

# The Antecedents of the Consumer Complaining Behavior (CCB)

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to test a theoretical model which attempts to integrate different streams of CCB and analyze it among Brazilian consumers. Two levels of severity of failure between-subjects design was used. A total of 480 students were exposed to a written scenario describing a restaurant experience. Dissatisfaction level, attitude towards complaining, self-confidence and perceived likelihood of success influence complaint, word-of-mouth and switching intentions, but in different manners. Consumer self-confidence is the main driver to complaint while dissatisfaction level the most relevant for negative WOM and switching intentions. Attitude towards complaining moderates the relationship between dissatisfaction level and complaint intention.

## INTRODUCTION

Researchers and practitioners have begun to recognize that the study of consumer responses to marketplace dissatisfaction has significant implications for such key phenomena as brand loyalty and repurchase intentions (Day 1984), market feedback mechanisms and new product development (Fornell and Wernerfelt 1987) and consumer welfare (Andreassen 1984). Firms can heighten their customer retention rate, protect against diffusion of negative word-of-mouth, and minimize disadvantages by effectively managing post-purchase consumer dissatisfaction (Tax et al. 1998). Moreover, complaining increases long-term satisfaction by facilitating the venting of the source of dissatisfaction (Nyer 2000).

Unfortunately, most dissatisfied consumers exhibit indirect behaviors, such as negative word-of-mouth and exit, rather than complain directly to the firm. Empirical studies report that at least two thirds fail to inform their dissatisfaction to firms (e.g., Richins 1983; Andreassen 1984). Consumer reactions to dissatisfaction consist of multiple responses that consumers adopt in order to deal with a particular dissatisfying situation, including complaining to the seller, communicating negative word-of-mouth, switching supplier and taking legal action (Singh 1990).

Despite the strategic importance of consumer reactions to dissatisfaction, the current understanding is somewhat limited. Marketing literature on consumer responses to dissatisfaction has focused on identifying various determinants of consumer complaining behavior (hereafter referred as to CCB), although we find the following gaps: first, most literature focuses on only identifying determinants, not comparing their impacts (e.g., Day 1984; Singh and Widing 1991); second, the literature is fragmented, most studies consider only two or three determinants and, sometimes, fail to consider the major ones (e.g., Singh and Wilkes 1996); third, the role of attitudinal and personality-related variables has not been a central issue; fourth, most research has tended to utilize simplistic response styles (e.g., Gronhaug and Zaltman 1981); and, fifth, most studies focus only on those clients that register their dissatisfaction, complaining directly to firm, and do not consider those who spread negative word-of-mouth or silently switch suppliers (e.g., Nyer 2000). Such inconsistencies undermine the goals of systematic and cumulative research into the focal questions.

Our study aims to analyze, by extensive literature review and empirical data, the impact of multiple attitudinal perspectives (i.e., attitude towards complaining, perceived likelihood of successful complaint), personal factors (i.e., alienation and self-confidence)

and dissatisfaction level on CCB. The term “complaint behavior” or “complaint responses” implies all plausible reactions to dissatisfaction. While, “complaint actions” or “complaint intentions” connotes complaining behavior directed to seller.

Research into CCB has, with few exceptions, been carried out in developed countries; consequently, it has had a strong US and European orientation (Liu and McClure 2001). This fact raises questions as to the transportability of its findings to developing country markets. Now, large numbers of corporations are preparing to enter in developing country markets, such as Brazil, which has received increasing foreign investment, especially from the US. Under these circumstances can CCB researchers advise those firms on what drives their dissatisfied customers to express their complaint, to switch companies or to spread negative word-of-mouth? Or how dissatisfied customers in developing countries are likely to engage in complaining, switching, negative word-of-mouth behaviors, or to seek legal action against the firm? Answers to these questions have become increasingly timely and critical.

To date, however, CCB research, especially empirical studies outside the US and European settings, has been limited, with a focus on highlighting Asian cultures (Chiu et al. 1988, Huang 1994, Watkins and Liu 1996, Liu et al. 1997, Kim et al. 2003, Chelminski 2003). With the exceptions of Hernandez et al. (1991), comparing voice complaint intentions between US and Puerto Rico consumers, and Hernandez and Fugate (2004), analyzing dissatisfied retail consumers in Mexico, a thorough literature search revealed no study focusing on South American CCB. Therefore, it is of practical as well as theoretical importance to analyze CCB within a developing and important country in South American culture such as that of the Brazilian market.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

This section develops a set of hypotheses that describe how personality, perceptual and attitudinal variables influence complaint intentions.

