Contrasting "Complainers" with "Non-Complainers" on Attitude Toward Complaining, Propensity to Complain, and Key Personality Characteristics: A Nomological Look

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of four personality characteristics (self-efficacy, Machiavellianism, perceived control, and risk-taking) on consumer attitude toward complaining and propensity to complain. The proposed model is tested on two groups of consumers classified as "complainers" and "non-complainers." The findings reveal that the two groups differ distinctly on the pattern of relationships among the variables. The implications of these differences are discussed.

Over the years, consumer complaint behavior has received considerable attention from researchers, and indeed there is a wealth of information in the extant literature. Nevertheless, the ever-increasing importance to any organization of the customer satisfaction goal makes it imperative to fill the lacunae in the complaining behavior literature so as to gain a deeper insight into its complex nature.

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Research has established the definite influence of personality traits (Bearden & Mason, 1984), attitude toward complaining (ATC) (Richins, 1981), and propensity to complain (PTC) (Rubin & Brown, 1975) in the context of complaining behavior (e.g., Bennett, 1997; Davidow & Dacin, 1997; Keng, Richmond, & Han,1995). However, there appears to be a lacuna stemming from the way they have been treated in this context.

While the individual relationships between some personality traits, ATC, PTC, and actual complaint behavior have been examined in many studies, there has been no attempt to view these relationships within a nomological net. This study attempts to do just that by proposing a model involving key personality characteristics, ATC, and PTC. Furthermore, to gauge the extent to which these relationships are influential in relation to actual complaint behavior, a comparison of the model is made across groups of "complainers" and "non-complainers."

PROPENSITY TO COMPLAIN (PTC)

Propensity to complain (PTC) is defined as an individual's likelihood of seeking redress or expressing dissatisfaction to a service provider when he or she has had an unsatisfactory service encounter (Bearden & Mason, 1984). Past research suggests that PTC may depend on the severity of the dissatisfaction, ease of access to marketing channels, reputation of the firm, and the extent of damage the consumer has incurred (Day & Landon, 1977; Goodman & Newman, 2003). Notwithstanding, PTC is perceived as being a fundamental factor in understanding complaint behavior because of its direct effect on the actual decision to complain or not. Similarly, ATC also holds a close relationship with complaining behavior.

ATTITUDE TOWARD COMPLAINING (ATC)

Defined as 'the overall affect of 'goodness' or 'badness' of complaining to sellers…not specific to a given episode of dissatisfaction" (Singh & Wilkes, 1996, p. 353), ATC yields considerable weight in the prediction of complaint behavior. In fact, the importance of attitudes in relation to complaining is well documented by Hirschman (1970), whose theoretical framework for understanding complaint and exit behaviors clearly posits that ATC, along with value of complaint and likelihood of the complaint's success, has a significant influence on complaint behavior. In addition, the relationship between ATC and complaint behavior has been further recognized in studies (e.g., Blodgett, Granbois, & Walters, 1993; Blodgett & Anderson, 2000; Kim, Kim, Im, & Shim, 2003; Singh & Wilkes, 1996), which have clearly cemented ATC as a pivotal variable in the prediction of complaint behavior. For example, Singh and Wilkes (1996) found that

ATC has a positive relationship with complaint response estimates such as voice (complaining to seller), private (telling friends and relatives), and third-party (taking action with external agencies), while Blodgett and Anderson (2000) found that dissatisfied customers with a positive ATC are highly likely to seek redress. In other words, in the event of dissatisfaction, individuals with a positive ATC will have a stronger propensity to complain. On this basis the first hypothesis of this study is proposed:

H1: ATC will have a significant positive effect on PTC.

