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‘My Problem Solved, That’s All!!’: A Phenomenological Approach to Consumer Complaint Redressal in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper presents the process of complaint redressal from the perspectives of consumers through their lived experiences. It also attempts to highlight the peculiarities in behaviour exhibited by Malaysian consumers when their complaints/grievances have been sorted out. Based on phenomenological interviews conducted with the consumers, the complaint redressal process is discussed on the basis of their experiences in situations involving dissatisfaction arising from the usage of a product or service. The findings reveal that consumers in certain situations leave no stone unturned in gaining the support from different sources when they face a problem related to a product or service. They may also make use of different consumer associations/forums for having their problems voiced and tackled through. However, as soon as their issue is sorted out by the concerned product/service provider, they may just disappear without taking the pain to inform back the consumer associations which made all possible efforts to take forward the complaints with the concerned organization. In such situations, the consumer associations might have to face several difficulties and challenges which might further hamper their abilities, strengths and motivation to offer support to the aggrieved consumers in future.

Keywords: complaint redressal; consumer learning; post redressal behaviour; consumer association; phenomenology

1. Introduction

The steadiness of Malaysian economy has resulted in offering a plethora of options for different products and services to its consumers. Firms present their products as if these are the best ones and contain no problem of any

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kind. If such claims were true, there wouldn’t be any dissatisfaction among the consumers. However, reality being quite different, some products or services end up causing trouble to the users by offering an experience which wasn’t expected from using it. In some cases, consumers are given opportunity to express their dissatisfaction and their problems are solved by the intermediaries functional in upcountry markets. However, there are times when a consumer is not given due justice by the firms and their channel partners and as such, it leads to a situation wherein consumers start to search for avenues with hopes to have their grievances heard and solved.

Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) is one of the active consumer associations in Malaysia which receives huge number of such complaints from the consumers. Most of these complaints reflect to the injustice and harm caused by the firms. However, there are also instances when consumer himself made a wrong decision and latter passed through pains of umpteen kinds. For instance, a consumer lured by glamorous advertisements sometimes decides to make a purchase worth more than his actual capacity. Salesman convinced him for buying an expensive product and he bought it using his credit card. And now he has difficulty in paying back the huge instalments. Firms argue that these are the problems created by consumers themselves and they are not the ones to be blamed for it. In these situations, consumers are offered solutions which are again very expensive for them. As such, a dissatisfied consumer still wants to avail his rights to fix the matter. It is expected from the firms that they respect the rights of consumers and treat them ethically. However, such practices are not always seen. Simultaneously, it is also expected from the consumers that they contemplate adequately prior to deciding to make any purchase, particularly for the products of high involvement. As a whole, this paper is an attempt to highlight various nuances of the complaint redressal process observed in a Malaysian context.

2. Consumer Complaint Concerns

An organizational response to a complaint can lead to a conflict between the consumer and the organization if such response is deemed to be dissatisfactory by the consumer (Calin, 2012). As such, organizational ways of dealing with consumer issues can be of immense significance in ensuring that consumers are satisfied with the said firm. It has always been a prime and universal objective of the sellers to keep the customers satisfied (Eid, 2011), however it still remains a real challenge to achieve that objective in every purchase made by the consumers (Lu, Lu, & Wang, 2012). Though, unsatisfactory purchases are almost a common phenomenon these days wherein a consumer makes a purchase and he finds the product or service or the purchase decision itself dissatisfactory. It has been reported that around “one in five purchase experiences result in some kind of dissatisfaction” (Andreasen & Best, 1977). However, consumers’ response to dissatisfying situations in terms of “complaining behaviour and redress seeking” (Bearden & Teel, 1983) has been seen to be varying considerably. According to the complaint behaviour theory, a consumer tends to raise his issue when he perceives the possibility of a successful outcome (Richins, 1983). Also converse being true, consumers usually avoid to voice when they perceive that their efforts would go futile (Robertson, Mcquilken, & Kandampully, 2012). As a whole, for creating a successful redress environment, it is suggested that all concerned parties like the manufacturer, retailer, consumer associations, etc. must clearly understand the “cognitive and emotional processes as well the consumers’ perceptions of justice expected from their complaint handling” (Donoghue & De Klerk, 2009).