### Consumer Complaining Behavior

Dissatisfied consumers engage in several different behaviors, such as negative word-of-mouth, exit, complaint to the firm, appeal to a third party or repeat purchasing as usual. Hirschman's work (1970) establishes the “Exit, Voice and Loyalty” model. Exit means a consumer voluntarily intention to terminate an exchange relationship by switching patronage to another retailer. Voice suggests an attempt to change rather than escape from a state of affairs, while loyalty occurs when the consumers neither exit nor voice and “suffer in silence confident that things will soon get better” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 38). Later, Day and Landon (1977) suggested this conceptualization was simplistic and listed nine broad categories for alternative responses to unsatisfactory experiences, including complaining to friends and relatives (negative word-of-mouth) and seeking redress from third parties. They included these defining categories in a two-dimensional taxonomy of responses consisting of public (e.g., voicing complaints) and private (e.g., word of mouth) dimensions. Singh's (1988) results show that complaint responses can be appropriately conceptualized as consisting of three distinct dimensions: voice responses, including actions directed toward the seller; private responses, that is, actions involving

stopping patronage and word-of-mouth communication of the dissatisfying seller; and third party responses, including actions directed toward external agencies. This parsimonious structure underlies the various dissatisfaction responses, it is sustained by empirical data and externally validated by discriminant evidence. As the Brazilian legal structures intended to deal with complaining actions are recognized as ineffective and much too slow, consumers do not consider the possibility of acting directly toward third parties. Based on the literature mentioned (Singh 1988, Day and Landon 1977) and on qualitative research data (in-depth interviews), three possible responses will be considered: complaint intentions (toward the company), negative word-of mouth and switching intentions.

It is important to highlight that the literature on CCB suggests that consumers often utilize a wide variety of responses that can be successfully categorized into the preceding three dimensions (negative word-of-mouth, switch company or complaint toward the seller) (Singh 1988). For this reason, it seems desirable to explicitly recognize and consider these responses. As Singh and Widing (1991) argued "these dimensions are not posited as mutually exclusive responses. Instead, the framework accepts that consumers may often engage in multiple responses" (p. 39). This study focuses on explaining what drives a consumer's behavior immediately following an unsatisfactory experience and analyze what drives the consumer during the first-stage (i.e., right after an unsatisfactory experience) to complain toward the seller, switch company, spread negative word-of-mouth or to do nothing after an unsatisfactory buying or consuming event.

#### Antecedents of Consumer Complaining Behavior

The idea of linking consumer responses to the intensity of dissatisfaction is not new. The first model proposing such a relationship was put forward by Landon (1977). More recent research agreed with this statement (Maute and Forrester 1993). Richins (1983), using severity of the problem as a surrogate for intensity of dissatisfaction, found a direct relationship between intensity and complaining behavior. In other words, we propose that the more consumers are dissatisfied the higher the probability to engage in complaint behavior. Thus, the first hypothesis group is the following:

- H1: *The dissatisfaction level will positively impact the complaint intentions.*
- H2: *The dissatisfaction level will positively impact the negative word-of-mouth.*
- H3: *The dissatisfaction level will positively impact the switching intentions.*

In contrast, proponents of the process approach see perceived dissatisfaction as a necessary, but not sufficient condition for explaining or predicting consumer complaint responses. Perceived dissatisfaction is hypothesized to be an emotional state that motivates consumers to undergo a process (Day 1984). This process results in specific complaint responses which are proposed to depend not so much on how strongly emotions are felt but more on consumer perceptions and attitudes (Singh and Widing 1991). Bearden (1983) found that only 15% of complaint reports could be explained by dissatisfaction level.

Other constructs are likely to influence such a complex behavior. In general, previous studies have found weak relationships between demographic variables and complaint responses (Gronhaug and Zaltman 1981), while indicating the strong influence of personal variables such as attitude towards complaining, consumer

alienation from the marketplace, perceived likelihood of successful complaint and consumer self-confidence.

