present study. In other words, the configurations fall together only the wording regarding the emotional expression differs. It may be the case that customers more conveniently use "stress" instead of nervousness or pessimism in a consumption situation. The consequential concern is whether the customers both expressions have covers the emotional experiences in the same way. The misfit may hence follow the

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doubts articulated by Yu and Dean (2001), White and Yu (2005), and Dallimore *et al.* (2007) concerning the origin of the emotional experiences. Therefore, for understanding the meaning of the words it was fruitful to link the emotional expressions to an established configuration for relationship continuation.

Third, contribution to customer relationship literature: enhanced understanding of the continuum of the customer-perceived relationships on the individual level.

The implication of the longitudinal approach to customer relationships on the individual level seen from the customers' view is that set boundaries of the customer relationships may not coincide with the set boundaries seen from the service providers' perspective. Based on the findings of the present study it seems more or less impossible to understand customer relationships unless you have not followed customers on an individual level both in previous and current relationships, which is in line with research on relationships (Bolton, 1998; Ganesh *et al.*, 2000) and on frequent switchers (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007). Despite the fact that dynamism of customer relationships is widely discussed in previous research, few studies has applied a perspective that allows an analysis of the dynamism in the empirical study, which also includes actual behavior (Ganesh *et al.*, 2000). The dynamism presumes per definition that different constructs interact. Hence, in order to meet this assumption there is a need for understanding the dynamism of the configuration, i.e. the relationships, which the inclusion of emotions in the configuration enhanced (Figure 2). Customers do not, regarding emotions, cut the previous relationship when they enter the new one. On the contrary, customers linger in the switched-from relationships at least in the beginning of the new relationships, which various emotional expressions indicate. In the present study, initial steps for a deeper understanding of the dynamism have been taken facilitated by the insight of customers' differing emotional reactions connected to triggers during one and the same relationship.

#### *Limitation of the study*

The findings of the present study are based on a longitudinal-empirical study but only in one industry. Although the telecom industry may have been very fruitful for a longitudinal study on the stability of customer relationships because of the turbulence in that specific industry during almost one decade, the industry representations is narrow. Therefore, it would be preferable to conduct an empirical study in another setting or to carry out a cross-sectional study in order to compare the customers' emotional experiences on a more broadly taken basis.

#### **Managerial implication**

The findings in the present study provide important information for managers in planning their communication-strategy. There seems to be differences in customers' emotional states based on whether the customers are new customers or if they have been customers for some time. The differences are based on the experiences in the former relationships. Depressed customers are consequently not necessarily depressed because of circumstances in their current relationships. On the contrary, depressed customers that linger in their switched-from relationships are potential future-loyal customers if they experience they found the service provider they searched for when they switched. Therefore, understanding the messages of customers' emotional expressions and the connection between different relationships on the individual level is necessary for managers.

### Future research

The findings of the present study raise a serious question. What is the customer relationship space or continuum, beginning and end, on the individual level? The overall finding of the present study implies that the perspective to research for understanding-customer relationships is most important almost necessary and that is; the customer perspective. Therefore, new questions raised by the findings of the present study are:

- (1) What is the continuum of the relationships seen from the customers' perspective? Do customer relationships need re-definition?
- (2) Do the customer perspective and the service provider perspective differ on the boundaries of customer relationship?
- (3) Has the research on customer relationships to date actually applied a service provider perspective on "where the customer relationship starts and ends"?

These three questions are a consequence of the findings of the present study and will hopefully encourage researchers to elevate new views to the research in order to refine the knowledge on the topic of customer relationships.

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#### **Further reading**

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