

Do Personality Traits Predict ‘Complaining’ Consumers?

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Abstract

Although the effects of personality traits on complaining behaviour emerged in the early 1980s, there is limited research in the service industry. The purpose of this study is to two fold; to examine whether consumer personality traits influence intentions to complain and to investigate whether product price and product types moderate the relationship between personality traits and intentions to complain in the retail industry. The research model is tested by logistic regression analysis on two groups of consumers who report passive and active complaining intentions. The study reveals that those who are more conscientious and open to new experiences tend to have higher intentions to complain. Being extroverted does not have any influence on complaining behaviour. Whilst price levels (low/high) and product types (grocery, clothing and electronics) improve the predictive ability of the complaining behaviour, the interaction effects relating to the three personality traits are not statistically significant. Theoretical and managerial implications of the study findings are discussed.

Keywords: complaining behaviour; personality traits; retailing

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Introduction

A defective product will often result in customer dissatisfaction and prompt a variety of undesirable behavioural responses such as complaining, negative Word-of-Mouth (WoM), switching supplier and to stop purchasing the product. If a customer complaint arises, compensation or service recovery tactics will likely win the customer over.

However, this assumption does not take into consideration the fact that 90% of dissatisfied customers will not express their negative feelings to the service provider (Tax & Brown, 1998). Dissatisfied customers who do not complain are of special concern to management. This is because they miss the opportunity to remedy the problem and deprive themselves of valuable feedback that could be used to improve their products. A failure to detect customer complaints can also damage the brand reputation as customers engage with negative WoM (Stephens & Gwinner, 1988).

Generally speaking, dissatisfied consumers tell more people about their poor experiences than those who are satisfied or even delighted with their product experience (Bolfing, 1989). In today's digital marketing environment, negative WoM can be more quickly disseminated to reach a potentially large audience and influence consumer decision making due to the increasing popularity of social media (Liang et al. 2013). Negative WoM can be accessed immediately or after a period of time; its digital footprint can remain on-line permanently (Sun et al., 2006). It is therefore important for marketers to understand the antecedents of consumer complaining behaviour; to gain an idea of what prompts people to complain and to minimise those adverse effects on business performance.

This study unveils two contributions to this research. Firstly, although the effects of personality traits on predicting complaining behaviour first emerged in the early 1980s, there is limited research on this topic, particularly in the retail industry which is dominated by consumer-buyer interaction and involves a wide range of services and goods (Beardon & Mason, 1984; Krapfel, 1985; Richins, 1983). Previous research is predominantly focused on three broad factors - *market conditions* (Hirschman, 1970), *organization and product characteristics* (Granbois, Summers, & Frazier, 1997) and socio-demographics of consumers *such as age, gender, income and attitudes towards complaining* (Bolfing, 1989; Lee & Soberon-Ferrer, 1999) to explain the propensity of complaining behaviour. This study also takes into consideration two prominent product related characteristics in which to understand consumer complaining behaviour, which are product type and price.

Secondly, when specifically investigating the ability of personality traits to predict complaining behaviour, previous studies have produced mixed or inconclusive results, causing interesting debates. Therefore, additional research would be fruitful in addressing these debates. For example, Kenrick and Funder (1988) and Mishel (1984) argue that personality is not a good predictor of behaviour. Bodey and Grace (2007) agree with the arguments of Kenrick and Funder (1988) and Mishel (1984) as their research did not find support for the effect of three personality characteristics - self-efficacy, Machiavellianism, perceived control - on propensity to complain with the exception of risk-taking. To enhance the predictive ability of personality traits, Harris and Mowen (2001) introduced a hierarchical model of personality and consumer intentions to complain. This showed that a set of central and surface level traits such as value consciousness and materialism mediate the influence of personality traits on the intention to complain.

Whilst there is limited research on this topic overall, even less research is available on the investigation into whether product related characteristics (e.g. price and product type) moderate the relationship between personality traits and complaining behaviour. Therefore, this study aims to add clarity to the existing debate of whether personality has an effect on the intention to complain and if product price and product type moderate the relationship between personality traits and intentions to complain.