Attitude towards the act of complaining is conceptualized as an overall effect towards the "goodness" or "badness" of complaining to sellers (Singh and Widing 1991). Two dimensions form this variable; the first corresponds to personal norms concerning complaining, while the second factor reflects the social dimension of this construct. Thus, consumers who have a more favorable attitude towards complaining are more likely to express their complaint to the firm (Day and Landon 1977). For this reason, we posit:

- H4: *The attitude towards the act of complaining will positively impact the complaint intentions.*

It is well documented that the likelihood of successful complaining positively influences complaint intention (Richins 1983, Singh 1990). When consumers believe that their complaints will be accepted by the firm and effectively managed, they are likely to express their feelings to the firm and not to spread negative word-of-mouth or to switch supplier (Anderson and Sullivan 1993, Dabholkar 1994). According to this, we hypothesize:

- H5: *Perceived likelihood of successful complaining will positively impact the complaint action intentions.*
- H6: *Perceived likelihood of successful complaining will negatively impact the negative word-of-mouth intentions.*
- H7: *Perceived likelihood of successful complaining will negatively impact the switching intentions.*

Consumer alienation is a consumer's global negative affect toward the dissatisfying firm's industry (Singh 1989) and reflects a negative feeling for the firm and its markets (Westbrook 1980). When consumers feel alienated from the market they are more likely to have helpless and powerless feeling (Allison 1978), and, thus, negative attitude towards complaining and lowered perceived likelihood of successful complaint, as follow:

- H8: *Consumer alienation will negatively impact his/her attitude towards the act of complaining.*
- H9: *Consumer alienation will negatively impact his/her perceived likelihood of successful complaining.*

Prior complaint experience can be conceptualized as a consumer's past experience toward unsatisfactory events (Sing 1989, Singh and Wilkes 1996). The extent (frequent or infrequent) of past complaining experiences can reinforce a consumer's attitudinal and behavioral disposition in future situations (Singh and Wilkes 1996). Prior complaint experience may influence attitude towards complaining. Such processes are consistent with the behaviorist and/or situationist theories that explain how past behaviors and exposure to situations shape and reinforce an individual's behavioral dispositions in future situations. Moreover, prior experiences affect an individual's cognitions about, for instance, how a retailer or manufacturer would probably respond to voiced complaints and the associated costs and/or benefits. As consumers learn about the mechanisms, options, and positive outcomes of prior complaint experience, they develop more positive attitudes towards complaining. In addition, those consumers who have prior complaint experience may determine how a firm might respond to voiced complaints, thus the perceived likelihood of successful complaint will be greater, the greater the prior experience of complaining is. Consequently, we posit the following:

H10: *Consumer prior complaint experience will positively impact his/her attitude towards the act of complaining.*

H11: *Consumer prior complaint experience will positively impact his/her perceived likelihood of successful complaining.*

According to the personality based approach, the consumer's intrinsic nature influences his/her complaining behaviors (Landon 1977). In general, consumers who complain after dissatisfaction tend to be more assertive (Bearden and Mason 1984) and self-confident (Gronhaug and Zaltman 1981). Although the results addressing these aspects have been encouraging, their impacts on complaint responses are not well documented and fully explored. Bearden et al. (2001, p.122) argue that "consumer self-confidence is the extent to which an individual feels capable and assured with respect to his or her marketplace decisions and behaviors" and reflects subjective evaluations of one's ability to generate positive experiences as a consumer in the marketplace (Adelman 1987). Therefore, it is proposed that self-confidence will influence the consumer's complaint intentions, as follows:

H12: *Consumer self-confidence will positively impact the complaint action intentions.*

The absence of prior research on the relationship between consumer self-confidence and intentions to exert negative word-of-mouth communication and to switch company, does not allow us to elaborate more specific hypotheses. However, by the reasoning that self-confidence is related to the propensity of action, it can be inferred that a likely action might be to communicate with friends and relatives about the problem or to abandon the current supplier. Therefore, the following hypotheses are posited:

H13: *Consumer self-confidence will positively impact negative word-of-mouth.*

H14: *Consumer self-confidence will positively impact switching intentions.*

Based on attitude theory (Ajzen and Fishbein 1977), it can be inferred that the intrinsic attitudes towards the act of complaining will moderate the effects of situation triggers, such as encounter-specific dissatisfaction responses on intentions to complain. In doing so, it is likely that consumers with a high predisposition toward complaining will be more likely to complain regardless of their level of dissatisfaction they experience, so, such customers would probably complain even when only slightly dissatisfied, causing the direct effect of dissatisfaction level on complaint intention to be weaker. Alternatively, future complaint intentions for a customer with a low attitude towards complaining would be driven more by dissatisfaction level, and therefore the direct effect of dissatisfaction level will be delegated a stronger role. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H15: *Attitude towards complaining moderates the relationship between dissatisfaction level and complaint intentions.*