A firm’s appropriate response is necessitated by the issues identified in the widely accepted taxonomy of consumer complaint behaviour articulated by Day and Landon (1977) shown in Figure 1, which says that dissatisfied consumers usually take three kinds of action: no action, private action, and public action. Some consumers just avoid the problem and move on to their regular life. Whereas, some dissatisfied consumers decide to take action privately by informing their friends and by creating a negative attitude towards that brand. On the other hand, some dissatisfied consumers move one step further and decide to raise the issue by seeking the redress directly from the firm or through consumer associations or even through legal routes (Broadbridge & Marshall, 1995; Day & Landon, 1977; Day & Bodur, 1978; Donoghue & De Klerk, 2006).
2.1 Post purchase behaviour

As consumer satisfaction leads to repeat purchases (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1987), and dissatisfaction leads to reduced repurchase intentions (Lam, Shankar, Erramilli, & Murthy, 2004; Lin, 2009), it is assumed that firms stress upon keeping their consumers always satisfied (Lu, Lu, & Wang, 2012). If the service providers fail to handle consumer problems in a satisfying manner, consumers may easily take counter actions by resorting to brand switches (Lin, 2009). As such, it is of ultimate significance that a firm takes all efforts necessary to maintain the confidence of its consumers towards its brand. In cases of dissatisfaction, there are chances of petitionary action being taken by the consumers through possible channel available to them. CAP affirms that there are several instances wherein Malaysian consumers have been served to their great dissatisfaction by several local and international firms which will be discussed in the subsequent sections of this paper.

2.2 Handling consumer complaints

From a firm’s perspective, ideally it is considered appropriate to have in place proper service strategies to decrease number of complaints filed by the consumers by offering them a more satisfying purchase experience (Fan, Miao, & Wu, 2013). Proper ways of complaint handling have become so significant these days for a firm’s sustainability that it is suggested to continuously maintain categorized records of the complaints received by them and solutions offered to the consumers for developing customer oriented strategies in future (Louden, 2012). However, reality being very different, it is interesting to note that companies assume that consumers will not have enough time and resources to fight with a company for long time and they also assume that a consumer will have to compromise his image in society by being known as a pest who tries to beat the system (Marks, 2013). And which is why, some firms do not seem to take complaints issue seriously. In such cases, consumers may opt to leave a seller due to inappropriate responses received for their problems (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). In general, as it is perceived that consumers make complaints prior to leaving a seller, service recovery options and complaint redressal efforts are engaged by the companies as prime methods for letting the consumers not go away (Holloway & Beatty, 2003; Schoefer & Ennew, 2005). Also, it is suggested that the local managers should be allowed to make decisions which are compatible with the local market traditions (Swimberghe, Flurry, & Parker, 2011).
For making complaints these days, consumers have got low cost alternatives available like online option for expressing their negative experiences with the purchase of a particular firm’s product/service (Lee & Cude, 2012). When the problem gets more serious and the consumers are determined to have their problem solved, another option available to them is consumer forums/associations operative in their respective countries (Day & Landon, 1977). In Malaysia, Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) is one of the organisations of such nature which receives huge number of complaints from consumers on a daily basis and it is known for defending the consumers and taking their cases further with the companies. In line with Marks (2013), CAP divulges that companies many times use delay or ignore tactics. Also, if regular follow up is done, firms tend to make compromising offers to consumers instead of offering fully satisfying solutions.

3. Research Methods

The interest of this paper was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of consumers when they pass through different stages of complaint redressal after detecting a problem in the product or service they purchased. In line with that, the authors who were also the researchers of this study further intended to structure and describe the complaint redressal process from the perspectives of consumers experiencing this phenomenon. The overall idea was to narrate actual experiences of dissatisfied consumers rather than creating a generalizable theory. As such, this paper resorted to phenomenological interviews for generating different shades of the issue under study. In phenomenology, sampling is said to be based on the adequacy of participants’ abilities wherein they can link and relate their experiences with the phenomenon under study and as such, a small number of participants may be sufficient (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2009). The researchers of this study therefore opted for purposive sampling and interviewed seven Malaysian consumers chosen from Penang and Kedah states (shown and numbered in subsequent sections as R1-R7, where R1 is participant 1, and so on) who had experienced dissatisfaction and also had gone through redressal process. These participants included three women and four men and they were all working people in the age group of 25-40 years. In line with Patton (1990), the interviews were held more as a discussion which began with a predetermined list of topics to be covered. Interviews were scheduled when the participants seemed to possess a fresh mood in line with the suggestions made by ‘Temporary non-appearance of memory (TNM) theory’ proposed for scheduling interviews by Kumar and Mokhtar (2013). Once the interviews were done, with an aim of finding emergent themes, the researchers transcribed data leading further to conducting phenomenological reduction at both levels: for individual responses as well as for across the participants. The emergent themes found as such in this study will be discussed in the subsequent sections now.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Stages involved in consumer complaint redressal

