CONSUMER COMPLAINING BEHAVIOR: A STUDY
WITH REGARDS TO PUBLIC SERVICES IN
KLANG VALLEY, MALAYSIA

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Introduction

In Malaysia, to monitor and manage the complaints from the public towards the services provided by the government agencies, the government has set up the Public Complaint Bureau. Dissatisfied consumers of any service from any government department can voice their complaints to the Bureau by writing, telephone call, facsimile, email, or present themselves at the office of the bureau. However, the number of complaints received by the bureau is substantially few. Nowadays, the public is more comfortable to voice their dissatisfaction to news media which allows them to see that their complaints being attended to. Amidst the availability of a variety of channels for people to voice their complaints, there are still many dissatisfied customers who choose to remain silent.

This study specifically examines complaining behaviors of the Malaysian public. The outcome of the investigation is hoped to be useful in assisting the government, specifically PCB as the eyes and ears of the government to understand the grousers and grievances of the public in their daily encounters in getting services from government agencies.

The study will examine the public behavior of complaining and what are the factors affecting complaining behavior.

Overall, the study intends to answer the following questions:

i. What do the public expect out of a public servant at the time they acquire any service from the government
agencies? What is the perception of the public towards complaining when dissatisfaction is experienced?

ii. What are the prevalent factors affecting the decision to complain and what is the perception affecting the choice of method to complain?

iii. What are the factors that create the level of dissatisfaction that initiates complaining behavior? What makes some people complain, while others remain silent?

iv. Is the inclination to complain determined by the type of response received?

Studies on complaining behaviors at the macro and micro levels is plentiful, however studies that focus on the services of government agencies is limited, especially in this country.

Literature Review

When dissatisfied with public services, the consumer is faced with the choice of either to complain or not. This study further explored the motivating factors that defined the action of both complainers and non-complainers.

This study by and large reaffirms the importance of the effect of attitude and perception on intention to complain. Attitudes, which have been the focus of numerous pieces of research, refer to the disposition to respond to an object, person, an institution or event (Ajzen, 1988). Day and Landon, (1976) defined that attitudes, personality, and lifestyle variables impacted the nature of the action taken when facing unsatisfactory services. Attitude is further conceptualized as the overall affect of, “goodness or “badness” of complaining to service provider or sellers and not specific to specific episodes of dissatisfaction (Singh and Wilkes, 1996).

Lariviere (2005) analyzed the actual behavior of non-complainants, he selected 2500 customers who did not complain within the period of analysis (between 1 January 2000 and 1 February 2003), he concluded that complainants with an unsatisfactory service recovery show evidence of higher repeat-
purchase behavior than the group of non-complainants. Generally, non-complainants consist of customers who do not experience a service problem as well as customers who do not complain about the problem they encounter. A possible explanation might be that complainants represent more ‘active’ customers who are not only more inclined to complain when they experience a service failure, but also more likely to buy (even they are dissatisfied about the service recovery) compared to the more ‘passive’ customers who do not buy as often and are less likely to communicate with the company. He assumed (i) ‘being an active customer’ has a stronger impact on future behavior than the satisfaction level with the service recovery and that (ii) complaining is a result of being active.

Attitudes towards Complaining

Inferring further from this, we presume a complainer’s attitudes towards complaining, positively correlates with intention to complain. Consumers with a positive attitude towards complaining, compared with those that are reluctant to seek redress, are more likely to complain and less likely to engage in negative intention and behavior, such as negative word-of-mouth (Day and Landon, 1976). This finding is supported by study done by Valuenza et al. 2005 who says that active complainers have a more positive attitude while passive or non-complainers have a more negative attitude toward complaining.

Chulmin et al. (2003) in their study of the effect of attitude and perception on consumers’ intention to complain found out that attitude towards complaining, perceived value of complaint and perceived likelihood of successful complaint significantly and substantially enhanced intention to complain. This finding was based on data collected from 276 questionnaires administered through face-to-face interviews with consumers in Korea in Seoul Department Store.

Chulmin et al. (2003) in their study of the effect of attitude, perception and consumer intention to complain interestingly found that the mediating role of attitude toward complaining was strongly influenced by the perceived value of complaining.
likelihood of successful of complaint, and attitude toward complaining. Chulmin et al. (2003) concluded that firms should make it easy for dissatisfied consumers to complain.

