

Complaint Behaviour between Generations and Its Transmissions: An Exploratory Study in Malaysia

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Abstract

Despite the abundance of marketing literature on consumer complaint behaviour, little is done to explicate such behaviour from generational perspectives. How the older and younger groups complain, and whether the latter learn or inherit behavioural values from the former remain unknown. Using theories pertinent to complaint behaviour and social learning theory as the basis, the present study aims to look into complaint behaviour between two generations, namely the mothers and the daughters. A qualitative approach using dyad interview was employed in Malaysia to gain insights not only about their respective complaint behaviour but also its similarities and differences simultaneously. Subsequently, five pairs of mothers and daughters were interviewed. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using content analysis. The findings show that while the mothers would most likely seek redress in person, complain to others verbally and take no action, the daughters tend to seek redress and tell others about it using electronic media. There is apparent similarity in seeking redress and ranting on between the mothers and daughters but the younger generation tends to do it via social media. The study thus serves as a precursor to future investigation on complaint behaviour by different generation cohorts in the same family and the potential transmission of behavioural values between them. Practical implications are provided.

Keywords: complaint behaviour, dyad interview, generation, transmission, qualitative

1. Introduction

Consumers become dissatisfied when the products (including goods and services) they purchase or use do not meet their expectations. However, the manners of which the consumers react due to dissatisfaction differ from one person to another (Metehan & Yasemin, 2011). Some would seek redress from the sellers in person, some choose to avoid any confrontation, and some would rant on to tell others about the product and the company (Mellor, Martin, & Bradley, 2014). All these reactions are related to complaint behaviour which is a process where consumers evaluate their dissatisfaction after purchasing the products. It is generally concluded that consumers can get upset relatively easy due to the quality and price of the product and the manner the service is purveyed (Carnoy, 2015).

While consumer complaint behaviour (CCB) is a well-studied topic in marketing literature, little is known whether such behaviour is different by generations and whether it is transmittable between two generations. Such consideration is necessary because many consumers today still purchase the products with their family members and make purchase or post-purchase decisions jointly. If the parents are unhappy with certain products or services, their negative responses would likely affect their children to a certain degree. In fact, generational transmission between the parents and the children has been looked into in past studies (Cipriani, Giuliano, & Jeanne, 2007; Hoge, Petrillo, & Smith, 1982; Barni, Ranieri, Scabini, & Rosnati, 2011), and it is something well-established in biological and anthropological research. Nevertheless, generational transmission is relatively less researched in consumer behaviour, let alone complaint behaviour. It is assumed that children's patterns of behaviour are learnt through direct experience and by observing the behaviours of their parents (Bandura, 1971).

While it is known that behavioural values can be shared across generations (De Run & Ting, 2013), there is no evidence to date to substantiate the transmission of complaint behaviour between generations.

In the Malaysian scenario, the cases of consumer complaint happen frequently, and the manners of complaint differ from one case to another. For instance, a consumer decided to complain about a MAGGI noodles cup and make it public in order to generate awareness about the incident (Singh, 2015). However, Malaysians are found to be more likely complaining privately to their family and friends, rather than confronting the persons who facilitate the purchasing process (Malhotra, Oly-Ndubisi, & Agarwal, 2008). It corresponds to past studies that Malaysians are highly collectivistic (Hofstede & Bond, 1988), thus they are more sensitive towards others' perceptions. As a result, they are more inclined to cringe away than people from individualist societies. This might explain why Malaysians prefer not to complain publicly about their dissatisfaction because such behaviour is perceived to have negative effect on their self-image (Singelis & Sharkey, 1995). Whether these findings still hold true in contemporary setting remains largely uncertain.