PERSONALITY TRAITS

In addition to ATC and PTC being shown to predict complaint behavior, so too has the perceived likelihood of success in seeking redress (e.g., Hirschman, 1970; Kim et al., 2003). For example, although one may have a positive attitude and strong PTC, it may be that the perceived likelihood of success (if low) may impede the individual in engaging in complaint behavior. For example, Richins and Verhage (1985) found that the reputation of the retailer for responsiveness (a signal of likelihood of success in redress) significantly influenced complaint behavior. However, the external or situational factors may not always dictate the likelihood of success. It may be that intrinsic factors, such as personality traits, are very instrumental in influencing perceptions of the degree to which complaint success is likely. In other words, the decision to complain (or not) may also depend on the degree to which the individual believes he or she can orchestrate a successful outcome through the complaint process. On this basis, personality traits such as self-efficacy, Machiavellianism, perceived control and risk-taking—which are all individual traits that link to one's perception of outcome success—become supremely important for this study of complaint behavior.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as "beliefs in one's capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands" (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 408). In this sense, self-efficacy is viewed as one's perception of ability to evaluate one's own thought processes and experiences, thus adapting behavior and thinking patterns as a means to achieve certain levels of performance (Gibson, 2001). Self-efficacy is often used interchangeably with self-esteem; however, the difference is that self-efficacy is not inherently evaluative and concerns judgments based on task capability rather than that of one's self (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). This is an important distinction to make, particularly in relation to complaint behavior, as it would be expected that

self-efficacy would influence one's perception of the ability to achieve a successful outcome by complaining. In fact, the higher a person's level of self-efficacy, the more persistent he or she is when faced with setbacks or failure (Luthans & Peterson, 2002). This may be the result of the individual having greater confidence in achieving success through complaining. It is on this basis that the following hypotheses are posed:

H2: Self-efficacy will have a significant positive effect on ATC.

H3: Self-efficacy will have a significant positive effect on PTC.

Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism is defined as "a negative epithet, indicating at least an amoral way of manipulating others to accomplish one's objectives" (Hunt & Chonko, 1984, p. 24). Much of the literature regarding Machiavellianism relates to the findings of Christie and Geis (1970), who advocate that people who are considered to possess the Machiavellian personality trait maintain some kind of cool detachment that makes them less willing to associate with others on a personal level. In addition, several studies have distinguished between low Machs and high Machs. Those individuals who are considered high Machs engage in more manipulative behavior by using indirect, irrational tactics such as exploitation and persuasion (Gunnthorsdottir, McCabe, & Smith, 2002), but they also use emotional tactics in a convincing fashion to persuade others of their ideas. This may explain why high Machs are often labeled as dishonest or deceitful and tend to take the position that "the end justifies the means" (Walle, 2001, p. 403). As a result, high Machs are more likely to engage in behavior that may benefit them, even at the expense of others. On this basis, in the event of service failure, high Machs may well perceive complaining to be a mechanism by which they can get what they want, achieve success in the service transaction, or even get something over and above their investment. In this sense, the Machiavellian trait is strongly linked to perceptions of successful outcomes and thus would be expected to have a strong association with both ATC and PTC. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H4: Machiavellianism will have a significant positive effect on ATC.

H5: Machiavellianism will have a significant positive effect on PTC.

Perceived Control

Perceived control is defined as "the expectation of having the power to participate in making decisions in order to obtain desirable consequences and a sense of personal competence in a given situation" (Rodin, 1990, p. 4). In this sense, perceived control is viewed as the ability of a

person to control events, of which the control does not have to be present, so long as it is perceived to be present (Endler, Speer, Johnson, & Flett, 2000).

Generally, studies have concentrated on the level of control that individuals maintain over their environment or certain events that affect their lives. Skinner (1996) drew a distinction between individuals who have a high degree of control over their environment, as opposed to individuals who maintain a low level of control. Those who are considered to have a high level of control generally exercise greater effort to achieve goals by taking action, are highly motivated, and display attributes of competence in situations. In fact, in the context of complaint behavior, Folkes, Koletsky, and Graham (1987) found that perceived control (control over the problem and solution) and stability had a significant influence on an individual's PTC, as well as future intentions to purchase. Because complaints are mechanisms by which individuals can maintain control (e.g., instrumental reasons) and therefore achieve higher likelihood of success with the complaint, it is hypothesized that:

H6: Perceived control will have a significant positive effect on ATC.