Johnston (1995) in his research on 431 bank customers to find out the determinants of quality service among both satisfied and dissatisfied consumers; satisfiers and dissatisfiers, concluded that the main sources of satisfaction are attentiveness, responsiveness, care and friendliness where as the main sources of dissatisfaction are integrity, reliability, responsiveness, availability, and functionality.

Other factors found to influence consumer behavior were past experience, personality, knowledge of complaining procedure and time constraint.

Past Experience

Experience is crucial in determining whether someone can easily file a complaint. As Singh (1990) pointed out complaining behavior is determined by experience. What it does was it makes it easier to file a complain as those consumers already knew the procedure.

Ajzen, 1991, reaffirms that past experience with a behavior remains the most important source of information about behavioral control. This is echoed in the dictum, “past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior.” This finding agrees with Morel et al. (1997) who found that identified consumers lacking the experience of filing complaints tended to be less likely to complain compared to the one who had previous experience, while Brucks (1985) concluded that experienced consumers tend to easily evaluate service providers.

Personality

William O. Bearden, and J. Barry Mason, 1984 in their investigation of influences on consumer complaint reports, spoke of two personality variables – assertiveness and powerlessness. In a survey of 749 households they found that the two variables
were unable to predict behavior. It will be interesting to check on how assertiveness will hold as determinant of behavior in the local context.

Davidow and Dacin (1997) posited in their research that personality and attitude factors are the major reasons of complaint behavior. In line with the findings, other researches concluded that consumers who complain are more socially responsible and willing to take risks such as the risk of embarrassment when complaining (Fornell et al., 1979 and Keng et al., 1995).

Knowledge of complaining procedure

As heighten by Chulmin et al. (2003) that firms should make it easy for dissatisfied customer to complain by offering toll free numbers, telephone numbers, online customer service, consumer suggestion box, and consumer voicing center, reemphasize the importance of knowledge of complaining procedures. Furthermore, Berry, Seiders and Grewal (2002) stated that those consumers who knew where and how to complaint will reduce their time and effort in filing complaints.

Huppertz (2003) claimed that consumers will go directly to retailers to complaint if complaining procedure is made easy. In view of the need for an immediate response to the problem of consumer dissatisfaction, much of complaint procedures had been made easy which reduced the time and effort needed to file dissatisfaction (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1988; Tax and Brown, 1998).

Huppertz (2003), reiterated that if businesses simplified their complaining procedures, this so called effort model predicts an increase in the percentage direct complaints to those businesses. He also posited that consumers will go directly to retailers to complain if complaining procedure is made easy.

Time constraint

Jane Kolodinsky, in her Usefulness of Economic in explaining Consumer Complaining, offered finding by Liefeld (1980) that rural
consumers are more satisfied with services that their urban counterparts but make more public complaints by the mere fact that they have more time. The researcher experienced almost a similar situation when conducting a study in the Midwest of America.

Marmorstein et al (1992) however reiterated that the perception of time constraint is subjective because with adequate know-how, filing a complaint is never been easier. The use of telephone, writing, email and facsimile reduce the time constraint factors to almost zero.

Keng et al. (1995) found that perception pertaining towards time spent in complaining is a difference between complainers and non-complainers. Non-complainers considered that complaining was done by people with little else to do and it would be futile.

Developing framework from the literature review

Based on the literature review, a research model was developed, as indicated in the diagram below (Figure 1). The model assumes that complaining behavior is initiated by a critical level of dissatisfaction, arising from problems faced in obtaining services from government agencies. Among the factors influencing complainant behavior are knowledge about complaining procedure, time constraint, and previous experience. Where as individual factors that plays a major role in this model, include attitudes towards complaining and personality.

This model has also identified four action options pertaining to the dissatisfaction towards the service provider; namely; making a complaint to the authority concerned, negative word-of-mouth (talking about the dissatisfaction to friends, relative and people close to them), not making actual complaint by letting the problem persist, or to abandon the department by just forgetting about it. Meanwhile, socio-demographic aspects of the consumers including of race, age, sex, education, occupation and income act as mediators in the complaining process. These aspects were found to have great impact in determining the attitudes and beliefs towards complaining.
Figure 1: A Proposal Framework for Research of Consumer Complaining Behavior

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study therefore was to determine the extent to which this model is relevant in explaining complaining
behavior in the local context. The decision to carry out a qualitative study was mainly to understand complaining behavior locally in order to prepare items to be used in the quantitative study to collect data. Hence, the outcome of this study would be the development of a theoretical framework that is comprehensive that reflects the local context. Therefore, the purpose of this study is as follows:

a. to determine factors influencing complaining behavior using a sample of both complainers and non-complainers.

b. to determine the extent to which the Theory of Planned Behavior is successful in explaining complaining behavior.