There seems to be contradiction between how cases of complaint have recently transpired and how CCB is documented in literature pertaining to Malaysian consumers. Moreover, in spite of the implication of generational differences and generational transmission between the parents and the children in biological sense, there is an extreme lack of literature that articulates complaint behaviour by generations and the reasons to behaving in such manners. Furthermore, in light of the competitive business environment, consumers often make purchase decision with reference to others, especially their family members. Inevitably, there will always be someone will always voice out their displeasure about something despite the effort from the business personnel to satisfy them and rectify the problems. Hence, the lack of understanding about complaint behaviour by generations could hinder the business from serving consumers from different age groups effectively and persistently. Therefore, this study aims to explore CCB between two generations, namely the mothers and the daughters in Malaysia using qualitative approach. Dyad interview is appropriated so as to provide a clear understanding of the similarities and differences of complaints between them, and whether transmission takes places. It is believed that such attempt would extend knowledge about CCB and provide practical understanding not only about the similarities and differences between generations, but also the transmission from one to another.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Consumer Complaint Behaviour by Generations

CCB contains numerous behavioural and non-behavioural responses towards product failures (Kruger & Mostert, 2014). When consumers are dissatisfied with the products that they purchase or consume, they would take series of reactions either in the form of verbal or non-verbal conducts (Tronvoll, 2011). Hence, CCB includes all probable responses of dissatisfaction related to the purchase, consumption or possession of products (Vincent & Webster, 2005). As such, it is largely described as a process that occurs when the consumers' experience lies outside the acceptance zone in the process of evaluating the products based on their expectation. It encompasses complex combination of psychological and behavioural factors (Kang, Zhang, & Zheng, 2009).

Notwithstanding abundance of literature on CCB using various behavioural constructs in diverse situations (Broadbridge & Marshall, 1995; Kim, Im, & Shin, 2003; Kruger & Mostert, 2014; Nimako, 2014), and some evidence in the Malaysian context (Malhotra, Oly-Ndubisi, & Agarwal, 2008; Mat, Said, Bakar, Munir, & Kori, 2014; Ndubisi & Tam, 2007), there is no mentioning of complaint behaviour by generations. Past studies have briefly shown the older generation tends to complain less than the younger groups who are likely to take some form of action to express their dissatisfaction (Mahayudin, Haron, & Chan, 2010; Ngai, Heung, & Chan, 2007). It is also asserted that due to the experiences of the older consumers dealing with their dissatisfaction towards persons, products and organizations, they would most likely prefer to avoid any confrontation (Grougiou & Pettigrew, 2009). If they do decide to complain, they would respond using public actions (Ngai, Heung, & Chan, 2007). However, a separate study has found a positive relation between age and complaining behaviour (Metehan & Yasemin, 2011). Since consumers over the age of 40 expect more from their purchased products, they are more persuaded to complain when they experience dissatisfaction. Given the implication of generation and the contradicting findings in past literature, it necessitates the present study to look into CCB by generations in the Malaysian context.

A generation is defined as a group of individuals who are born during the same time period and who experience similar external events during their late adolescent and early adulthood years (Meredith & Schewe, 1994; Rogler, 2002; Ryder, 1965). As such it goes beyond what age alone can explain because it explores the life journey of individuals through their formative years (Motta & Schewe, 2008; Smola & Sutton, 2002). Although different

generations might share some similarities, cross-sectional studies have provided support to fundamental differences between any two generations that go beyond the demographics of age and life-stage (Loroz & Helgeson, 2013; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). Therefore, it can be said that CCB between two generations can neither be entirely similar nor different. This gives rise to the need to look into complaint behaviour by generations in the present study.

2.2 Theoretical Grounding on Complaint Behaviour

There are theories of complaint behaviour which explain the actions taken by consumers in order to express their dissatisfactions. Originally, Hirschman's theory of exit, voice and loyalty is used to explain a person's dissatisfaction towards relations, organizations and employment. It is also used to describe complaint process between the buyers and the retailers (Maute & Forrester, 1992). The theory proposes exit, voice and loyalty as potential responses towards the dissatisfaction and it is later found to be useful in categorizing CCB (Boutaibi, 2014; Kruger & Mostert, 2014). It also highlights the fact that although the loyal consumers are not motivated to respond negatively due to dissatisfaction, this does not mean that they maintain positive feelings towards the organizations and products (Maute & Forrester, 1992; Bolton & Bronkhorst, 1995). However, it tends to only observe the visible behavioural responses, like switching and making obvious complaints (Hee, 2007).