Although the last hypothesis is logical, consistent and sustained by a solid theoretical background (Ajzen and Fishbein 1977), two empirical and relevant studies (Singh and Pandya 1991, Singh and Wilkes 1996) found that only the opposite moderating relationship occurred. That is, according to Singh and Wilkes (1996), the

predictive and explanatory power of the attitude towards complaining changes with different levels of dissatisfaction. Using a critical incident approach, the authors found that the relationship between dissatisfaction level and voice varied substantially across the high and low dissatisfaction groups and, so, they provided a theoretical rationale and empirical evidence for a moderating role of dissatisfaction intensity. The reasoning here is that, being highly dissatisfied the customer will probably complain even having a negative attitude towards complaining. And only when the dissatisfaction level is low, does the impact of attitude towards complaining get stronger. Based on this reasoning, we have the alternative to the previous hypothesis:

H16: *The dissatisfaction level moderates the relationship between attitude towards complaining and complaint intentions.*

It's important to reinforce that hypotheses 15 and 16 are not opposing and could in fact both be operating. Given the theoretical background and the established hypotheses, Figure 1 presents a theoretical model to investigate the impact of the dissatisfaction level and personal variables on consumer complaint responses.

## RESEARCH METHOD

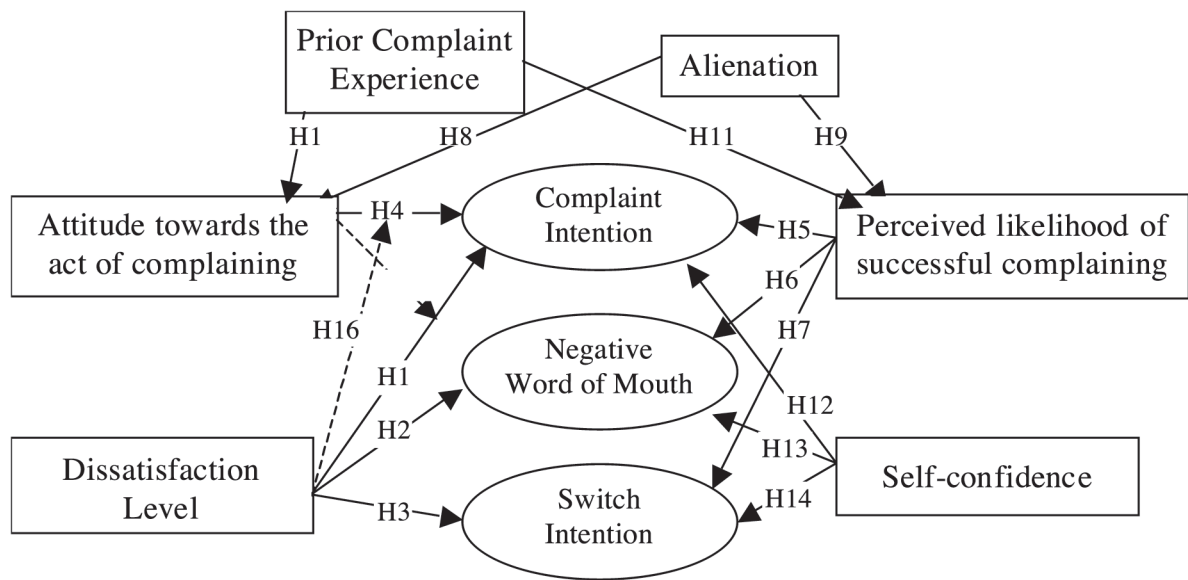
The investigation was carried out in two stages. In an initial, exploratory phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 consumers to probe their beliefs about variables included in the hypotheses. Based on this work and extensive pre-testing, a questionnaire was developed and administrated in the final, descriptive phase. To empirically test the model, a quasi-experimental design was applied. A restaurant service was chosen as a research setting.

Service failures were manipulated at two levels of severity (low and high) via scenario description (appendix A). Then, participants were asked to rate, on a five-point Likert-type scale, their level of dissatisfaction toward that situation. Each participant could respond based only on one situation. Past experimental studies (Levesque and McDougall 2000, Wirtz and Mattila 2004) were consulted to assure the development of a parsimonious design.

The questionnaire was administered to 480 graduate students from two universities in the south of Brazil. Firstly, an ANOVA test was conducted to check the manipulation of service failure levels described by the scenarios. As expected, there was a significant difference on dissatisfaction levels ( $F=162.543$ ;  $p<0,000$ ), an indication that the high severity situation produced a higher dissatisfaction than the low severity situation. Prior to the data analysis, cases with missing values and outliers, were deleted.

