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Bert K. Robinson

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Applicability of Exculpatory Clause Principles to Credit Card Risk-Shifting Clauses

The tripartite credit card transaction is the result of a series of interlocking agreements between three parties: holder, issuer, and merchant. The holder agrees that he will pay for the merchandise upon receipt of a statement. The issuer purchases charge slips evidencing the holder's credit purchases from the merchant by virtue of a prior contract between them. This latter agreement normally provides that the issuer will purchase all of the charge slips from the merchant unless the issuer has notified the merchant that any particular credit card is invalid. After purchasing these credits, the issuer renders a monthly statement to each holder.

From the issuer's standpoint, one risk attending the issuance of credit cards is the possibility of loss due to unauthorized use of the cards. Without more, the credit card contract would bind the holder to pay only for his own purchases, and he would not be liable for purchases without his authorization. Since the issuer is bound to purchase the charge slips that the merchant has accumulated before receiving notice that a card is invalid, the possibility of unauthorized purchases presents a substantial risk of loss to the issuer.

In order to avoid this risk, the card issuer usually inserts a

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1. For other discussions of risk-shifting clauses in credit card transactions, see Clafin, The Credit Card—A New Instrument, 33 Conn. B.J. 1 (1959); Comment, 48 Calif. L. Rev. 459 (1960); Note, 13 Stan. L. Rev. 150 (1960); Annot., 158 A.L.R. 762 (1945).

2. For a discussion of the nature of the credit card contract itself, see Comment, 48 Calif. L. Rev. 459 (1960). It is not within the scope of this Comment to consider the time at which the credit card agreement becomes binding upon the parties. Although many credit cards bear the words "acceptance of this card is conclusive presumption of assent to all of the provisions herein," there is some question whether or not this will be held binding on the card holder in absence of consent, express or implied. For the purposes of this Comment, a binding contract is presumed to be formed upon the holder's receipt of the card. It seems there would be grounds for assuming a valid contract if the holder makes at least one credit purchase, for this might be an act from which a court would infer consent to all of the terms contained in the card.

3. Although the card is usually made out in the name of one individual, it is common knowledge that cards are frequently used by persons other than the holder. Often a card made out in the husband's name will be used exclusively by his wife. Therefore, the question arises as to who will be considered as unauthorized. For the purposes of this Comment it is presumed that an unauthorized purchaser is one who has found or stolen the card, or who is clearly without authorization from the holder.

4. Of course, there is the possibility of recourse against the unauthorized user.
clause on the reverse side to the effect that by “accepting” the card the holder agrees to be responsible for all purchases made with the card, unless and until the issuer is notified of its loss, theft, or cancellation. Due to a paucity of jurisprudence, the legal effects of this risk-shifting clause are not as yet clearly defined. This Comment will attempt to anticipate possible judicial attitudes toward enforcement of credit card risk-shifting clauses by analogy to those factors influencing the decisions involving a kindred contractual device, the exculpatory clause. Although there are dissimilarities, both are contractual devices used in attempting to shift the risks attendant to the performance of executory contracts.

Exculpatory Clauses

Exculpatory clauses are stipulations inserted into contracts which purport to relieve one of the parties of civil liability that may result from a future act of negligence or other improper performance of the contract. They are strictly construed.

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5. The following is written on the back of a credit card issued by a major oil company, in a space 1 1/2" by 15/16": “This card, if not canceled or expired, may be used for purchasing merchandise marketed by [issuer], and for lubrication, washing, tire repairs, and accessory installations at service stations displaying this Company’s signs; and for similar purchases at stations displaying the signs of other companies shown hereon. Tires, tubes, batteries and mountable accessories must be mounted or installed on the vehicle. Motor fuel and oil deliveries must not exceed tank and crankcase capacities of vehicle taking delivery. This card must be presented when purchases are made and remains the property of [issuer] and may be canceled or repossessed by it at any time. Customer must notify issuing company in writing if this card is lost or stolen, otherwise customer’s approval of all purchases is conclusively presumed. By acceptance of this card, customer named hereon agrees to the above conditions.” (Emphasis added.)

6. Whereas the exculpatory clause actually shifts or entirely removes the risk from the exculpated party, the credit card clause operates more like an indemnity clause—it does not bar the issuer’s liability to the merchant, but operates to force the holder to indemnify the issuer. In exculpatory clauses a party is trying to avoid responsibility for his own negligence or failure to perform the contract, but in credit card transactions the issuer is seeking indemnification for his fulfillment of a contractual liability to the merchant, which liability was originally caused by the carelessness or wrongdoing of another.


