Complaining Behavior: Cross-Cultural Or Situational? an Exploratory Study of the Indian Nationals Living in the United States

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The purpose of this study was to assess the extent to which cross-national differences in complaint behavior are due to cultural vs. situational factors. Eighteen individuals who were born and raised in India, and are now living in the U.S., provided insight. Respondents indicated that policies regarding returns and exchanges are much more restrictive in India. Consequently, a majority stated that they are less likely to attempt to return or exchange unsatisfactory products when in India, and instead are more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth. Given that most individuals stated that their underlying, cultural values had changed little, if at all, it appears that complaint behavior is influenced to a large extent by situational factors.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Many studies have attributed cross-national differences in consumers’ responses to dissatisfaction to cultural factors (e.g., Watkins and Liu, 1996; Mattila and Patterson, 2004). Indeed, studies indicate that in collectivist cultures dissatisfied consumers are less likely to complain to the seller (Liu and McClure, 2001), as are individuals living in countries that are characterized by high levels of uncertainty avoidance (Hernandez, Strahle, Garcia, and Sorensen, 1991). This study, however, challenges the notion that culture is the major factor that accounts for differences in complaint behavior across countries. Although it is clear that cultural norms and values influence consumer behavior in general; we posit that situational factors provide a more compelling explanation for differences in cross-national complaint behavior.

More specifically, we propose that much of the variation in complaint behavior (i.e., whether a dissatisfied customer complains to the seller, engages in negative word-of-mouth, or exits) across national boundaries is instead due to differences in the prevailing retail policies.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to gain insight as to the extent to which complaint behavior is due to cultural vs. situational factors. Assuming that cultural values are relatively stable and enduring we wanted to establish whether dissatisfied consumers’ complaint behavior varies depending on the country in which they are living. With the U.S. being a “melting pot”, consisting of individuals from around the world, it is essentially a “living laboratory” in which to address the research issue. Given that the return policies of U.S. retailers are the most liberal in the world, we attempted to determine whether the complaint behavior of expatriates living in the U.S. varied from their behavior when residing in their home country. If culture is indeed the predominant determinant of complaint behavior then the actions of foreign nationals living in the U.S. should not differ from their responses when residing in their home country. If, however, individuals who would not normally seek to exchange an item or request a refund when living in their home country behave differently when in the U.S., one could argue that cross-national differences in complaint behavior are due largely to situational factors.

In order to shed light on this issue a qualitative approach was taken. Eighteen individuals who were born and raised in India, and are now living in the U.S., shared their insights. Informants ranged in age from 23 to 40. Some had lived in the U.S. for a relatively short time (one year or less), while others had been in the U.S. for over ten years. Each person had been in India within the past three years, and hence was well aware of any differences between U.S. and Indian retail policies. Informants provided in-depth responses, in writing, to several open-ended questions. They were asked to describe any differences between retail policies in India vis-à-vis the U.S., and whether it was common for retailers in India to guarantee satisfaction. Informants were also asked to indicate whether they responded differently to dissatisfaction when residing in the U.S., as compared to India. In order to assess whether culture is indeed stable respondents were also asked whether their own values and norms had changed at all since moving to the U.S.

Based on the various responses it is apparent that retail policies are much more liberal in the U.S. as compared to India. Informants indicated that: 1) policies regarding returns and exchanges are much more restrictive in India; refunds are almost unheard of, although some retailers do grant store credit; 2) exchanges are allowed only for defective items; 3) policies regarding returns and exchanges depend on type of store (i.e., “Mom and Pop” stores have restrictive policies, whereas some of the large chain stores have more liberal policies); 4) to exchange clothing, items must be in the original packaging and price tags must be intact; and 5) electronic items typically have to be returned to the manufacturer. Informants also indicated that it is uncommon for retailers in India to guarantee “satisfaction, or your money back.” Exceptions exist within a few product categories, such as cosmetics, but only when the product is backed by the manufacturer. Interestingly, a large majority of informants indicated that they would be much less likely to attempt to return or exchange unsatisfactory products when in India, and if they did attempt to do so the likelihood of success would be much lower. At the same time, most individuals stated that their underlying, cultural values had changed little, if at all; however, several respondents admitted that they might have shifted just a bit towards more of an individualistic orientation. Some respondents also stated that their expectations of retailers had changed; i.e., that they now demand a higher level of quality and service. Finally, respondents indicated that when dissatisfied in India they are much more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth, and that this type of communication is particularly effective in their culture.

Although we cannot arrive at a definitive conclusion it appears as though complaint behavior is influenced to a large degree by situational factors. Assuming that cultural values are internal and stable, any variations in the complaint behavior of individuals – e.g., depending whether they are in India vs. the U.S. – must be due to other factors. In this case, the most obvious factor is the stark contrast in the prevailing return policies of retailers in the two countries. Of course, more work needs to be done to disentangle the effects of cultural and situational variables. Nonetheless, this exploratory study certainly challenges the prevailing notion that culture is the driving force behind differences in complaint behavior across national boundaries.

REFERENCES