The measurement scales were taken from diverse studies. Complaint intentions were adapted from Day et al. (1981) and Singh (1989); dissatisfaction intensity was operationalized by asking respondents how they felt after experiencing the situation described by the scenario; attitude towards complaining (8 items) was drawn from Singh's work (1990); alienation (5 items) from Allison (1978); perceived likelihood of successful complaint (3 items) from Day et al. (1981) and Singh (1990) prior complaint experiences (2 items) from Singh (1989) and self-confidence (11 items) from Bearden et al. (2001). According to the recommendation of Bagozzi (1977), the use of SEM in experimental studies is better applied when measures are interval, or, at least, manipulated at three levels. Therefore, an interval measure was used to check dissatisfaction level toward the situation. All measures were applied using a five-point Likert-type scale. Measures were translated into Portuguese using the back translation technique and submitted to marketing professors for meaning and consistency evaluation.

**FIGURE 1**  
Framework for understanding the impact on complaint responses



## RESULTS

Results obtained by the survey are presented as follows: first, a general profile of the sample will be presented. Next, the measurement model will be examined through Confirmatory Factorial Analysis (CFA). The examination of the structural model will only be performed after the establishment of the validity and reliability of the measures used. Finally, moderating hypotheses will be investigated.

### Sample Profile

From data collection, a total of 480 interviewees was obtained, 240 for each scenario (low and high severity). Mean age of the respondents was 24 years-old (s.d.=6.93), 60% of them are male. The majority (46%) have a monthly family income higher than two thousand dollars, 31.5% from one to two thousand dollars and 22.5% above one thousand dollars.

Most of the interviewees are in the habit of eating in restaurants more than three times a month (56.5%), 23.4% eat in restaurants between once and three times a month and 20% less than once a month. This result shows that the situation suggested in the scenario is known, which enables the respondents to imagine themselves in it. More than half (57.3%) had some real unsatisfactory experience with some restaurant in the 12 months prior to the data collection. Of those that had some problem, 28.4% had only complained, 17% did not return, complained and used negative word of mouth, and 48% did not return and used negative word of mouth. These data show that a large proportion of the interviewees adopt more than one action in relation to an unsatisfactory situation, which tends towards agreement with the findings of Day and Landon (1977) and Singh (1990), which suggest that post-dissatisfaction behavior is exhibited in multiple ways.

### Measurement Model

Considering the recommendations of some authors (Anderson and Gerbing 1988, Bagozzi 1994, Hair et al. 1998), the validity of the measurement model was basically supported by the fact that: (a)

the measurement model was fairly well fitted to data, that is, within the established satisfactory adjustment levels; (b) the factor loadings of the indicators in the corresponding factors were high and significant; (c) indicators of the same construct produced levels of reliability over 0.70 and variance extracted over 0.50; (d) the correlation analysis between the constructs indicated discriminant validity.

The measurement model produced the following satisfactory fit statistics: the convergent validity was supported, basically, because all items presented high and significant factorial coefficients in the proposed constructs. The estimated parameters reveal that the standardized factor loadings, without exception, are statistically significant and substantively large (from 0.51 to 0.95,  $t$ -values > 6.92). In addition, the composite reliability estimates ranged from .72 to .91 (switching intention and attitude towards complaining–personal norms, respectively), and variance extracted estimates from .53 to .76 (prior complaint experience and complaint direct toward the seller intention, respectively).

Evidence of discriminant validity, which is particularly important when constructs are similar by nature, was found through the correlation levels between constructs. Correlation over 0.80 would indicate lack of discriminant validity, that is, constructs would be measuring the same phenomenon. Constructs were found distinct from one another, with the highest correlation between negative word-of-mouth and switching company intentions (0.71). The comparison between the variance extracted estimates and the square of the correlation of two constructs for each one of them provide additional evidence of discriminant validity.

### Test of Hypothesis

After the examination of the measures used, this study focused on the theoretical structure, which establishes relationships between the proposed constructs. The investigation of the set of hypotheses will be primarily made through the goodness-of-fit indices of the hybrid model and the significance and magnitude of estimated regression coefficients. Moreover, the coefficient of