Method

A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews can be an effective way to get personal opinions on complaining behavior. The in-depth interview’s feedback yields the personal understanding in terms of their beliefs and attitude of the complaining behavior. The outcomes that emerge from the local context were added on to the construct of the model to be used in this study. In addition, by having the local context scenario, there will be no questions on the relevancy of the cultural perspective.

This exploratory study allows for an in-depth look at the factors of consumers expectation and perception toward services offered by the government agencies and how those two factors affect complaining behaviors. In addition, the study seeks to know on how far important people in the life of the consumers influence them in voicing the complaint. Besides looking at whether dissatisfied consumers have the ability to submit a complaint, the study intends to highlight major factors influencing the will to complaint and the kind of complaint being chosen.

By and large, this study does not intend to draw any conclusion, but instead, is meant to be used in developing hypothesis and formulating the quantitative investigation in the latter stage (Bartos, 1986).
Rational in having Non-complainers Sample

In looking into complaining behavior, based on the experience of the staff of the PCB, there are a large number of publics who are dissatisfied with the services given by government agencies but did not complaint (non-complainers). However, many of them voice their dissatisfaction through the media and through negative talk among them. In this respect, the researcher is particular interested in getting their feedback on their rational for not making complaints through the PCB (Is it because their perception of PCB is a government body, so they could be BIAS).

There are studies on dissatisfied consumers who were non-complainers. Huppertz et al (2003), in his examination of the factors influencing consumer behavior towards health care, reported that 66.4% of the 30.9% patients who encountered service failure/poor services did not file any complaint. Snellman and Vithkari (2003), on why consumers did not complaint after experiencing failure of services, found that 25% of the 90 consumers believed that complaining will make no difference, 19% said that complaining is time consuming and 15% pointed that the situations were so bad that if complaints were done, they don’t believe things will change.

Sample and Study Area

All data has collected from a number of government agencies in the Klang Valley region. Respondents representing those dissatisfied consumers who complained were selected from the list of complainers in the PCB office in Putrajaya while respondents who feel dissatisfied but did not complain were gathered randomly outside the office of the Immigration department at Putrajaya and Shah Alam, the department of Public Services at Putrajaya and from the office of National Registration Department Shah Alam and Putrajaya.

The study comprised of two groups;

a. Complainers came from among those whom had submitted complaints directly to Public Complaints Bureau. In this study, the names and particulars of the
complainers for the entire year of 2004 had been prepared for the researcher. Phone calls were made to ask for their consent to be interviewed. The first few calls had not been answered, even when the calls were answered; some of the complainers were reluctant to participate in the study. Eventually, twelve consumers registered as complainers with the PCB and living in the Klang Valley had agreed to be the respondents for this study. These complainers had voiced their dissatisfaction on the public service with regards to delay in taking action, rude counter staff, abuse of power and others. Selecting those respondents within the Klang Valley area allows them to be easily met and interviewed.

b. Non-complainers are thirteen dissatisfied public service consumers but who did not complaint. These people had the experience in getting services at the Public Services Department, the Immigration department and the National Registration. The three selected departments share strong similarities in that provide their services to all levels of the Malaysian Public. Selection of respondents is made randomly by interviewing those consumers at the three selected government departments counters.

Research Questions

The inquiry used semi-structured open-ended questions. The questions were developed using the sample questions from theory of planned behavior by Ajzen (1991) as a guide, and also in part, on the study conducted by Huppertz et al. (2003).

This study is to look for new variables that are true to customers dealing with the government agencies, their experience and the process they go through (Newsome, 2000) and to specifically gauge data about consumers’ behavior at local level and comparing them with past precedents. This will provide actual quotes and statement and phrases use to describe their feeling and action when encountering dissatisfaction services.
The outcome of the interviews will be used as a reference and a guide in formulating a later research instrument. The method of the inquiry allow for a true and frank feedbacks without any reference to whom the interviewees are.