H7: Perceived control will have a significant positive effect on PTC.

Risk-Taking

Although different people perceive risk differently, an individual's attitude towards risk is considered a stable property of his or her personality and culture (Mitchell & Boustani, 1993). Those individuals who have adendency to willingly take risks are said to be risk seekers and, as such, engage in activities or situations where the possible outcomes are generally poor or negative (Mitchell & Boustani, 1993). In comparison, risk-averse individuals engage in behavior where there is a certain degree of certainty that the outcome will be positive or good (Keng et al., 1995). However, because achieving positive outcomes through the complaint process is not always assured, such individuals may steer clear of any complaint actions. As such, risk-taking may well be an important trait in the context of complaint behavior because uncertainty, which is inherent in seeking redress, would tend to be of little hindrance to the risk-seeker, whose main goal is to achieve a successful outcome regardless of the consequences. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H8: Risk-taking will have a significant positive effect on ATC.

H9: Risk-taking will have a significant positive effect on PTC.

The preceding discussions outline the theoretical basis upon which the hypotheses of this study are proposed and shown in Figure 1.

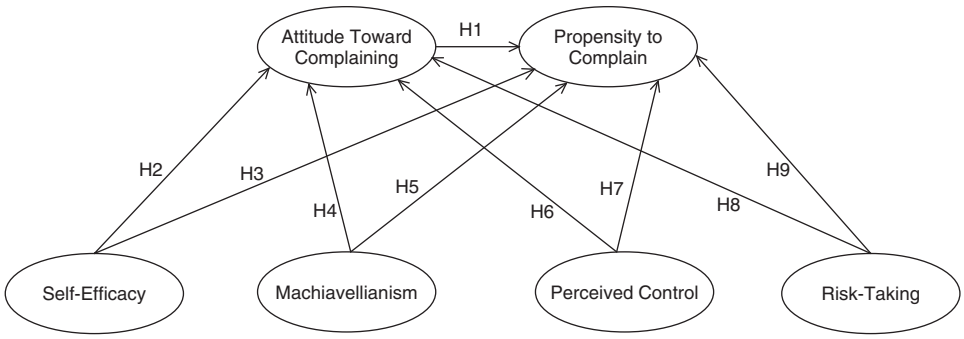

Figure 1. Role of personality in complaining.

Complainer vs. Non-complainer

While the proposed model is used as a framework to test the relationships between individual personality traits (self-efficacy, Machiavellianism, perceived control, and risk-taking), ATC, and PTC, the model fails to depict actual complaint behavior. However, it is important to determine how the key variables, proposed in Figure 1, relate to the actual act of complaining; this information can be gained by contrasting the hypothesized relationships across those individuals who willingly complain (complainers) as opposed to those individuals who avoid complaint behavior (non-complainers). It is on this basis that the following research question is posed:

RQ1: To what extent do the relationships shown in the proposed model (Figure 1) differ across "complainers" and "non-complainers"?

METHOD

This study was based on the development and administration of a self-reported survey. Where possible, measures were accessed from the literature. For example, Machiavellianism was measured via 11 items of 20 items used by Christie and Geis (1970). Being mindful of survey length, only 11 items of this scale measuring Machiavellian traits (as opposed to non-Machiavellian traits) were used. Self-efficacy was measured using 10 items from Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995); risk-taking using 8 items from Keaveney and Parthasarathy (2001); perceived control using 11 items of James' (1957) locus of control (LOC) scale (all items were reverse scored to reflect internal LOC, which is what was being measured here), and the 4 items measuring PTC came from three different sources (e.g., Folkes et al., 1987; Bennett, 1997; Blodgett, Wakefield, & Barnes, 1995). Not all items were used verbatim because some required

adaptation to reflect the services context of this study. In terms of ATC, a total of 7 items were generated, but only 4 items that were rated by three expert judges as "representative" were retained for the survey. Finally, in order to determine "complainers" and "non-complainers," a categorical variable was included in the survey. Respondents were asked to select one of the following statements as being most applicable to them:

- In most situations, I *tend* to complain to the service provider when I am unhappy with the service, rather than do nothing.
- In most situations, I *don't tend* to complain to the service provider when I am unhappy with the service.