Another theory pertaining to CCB that is widely accepted is the Day and Landon's taxonomy of consumer complaint behaviour (Broadbridge & Marshall, 1995). There are three choices available for consumers who are dissatisfied with the purchase, namely no action, private action and public action. The first decision the consumers have to make is to decide whether to take some form of action or none. If an action is decided, the consumers would then consider taking either private action or public action. Such decision process explains the nature and the importance of action based on the dissatisfaction level of the product and the valuation of effort required and expected to perform such action. The theory not only elucidates the options that dissatisfied consumers can have, it also explains some of the factors which might affect the eventual decisions (Day & Landon, 1976).

Singh's taxonomy of consumer complaint responses is another theory on the subject matter (1988). He developed the three-dimensional typology that differentiates numerous consumers' complaint behaviours based on the object that the response is directed. The voice response is a behaviour directed towards the objects, such as seeking redress from the organization. The private response, in turn, is a behaviour directed towards the objects which is not directly involved in the consumers' dissatisfaction experience, such as telling their family and friends. Lastly, the third party response is a behaviour directed towards the objects which are external to the consumers, such as taking legal actions and making complaints via printed media. As such, the theory emphasizes more on the objects of CCB responses than the consumers' actual complaint behaviour (Maute & Forrester, 1992).

Theory of cognitive dissonance is often used to explain how dissatisfaction would lead to high dissonance and the subsequent actions to eliminate it (Thomas, 2010). It elucidates a state of imbalance between one's cognition that results from the contradictory messages, objects, events or experiences (Awa & Nwuche, 2010). In marketing literature, it happens when the products purchased and used do not meet the expectations (Salzberger & Koller, 2010). The theory also suggests that high dissonance becomes a driving factor which causes the consumers to take some form of action to eliminate the state of discomfort, one of them being making complaint. Suffice to say that CCB cannot be taken lightly. If it is unaddressed appropriately, it could have serious repercussion for the organizations and businesses.

2.3 Theoretical Grounding on Generational Transmission

To date there is no concrete theory which systematically explains the mechanism of transmission among generations. There are, however, studies on parents and children's behaviour by using the social learning theory. It is asserted that children learn behaviour from interactions with important people in their environment, and most of the time these people are their parents (Scott, Doolan, Beckett, Harry, & Cartwright, 2010). It is found that demonstration and reinforcement play important roles in shaping their behaviour. Another recent study, which looks into value similarities among grandparents, parents, and adolescent children, concludes that parent-adolescent value similarity is lower than grandmother-parent similarity (Barni, Ranieri, & Scabini, 2012). It also highlights the strong interaction between family and social-cultural context in value choices and in determining the level of similarity among family members. Moreover, daughters are found to be more similar to their parents than are sons (Barni & Ranieri, 2010; Whitbeck & Gecas, 1988). This provides the basis to the present study to delve into the similarities and differences of complaint behaviour between two generations, specifically the mothers and the daughters. Given the fact that past studies have shown inconclusive results on