Conceptual Framework

What is consumer complaining behaviour (CCB)? The simplest way to answer this question is to say that CCB is the ‘set of multiple behavioural and non-behavioural responses, some or all of which are triggered by perceived dissatisfaction with a purchase episode’ (Singh, 1998, p. 94). Hirschman’s (1970) model of CCB, one of the oldest theories, identifies three major types of complaining behaviour outcomes: exit, voice, and loyalty. For this model, ‘loyalty’ refers to the consumer taking no action what-so-ever despite dissatisfaction with a product; often these consumers are so loyal that they strongly believe the problem will get better with time and on its own. ‘Exit’ is rather less passive and involves the consumer actively rejecting the brand or company; often buying other brands instead or maybe just buying less of the said product. When consumers ‘voice’ their complaint, they do so directly to the company through either employees or management. Day and Landon (1977) had similar attributes to Hirschman’s model but separated consumer complaining behaviour into several levels of response. The first level of this particular model is the dissatisfaction with a product which then splits into categories of action with no action at the second level.

If a consumer decides to take action a third level appears whereby the consumer chooses between a public or private action. At the fourth level, public actions include: seeking redress (amends or reimbursement) directly from the business, complaining to the business or government agency or taking legal action. If the consumer decides on a more private route, the fourth level includes: warning others (friends/family) about the product and no longer buying the product. This is quite similar to Hirschman's (1970) 'Exit' typology.

As a result of these two typologies, Singh (1988) proposed that 'no action' be treated as a type of voice response rather than a passive behaviour. Under this typology, the 'voice' response is similar to the terminology used in the other two models. Nonetheless, it does refer to behaviour directed toward the business whether in person, through a phone call, or even a letter. No action, as already mentioned, is a voice response because 'taking no action appears to reflect feelings towards the seller' (Singh, 1988, p. 104). Private responses include exit and warning to family and friends (also classified as negative WoM). Third-party action is similar to 'public action' mentioned in the previous model, but seeking redress is now a voice response. Under this category, the consumer is in essence, complaining through a third-party; someone other than the actual business they made their purchase through.

Personality is defined as abstractions (or traits such as conscientiousness) of behaviour that determines the pattern of interaction with the environment (McKenna, 2000). Personality can be observed, because behaviour is directly affected by the personality of the individual. The characteristics that make up personality are unique; they may or may not be present in an individual, vary in intensity, therefore ultimately make the individual unique.

This resurgence was facilitated in part by the emergence of a consensus of understanding in that traits are well structured within five broad, empirically driven domains. These are known as 'Five Factor Model' or 'Big Five' and consist of extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience. The openness to experience personality trait is interpreted to reflect not only a facet of creativity and innovation, but also intellect. These five domains encompass narrower, more context-specific facets in a hierarchy of individual differences and have been validated through many empirical studies. Therefore, they are considered to be the fundamental dimensions of human personality. Existing studies suggest that complainers tend to be more assertive and self-confident, having higher levels of aggression than non-complainers (Richins, 1987; Phau & Sari, 2004). Assertive and self-confident people are more likely to complain, whereas submissive and unconfident individuals are more likely to keep quiet (Bolfing, 1989; Fornell & Westbrook, 1979). Chang and Wang's (2008) study in a virtual market environment suggests that when e-service failures occur, internally oriented consumers engage in aggressive complaint behaviours and expect high service recovery efforts. This is in comparison to externally oriented consumers who tend to tolerate e-service failures and refrain from complaining.

Based on previous work, this study proposes that three types of personality traits; extroversion (H1), conscientiousness (H2) and openness to experience (H3) will have a positive influence on the intentions of consumers to complain as shown in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

As Figure 1 shows, there are no prior hypotheses relating emotional stability or agreeableness to CCB. Moreover, this model also proposes that the effects of personality traits on CCB are moderated by product price (H4, H5, and H6) and product type (H7, H8, and H9) 1. Research hypotheses are discussed in the following section.

Effects of personality traits on complaining intentions

Those who score high on the *extroversion* scales, complain more than those with lower scores (Thøgersen, Juhl, & Poulsen, 2009). In increasing levels, 'assertiveness, self-confidence and personal control over ones' own life experiences can lead to a higher probability to complain' (Bolfing, 1989). According to Keng, Richmond, and Han (1995) and Phau and Sari (2004), consumer assertiveness and confidence are found to be linked to CCB, whilst non-assertive consumers were oppositely linked (Singh, 1990).

Conscientious individuals are described as organised, dependable, responsible, punctual, self-disciplined, hardworking and achievement-oriented (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Because of these positive characteristics, conscientious people tend to display effective interaction with other people and are better at managing conflicts (Roberts, Jackson; Fayard; Edmonds & Meints, 2009). If a product is not satisfactory, conscientious people are likely to complain as they exhibit traits associated with a strong sense of purpose, obligation, persistence and intolerance to poor performance (Harris & Mowen, 2001).