**Table 1:** Below are the examples of the main questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Have you encountered any dissatisfaction towards the service of government department?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Did you think your dissatisfaction was so severe that you needed to do something to solve it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>If you were to submit a complain, do you make sure you get results?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Have you ever made any complain with regards to your dissatisfaction?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>What is your perception and expectation towards complaining?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>What is your perception towards government service?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Do you know the procedure of complaining?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedure**

The researcher introduced herself to the selected respondents, stated the purpose of the interview, and gave the assurance on the confidentiality of the interview. The respondents were asked if they have encountered problems when dealing the departments and felt dissatisfied. Those dissatisfied consumers who were willing to be interviewed would have their responses taped with their prior consent. On the average, each of the interview lasted for about 45 minutes.

**Data Analysis**

The analyses of the data was done manually in great detail and care to identify those variables, that reaffirmed past studies to
those that could be categorized as new variables that were hoped to clarify the linkage between the variables already identified for this study.

The transcribed interviews were transferred word-for-word (verbatim) to Microsoft Word. It was analyzed using the content analysis. Each interview was carefully read through. After highlighting the relevant phrases, labels were put at the margin on the side of the important phrases. The highlighted phrases were copied and pasted into separate files so that each file contains all the information on a particular idea. The entire process was repeated several times until all relevant categories have been identified from the interviews.

In this sort of study, the aim is always to look for new items, ideas and dimensions beyond the interview. For instance, one of the categories that emerged was the individual’s perception/interpretation of the cultural appropriateness of complaining. Some respondents strongly felt that they had the right to complain if the services fall below their expectation. On the other hand, some participants thought that it might be impolite to complain.

Results

The study investigated consumer complaining behavior with regards to public service by comparative analysis of the responses of the dissatisfaction consumers who complained to that of those who were dissatisfied but did not complain. The results were as follows:
Demography of the Respondents

Table 2: The sociodemographic variables include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio demographic</th>
<th>Complainers (%)</th>
<th>Non-Complainers (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>8 (66.7)</td>
<td>10 (76.9)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2 (16.7)</td>
<td>2 (15.4)</td>
<td>4 (16.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>2 (16.7)</td>
<td>1 (7.7)</td>
<td>3 (12.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (year)</td>
<td>30 and below</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 to 40</td>
<td>3 (25)</td>
<td>3 (23.1)</td>
<td>6 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 to 50</td>
<td>3 (25)</td>
<td>4 (30.8)</td>
<td>7 (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 and above</td>
<td>5 (41.7)</td>
<td>4 (30.8)</td>
<td>9 (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School School</td>
<td>1 (8.3)</td>
<td>1 (7.7)</td>
<td>2 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>3 (25)</td>
<td>2 (15.4)</td>
<td>5 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>3 (25)</td>
<td>2 (15.4)</td>
<td>5 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>5 (41.7)</td>
<td>7 (53.8)</td>
<td>12 (48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensioner</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (7.7)</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not work Own business</td>
<td>1 (8.3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>3 (25)</td>
<td>2 (15.4)</td>
<td>5 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>2 (16.7)</td>
<td>4 (30.6)</td>
<td>6 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>2 (16.7)</td>
<td>2 (15.4)</td>
<td>4 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Income</td>
<td>2 (16.7)</td>
<td>4 (30.8)</td>
<td>6 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Income</td>
<td>8 (66.7)</td>
<td>7 (53.8)</td>
<td>15 (60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study sampled 25 complainers, 12 of whom are dissatisfied customers who complained and 13 were dissatisfied but did not complaint. The ethnicity of the complainers were eight (66.7%) Malays, two (16.7%) Chinese and two (16.7%) Indians while non-complaining comprised of ten (76.9%) Malays, two (15.4%) Chinese and one (7.7%) India.
The majority of the complainers (42%) aged 50 and above, while non-complainers were mostly 40 years and above (62%). In terms of education attainment, 67% of the complainers were college educated and 25% attended high school. Education for non-complainers seem to be much higher with 69% had a college education.

Fifty percent of the complainers were self-employed, with 25% had a job in the public sector and 16% worked in the private sector. Majority of non-complainers (46%) had a job in the government office while 31% worked in the private sector. Fifteen percent of the complainers were self-employed. Complainers recorded a high level of income at 67% while non-complainers had only 54%.