CCB by older and younger generations, it is imperative to scrutinize the subject matter with interpretative inquiry to explain the phenomenon under investigation.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Qualitative approach was used to explore and understand CCB by generations and transmission of complaint behaviour between two generations. Qualitative method is deemed more suited because it provides avenues to elicit consumer's account of thoughts and actions (Badghish, Stanton, & Hu, 2015). Hence, purposive sampling technique was adopted to sample the respondents of two generations (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). Not only must the respondents be from two different generations, they must also be of mother-daughter relationship, where the daughter is at her young adulthood (Rogler, 2002). It is because mothers are most likely the persons who purchase products for the families and daughters the ones who accompany. Since there is no specific rule to determine sample size in qualitative research (Perry, 1998), past studies were referred to so as to predetermine the number of mothers and daughters needed to generate findings which carry practical meaningfulness to the purpose of the study (Patton, 1990). Subsequently, a minimum of four cases was determined (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Consensus panel, a type of group interview, was selected as data collection method as it helped identify group decisions or unitary response to specific questions (Coreil, 1995; Fink et al., 1984). Specifically, dyad interview was utilized as it involved the data that span two individuals in the same family. As such, the combination of the mother and the daughter was regarded as one unit of measurement in the study.

Both the mothers and the daughters were asked to recall a negative event during the past 3 months because such event would likely have an adverse effect on their attitude and behaviour towards the persons who facilitated the purchasing process, the organizations and the products (Tronvoll, 2008). In addition, they were also asked to comment about the complaint behaviour of each other. All dyad interviews were conducted at respondents' houses to ensure they were comfortable with the environment and the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Subsequently, dyadic and content analysis was used to examine the responses, and the similarities and differences of both respondents (Gonzalez & Griffin, 2012). All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts were checked by an independent person to match against the recorded interview (Kurasaki, 2000). Data analysis was carried out by multiple coders to secure inter-coder reliability (Hruchka et al., 2004).

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Complaint Behaviours by Generations

Five consensus panel discussions using dyad interview are carried out. Table 1 shows the themes and the selected quotes related to complaint behaviours of the first pair of mother and daughter. While both the mother and the daughter tend to seek redress from the seller in person directly, the latter is likely to make complaint using electronic media such as E-mail and Facebook. Moreover, the daughter tends to seek redress directly if the product is of value and if immediate action is necessary.

Table 1. Themes and quotes of the first pair

Mother	Daughter
Seek redress from the seller in person directly <i>That time after I bought a pack of rice back home, the rice smelled weird and tasted sour after I cooked. I went back to the shop and told the owner about it. At the end, the owner changed a new pack of rice for me.</i>	Seek redress from the seller in person directly <i>Because I think that face-to-face explanation of the whole incident to the person in-charge will be better, we are able to communicate well, they are able to understand clearly and they can help to solve the problems immediately.</i>
	Make complaint using electronic media <i>Because my house to the Pizza Hut outlet is quite a distance and I would have wasted my time to go there, so I used email. I took photo of the food and attached it in my email. I also explained the time it happened and the location of the outlet.</i> <i>I will post on my own Facebook wall so that my friends know that I have experienced dissatisfaction at the store. Mostly they will comment and ask. Then I will respond and explain to them what has actually happened so that my other friends can also know about it.</i>

Table 2 presents the findings of the second pair. Similar to the previous findings, the mother will likely seek redress from the seller in person directly as she believes things can be resolved that way, such as changing the product or getting the refund. The responses from the daughter, however, suggest that while she is comfortable with complaining using electronic media, she is uncomfortable with direct confrontation in the public area. Moreover, complaining on social networking sites, such as Facebook, is not only about making the organization aware of her displeasure, it is also about publicizing it so that their friends and others would know about it.

Table 2. Themes and quotes of the second pair

Mother	Daughter
<p>Seek redress from the seller in person directly</p> <p><i>I remember last time I bought a body shampoo for my second daughter at Boulevard ... The shop offered promotion on the products ... After I paid and got home, I saw the price I paid was RM10 more ... So I went back to the shop and complained and they refunded the money to me.</i></p>	<p>Make complaint using electronic media</p> <p><i>I used email which I got from the resort's website to inform them about the hygienic problem. If you complain face-to-face at the counter, nowadays people would like to take video of everything ... So to avoid from becoming popular, I prefer using email to complain about my dissatisfaction ...</i></p> <p><i>I will comment and rate its performance on the Facebook page. On the page there is usually a column to let us rate. I will rate it and post a comment on their page so that they will know what they need to improve on.</i></p>

The findings as shown in Table 3 correspond to the findings of the first pair as both the mother and the daughter would seek redress from the seller in person. While the daughter would also voice out her displeasure through electronic media, the mother would complain to others verbally to make it known. Understandably, since the daughter is in her early 20s, she is more technology-savvy than her mother. If the problem persists, the mother would likely boycott the organization or the product altogether.