Consumers while revealing their experiences made us aware of several difficulties they faced during the whole process of complaint redressal. Many of them had to run from pillar to post until they got satisfactory solutions. After group analysis of the essence of their stories taken together, this study thematized their whole experiences according to the stages they had to pass through during the redressal process:

4.1.1 Emergence of dissatisfaction

When the consumers experience a problem with a product or service, they start to think about finding a solution. Showing varying responses, some consumers may just decide to forget and forego whereas some consumers decide to seek a satisfactory redress from the sellers (Bearden & Teel, 1983). It is a stage wherein almost all consumers pass through a painful experience in contemplating about a product/service which is troubling them. Some consumers might assume that they are too weak to challenge a big organization whereas some dare to ask for redress. However, all of our interviewed participants express their deep dissatisfaction from the usage of such products or services. A participant whose claim request was denied from an Insurance company says:

R1: The sales agent came to me and said I am eligible to buy a particular health policy. Even though I
previously had health problems, he manipulated and said there is no need to disclose it and sold the policy to me. He also promised that claims will be settled for all covered illnesses. But when I got my heart stroke, my claim settlement request was refused. I am being blamed now for not revealing it while buying the policy. Why did the sales agent not enclose my history with the application or why did he say that claims will still be settled for covered illnesses?

4.1.2 Complaint made to seller/companies

Consumers who decide to report and seek redress may usually try to approach the seller (Schoefer & Ennew, 2005) first. In this step also, great amount of inconvenience might be felt by the consumers. They can buy a product anywhere including in the smaller towns. However, when they approach their seller with a complaint, the seller may initially try to settle down the matter without doing anything. Upon consumer’s insistence, they may accept to take their complaint forward to the company’s main office located far in the capital cities which takes several weeks for smaller town consumers and comparatively lesser time for the consumers staying the main cities itself. However, in both situations, consumers might be asked to come after a long gap and a second class treatment is usually given to them during whole of this process by not answering their calls, same ignoring answer every time, and so on. A male participant having painful experience from using a cosmetic product reveals:

R2: I was told that the fairness cream of a particular brand will have quick effect on my skin within few days. I used it for around two weeks and now I am having my skin discoloured. My beard is not growing properly and my neck has got burnt spots. When I contacted the seller, I am told that it was written clearly in the product usage terms that before using the product it is user’s responsibility to ensure that his skin is not vulnerable or he has no allergy from the chemicals used in the product. How do I know that which chemical has what impact?

4.1.3 Companies’ responses to complaint

In some cases, companies may offer the consumer a compromising solution (Marks, 2013). It can vary from product to product or from service to service. In some instances, consumers are asked to pay additional cost to fix the problem or in some cases they are offered to get a refund in form of some other product which is of much less price than what he originally paid. It is interesting to point out that retailers at their own level also might offer similar kind of solutions to the consumers wherein a consumer returns the problematic product and chooses some other product of much lesser value from same or another brand. It might raise a doubt in consumer’s mind that probably the seller would get the problem solved through company and sell that product to some other consumer making profits again by benefitting from this consumer’s current problem. Some consumers may opt one of these solutions offered to them and somehow decide to close the matter while some might decide to seek redress from other available options.

An aggrieved participant who used a credit card upon insistence of the salesman for buying an expensive durable product was now unable to pay the instalments because he had to take care of other expenses too. He shares his experience about the reply he got when he contacted the bank for expressing his inability to pay and offering to return the product to the seller:

R3: The bank informed me that it is my obligation to assess my loan payment capabilities and I should be the one to think before buying a product using credit card. Once it is used for buying a product, consumer has to pay back the instalments.

4.1.4 Complaint lodged through consumer associations

Some consumers after receiving completely unacceptable responses from the sellers may decide to seek redress through consumer associations/forums (Day & Landon, 1977). These consumer associations are generally considered as bête noire by the sellers because they take a consumer complaint further and fight till an acceptable end. The consumer associations are found to be usually equipped with knowledge and technical know-how for seeking redress in the local environment as they are also considered to be well aware of the government regulations
for protecting consumer’s interests. And the consumers might get little relief from directly battling with the powerful sellers who are well versed with all kind of tricks. Justifies a participant who invested his money in a firm which later resulted in a huge loss:

R4: I don’t understand the big documents on terms and conditions for using a service. I also don’t have knowledge about the government regulations for protecting consumer’s interests. I can’t make proper communication with the sellers because I don’t even know that what a fair solution is for me in this case. That is the reason I prefer to solve my problem through consumer associations like CAP.