The requirement of consent. In order for one to be bound by an exculpatory clause, there must be consent, express or implied. The clause need not be pointed out to the party to whom the risk is shifted, but only “so laid before him that he may be reasonably . . . believed to have been made aware of [it].” In the absence of actual knowledge of the clause, it has been held that there was no implied consent to it where the clause was printed on the back of a document or perpendicular to the other contract provisions, in cramped type, superimposed over other matter, or on a separate instrument such as a letterhead or ticket.

§ 1751 (B) (rev. ed. 1938); RESTATEMENT, CONTRACTS § 574 (1932).

There is a notion that exculpatory clauses tend to cause one to be less careful in performance of a duty. Sinclair Refining Co. v. Lang, 28 Okla. B.J. 1802 (1957), cited with approval in Mohawk Drilling Co. v. McCullough Tool Co., 271 F.2d 627 (10th Cir. 1959). See Boll v. Sharp & Dohme, Inc., 231 App. Div. 568, 121 N.Y.S.2d 20 (1953). This case involved a blood donor and held an exculpatory clause invalid by strict construction. The basis for the decision was probably the public function served by the blood donee.


10. 1 CORBIN, CONTRACTS 94 (1950).


15. E.g., Anaconda Copper Mining Co. v. Houston, 107 Ill. App. 183 (1903).

A party to an otherwise oral or implied contract may shift certain risks by a written stipulation. However, as in the written contract, the party attempting to limit his risk must make such efforts to communicate the clause as would have communicated notice of it to a reasonable man. For example, where a parking lot attendant hands a customer a ticket containing an exculpatory clause, or posts a sign to the same effect, the customer is bound only if these are such notices as would have been communicated to a reasonable man. From this notice, consent is inferred.

Policy considerations. Even where all of the elements of a binding contract are present, a court may refuse to enforce an exculpatory clause which it considers contrary to public policy. The clearest case of this is an agreement by which a party seeks to exempt himself from liability for gross negligence, or "willful and wanton misconduct." More often, however, the exculpatory clause's conformity with public policy will depend largely upon the relationship between the parties at the time of the contract.

Courts have denied the validity of the exculpatory clauses


20. RESTATEMENT, CONTRACTS § 70 (1932).

by which a party attempts completely to absolve himself of liability either in tort or contract in the performance of a "public function."\textsuperscript{22} This seems to be based upon the notion that institutions such as common carriers,\textsuperscript{23} telephone and telegraph systems, etc., have a public duty or responsibility which may exempt them from absolute liability either in tort or contract in the performance of a "public function."\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{22} 6 CORBIN, CONTRACTS § 1472 (1951); PROSSER, TORTS § 55 (2d ed. 1955); Comment, 44 CALIF. L. REV. 120 (1956); 32 N.Ew. L. REV. 600 (1953); 17 C.J.S. CONTRACTS § 262 (1939); RESTATEMENT, CONTRACTS § 575 (1932).


tems, power, and irrigation companies ought to bear the risks attending performance in return for their public franchise. Courts appear reluctant to uphold exculpatory agreements where the bargaining power of the party to whom the risk is shifted is relatively small as compared with that of the exculpated party. Accordingly, exculpatory clauses have been held


27. See cases holding that employers cannot exculpate themselves from potential tort liability for injury to their employees: Brant v. Chicago & A. R.R., 294 Ill. 606, 128 N.E. 732 (1920); Haven v. Munson, 169 So. 519 (La. App. 1st Cir. 1936); Lakube v. Cohen, 304 Mass. 156, 23 N.E.2d 144 (1939); Jewell v. Kansas City Bolt & Nut Co., 231 Mo. 176, 132 S.W. 703 (1910); Johnston v. Fargo, 194 N.Y. 379, 77 N.E. 388 (1906); Direct Transportation Co. v. Baltimore & Ohio
unenforceable when imposed upon the one who is, in effect, forced into contractual relations with a monopolistic enterprise. Similarly, a stipulation limiting or exempting one from liability has been struck down although the transaction occurs in a highly competitive field where the party sought to be burdened with the risk has little freedom to choose contractual terms because the competitors will not deviate from a standardized contract form. Although disparity in bargaining power appears to be the reason for the results in many cases, the courts have usually granted the employer as to employee who agreed to hold third party harmless. Contra, Wells Fargo & Co. v. Taylor, 254 U.S. 175 (1920).