Table 3. Themes and quotes of the third pair

Mother	Daughter
<p>Seek redress from the seller in person directly</p> <p><i>After I noticed the chocolates and peanuts had expired, I went back to the supermarket to ask for refund, but the staff told me ... she was only a staff and did not have the authority to make decisions. I went to see the manager ... He told me that he could not refund the money but allowed me to exchange them with different products which had the same price.</i></p> <p>Complain to others verbally</p> <p><i>I will go home and tell others when I am displeased with something ... When I find it costs too much, I will make it known to others.</i></p> <p>Boycott the organization or product</p> <p><i>I went to the coffee shop again, and at that time her business was very good until she forgot my order ... So I reminded her. But ... she replied me with a bad manner and gave excuses ... I became mad and would not dine there again.</i></p>	<p>Seek redress from the seller in person directly</p> <p><i>After I purchased and reached home, when I opened up and used it, I noticed the snow spray was waterish ... So I went back to the shop and explained to the staff that this was not the spray as stated on it ... the manager came out and apologized. He allowed me to exchange with another product with the same price.</i></p> <p>Make complaint using electronic media</p> <p><i>I ordered a product online, the owner told me that the thing should arrive within two weeks times ... But after two weeks I still did not received anything, so I emailed the owner and told her that she did not keep her promise as I did not receive it after two months... the owner did reply my email ... and later refunded all the money ... but I still got the thing that I bought.</i></p>

Interestingly, the mother and the daughter of the fourth pair agree that they would take no actions when they believe that direct confrontation would not solve the problem as shown in Table 4. Nevertheless, the mother would still complain to others verbally, boycott the organization and switch to others when she realizes there is nothing for her to lose. The daughter, in turn, would seek redress in person. When putting all these responses together, it is evident that taking some forms of action or not depends on the products and the beliefs about whether the reactions help resolve the problems.

Table 4. Themes and quotes of the fourth pair

Mother	Daughter
Take no actions <i>I think that the manager will not entertain me if I go and meet him ... So there is no point to complain before him ...</i>	Take no actions <i>I don't like to make things become worse. Also, I don't think the managers would want to entertain me as the workers are the ones whom we are dealing with and they are paid to do their jobs.</i>
Complain to others verbally <i>I just want to express my dissatisfactions. After I say it out and let my family know, I will feel better ...</i>	Seek redress from the seller in person directly <i>Last week I bought the fruits... When I wanted to eat, I found the papaya was not fresh already ... So I straight away went back to the stall and talked to the owner. Fortunately the owner exchanged a new one for me ...</i>
Boycott and switch <i>Definitely I would not go back to the shop again because there are so many other choices out there ...</i>	

The findings in Table 5 basically repeat what has been shown in earlier findings. In addition to seeking redress directly, once again, the mother would complain to others verbally and the daughter would rant and rave through electronic media, such as E-mail and Wechat. The advancement of communication technology means that the daughter, like others of similar age, can voice out their dissatisfaction instantaneously through digital application which is installed on her mobile phone.