**TABLE 1**  
Estimated Coefficients for the Nomological Relationships in the Model

Model Relationships	Standardized Regression Coefficient <sup>ab</sup>	Hypotheses
<b>Dependent Variable: Complaint Intention</b>		<b>R<sup>2</sup>=0.48</b>
Dissatisfaction Level	0.29 (3.22)	H <sub>1</sub>
Attitude towards complaining	0.19 (2.18) <sup>c</sup>	H <sub>4</sub>
Perceived Likelihood of Success	0.27 (3.04)	H <sub>5</sub>
Self-confidence	0.38 (5.96)	H <sub>12</sub>
<b>Dependent Variable: Switching Intentions</b>		<b>R<sup>2</sup>=0.79</b>
Dissatisfaction Level	0.72 (9.84)	H <sub>3</sub>
Perceived Likelihood of Success	-0.19 (2.25) <sup>c</sup>	H <sub>7</sub>
Self-confidence	0.12 (2.01) <sup>c</sup>	H <sub>14</sub>
<b>Dependent Variable: Negative Word-of-Mouth</b>		<b>R<sup>2</sup>=0.75</b>
Dissatisfaction Level	0.65 (6.21)	H <sub>2</sub>
Perceived Likelihood of Success	-0.12 (2.05) <sup>c</sup>	H <sub>6</sub>
Self-confidence	0.18 (2.41)	H <sub>13</sub>
<b>Dependent Variable: Attitude towards complaining</b>		<b>R<sup>2</sup>=0.28</b>
Alienation -0.21 (3.09)	H <sub>8</sub>	H <sub>10</sub>
Prior Complaining Experience	0.03 (1.07)	
<b>Dependent Variable: Perceived Likelihood of Success</b>		<b>R<sup>2</sup>=0.08</b>
Alienation -0.16 (2.26) <sup>c</sup>	H <sub>9</sub>	H <sub>11</sub>
Prior Complaining Experience	0.08 (1.45)	
<b>Goodness-of-fit statistics:</b>		
χ <sup>2</sup> (Chi-square)	354.654 (p<0.001)	
DF (Degrees of freedom)	176	
CFI (Comparative Fit Index)	0.95	
NFI (Normed Fit Index)	0.91	
NNFI (NonNormed Fit Index)	0.93	
RMR (Root Mean Sq. Residual)	0.06	
RMSEA (Root Mean Sq. Error of Approx.)	0.05	

<sup>a</sup> The estimates presented are from the ERLS (iteratively reweighted generalized least squares) using EQS.

<sup>b</sup> T-values in parenthesis. Based on the one-tailed: t-values>1.65=p<0.05; and t-values>2.33=p<0.01.

<sup>c</sup> Coefficient significant at 0.05 level. Coefficients significant at 0.01 are in bold.

determination was verified for each equation, which represents the proportion of variance of the dependent variable explained by the independent variables.

The findings of the structural model analysis, based on the 480 customers, are found in Table 1. The chi-square value is significant. However, knowing that this test is very sensitive to normality deviations and to samples higher than 200, the analysis of the chi-square value must be done along with other adjustment criteria (Hair et al. 1998). Dividing the chi-square value by the degrees of freedom produces a satisfactory value—2.01, less than the maxi-

mum recommended (5). Goodness-of-fit indexes CFI, NFI, NNFI, all over 0.90, are considered sufficiently satisfactory and the RMSEA of 0.06 is acceptable.

The results provide support for most of the nomological relationships specified in the model. These relations reflect the impact of: 1) self-confidence on complaint, word-of-mouth and switching company intentions; 2) dissatisfaction level on complaint, word-of-mouth and switching company intentions; 3) perceived likelihood of successful complaint on complaint, word-of-mouth and switching company intentions; 4) attitude towards

**TABLE 2**  
Estimated coefficients for theoretical relationships, for clients with contrasting attitudes <sup>a</sup>

Dependent Variable: Complaint Intention	Positive Attitude	Negative Attitude
R <sup>2</sup>	0.62	0.31
Level of Dissatisfaction	0.41 (6.07)	0.15 (2.13)

<sup>a</sup>The estimates presented are from ERLS (iteratively reweighted generalized least squares) using EQS.

complaining on complaint intentions; 5) alienation on attitude towards complaining; and 6) alienation on perceived likelihood of successful complaining.

The impact of dissatisfaction level on switching (0.72) and negative word-of-mouth (0.65) intentions are highly significant. The perceived likelihood of success and the consumer self-confidence had a weaker, though, significant, impact on switching intentions (-0.19 and 0.12, respectively) and on negative word-of-mouth communication (-0.12 and 0.18). Note that the perceived likelihood of success has a negative impact on both responses, as predicted.

With regard the impact on complaint intention, the results indicate that the impact of the following antecedents: dissatisfaction level (0.28), probability of success (0.25), attitude towards complaining (0.17), and consumer self-confidence (0.36). Although not as large as the negative word-of-mouth and the switching intentions coefficient, the R<sup>2</sup> of 0.44 reflects a reasonable effect of the variables on the complaint direct to the firm intention.