"[T]he workingman as a matter of fact gets little or nothing for the risk which he assumes and that public policy demands the avoidance of such exculpatory contracts not only for good of the employee but for the safety of society at large." See Beers, Contracts Exempting Employers from Liability for Negligence, 7 YALE L.J. 352 (1898).

However, if the court finds that the injured party is in reality an independent contractor, the employer may stipulate against its negligence toward him. Chicago, R.I. & P. Ry. v. Bond, 240 U.S. 449 (1916).

See also 6 CORBIN, CONTRACTS § 1472 (1950); RESTATEMENT, CONTRACTS § 575 (1932); 17 C.J.S. § 262 (1932).


29. In doing business with banks one often has little choice of terms in contracting due to the widespread custom among banks of using standardized contract forms. On stop-payment orders banks will sometimes stipulate that the person wishing to stop payment is not demanding, but is only asking the bank to do it as a courtesy and that the bank will not be liable should it negligently honor the check. When a bank attempts to shift the risk of liability for the negligent honoring of a check against a stop-payment order in this manner, courts have taken divergent positions. The stipulation may fail for "lack of sufficient consideration" (BRITTON, BILLS AND NOTES § 181, n. 3 (1943)), or it may not have been communicated to the offeree (HIROSHIMA v. BANK OF ITALY, 78 Cal. App. 362, 248 Pac. 947 (1926); BRITTON, BILLS AND NOTES § 181, n. 3 (1943)), or the stipulation may be void as against public policy (HIROSHIMA v. BANK OF ITALY, 78 Cal. App. 362, 248 Pac. 947 (1926)). However, some courts have found that the stipulation is reasonable and not against public policy (TREMONT TRUST CO. v. BURACK, 286 Mass. 306, 126 N.E. 782 (1920), 175 A.L.R. 1, 78 (1920)). The redactors of the Uniform Commercial Code feel that the banks should not be allowed to shift this risk and should carry losses due to negligently honoring checks.
preferred to articulate their reasons in different language.30

In summary, the courts tend to invalidate exculpatory clauses when they are convinced that the party burdened by the clause has not consented to it, or where, because of standardized business practices, he is virtually unable to contract without assenting to the clause. It has been noted also that the courts tend to strike down exculpatory clauses when the favored party is in a monopolistic position, performing a "public function."

Application of Exculpatory Clause Principles to Credit Card Risk-Shifting Clauses

It is suggested initially that the typical issuer of a credit card does not perform a "public function" because there are ordinarily numerous enterprises anxious to sell to the consumer; furthermore, the consumer need not purchase on credit as he may ordinarily use cash.

In some situations the choice of contract provisions is limited. For example, it is doubtful that one could obtain an oil company credit card which would not have a clause designed to shift the risk of loss due to unauthorized purchases to the card holder. To this extent, his bargaining power is inferior to the issuer — if he is to obtain oil products on credit, he must assent to some liability for unauthorized purchases. The question then arises in these situations as to whether or not the holder's bargaining

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30. Relative bargaining power is being more frequently discussed by the courts. Tyler v. Dowell, Inc. 274 F.2d 900 (10th Cir. 1960).

See Miller's Mutual Fire Insurance Ass'n v. Parker, 234 N.C. 20, 22, 65 S.E.2d 341, 342 (1951): "A provision in a contract seeking to relieve a party to the contract from liability for his own negligence may or may not be enforceable. It depends upon the nature and the subject matter of the contract, the relation of the parties, the presence or absence of equality of bargaining power." (Emphasis added.) Other jurisdictions have held that a hotel, acting as a depositary, cannot shift the risk of losing a guest's valuables, because to do so would be against public policy. Oklahoma City Hotel Co. v. Levine, 189 Okla. 331, 116 P.2d 997 (1941);

Generally, the courts will hold that there has been a valid exculpation of negligence if the following factors are present: The parties must be of relatively equal bargaining power. See Shafer v. Reo Motors, 205 F.2d 685 (3d Cir. 1953); Charles Lachman Co. v. Hercules Powder Co., 79 F. Supp. 206 (E.D. Pa. 1948). In the following cases, involving what might be termed luxury contracts, the court allowed complete exculpation of negligence when there was a signed contract:

- Weik v. Ace Rents, 249 Iowa 510, 87 N.W.2d 314 (1958) (lawn mower rental);
- Barrett v. Conrangan, 302 Mass. 33, 18 N.E.2d 369 (1938) (beauty salon);


A Louisiana warehouseman may not absolve himself of negligence liability. La. R.S. 54:3 (1950).

