



Cross-cultural comparison of Chinese and Arab consumer complaint behavior in the hotel context



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ABSTRACT

There is no universal pattern of consumer complaint behavior as individual consumers from different cultures have diverse needs and expectations when they complain. This study combines the cultural dimensions of Hofstede (1980, 2001) and Schwartz (2006) to form a new theoretical model for examining cross-cultural consumer complaint behavior. The model is applied empirically in comparing the complaint behavior of consumers from two different Asian cultures (Arab and Chinese) in the context of the Iranian hospitality industry. The results address the implicit assumption contained in previous cross-cultural studies that Asian consumers are homogeneous in their behavior, revealing significant difference in Arab and Chinese consumer complaint behavior. The findings provide new insights into cross-cultural consumer complaint behavior. Managerial implications for the hospitality industry are offered.

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1. Introduction

In the hospitality industry, promoting and maintaining high levels of service quality, satisfaction and loyalty is integral to the consumer experience (Alegre and Cladera, 2006; Petrick, 2004; Sánchez-García and Currás-Pérez, 2011). When service failure occurs, inevitably followed by consumer dissatisfaction, the effective handling of complaints becomes central to the recovery of service satisfaction (Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002; Namkung et al., 2011; Smith et al., 1999). It is important for hotels to understand consumer complaint behavior (CCB) and to use complaints as a useful information source to improve service quality.

In the hospitality marketing literature, cross-cultural studies show that consumers from varying cultural groups behave differently (Wong and Lau, 2001) and with varied intentions (Ngai et al., 2007; Liu and McClure, 2001; Yuksel et al., 2006). In the limited extant cross-cultural consumer complaint research, Asian

consumers are identified as less likely to complain relative to non-Asian or western consumers (Ng et al., 2007; Patterson et al., 2006). Asia is one of the world's major source markets for international travel. China, as by far the fastest growing country with regard to international travel expenditure in the last decade, is a new driving force of global hospitality and tourism development (UNWTO, 2011). Therefore, it is important to understand Asian guests' complaint behavior in the hospitality industry. However, the majority of the extant CCB research is from the Western orientation, with only a few cross-cultural studies exploring alternative perspectives (Yuksel et al., 2006; Becker, 2000; Mueller et al., 2003). The majority of extant research implicitly assumes that Asian (eastern) consumers are homogeneous in their behavior (Ngai et al., 2007; Patterson et al., 2006). This assumption is rooted in Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions in which Asians are considered homogeneous to some extent in the three dimensions of consumer culture, namely power distance, individualism versus collectiveness, and the avoidance of uncertainty. However, in a more recent framework, Schwartz (1999a,b, 2006) explicitly indicates considerable cultural differences among Asian sub-cultures, suggesting homogeneous behavior of Asians may not be the case. Despite the strong theoretical foundations of Schwartz's dimensions of national culture (Ng et al., 2007; Steenkamp, 2001; Zhang et al., 2008), there is a lack of empirical support for this suggestion, and further testing of this framework is required for validation purposes.

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Both Hofstede (1980) and Schwartz (1999a,b) are leading researchers in examining cross-cultural differences. Hofstede's framework has been examined empirically through multiple replications and extensively applied in cross-cultural studies (Ngai et al., 2007; Engelen and Brettel, 2011). Using an integrated cross-cultural model based on Schwartz (1999a,b) and Hofstede's (1980) theories, this paper examines whether culture influences complaint behavior of Chinese and Arab consumers in the context of the Iranian hospitality industry. Iran's cultural identity and heritage is of Persian origin (Baum and O'Gorman, 2010), and the country has large numbers of Arab and Chinese visitors (Butler et al., 2012). Within Hofstede's model, Arabic and Chinese cultures are connected to some extent based on their association in terms of geography and cultural similarities such as collectiveness and power distance (Hofstede, 1980). This paper seeks to build on this model by combining Hofstede's cultural dimensions with that of Schwartz (2006).

Using this combined cultural dimension, an integrated model is applied to empirically examine CCB in two Asian cultures (i.e., Arab and Chinese). Specifically, a three-staged mixed research design is used to: (1) compare Arab and Chinese hotel guests' complaint behavior; (2) examine the association between culture/national identity and CCB of Arab and Chinese consumers; and (3) through a qualitative approach, extend and validate the complaint behavior of these two cultural groups from the hotel staff and managers' perspective.

2. Literature review

2.1. Hofstede's dimensions of culture

In cross-cultural studies, culture commonly refers to "a stable and dominant cultural character of a society shared by most of its individuals and remaining constant over long periods of time" (Reisinger and Turner, 2002, p. 297). People from different cultures have different values, rules of social behavior, perceptions, and social interaction, which consequently influence their lifestyle, work, leisure, and consumer behavior patterns (Richardson and Crompton, 1988).