From results of the analysis has confirmed some of the variables identified through the Literature Review. The categories identified are shown in Figure 2, those were: Level of Dissatisfaction, Attitudes towards Complaining, Attributes of Services, Personality, Experience, Time Constraint, Procedure to Complain, Methods of Complaining, Attitudes towards Government Service, Expectation towards Complaining, and Individual Rights. The interview data has also elaborated the meaning or content of these factors in the local context.

Level of Dissatisfaction

Level of dissatisfaction is normally used as a measuring scale, a point at which consumers decide to take action against the situation. In general, the higher the level of dissatisfaction encountered in getting a service, the greater will be the action taken to gain the attention of the service provider (Bougie et al., 2003). The study captured an angry complainer scolding a rude counter staff:

I was very angry and fired at him, "If you do not want to do the job, there are many others who want to, just quit!" (p7)
Figure 2: A Final Framework for Research of Consumer Complaining Behavior

Besides showing their anger to the counter staff, there were consumers who lodged complaints by writing letters, made a phone call to the head of the department, while a few others did not do anything although they were angered by the poor service they received;
Because we are government staff, there isn’t much we can do about it although we are dissatisfied. Definitely we were frustrated and angered. They should be firm, if cannot, just say no, but don’t say ‘yes’ and then say ‘no’ (bp1)

Failure in getting a desirable service caused the consumers to be feeling disheartened, shy, frustrated, shocked and angered. However, there were instances where customers who encountered a rude counter staff showed no anger. They felt that feeling anger would not do any good or benefit them;

I am quite creative, when I encounter problem, I seek to check my objective of being there. Then I realized, anger won’t do any good in the long run. (bp3)

**Attitudes towards Complaining**

Every consumer who complaint seeks to get justice and redress for the unsatisfactory services rendered. Consumers will complain if they feel that the services rendered to them are terribly worst, and some will complaint if they are certain that the problem can be rectified:

I look for results in my action. When I complain, I expect things will change. I will do follow up. Those counter staff should be transferred if they are not polite. (p12)

There were customers who, although feeling dissatisfied, do not complain because of their concern about other people knowing about it or their grusses being covered by the media. They are also concerned about being blacklisted, their application not being processed, their application delayed, the file thrown out and they are deprived of any service by complaining. Besides, consumers are unsure of how far their complaints will be investigated and given justice:

It is not people don’t want to complain, but our culture does not really encourage us to come forward and complain, we don’t want to offend other people. (bp5)

I have my doubts, will they really take action towards my complaint or not? (bp6)

Why bother complaining, it is just a waste of time. (bp1)
Attributes of Services

Some of those attributes that typifies a good and effective services or that raised dissatisfaction that made consumer to be satisfied or complain involved the absence of enforcement, tardiness, disregard of procedures, wrong or vague information, unreasonable, unfriendly and rude services:

“They are not open to queries. Not friendly, not service oriented at the counter. When we ask questions, they are not open to queries. What ever they dish out, you just have to accept it.” (bp13)

In addition, other factors affecting the quality of services include delay in action, untransparent policy, vague policy, keep on changing policy, non-committed to the organization, lack of anticipation to consumer needs, lack of initiatives, bias decisions, unsystematic counter services, long waiting time, rude, and challenging the consumer:

Consumer, “Sir, when will my son’s mykad be ready? It has been five month. I was promised only one month. What is going on? If there is a problem, let me know. Don’t give excuses.”

Officer (raised his voice), “If you come to other people’s office and want to ask questions, please be polite. We do work here, you know. Not just shaking our legs. Let me tell you something, if that is the reason given to you by my staff, just accept it, why question further?”

Consumer, “I am just asking, wanting to know what happen to my son’s application for Mykad. Why did you raise your voice? In front of the public?”

Counter Staff, “Sir, you look pious, put on head gear (ketayap- indicating a religious person) and all, but speak foul languages. You expect people to do right, but you don’t.”

Consumer, “Excuse me, why do you mention about my attire? After all, we are talking about my son’s Mykad?”

Counter Staff, “Next time if you want to be rude, take off your head gear first!”