According to Barrick and Mount (1991), openness to experience means a person is imaginative, creative, open-minded and analytical. Individuals who achieve high scores on the openness scales are less conservative and more likely to have positive attitudes towards learning experiences in general (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Open individuals are motivated to seek out the unfamiliar and to look for complexity (Costa

& McCrae, 1992). They are more likely to experience both positive and negative emotions and are keener to complain when a product has failed than closed individuals.

Thus we propose:

H1: Extraversion is positively associated with the intention to complain by consumers.

H2: Conscientiousness is positively associated with the intention to complain by consumers.

H3: Openness to experiences is positively associated with the intention to complain by consumers.

The moderating effect of price on the relationship between personality traits and complaining intentions

Broadbridge and Marshall (1995), Lilleker, Mapes, and Riley (1969), report that the price of a product correlates to whether or not a consumer decides to complain. The more expensive the product is the more likely the consumer is to complain if it is unsatisfactory. Thus we propose:

H4-H6: Product price moderates the effects of extraversion, conscientiousness and openness to experiences on the intention to complain by consumers.

The moderating effect of product category on the relationship between personality traits and complaining intentions

A variety of product characteristics can influence the reactions to dissatisfaction. Generally speaking, consumers avoid complaining about low-cost, low-involvement products such as non-durables (Day & Landon, 1977). They are more likely to complain if a product is considered important or if the product fault is serious and complex (Bolfing, 1989; Richins, 1983). As expected, the two major reasons for complaining behaviour are those of defective products and unsatisfactory products (Best & Andreasen, 1977). Thus we propose:

H7-H9: Product type moderates the effects of extraversion, conscientiousness and openness to experiences on the intention to complain by consumers.

Method

To investigate the moderating effect of product price (low/high) and product type on the relationship between personality traits and CCB, a 2x3 quasi-experimental research design was employed. The experiments included 6 product failure scenarios involving high and low prices and three different retail product areas: grocery, fashion retail and electronics (See Appendix). These retail products were chosen because UK retail sales amount to around £300bn pa. The UK is also the third largest retail industry behind the USA and Japan (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2012). Overall, UK retail has a 6% share of the top 250 global retailers as well as a share of 6.5% of sales made by those same top 250 retailers (Deloitte, 2012). The industry itself contributes 11.3% of total Gross Value added to the UK economy, provides 10% of total employment and accounts for more than a third of consumer spending (Department of Business Innovation & Skills, 2012).

Measurement of employee personality was based on the Big-Five framework, which is the most widely used and extensively researched personality model.

Extraversion, conscientiousness and openness to experience were measured using a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from (1) extremely disagree to (7) extremely agree (Ekinci & Dawes, 2009). Based on CCB literature, the intention to complain by consumers was measured by 6 nominal (yes/no) scales (e.g. negative WoM and seeking compensation). After reading the six retail products failure scenarios, respondents were asked to register their intention to complain based on these scales. Thereafter, the measures were used to form two groups according to Hirshman's (1970) typology: passive and active complaining.

A total of 93 people participated in the study. As each individual responded to the six experimental scenarios their responses were pooled. The pooled data of 558 responses (93x6) were used to test the research model. The sample consisted of 62% female and 38% male respondents. Approximately 62% of participants were within the group aged 18-25 years of age. This was followed by the 26-34 year olds (21%) and the 35-44 year old group (13%). 44% of participants indicated that they earned less than £10,000 annually before taxes.

Findings

Before testing the model, validity of the personality measures were established through Exploratory Factor Analysis with the Varimax rotation. As expected, the three personality traits explained 75% of the total variance. Factor loadings were substantially high and had no cross loadings. These findings supported the construct validity of personality measures. The internal consistency reliability of the personality measures were also acceptable because they exceeded the recommended Cronbach Alpha value of 0.70 (Churchill, 1979) - (Extraversion = 0.77, conscientiousness = 0.73, and openness to experience = 0.71).

The primary model testing method was logistic regression through the use of the Baron-Kenny Method (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The first logistic regression model including the three personality measures had a statistically significant relationship with intentions to complain (-2 Log likelihood= 417.848, $p < 0.05$, Cox & Snell R Square = 0.04, Nagelkarke R Square = 0.08, Overall percentage of correct classification = 0.86). Of the three personality traits, conscientiousness and openness to experience were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). Therefore H2 & H3 were supported. H1 posited that extraversion had a positive relationship with CCB, so was therefore rejected.