4.1.5 Complaint redressal and consumer learning

Similar to other consumer associations, CAP has been greatly assisting the Malaysian consumers in getting their problems sorted out. With years of experience in dealing with consumer complaint redressal issue, such associations may also assess a complaint’s substance and legitimacy prior to taking it further with the sellers and advise the consumers accordingly. The voices of consumer associations are given due significance by the sellers (Broadbridge & Marshall, 1995; Donoghue & De Klerk, 2006) who tend to operate with caution and want to avoid a bigger problem in future which might come in form of having asked to pay huge compensations to the aggrieved consumer. Also, these consumer associations make genuine demands from the firms and generally with a series of negotiated talks, they get success in obtaining redress for the consumers. Thereafter, the consumer finally feels a sigh of relief and gets a kind of learning of not repeating such mistake in future. At times, consumers do not get success in seeking redress through these associations, particularly in instances when the seller has closed his office and has run away forever. But in all of these situations, consumer finally sets his mind to be cautious in future purchases so as not to invite any kind dissatisfying experience anymore. A participant expresses his learning:

R5: We have to be extremely careful in using our credit cards. That looks like a ready money but later it shows its true colour and causes lots of pains if we use it uncaringly.

Another participant talks about her learning after her complaint’s redressal:

R6: I must learn how to say ‘No’. Once it is a ‘No’, it can always be made ‘Yes’, but once a ‘Yes’ is ‘Yes’ forever. I have got to be extremely careful in my purchase decisions from now onwards.

4.2 Consumer response after complaint redressal

In most of the cases where redress is sought through consumer associations and initial communications are made through them, it may so happen that the seller calls a consumer and fixes a deal with him after a round of negotiations. Consumers after accepting the deal go home happily by accepting the fact that this is the maximum they can get. In Malaysia, it may be seen that such consumers after obtaining redress do not go back to consumer association for informing that the settlement is already done. They do not seem to understand the necessity of it. When consumer association calls them, that time they inform that the problem has already been solved sometime before. Sometimes the problems were solved several weeks before. However, there is always a possibility of filing and documentation still being done/maintained by the consumer association for such cases in the ‘under progress’ category. In such situation, consumer association also might have to face a situation of inconvenience and embarrassment when they again contact the consumer or the seller. It may wastefully consume the capacity of such associations which work for a good cause. A participant who had passed through a long redressal process with the help of CAP said:

R7: Oh, finally I am happy that my problem is settled by the seller. Anyway, I am not going to deal with this seller anymore.

When asked further, similar to some other participants, he revealed that he didn’t go back to inform CAP after the seller finally called him and settled the matter. Once a consumer’s problem is solved, he may assume that the issue is over without realizing that this kind of post redressal behaviour wherein consumer associations are not informed
about the final solution might hamper the working abilities and suppress the interests of such consumer associations.

5. Concluding remarks

The authors have tried to document in this paper the complaint redressal process usually seen in Malaysia from the perspectives of consumers. Similar to previous research on this subject, it seems that consumers after diagnosing a problem might start exploring alternatives available to them for seeking redress. They may avail the services of consumer associations also in having the matter dealt with the firms. Moreover, consumers’ grievances highlighted at several stages of complaint redressal seek to offer insights to the businesses for developing customer oriented business strategies. The formula seems simple: If a business is to stay successful, then the consumers are to be kept satisfied. The paper also illustrates the carelessness shown by consumers in some cases like credit card overuses or expecting a magical effect from cosmetic products. It is pertinent to notice that consumers sometimes show their ignorance in making purchases. This information can guide a seller when he is trying to convince a customer into buying something. A seller should understand that a persuasion for buying something inappropriate can bounce back later and it can lead to wastage of several resources like time, money, energy, etc. of all parties.

Moreover, previous researches seem to have only focused up to complaint redressal stage, whereas this study has tried to unravel the post redressal behaviour of consumers also. After seeking assistance from the consumer associations, once the solution/redress is received, consumers seem to consider the matter finished. They may not find it important to go back and inform the consumer association which helped them all throughout. As such, it is suggested to pursue future studies in the themes related to post redressal behaviour whose different facets can be explored further. This study also discovered that aggrieved consumers seem to possess some kind of anger and a sense of huge dissatisfaction from the sellers. Therefore in future, understanding the attitude of consumers towards ethicality of business practices, particularly that of marketers would be immensely useful research direction, especially in the context of developing economies.

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