Consumer, “OK, I will submit a complaint against you”

Counter Staff, “I don’t even care about your complain, even if you want to fight, I don’t mind. Just as long you put down your head gear first!” (p12)
Personality

In this study, a complainer seemed to have high self-efficacy in ensuring their dissatisfaction is appropriately attended to:

He told me to come back in 2 days. I pleaded, "this is urgent, if not I won't have to come again today after you curse me yesterday." Seeing my humbleness and pleading he said, "A moment," After 5 minutes, he came out with my passport. All ready! (p1)

In addition, those with high self-esteem being very assertive in demanding that action must be taken to ensure services meet customers' needs. Nonetheless, some complainers feel being aggressive by shouting to the provider of poor services is justified, just to show their dissatisfaction.

I screamed at the counter staff after she took my application form and crumble it, right in front of me, "How dare you! You think your grandfather paid this form for me? I want to see the officer in charge. NOW!" (p6)

As for non-complainers, they seemed to be more patient and flexible in coping with dissatisfaction and this shows through as they did not take action on the dissatisfaction:

I just gave-up. It will be useless for me to say anything. What more if I complain. They will say that was the decision of the board, decisions are all final. (bp1)

Experience

Experience in complaining, if someone ever complaint or otherwise, plays a critical role in the investigation of consumer complaint behavior. For those who had complained before of their dissatisfaction about the services of the government agencies will not hesitate to do it again if they encounter problems in dealing with the government agencies.

For a first time complainer, the feeling of ambiguity about the risk of taking such action and whether their complaint will get attention are barriers to complaining, unless and until the level of dissatisfaction is overwhelming like encountering a very rude counter staff:
After finishing my dealing and return to the office, I told my office peers about the rude encounters in getting the services at the government office, and they told me to lodge my complaint to PCB. On a conversation through phone, PCB advised me to officially write to them or present myself at their office. Because I know where the office of PCB is, I went to complain, personally. (p6)

For non-complainers, they never know that they could complaint until their friends told them that they could. They, however, did not proceed with complaining as they found the complaining process is tedious:

My exposure to the complaint procedure was almost none. So, it is very difficult for me to come forward and complain. (bp5).

Time Constraint

Besides knowing the procedures on how to complain, time allocation for such action appears critical in making someone choose to complaint:

I don’t want to make it difficult on me. If I complaint things will be prolonged. I was shocked at the time. I just want to get it over with and go home. (bp7)

In contrast, consumers who feel obliged to improve the service and to express their rights as consumers and at the same time to seek justice in getting proper service will allocate time to seeking redress, to complain:

I took time off to come to Putrajaya, all the way from JB, just to submit my complaint. If I don’t do this, they (the department) will not resolve about my problem. (p4)

Procedures to Complain

Understanding about complaining procedures is by and large critical to ensure that the complaints be submitted to the correct department through the right channel. The most critical aspect in complaining is the information about complaint itself, it needs
to be clear and precise. Other supporting documents will make the difference on whether a complaint is promptly and rightfully attended:

I went to see the head of the department with all the proof of work that I have done, to complain about the payment that the department has been denying me! (p2)

For non-complainers, although they have the intentions to complain because of their experience with unsatisfactory services, they remain not doing it because of their ignorance of the complaining procedure:

"I was thinking at that moment, maybe I should do something about this. Write official complaint or something like that. But, I just don't know how." (bp6)

Others voiced about their concern of the long processes that it might take if they submitted complains.

Methods of Complaining
Consumers tended to voice their dissatisfaction by writing to the department involved, verbal complaint to the office, email, telephone, and facsimile. There were also consumers who directly voiced their dissatisfaction to the officer on duty or negative word of mouth to their peers and relatives about it. Writing to news media, leaving the scene and abandon the departments are also another form of behaviors shown by the consumers:

There comes a stage where I just abandon the deal if things are not urgent. If I have any future dealing, I will definitely avoid them. (p1)

The study has identified three new categories, which are presented below:

Attitudes towards the Government Service

The Public Service is a necessary to all citizens in Malaysia. These services include those offered by the Public Service Department, the Immigration Department, and the National
Registration Department, whose customers formed the samples of this study.

There were numerous negative assumptions from the public about their dissatisfaction with the government services with regards to behavior of the counter staff, officer in charge of delivering the service and the head of such departments that deal with the public at large.