Data Collection

Data were collected from 200 third-year marketing students enrolled in a large university in southeast Queensland. A number of studies support the use of surveying university students (e.g., Bennett, 1997; Blodgett et al., 1995; Christensen, Fogarty, & Wallace, 2002) and, more specifically, many studies in complaint behavior and personality characteristics have effectively surveyed marketing undergraduate students (e.g., Bebko, 2000; Bennett, 1997). Female respondents represented 58% of the sample, while male respondents represented the remaining 42%. Of the respondents, 66% were under 25 years of age, 32% were between 25 to 45 years of age, and 2% were over 45 years of age. Income levels reflected the level of education achieved, as 66% of the sample earned $25,000 or less per year, while 10% earned between $25,001 and $50,000 and 24% of respondents earned over $50,001 per year.

Data Analysis

Initially, the data were visually inspected for normality, skew, and kurtosis through the representation of histograms. Preliminary analysis included inspection of bivariate correlations and assessment of factor structures and reliability coefficients. Items revealing correlations below 0.30 and above 0.90 were deleted, as they were considered inappropriate for factor analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Factor analysis was conducted via principal components with varimax rotation. Factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1 were identified, and factor loadings of less than 0.35 or with cross-loadings of greater than 0.40 were deleted from the data analysis (O'Cass, 2002). This resulted in the deletion of 4 items (Machiavellianism), 6 items (perceived control), 2 items (risk-taking), and 3 items (self-efficacy). The reliability of the remaining items of the scales was greater than the recommended level of 0.70 (Sureshchander, Rajendran, & Anantharaman, 2001). For full preliminary statistics, refer to Table 1. Prior to conducting the analysis to address the hypotheses,

Table 1. Preliminary Data Analysis Results.

Item	Loading	Mean	St dev	% Variance explained	Alpha
Machiavellianism					
Anyone who completely trusts anyone else is asking for trouble.	.59	3.50	1.71		
It is hard to get ahead without cutting corners.	.70	4.06	1.58		
It is safest to assume that all people have a vicious streak and it will come out when they get a chance.	.68	3.84	1.58		
Never tell anyone the real reason you did something unless it is useful to do so.	.53	3.15	1.51		
There's a sucker born every minute.	.58	4.71	1.58		
Most people forget more easily the death of their father than the loss of their property.	.54	2.57	1.57		
Generally speaking, people won't work hard unless they are forced to do so.	.62	3.40	1.69	37.88	.73
Perceived Control					
*It isn't wise to plan too far ahead because many things turn out to be a matter of good or bad fortune anyway.	.60	4.88	1.55		
*When things are going well for me, I consider it due to a run of good luck.	.66	4.60	1.54		
*I have usually found that what is going to happen will happen regardless of my actions.	.68	4.80	1.68		
*Success in dealing with people seems to be more a matter of the other person's moods and feelings at the time rather than one's own actions.	.69	4.53	1.55		
*I think that life is mostly a gamble.	.73	4.89	1.59	45.37	.79
Risk-Taking					
When I eat out, I like to try the most unusual items.	.76	3.38	1.73		
I am the kind of person who would try a new product.	.64	5.37	1.30		
*When I go to a restaurant, I find it safer to order dishes I am familiar with.	.85	4.78	1.57		
*I am cautious if trying new/ different products.	.71	4.03	1.57		
I would rather stick to a brand I usually buy than try something I am not very sure of.	.68	4.32	1.65	53.46	.78