The second regression model including price level, product type and their interaction effects with personality traits displayed better fit than the first model (-2 Log likelihood = 417.848, $p < 0.05$, Cox & Snell R Square = 0.17, Nagelkarke R Square = 0.31, Overall percentage of correct classification = 0.87). As expected, the price level and two product types - clothing and electronics, had a statistically significant influence on the intention to complain ($p < 0.01$). However, none of the interaction variable in the model had a statistically significant effect on complaining intentions. Therefore H4 to H9 were partially supported.

Conclusion

Overall, results of the study contribute to the ongoing debate as to whether consumer complaining intentions are motivated by personality traits. As two of the three personality traits, conscientiousness and openness to experience had a statistically significant relationship with the intention to complain by consumers, this finding provides support to the major premise that personality traits can be potential predictors for CCB. The findings partly support Harris and Mowen (2001) who found that complaint propensity was positively influenced by conscientiousness and extraversion.

However, contrary to their findings this study did not find that extroversion had a statistically significant influence on the intention to complain by consumers. Acting upon their review, this study also employed quasi-experimental research to investigate the effect of product price and product type on complaining intentions. The study found that more expensive products (e.g. French Wine) are likely to motivate a higher intention to complain compared to cheaper products. Similarly, clothing and electronic products are likely to influence a higher intention to complain as compared to grocery products. However, the study findings suggest that price and product type do not necessarily interact with personality variables to generate higher intentions to complain. These two factors act independently from personality traits. In other words, consumers are likely to complain actively when an expensive product, electronic product or a clothing product, are unsatisfactory.

The knowledge gained from this study can be used to understand the complaining intentions of consumers. A customer who has made the effort to voice dissatisfaction or seek redress for an unsatisfactory purchase may be motivated by conscientiousness, open to experiences, product price or high involvement products. The combinations of these psychological and product related characteristics signal the importance of taking caution when dealing with customers who complain or are likely to complain. Therefore, this knowledge can also be used to develop effective complaint management programmes and the training of employees in the management of consumer complaints.

Two potential limitations of this study are the sample size and product type. Although the sample covered a wide range of consumers and the product type included three different products categories from the retail industry, the results cannot be

generalized to the whole consumer population and other industries. A larger sample and different product categories will offer a more generalised result.

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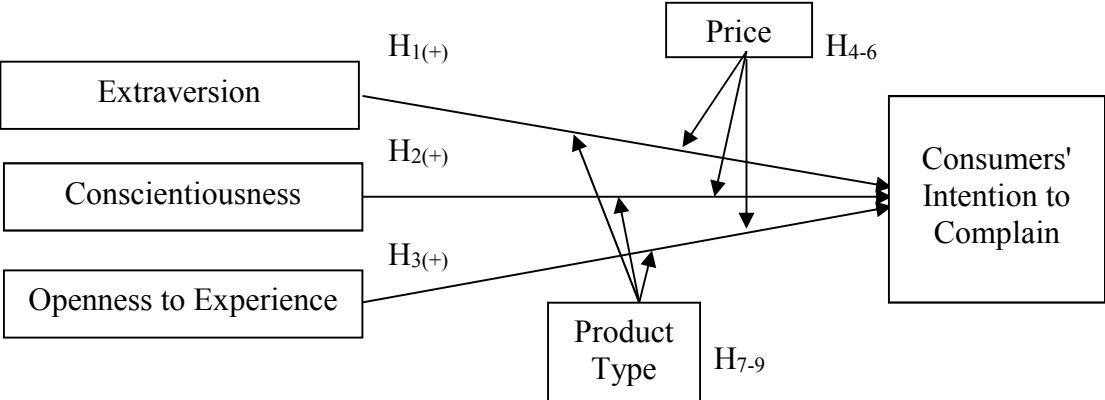
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Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Appendix: A sample scenario to record complaining intentions

Below you will find several scenarios which may or may not have occurred to you. For each scenario, please select the action(s) you think you might engage in whilst keeping the scenario in mind. Select all that apply.

1. You have just purchased a new cashmere coat for the winter. Once you are home and you have taken the coat out of its packaging you notice that the fabric on the inside of the coat is coming apart from the outside fabric which you had not noticed in-store.	
Bearing in mind this situation would you?	
Take no action	
Seek compensation from the seller or manufacturer	
Complain to the seller or a government agency	
Warn family and friends about the seller/product	
Decide to discontinue buying the product	
Take legal action to obtain compensation	