Consumers in this study reflected that rude behavior is the norm of civil servants at large. When dealing with public services, consumers are subjected to humiliation and pleading. Government officers appear arrogant and tend to ignore giving out proper explanation when requested:

When I received a bad treatment from the counter staff, I just assume that the staff does not deserve to be there, he should be somewhere else, not dealing with the public. (bp4)

There were also errors committed by the government offices that caused many difficulties to the consumers and make them return many time for the same service:

They said they will investigate and will let me know the outcome. After waiting for a month, I went back and asked them about the outcome of the investigation and what can I do to fasten the process and they asked me to go back to Kota Kinabalu to rectify the problem, but I insisted that this is not my problem. It is their department’s problem right from the beginning, why should they trouble me to go back to KK to rectify it. (p4)

Consumers were also ignoring all the procedures in dealing with the government offices and this also caused unnecessary delay. Sometimes the consumers can be the source of the dissatisfaction:

When I want to get business done at the government offices, normally I would first check the rules and procedures, to get things done fast. Otherwise, if we ourselves do not know what we want, surely there will be delay. (p7)

Nevertheless, government services are unique, which everybody needs it. By and large, people feel they earned the right for efficient services. Yet government officers may act as if the service is a privilege, for example getting the passports.
Even though all Malaysian citizens can apply for it, and they are almost guaranteed to get one, but due to certain rules that applied, some consumers have been prohibited of owning one. This difference of opinions is the root cause of consumer dissatisfaction.

**Individual Rights**

Every consumer feels that he/she has the right to get a quality services from the government departments because as citizens of the country, we are supposedly being rendered services that are good and timely manner.

I’m angered. You feel that you have not been treated fair. I feel humiliated, my right as citizen seems to be violated. When we come in at two, we expect to be entertained; instead, we were told that they are still at lunch or praying.” (p1)

As taxpayers, they also demanded their right to the basic services due to them: road and drain cleansing, garbage collection and access to recreational parks.

For those who applies for international passports and pay RM300 but were treated like they are getting them for FREE:

We were greeted with sour face and rude. It looks as though they were forced to work and looks uncommitted. We are treated like beggars. We are paying for the passports!” (bp13)

Sad were the situation, especially for those customers who are also civil servants and those government pensioners because they know the work ethics when dealing with the public. In fact, all government departments have public service charters that says, all customers be given an efficient, quality and friendly service.

**Expectation towards Complaining**

Consumers who complain about dissatisfaction with the government services had the expectation that the complaints would be attended to and corrective action taken. These
expectations include stern reminder to the counter staffs that they need to be polite when dealing with the public and apparent improvement to services delivered. For dissatisfied consumers, who were also civil servants, complaining appear to be betrayal to the service:

More often than not when feel dissatisfied, not much we can do, due to us being a civil servant. But frustrated and anger at the moment... if we complain they will accuse us of not being loyal to the government. (bp1)

There were also those consumers who expected redress be made for every complaint and will do the necessary follow up if things were not happening:

I want them to do something about my complaint, like rectify the problem by opening up more counters to serve faster, put more people to serve, less waiting time for the customers. (p4).

Conclusion

It is the rationale of the study to strengthen the cultural relevance of the study framework. To a large extent, the outcome of the study supported the literature review, nevertheless data from the interviews did provide additional information about variables previously identified from the literature. For example, the study has shown the most significant aspects that trigger the complaining was anger which arising from inaction of the counter staff, being scolded by rude and unfriendly counter staff, and delay in render services. The result of interview also showed that other feelings emerged when the participant faced with the dissatisfaction such as humiliation, embarrassment, disappointment, shocked and surprised.

The new model which is shown in Figure 3, incorporates both the existing variables and the new factors identified from the interviews.
Figure 3: A Research Framework for the Consumer Complaining Behavior Study
Discussion

Although the ethnic Chinese were the major group of complainers with the PCB, the Malays are the majority of the respondents because of their willingness to participate. Older age group (40-50), high income level and high level of education is associated with a positive tendency of voicing complains. Interestingly, most complainers were self-employed while non-complainers were civil servants. This shows that those who were self-employed are brave in voicing their grousers as it affects their livelihood as they own the businesses. As for the civil servants, the non-complainers, complaining seem to be an act of betrayal.

This study on complaining behavior in three government agencies showed that providing various channels of complaining made it more likely that dissatisfied customers would switch from being silent to voicing their complaints. This study also emphasized that the implementation of service improvement efforts will change attitude towards complaining.