The results also support hypotheses H<sub>8</sub> and H<sub>9</sub>, in which the impact of alienation on the attitude towards complaining and on the perceived likelihood of success are established. Although statistically significant, the power of alienation to predict the perceived likelihood of success is very low (R<sup>2</sup>=0.08). Finally, prior complaint experiences did not exerted influence on attitude towards complaining (0.03), rejecting H<sub>10</sub>.

The moderating hypotheses (H<sub>15</sub>, H<sub>16</sub>) highlight possible differences in the strength of nomological relationships established between dissatisfaction intensity and complaint intention (H<sub>15</sub>), due to the level of attitude towards complaining, and between attitude towards complaining and complaint intention (H<sub>16</sub>), due to the level of dissatisfaction. In order to test the first moderating role, we divided the sample into three sub-groups based on the level of attitude towards complaining. Then, those who indicated the attitude as low (163) and high (186) were retained. Those who indicated medium level of attitude were excluded to more accurately reflect the nature of the moderation, which could be blurred if intermediate values were included. The moderation hypothesis was tested by using the Multi-Group Structural Equation Analysis. This approach allows the theoretical model for each group to be simultaneously estimated; those that exhibited low and those that exhibited high attitude towards complaining. Thus, it is possible to test whether the estimated coefficients vary for both groups (Singh, Verbeke and Rhoads 1996). All parameters were initially restricted as invariant for both groups. Subsequently, based on the Lagrange-multiplier test (Byrne 1994), parameters with significant indicators "are released".

The results in Table 2 indicate different relationships between dissatisfaction level and complaint intention in the two groups of consumers. While for consumers with negative attitude towards complaining, the impact of dissatisfaction level is 0.15, for consum-

ers with positive attitude it is 0.41. This result corroborates the idea that attitude moderates the effects of situation triggers, such as dissatisfaction intensity. Thus, the attitude towards complaining is an important element for the translation of dissatisfaction level to complaint intention. The dissatisfied consumers with negative attitude towards complaining are less driven by dissatisfaction level. It means that those customers will probably not complain even when highly dissatisfied. On the other hand, the consumers with positive attitude toward complaint are "freer" to act according their levels of dissatisfaction. Thus, when highly dissatisfied they probably complain, while when slightly dissatisfied they probably do not. Additionally, Mean scores interaction provided additional evidence for the moderator effects. In accordance with methodological advice from previous authors (Irwin and McClelland 2001; MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher and Rucker 2002), if the relationship is nonlinear, then dividing into two groups, whether the extreme third tails or median splits, precludes the possibility of detecting the nonlinearity. Therefore, the interaction between dissatisfaction level and attitude toward complaining mean scores and its effect on intention to complaint was analyzed, reinforcing that when attitude toward complaining is positive, dissatisfaction level exert a stronger impact on intention to complaint ( $\beta_{\text{interaction effect}} = .51, p < 0.001$ ).

In order to test H<sub>16</sub>, the same procedure was used, but in this case the sample was divided into three sub-groups based on the level of dissatisfaction. Those who obtained low (178) or high (196) dissatisfaction scores were restrained, so the effect of attitude towards complaining on complaint intention in those two different groups could be better captured and compared. The results indicated no improvement to the model by adding the moderator impact, denying H<sub>16</sub> and contradicting the findings of Singh and Pandya (1991) and Singh and Wilkes (1996). One explanation for this rejection is that the previous authors dealt with complaint behaviors in response to actual experiences of consumer dissatisfaction instead of consumer's intentions or propensity to complain, as did the present study. Moreover, this difference may be explained to some degree by the origin of the current sample, a developing, South-American country.

## IMPLICATIONS

From the academic point of view, our research examines some relevant questions in the field of knowledge considered. Among them it is important to point out: (1) the consideration of the answers to dissatisfaction involving a series of intentions: complaint, word-of-mouth and switching intentions; (2) the relationship between dissatisfaction level and post-dissatisfaction answers; (3) the impact of attitudinal (attitude toward complaint), perceptual (dissatisfaction level and perceived likelihood of success) and personality (consumer self-confidence) variables on the post-dissatisfaction intentions; (4) the applicability of North American measures in the Brazilian context.

This research focuses on the impact of attitudinal, perceptual and personality variables on complaint behavior among Brazilian consumers. The majority of the antecedents' impacts were expressive and predicted a good part of the variations on the dependent variables, as the hypothesis suggested. The hypothesized relationships were empirically tested, and the results confirm that complaint reactions are influenced by dissatisfaction level, consumer self-confidence and perceived likelihood of success, but in different intensities.