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Item	Loading	Mean	St dev	% Variance explained	Alpha
Self-Efficacy					
I can always solve difficult problems if I try hard.	.64	5.54	1.15		
It is easy for me to stick with my aims and accomplish my goals.	.60	5.19	1.24		
I am confident that I could deal with unexpected events.	.81	5.47	1.02		
Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.	.76	5.30	1.04		
When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.	.71	5.43	.94		
If I am in trouble, I can usually think of something to do.	.76	5.69	.88		
No matter what comes my way, I'm usually able to handle it.	.78	5.63	.93	52.79	.84
Attitude Toward Complaining (ATC)					
Overall, I think people should complain when they are unhappy with the service they are getting.	.81	5.66	1.09		
*Overall, I don't think people should bother complaining when they are unhappy with the service they are getting.	.76	5.51	1.25		
*I don't like people who complain to service providers when they are unhappy.	.78	5.16	1.35		
I admire people who complain to service providers when they are unhappy.	.69	4.87	1.40	58.98	.76
Propensity to Complain (PTC)					
If there is a service failure, I will complain to the company.	.81	5.03	1.47		
If I am dissatisfied with the things I buy, I will complain about them to the shop (or other suppliers) who sold them to me.	.83	4.83	1.56		
I do not hesitate to complain if I think it is warranted to do so.	.83	5.17	1.48		
Based on my past purchasing experiences, I am likely to complain in the event of dissatisfaction or service failure.	.90	4.81	1.55		
I am inclined to complain to the service provider if I am unhappy with the service.	.75	4.70	1.56		
*I am usually reluctant to complain about the service regardless of how bad it is.	.67	3.21	1.71		
*I am less likely than most people to complain about unsatisfactory service.	.73	3.59	1.66	62.59	.90

* Indicates reverse scored.

composite variables were computed to test the structural relationships via Partial Least Squares (PLS). PLS is used in the analysis of structural equation modelling and is a multivariate technique that allows for the estimation and examination of paths between latent variables that are measured via multiple indicators.

RESULTS

Full Sample

PLS analysis on the full sample is shown in Table 2. The R^2 values relating to the endogenous variables, ATC and PTC (.11 and .21 respectively), are greater than the recommended level of 0.10 (Falk & Miller, 1992). Therefore, it is appropriate to examine the significance of the paths associated with these variables. An inspection of the bootstrap critical ratios show paths H1, H2, H4, H6, and H9 exceed the criterion of greater than 1.645 for a one-tailed test (Chin, 1998) and the average variance accounted

Table 2. Partial Least Squares Results for the Theoretical Model (N = 200).

Equation	Predicted variables	Predictor variables	Hypothesis	Path coeff.	R^2	Critical ratio
1	PTC	ATC	H1	.39*	.21*	5.11*
		Self-efficacy	H3	.10		1.41
		Mach	H5	.11		1.42
		Perceived control	H7	.03		0.45
		Risk-taking	H9	.15*		1.80*
2	ATC	Self-efficacy	H2	.23*	.11*	3.32*
		Mach	H4	.19*		2.92*
		Perceived control	H6	.17*		2.21*
		Risk-taking	H8	−.07		0.92
AVA					.16	

*Indicates significance at .05.

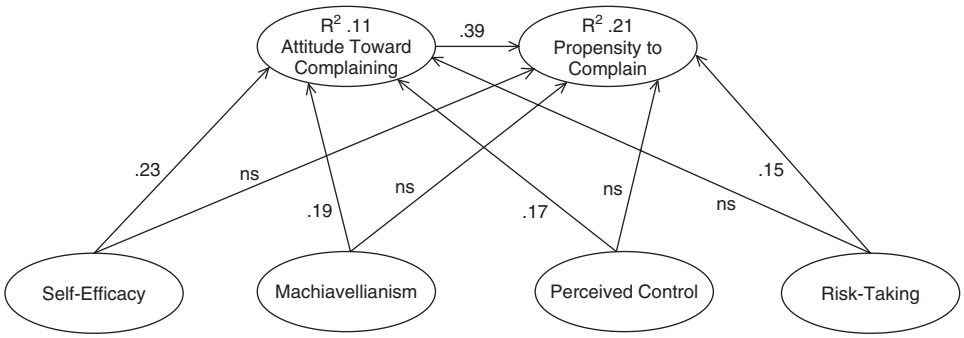

Figure 2. Role of personality in complaining—full sample.

for (AVA) is .16. Based on these results, H1, H2, H4, H6, and H9 are supported, while H3, H5, H7, and H8 are not.