Consumers' personality seems to play a major role in predicting one's behavior when facing dissatisfaction. An instance where one of the complainers hit the glass barrier of the service counter with his fist, apparently is a result of his disappointment with the rudeness and non-committal attitude of the counter staff. Such intensity of action could well be due to his level of dissatisfaction and due to his personality. This study shows that complainers were assertive, aggressive and with high self-esteem.

In this study, there were few complainers had an experience in complaining and those who have heard from others about how to complaint. Thus, this study tended to agree with Singh's (1990) claim that complaining behavior is determined by experience. Morel et al. (1997) identified that consumers who are lacking the experience in filing complaint seemed less to participate in the complaining behavior while Brucks (1985) concluded that experience consumers tend to easily evaluate service provider.

In terms of time constraint, the study revealed that complainers allocate time to complain in order to improve the
situation. For non-complainers, time constraint remained as the factor hampering them to complaint. It is a fact that time constraint is the barrier limiting the effort in resolving consumers’ grousers (Garbarino and Edell, 1997).

Findings of this study showed that a majority of complainers had a good knowledge of the procedure to filing a complaint thus affirms that complaining will be done if the procedure is made public. Huppertz (2003) claims that consumers will go directly to retailers to complain if complaining procedure is made easy.

The study also showed that complainers hoped that their complaints would be attended to and dealt with, but there were consumers who were also civil servants who felt disloyal to the organization if they complained. This to them is like showing scars on the abdomen. This perception is worrisome and should be avoided. But, there were also those consumers who vented their anger to the counter staff and demanded an apology from the officer on duty, but still came to PCB to complain and suggested a more drastic action to be taken.

All Malaysians are required to deal with all government departments. The government officers are meant to facilitate all citizens in their dealing with the government. With all the taxes impose on the public and coupled with fees levied for some services like all application for international passport, it is very right that the public being attended politely and with kindness. And if they encounter rudeness and delay in getting those services, they have the very right to complain.

Those government departments that fail to make public of good service attributes will continue to receive criticism and complaint on their services. In this study the following attributes are prevalent:

1. rude and unfriendly
2. counter staff not being reasonable
3. delay in taking action
4. disregard procedures
5. unclear information/direction
6. absence of enforcement
7. tardiness
8. unclear procedures
This study also revealed that the consumers are becoming aware of their rights pertaining to the service rendered by the government department. To them, they have the rights to be treated well, based on the fact they are the tax payer. However, a study by Valenzuela et al. (2005) at Chile, South America tend to disagree with the finding that says Chileans do not consider complaining as a right.

This study recorded that mainly of the method of voicing dissatisfaction against the government is through direct complaints or word of mouth among friends and relatives. There were also those who brought the grousers to the attention of the news media. For non-complainers, a reason why they did not complaint, is that they believe that the government will not change (e.g. Immigration department). This finding reaffirms Craighead (2004) claim that consumers tend to be loyal if only action to remedy is made and improvement seen.

As stipulated in the past studies (Warland, Rex, 1975 and Day, Landon 1976) only a number of dissatisfied consumers take action to complain. The outcome of this study also reaffirm past findings, showing that a majority of consumers although dissatisfied did not opt to find “exit” or “voicing” but remain loyal. The lack of alternative or options, being not brave enough, or lacking knowledge or information could well be the reasons for such inaction.

**Conclusion**

Building on the theory of planned behavior, this paper manage to give insight on the complaining behavior of the public towards the service of government agencies in Malaysia by extending the variables within that theory: level of dissatisfaction; sociodemography; personality; personal right; attitude towards complaining; attitude toward government service; experience; expectation towards complaining; belief towards societal approval; motivation to comply to societal approval; knowledge on the procedures to complaint; time constraint; and attributes of government service. Through the
examination of those 13 variables in the context of consumer complaining behavior, the study confirms that attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control are antecedents to intention to complaint and to the actual outcome of complaint behavior. The qualitative study manage to confirm and outline the drivers to complaining behavior: services that are not on time, action that disregards procedures, information to the public that is wrong and vague, unreasonable, unfriendly and rude staff; delay in action and long waiting time.

In conclusion, the study has managed to verify the applicability of some variables used in the western culture in the local context. It has also developed three local variables that have been incorporated into the final study framework. It will be interesting if the variables are successful in highlight cross-cultural differences in complaining behavior.

Bibliography