It is important to reinforce that dissatisfaction level significantly and substantially enhances negative word-of-mouth and switching intentions, but its effect on complaint direct toward the firm intention is not in the same intensity. This corroborates with some authors' idea (Bearden 1983; Day 1984; Singh and Widing 1991) that the relationship between dissatisfaction level and voice is tenable, but not encouraging. Instead, in the present study the complaint direct toward the firm was strongly influenced by consumer self-confidence. Perceived likelihood of success also seems to play a relevant role on predicting complaint direct toward the firm intention. We should reinforce that the  $R^2$  indicates that the four antecedent variables were capable to explain half (48%) of the total variance in complaint direct toward the firm intention. Although that is a considerable amount, it suggests the existence of other factors that could help to predict the intentions to complaint, such as attribution of failure, company/consumer relationship (degree of loyalty felt by the consumer to the company) and emotions felt by the dissatisfied customer.

Another important finding refers to the impact of personal antecedents (alienation and prior complaining experience) on attitude towards complaining and on perceived likelihood of success. In accordance with Kim et al. (2003) findings, alienation significantly and negatively has influenced attitude towards complaining and perceived likelihood of success. Kim et al. (2003) also found the influence of prior complaining experience on attitude towards complaining and on perceived likelihood of success. Those results were not sustained by the present study. One explanation for this could be the fact that enterprises in Brazil do not behave homogeneously, that is, there is no pattern companies follow referring to complaint handling. As a result, consumers do not expect from a company a positive response just because they had a good experience in complaining to another one.

This study set out to pose and examine the relationship between personality, perceptual and attitudinal variables and complaint intentions. Furthermore, specifically regarding the complaint direct toward the firm intention, we identify a moderator attitudinal variable that strengthened the relationship between dissatisfaction level and complaint direct toward the firm intention, enhancing its prediction from 48% (overall sample) to 62% (sample with positive attitude towards complaining). This calls for two remarks. First, the higher the attitude towards complaining score, the more likely the customers are to complain, even if they felt little dissatisfied. Second, dissatisfactions are more likely to be transformed into complaining if customers have a positive attitude towards the act of complaining. This result confirms and sheds some nuance on the key arguments of Ajzen and Fishbein (1977) that attitude moderates the relation between cognitive appraisals and coping behaviors.

The present study offers several contributions to marketing practitioners. The findings indicate that the focus on maintaining long-term relationships and avoiding negative word-of-mouth communication depends on enhancing post-purchase systems. Otherwise, dissatisfied customers will defect and spread negative word-of-mouth about the company. Moreover, the company should not try to hide failures and wait for the customer to register complaints, because customers who perceive the likelihood of success as low

and are not self-confident probably will not complain but remain dissatisfied.

The presence of a linear, but weak, relationship between dissatisfaction level and voice poses several implications and challenges for practitioners, since dissatisfaction can be managed only if consumers voice their complaints. The implication of this study is that customers complaint intention is likely to be dependent of several factors (e.g. personality, attitudinal variables) which can convert dissatisfaction level to voice intention. The knowledge of such factors is critical for dissatisfaction management.

Another managerial implication is that firms should realize that a consumer's perception of likelihood of success and favorable attitude towards complaining can heighten voice intention. Both aspects can be enhanced by educating consumers about the options and the mechanisms of complaining. Companies could also simplify the exchange and refund procedures, show to consumers they are willing to admit failures, provide employees education regarding quick and efficient complaint handling, motivate them to facilitate customers' expressions of complaint and increase their willingness to listen to customers. Finally, the high impact of consumer self-confidence on complaint intention shows that the company, when handling complaints, is dealing with self-confident consumers. Contact employees should be trained to pay attention when dealing with this type of consumer.

While this study considers several important factors, one of its weaknesses is that it fails to take into consideration consumer emotions as a determinant of complaining behavior. The method applied (experimental design with application of scenarios) is not favorable to measure emotions, because it provides a hypothetical situation. Previous research has also considered the impact of attributions on complaining behavior. Future research should focus on the place of attributions and emotions within the model. A further limitation is the sampling of only one service category (restaurants) and the use of students as participants. Future research is needed to validate our findings across a wider sample base.

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## APPENDIX A

## Scenario Description-High Failure Severity Scenario

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You and another person go to a restaurant for dinner to celebrate a special occasion. You reserved a table with an excellent location, however, when arriving at the restaurant, you were informed that the restaurant was crowded and the table was already occupied. After five minutes, you were moved to another table. You are seated. The waiter comes to take your order. You place your order and the waiter informs you that the dish you requested is unavailable. You choose another option and the waiter arrogantly informs you that it is also unavailable. You finally choose a third and available alternative. After one hour, the waiter brings your order.

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