In defining different cultures, Hofstede (1980, 1989, 1997, 2001) proposes four widely utilized dimensions of culture from the instrument entitled the Values Survey Module (VSM). Specifically, the four core cultural dimensions are power distance, individualism-collectiveness, masculinity-femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. Two extra dimensions, long-term orientation and indulgence versus self-restraint, have been added more recently to his framework. In Hofstede's framework (1980), power distance refers to the extent to which the less powerful members of a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Individualism-collectivism refers to the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. In an individualistic society, people are expected to stand up for themselves and to choose their own affiliations. In contrast, in a collectivistic society, individuals are considered members of a cohesive group and are expected to work and be rewarded as a group. Masculinity-femininity refers to the extent to which a society emphasizes masculine behavior such as assertiveness, acquisition of money and material possessions, as opposed to feminine behavior such as helping others, putting relationships with people before money, not showing off, and caring for the quality of life (Hofstede, 1980). Finally, uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertain or unstructured situations (Hofstede, 1980).

Hofstede (1980) proposes that in specific conditions some cultural measures are more influential than others. In particular, uncertainty avoidance is potentially the most important cultural dimension in international settings due to its association to

tolerances for risk and prescribed behavior (Hofstede, 1980; Litvin et al., 2004; Money and Crotts, 2003). As noted by Yavas (1990), risk is a major concern for international travelers. Accordingly, uncertainty avoidance appears to be a cultural dimension that plays a considerable role in regard to CCB in international settings. People from high uncertainty avoidance cultures tend to be more resistant to change, more fearful of the ambiguous, and less likely to take risks (for example, to complain about a service failure). Often, complaining is perceived as a risky behavior, as it involves facing the uncertainty of resistance from the hotel management and the undesirability of open conflict. Conversely, people from low uncertainty avoidance cultures more willingly accept risks (Huang et al., 1996).

Hofstede's framework has been extensively applied and dominates roughly 60 per cent of cross-cultural studies (Sivakumar and Nakata, 2001; Engelen and Brettel, 2011). However, scholars increasingly question Hofstede's methodology for the following reasons: the sample employed was deemed questionable as data were collected via a survey within a single global organization, i.e., data were collected between 1967 and 1973 from the IBM Corporation (Smith et al., 1996; Huang, 1995); many other variables (such as gender, race, religion, and first language) would produce response differences and be classified and labeled as "culture" or cultural difference (Schwartz, 1999a,b; McSweeney, 2002); and the generated dimensions are data driven without a strong theoretical base (Smith and Schwartz, 1997). Furthermore, Hofstede's cultural dimensions do not sufficiently describe cross-country differences in forms of business activity. The studies that employed Hofstede's (1984) dimensions to calculate cultural distance scores have not continuously found expected associations with variables of their interest (Hechavarria and Reynolds, 2009). Zhang et al. (2008) also observe that the model relates to work/business values rather than consumer behavior.

2.2. Schwartz's dimension of culture

More recently, Schwartz (1992, 2006) proposed an alternative framework to categorize cultural aspects for studying cross-cultural variation. The model indicates that human values represent a structure of interacting belief systems, the collection of which constitutes culture. Schwartz suggests a theory of conflicts and compatibilities to explain cultural variation, which has been relatively overlooked in understanding cross-cultural differences, especially in terms of consumer behavior. Selected examples include: different interpretation of what constitutes an important possessions of Americans versus New Zealanders (Watson et al., 2002); variations in reported sexual behavior across five central and eastern European countries (Goodwin et al., 2002); and responses to the Benetton brand and its advertisements across three European countries (Polegato and Bjerke, 2006).

Schwartz's (2006) model comprises seven dimensions of culture, which can be grouped into three major categories. The first category, *embeddedness*, describes how society views and defines the relationship between the individual and the group. *Embeddedness* conceptualizes the importance of group-relations in society, societal balance, social order, security, conformity, and tradition, and finds the meaning of life mainly through social relationships and group interests. The opposite poles of this Y-shaped dimension (*autonomy*) describe cultures in which the members are viewed as autonomous individuals. The second category, *intellectual autonomy*, refers to the extent to which people are free to independently pursue their own ideas and intellectual directions, whereas *affective autonomy* refers to the extent to which people are free to independently pursue their affective desires and pleasures. The second category describes regulation of responsible social behavior through unequal distribution of power, authority, and resources.

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