To examine if differences in the model did exist across "complainers" and "non-complainers," the sample was split based on the responses to the categorical variable. This resulted in the "complainers" sample being 120 and the "non-complainers" being 80. Having split the sample into the two groups, the PLS analysis was then run separately on each group, the results of which follow.

Complainers

Table 3 shows the path coefficients, the R^2 and critical ratios, and the AVA. The R^2 values were both above the recommended level of 0.10 (.16 for ATC and .22 for PTC). On inspection of the bootstrap critical ratios for the paths, six paths were greater than 1.645 (i.e., P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, and P9) and thus were shown to be significant, while P1, P6, and P8 were not. The average variance accounted for within the model was .17.

Table 3. Partial Least Squares Results—Complainers (N = 120).

Equation	Predicted variables	Predictor variables	Hypothesis	Path coeff.	R^2	Critical ratio
1	PTC	ATC	P1	.02	.22*	0.17
		Self-efficacy	P3	.25*		3.01*
		Mach	P5	.20*		1.71*
		Perceived control	P7	.20*		2.42*
		Risk-taking	P9	.18*		1.65*
2	ATC	Self-efficacy	P2	.36*	.16*	3.70*
		Mach	P4	.16*		1.83*
		Perceived control	P6	.03		0.36
		Risk-taking	P8	−.04		0.55
AVA					.17	

*Indicates significance at .05.

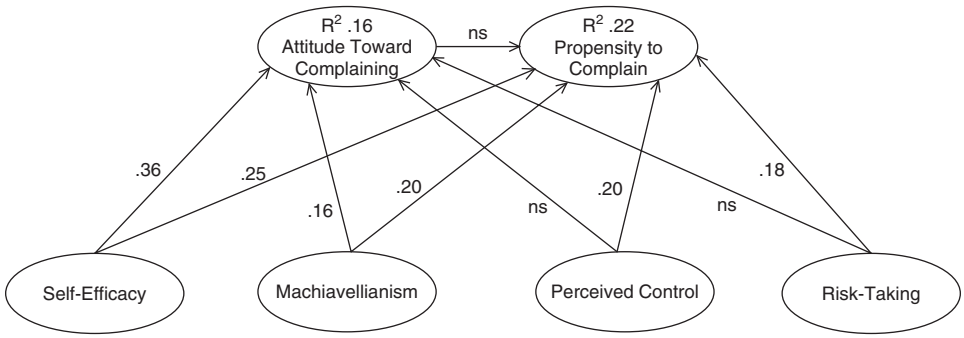

Figure 3. Role of personality in complaining—complainers.

Table 4. Partial Least Squares Results—Non-Complainers (N = 80).

Equation	Predicted variables	Predictor variables	Hypothesis	Path coeff.	R^2	Critical ratio
1	PTC	ATC	P1	.28*	.12*	2.65*
		Self-efficacy	P3	.03		0.21
		Mach	P5	.08		0.62
		Perceived control	P7	−.15		0.98
		Risk-taking	P9	.17		1.48
2	ATC	Self-efficacy	P2	.03	.05	0.26
		Mach	P4	.19		1.57
		Perceived control	P6	.11		0.95
		Risk-taking	P8	−.11		0.85
AVA					.09	

*Indicates significance at .05.

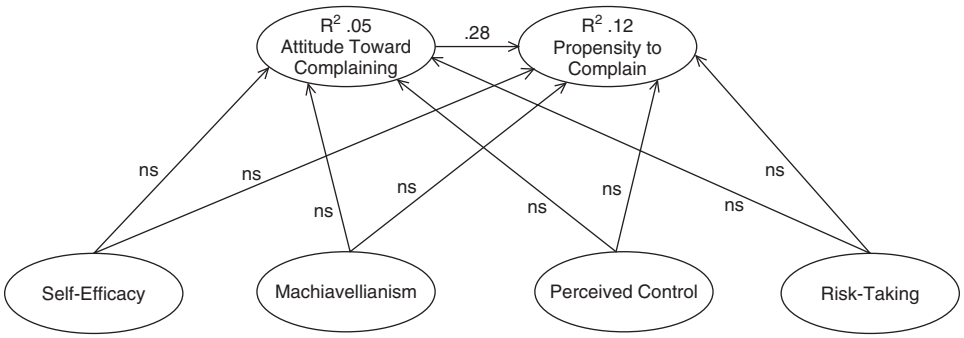

Figure 4. Role of personality in complaining—non-complainers.