Table 5. Themes and quotes of the fifth pair

Mother	Daughter
Seek redress from the seller in person directly <i>I bought the canned food from a shop .When I was at home, I noticed the canned food was already expired ... But I had lost the receipt ... I went back to the shop and let the owner see the products. The purpose I did this is to let him know that he had to check the products carefully next time ...</i>	Seek redress from the seller in person directly <i>I will point out the mistake and put on an angry face so that when they look at me, they will know that I am unhappy with it.</i>
Complain to others verbally <i>I won't go back and complain but I will talk to my family members... Talk to them to let them know so that they will be careful with it next time ...</i>	Make complaint using electronic media <i>I will email because I can correct my grammar and the message will be clearer ... so I prefer to write .. I am a bad tempered person. So if I experience dissatisfaction, I will post on Wechat moments mostly to express my anger ... Mostly my friend will Wechat me if they see my post, then I will tell them what has happened to let them know ...</i>

The overall findings seem to suggest that the older generation, the mothers, tends to seek redress directly if they believe such action would bring in favourable outcome. They would also complain to others verbally to voice out their displeasure and warn them about it. If they complain but the problem persists, they would likely boycott the organization and switch to other options. The younger generation, the daughters, is more inclined to making complaint through electronic media, especially social networking sites though they would also seek redress directly. However, they appear to be equally keen to let her friends know about the incident and comment about it to demonstrate their displeasure about something. Generally speaking, it can be concluded that the complaint behaviour by the mothers and the daughters are neither wholly identical nor different. Such phenomenon infers both the transmission of behavioural values from the mothers to the daughters and the shaping of behaviours of the daughters due to the socio-cultural context. Apparently, when the mothers have the propensity to seek redress directly, the daughters tend to respond in similar fashion. Moreover, if the mothers always shy away from direct confrontation, the daughters would do the same. While the mothers might choose to tell others about it verbally, the daughters find social networking sites as avenues to rant on. Hence, transmission of behavioural values pertaining to complaint does take place between the mothers and the daughters when they are dissatisfied with certain products. Nevertheless, the use of electronic media is not something the daughters inherit from their mothers, suggesting that they learn and adopt it from the social context that they are living in. The aforementioned thus underscores both the presence of generational gaps (differences) and generational transmission in complaint behaviour and how such behaviour can be partially transmitted from the older generation to the younger generation.

5. Implications and Conclusion

It is imperative to realize many of the purchase decisions and purchase activities are still carried out jointly with family members. Consequently, when a product does not meet expectations, dissatisfaction and some forms of

complaint are bound to happen, and the accompanying members would be most likely affected. As shown in the findings, complaint behaviour is not entirely similar across generations. While it is necessary for managers, marketers and business personnel to handle the direct complaint in an amicable manner to avoid the spread of negative word-of-mouth from the older generation, it is also pivotal to resolve the displeasure of the younger generation so as to prevent its spread through electronic word-of-mouth and subsequently backlash from social groups. However, generational transmission or learning of complaint behaviour is a more intricate matter. Unintended effects, and hence unintended consequences, are something which businesses need to be mindful of as the older generation can pass on their displeasure about the persons, organizations and products to the younger generation. If the mothers continue to complain about certain things to their daughters, it would be natural and spontaneous for them to pick it up and make it known in their online social groups. Noticeably, Malaysia is emerging as a promising and prospective business market, and the lack of understanding about CCB by generations could be detrimental to business performance and sustainability. Given the complexity and dynamism of the contemporary business environment, knowing how to satisfy consumers and how to resolve dissatisfaction by generations could prove to be pivotal to remaining competitive and being successful.

Due to the explorative nature of the research, the present study is delimited to just five pairs of mothers and daughters in Malaysia. As such, differences in terms of ethnicity, geographical location, family size and lifestyles are not taken into consideration. Besides, the study is also delimited to a specific behaviour. Hence, more investigations are needed to deepen and broaden the scope by looking into various behaviours across multiple generations. Ultimately, it is hopeful that a framework of generational transmission be developed to articulate the relationships of demographic and behavioural components and facilitate any future studies on the subject matter to provide a more comprehensive explanation to consumer behaviour by generations.

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