

The role of the customer–seller relationship in the intention of the customer to complain: A study of Chinese restaurateurs

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Abstract

The potential benefits of customer–seller relationships in the area of consumer complaints are seldom advocated, particularly in the relational oriented, Chinese society. The purpose of this paper is to explore how customer–seller relationships affect the intention of Chinese consumers to complain. Given that Chinese are collectivistic by nature, this paper also examined the effect of social approval and pressure on the act of complaining. Several relationships between personal attitudes, the subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, the extent of relational contact and the complaining intention of Chinese consumers were postulated. Results show that the complaining intention of Chinese consumers is influenced by customer–seller relationships and the social pressure on act of complaining while personal attitudes do not have any effect. Possible explanations for the results and implications for researchers and practitioners are presented.

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1. Introduction

With the growth of consumerism, the issue of consumer complaining has drawn considerable interest from both researchers and marketers in the past 30 years. The primary reason for the increasing interest in the study of consumer complaining behavior is the potential impact such behavior has on consumers' future repurchase intentions, their brand loyalty, the recovery strategies of organizations, as well as the spread of word-of-mouth information through such complaints.

Given the importance of consumer complaining behavior to practitioners, many studies have tried to understand its determinants and have attempted to develop a model of consumer complaints. There are two reasons to study the issue. First, little published research today has empirically examined the importance of social expectations and

pressures on consumers' complaining behaviors. Second, there has been scant research devoted to the effect of the relationship quality between customers and sellers on the intention of consumers to complain. Nicholson et al. (2001) suggested that quality relationships between customers and sellers might mitigate the effect of failures in transactions or services. He proposed that customers who have strong and good relations with sellers tend to accept service failures and will continue to use the services from the same organization. This proposition seems to assume that these customers generally ignore the failures in transactions or services and do nothing about the situation. However, this may not be the case. In view of the fact that they would like to continue to use the services of the offending organization, customers are likely to report their disappointment to the organization in the hope that failures will not occur again in the future.

This study focuses on the people in the China market. There are two reasons: first, very little research has been conducted to understand the complaining behavior among the people from Mainland China. Many studies tend to treat consumerism activity as a phenomenon of the developed Western economies and ignore the large Chinese

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market. Most of the studies on consumer complaining behaviors have been conducted in the US (e.g., Jones et al., 2002) and European countries (e.g., Crosier and Erdogan, 2001). The only Asian studies to date were conducted in Singapore by Keng et al. (1995); in Shanghai, PRC by Au et al. (2001); and in Indonesia by Phau and Sari (2004). Research on complaint issues in China market is inherently deficient and needs to be further expanded.

To fill in the existing gap in the literature, this study aims to examine empirically the significance of customer–seller relations on the intention to complain. The paper also makes an effort to understand the complaining behaviors of Chinese consumers by developing a comprehensive model that incorporates both personal and social factors. To achieve the above objectives, this paper first provides a brief review of historical studies on consumer complaining behaviors. It then sets forth the conceptual framework of the study. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of the implications of the research findings.

2. Previous research

2.1. Consumer complaining behaviors

The issue of consumer complaining has drawn considerable interest over the years. Many past studies focused on the examination of the determinants of consumer complaining behaviors. Many factors, such as situational factors, product attributes, and personal variables, have been examined. Situational factors include the availability of alternatives, the degree of dissatisfaction, the perceived cause of dissatisfaction, the perceived responsiveness of the business, the costs of and barriers to complain, the probability of success, and the stability of the problem; product attributes comprise the importance of product success and the price of the product; while personal variables consist of personality characteristics, such as assertiveness and optimism, consumer's demographic characteristics like national culture and education levels, and personal factors, including customer alienation, ability to complain, personal attitude toward complaints and past complaint experience.

2.2. Social influence

Despite the fact that a number of studies have been conducted over the years and that many variables have been found that are related to consumers' complaining behaviors, only a few studies included social factors. Jacoby and Jaccard (1981) were the first to propose the effect of the social climate on consumers' complaining behaviors. They suggested that if the society is more accepting of complaints, complaining behaviors will be more popular. Kowalski (1996) took into account the influence of social consequences on complaining behavior in his study. He puts forward that people who perceive that complaints might jeopardize interpersonal relationships or interfere with social interactions may complain less

frequently. Liu (1999) proposed the effect of social values on consumer behaviors. However, the literature on consumer complaining behavior is silent on the issue of how the reference group's subjective values towards an action and the reference group's expectations of the actor affect an individual consumer's choice of dissatisfaction responses. Triandis (1995) claimed that many decisions of Chinese consumers are made under heavy influence from the group with which they are interacting, such as the extended family, friends, co-workers, and the people in the same social circle, given their cultural orientation. Chinese tend to more susceptible to social influences than are consumers in any other country. This study, therefore, investigates the effect of social pressure on the intention of Chinese to register a complaint.

2.3. Customer–seller relationships

The importance of customer–seller relationships has been widely recognized since the 1990s. Many researchers realize that many benefits like sustainable competitive advantage, such as the price inelasticity and the lowering of marketing costs, can be obtained from long-term and committed relationships (Bowen and Shoemaker, 1998). Bove and Johnson (2001) further suggested that the building and maintenance of long-term customer relationships makes customers more tolerant of minor mistakes or inconsistencies. For example, customers who have strong relationships with their hairdressers frequently prefer to wait for an available appointment rather than accept an alternative hairdresser. However, the benefits of customers–seller relationships are more far-reaching than these. Given that customers who have close relationships with sellers are more committed to the organization (Liljande and Stranvik, 1995), they may more likely to voice out their dissatisfaction for the goodness of the organization, in order to avoid the possibility that the problem would occur again. This is particularly the case for Chinese consumers who are socially and relationally oriented. Yau (1994) asserted that Chinese do not easily reveal their true feelings to someone they do not know well. Yet they would more willing to report their dissatisfaction if they have established strong relationships with the organization or its staff. The building of customer–seller relations may, thus, encourage Chinese consumer to engage in complaining behaviors.

The concept of customer–seller relationships is relatively new in the area of consumer complaining behaviors. Only one study has discussed the frequency of interactions between customers and sellers (Fornell and Didow, 1980). They proposed that the more frequent the interaction is (as in the case of grocery shopping), the less likely it is that the customer will be able to afford the time and effort to register a complaint. That is, if customers interact frequently with sellers because the products or services are used habitually, they do not think it is worth their time to engage in complaining behaviors. Fornell and Didow's

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