On Louisiana deposit contracts see Comment, 25 Tul. L. Rev. 268 (1951).

Courts apparently tend to allow business enterprises not engaged in a public function to bind themselves as they see fit. Tyler v. Dowell, Inc., 274 F.2d 890...
Power is so inferior that the courts may feel constrained to avoid the clause. Because he is not precluded from purchasing petroleum products, but only from purchasing them on credit, it is doubtful that the courts would find such an unfair disparity in bargaining power as to warrant avoidance of the clause.  

Thus, if the analogy to exculpatory clauses is apt, consent to the risk-shifting clause on the credit card would make it binding on the holder. It might be said that in the absence of express consent, the holder, by using the card to obtain merchandise on credit, has manifested consent to the condition printed on the card. But this would turn on whether or not notice of the risk-shifting clause had been sufficiently communicated to the holder so that a court might reasonably infer consent from its use. This seems analogous to the situation where the parking lot attendant hands the customer a ticket bearing an exculpatory clause, and the principle applied to test consent should be the same, i.e., whether or not a reasonable man would have realized that the instrument purported to carry the terms of a contract.


There may be a distinction between private and commercial lease treatment. See Jackson v. First National Bank, 415 Ill. 453, 114 N.E.2d 721 (1953), 42 ILL. B.J. 241.

31. Rather than holding that the exculpatory clause is or is not enforceable as making the holder liable for the whole of the unauthorized purchases, the reported cases have apparently weighed the comparative carelessness of the parties. Although no express rule could be found, it appears that the holder must use due care in handling the card and the issuer or the dealer must use due care in honoring the card. Gulf Refining Co. v. Williams Roofing Co., 208 Ark. 362, 186 S.W.2d 790 (1945); Gulf Refining Co. v. Plotnick, 24 Pa. D. & C. 147 (1934); Union Oil Co. v. Luil, 349 F.2d 243 (Ore. 1960). In applying this approach of comparative carelessness, the courts impute the carelessness of the dealer to the issuer. This solution may be recommended in that it tends to make issuers exercise some degree of caution in honoring cards and tends to place the loss upon the more careless party.
court has admitted that most persons carrying credit cards are unaware of the liability sought to be imposed by the conditions on the card.8

Conclusions

If credit card transactions are to be encouraged, some means must be afforded the issuer by which he can protect himself from losses due to unauthorized purchases. Otherwise, the risk in issuing credit cards might become too great for the practice to be carried on at a level most consistent with good business. The use of a risk-shifting clause which places the risk of loss due to unauthorized purchases on the card holder seems to be a practically sound plan which would minimize unauthorized purchases because the holder is the first party likely to know when a credit card falls into unauthorized hands. Also, it gives him an incentive immediately to notify the issuer of a lost or stolen card, and then the issuer may in turn promptly notify the merchants to dishonor the card. However, it seems inequitable to shift this risk to the holder without giving him a notice sufficient to enable him to protect himself.

It is suggested that the courts may well apply by analogy to the credit card risk-shifting clause the policy factors considered in determining the enforceability of exculpatory clauses. The crux of the problem seems to be whether consent to the clause should be implied from mere use of the card. If the holder’s consent to the clause is to be presumed from use of the card, even though he is unaware of it, perhaps the judiciary or legislatures should require that the issuer take adequate steps to remind the holder of the importance of reporting loss or theft of the card to the issuer.83

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32. Union Oil Co. v. Lull, 349 P.2d 243, 247 (Ore. 1960), 13 STAN. L. REV. 150. The same case held that the question of whether or not the risk-shifting clause is a part of the credit card agreement is a question for the jury, if properly raised in trial.

33. There are many things that an issuer could do in an attempt to communicate notice of the exculpatory clause to the holder: the clause might be printed in large letters, or in a bright colored ink; the monthly statements might carry a reminder of the clause; the credit application blank or letter accompanying the card, or both, might explain the clause; the dealers might have signs posted reminding the holders of it.