Non-Complainers

Similarly, the PLS analysis was run on the "non-complainers" group, which resulted in the R^2 for PTC (.12) being higher than the recommended level of 0.10, whereas the R^2 for ATC (.05) was not. On examination of the significance of paths, only one path (P1) was significant in the model (i.e., having a bootstrap critical ratio greater than 1.654) and the AVA for the model was considerably lower than the "complainers" group at .09. These results are shown in Table 4.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that, although confirming the relationship between ATC and PTC, there is a difference in the way in which personality characteristics affect attitudes and propensity in the context of complaint behavior. For example, three of the traits studied (self-efficacy, Machiavellianism, and perceived control) all had a significant influence

on attitudes, but not propensity. On the other hand, while showing no relationship with ATC, risk-taking was the only trait to exert an influence on PTC.

On examining the proposed model across groups of "complainers" and "non-complainers," a distinctly different picture appears for each group. For example, in the "complainers" model, all personality characteristics tested had a significant influence on PTC and self-efficacy and Machiavellianism had a significant influence on ATC, but there was no relationship between ATC and PTC. Yet, in terms of "non-complainers," the only significant relationship in the model was that between ATC and PTC and none of the personality characteristics showed any influence in the model at all.

The results show that "complainers" can be characterized by the personality traits examined herein. In other words, it appears that "complainers" act accordingly because of their type of personality and regardless of their ATC and, therefore, they need no encouragement to complain. Their desire to maintain control in situations and their belief in their own capabilities in achieving successful outcomes is what motivates their behavior.

However, when examining the proposed model over a group of self-confessed "non-complainers," personality traits showed no influence whatsoever and the only variable that influenced their propensity to complain (or not complain) was their ATC. Therefore, in the case of "non-complainers," motivation to act (i.e., complain) is not impeded by their personality type, but rather by having a negative attitude toward the act of complaining and to those who complain.

The findings here support the arguments of Kenrick and Funder (1988) and Mischel (1984) that personality is not a good predictor of behavior. For example, the personality variables shown here to influence ATC and PTC among "complainers" merely allow the description of those individuals who willingly complain when things go wrong, rather than to predict behavior. This is so because the same personality variables were not significant in the "non-complainers" model, indicating that they cannot be used to predict complaint behavior across all consumers. However, the influence of attitudes within the realms of non-complaint behavior is significant and should be recognized.

In theoretical terms, the role of attitudes needs to be more thoroughly investigated, particularly in relation to "non-complainers." Before attitude change regarding complaint behavior can occur, it is necessary to determine why some consumers have a negative ATC and what can bring about attitudinal change. In practical terms, service providers may need to rethink the way in which they encourage their customers to complain. It is suggested that the key may well be to gather feedback through mechanisms that create enthusiasm through creative and innovative means and, to a certain extent, mask their purpose. In doing so, both negative and positive evaluations of the service offering may be more

readily forthcoming from customers who traditionally have remained passive.

A limitation of this study was the use of a student sample. However, student samples have been widely used in the marketing research domain (e.g., Bennett, 1997; Blodgett et al., 1995; Christensen et al., 2002) and, as such, the findings here should not be disregarded. Future studies in this area could rectify this by using wider demographic samples to fully confirm the findings of this study.

The need to understand consumers, within a rapidly-changing marketplace, has never been greater. This being the case, it is necessary to determine not only what consumers want, but also what they don't want. One way of doing this is to openly encourage customers to complain when things go wrong. It is, therefore, on this basis, that this study of consumer complaint behavior is justified. These findings enhance current understanding in this important area.

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