Effects of Attitude towards Complaining On Loyalty: Comparing Chinese and American Perceptions

Erdoğan H. EKİZ  
Taylor’s University  
erdogan.ekiz@taylors.edu.my

Nahit Erdem KÖKER  
Ege University  
nahit.koker@ege.edu.tr

Some unhappy consumers chose to complain while majority just walk away. Consumer complaining behavior literature has long been examining the root causes for consumer complaining decision. Individuals’ attitudes, which are ultimately affected by society they are living in, are one of the well-accepted and supported reasons behind this decision. Several scholars have successfully used Ajzen and Fishbein’s (1980) ‘theory of reasoned action’ as a base while explaining consumers’ ‘attitudes toward complaining’ in several different cultural settings. Yet, there is a paucity of cross-cultural research investigating attitudes towards complaining. China and America are ideal examples of their culture clusters, thus, studying these two cultures may provide very significant implications for both industry practitioners and academics.

In the era of intense competition, not only service firms but also destinations try to acquire and retain a pool of loyal and profitable visitors by providing ‘socks knocking’ service (Kotler, Bowen and Makens, 1999; Zemke and Anderson, 2007). However, mistakes are frequent occurrences in service businesses, especially tourism and hospitality settings (Babakus, Yavas, Karatepe and Avci, 2003). Thus, firms need to be ready to offer effective and efficient solutions. For this reason, first they need to understand how members of their target market think and behave, in other words, what are their attitudes towards complaining (Blodgett and Tax, 1993; Bodey and Grace, 2007; Oh, 2006).

Much research has adopted the theoretical framework of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), which underlies the notion that attitudes are used to predict acts of behavior, when examining the attitude-behavior relationship. Consumer complaining behavior (CCB) is not an exception. Many researchers acknowledged the importance of attitudes toward complaining as a determinant of a variety of CCB responses (Bearden and Mason, 1984; Blodgett, Wakefield and Barnes, 1995; Blodgett and Tax, 1993; Halstead and Dröge, 1991; Huppertz and Mower, 2003; Singh, 1989).

Several researchers have postulated that attitudes toward complaining (personal norms and/or societal benefits) influence complaint responses including voices and negative word-of-mouth (Bearden and Mason, 1984; Day, 1984; Oh, 2004; Richins, 1982). “Consumers who have a more positive attitude towards complaining - perhaps
because they are confident of success, or because they would not feel particularly uncomfortable in making a complaint - are more likely to complain than those who have a negative attitude towards registering their dissatisfaction” (Bodey and Grace, 2007, p. 187). Likewise, Cho and Joung (1999) interpreted attitude towards complaining as attitude towards redress seeking where they found a strong relationship between attitude and actual redress seeking. Similarly, Richins (1982) supported the relationship between ‘attitude toward redress seeking’ and ‘redress seeking intention’. Blodgett et al. (1995) put forward that consumers who are averse to redress seeking will just silently exit and/or engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior. On the other hand, attitude to complaining was linked to one’s intentions or behavior to complain in other words, generally, consumers with a more positive attitude towards complaining have a greater propensity to complain (Bearden and Crockett, 1981; Blodgett et al., 1995; Bodey and Grace, 2007).

Tourism in and out of both China and America is predicted to be on the top of the each list in coming decade (UNWTO, 2003; 2008). Chan (2006), in his article titled ‘coming age of Chinese tourists’ stressed the tourism potential of China and the need to provide some implication for both academics (studying Chinese consumer behavior) and industry (to tailor made their service offerings). Moreover, China and America are ideal examples of their culture clusters (Hofstede, 1980, 2001) where China being a good example of an Asian culture likewise America for Western culture. For these reasons, a comparison of China and America may provide very significant implications for both industry practitioners and academics. Thus, studying these two cultures hopefully provides results that can be generalized to other Eastern and Western cultures with similar cultural orientations.

The sample for the study consisted of the 1,822 graduate students, Chinese (884) and American (938). Data of the study were collected in 15 conveniently selected Chinese and American universities between October and December 2008 through the use of convenience sampling. Judd, Smith and Kidder (1991) define convenience sampling or opportunity sampling as choosing items arbitrarily and in an unstructured manner from the frame, most of the time used in exploratory research where the researcher is interested in getting an inexpensive approximation of the truth. Data collected through questionnaire because it is relatively less time-consuming, inexpensive and easy to administer (DeVellis, 2003). Questionnaire was originally in English language so needed to be translated to Simplified Chinese language. The concern was not translating the content literally but was generating meaning which was as similar as possible to the original English version (Karatepe and Ekiz, 2004). To do so, by following steps recommended by Werner and Campbell (1970) instrument is back-translated by two native speakers. With the help of academic staff in major universities in both China and America, questionnaires were distributed to respondents. Respondents, who were given assurance for confidentiality, were requested to fill out the questionnaires in a self-administered manner.

Current research aimed at finding out possible effects of attitude towards complaining on loyalty intentions by using Chinese and American graduate students as its sample. Comparison of Chinese and American respondents revealed that the most important difference between two groups is how they would react to the given service
failure. More specifically, Chinese consumers’ attitude towards complaining is there mostly to benefit their relatives and friends. Results of the mean comparison, ranked the highest mean score, and regression analysis, most influential dimension on loyalty, supported this argument. When compared to their Chinese counterparts, American consumers reported that they are less likely to be content with disseminating negative word of mouth to their friends and relatives. Unlike Chinese consumers, they are ready and willing to take any third party action, in forms of complaining consumer agencies, writing to local newspapers or even taking the issue to court. Results also revealed that both American and Chinese consumers have the attitude towards complaining for personal reasons. This finding is expected for American consumers who are reported to be individualistic (Hofstede, 1980) in their nature, which makes them comparatively more self concerned (Josiam et al., 2005; Manrai and Manrai, 1993). Finally, as can be seen from the results of present study cultural background of the people affects not only their attitudes towards complaining but also their loyalty intentions. For this reason, while designing service recovery activities companies and destinations should consider their target markets’ cultural backgrounds.