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Kwok, Shiling (2019) Can't complain? Factors influencing dissatisfied customers' non-complaining behaviour. *New Vistas*, 5 (2). pp. 4-7. ISSN 2056-9688

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# CAN'T COMPLAIN?

*Factors influencing dissatisfied customers' non-complaining behaviour*

**W**hy do dissatisfied customers no longer complain and never return? Customers do not necessarily express their dissatisfaction through complaints. Consequently, their grievances might never be heard. Past research has focused on the factors of complaining rather than non-complaining. Therefore, this study explores the non-complaining beliefs, intentions and behaviours of dissatisfied customers and breaks these down into five key factors.

## Introduction

Customer complaints indicate the level of customer satisfaction regarding product or service quality. Traditionally, dissatisfied customers channelled their complaints to the service provider through written (i.e. customer feedback card, email, letter, etc.) and verbal (i.e. telephone and face-to-face interactions) communication. Nevertheless, in today's business environment, not receiving any customer complaints should not be regarded as an indication that customers are satisfied or that there are no product or service failures. In the hospitality context, Su and Bowen (2001) revealed that only 58% of dissatisfied customers complained to management while 42% of the dissatisfied customers remained silent – a percentage that has steadily grown. The increasing number of customers who do not complain and will not return goods is a worrying issue to hospitality service providers. This is because dissatisfied customers' grievances will never be heard again (Chebat *et al.*, 2005). As a result, businesses could possibly lose the dissatisfied customers forever.

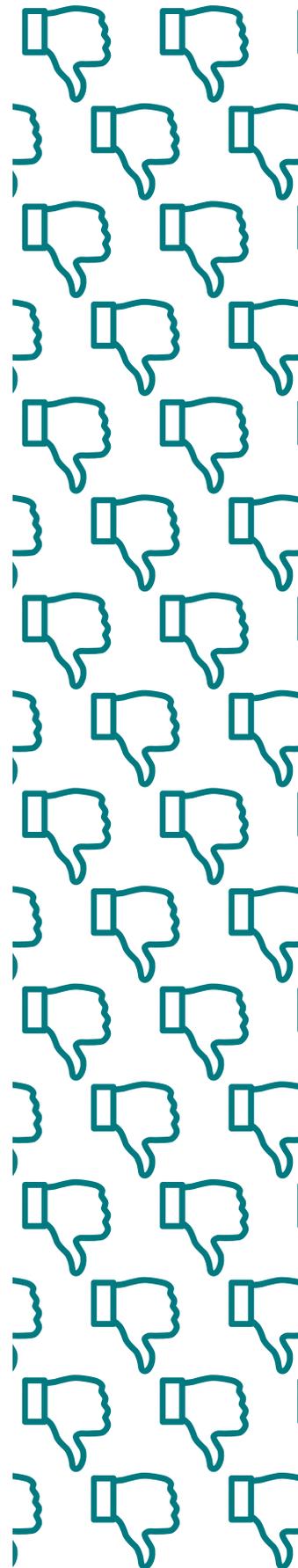
A review of current literature found it to be focused on the act of complaining rather than non-complaining (Voorhees *et al.*, 2006; Davidow, 2003). In terms of customer complaining behaviour, research has attempted to explore the factors that influence this behaviour. Past studies have shown that the factors that influence customers to complain are consumer-related factors; product-specific factors; situational factors, and product-related factors (Duruken *et al.*, 2012; Voorhees *et al.*, 2006). However, studies to identify the factors that influence customer non-complaining behaviours are scant and there is not yet consensus on these factors – especially in the hospitality context. To gain insight into this

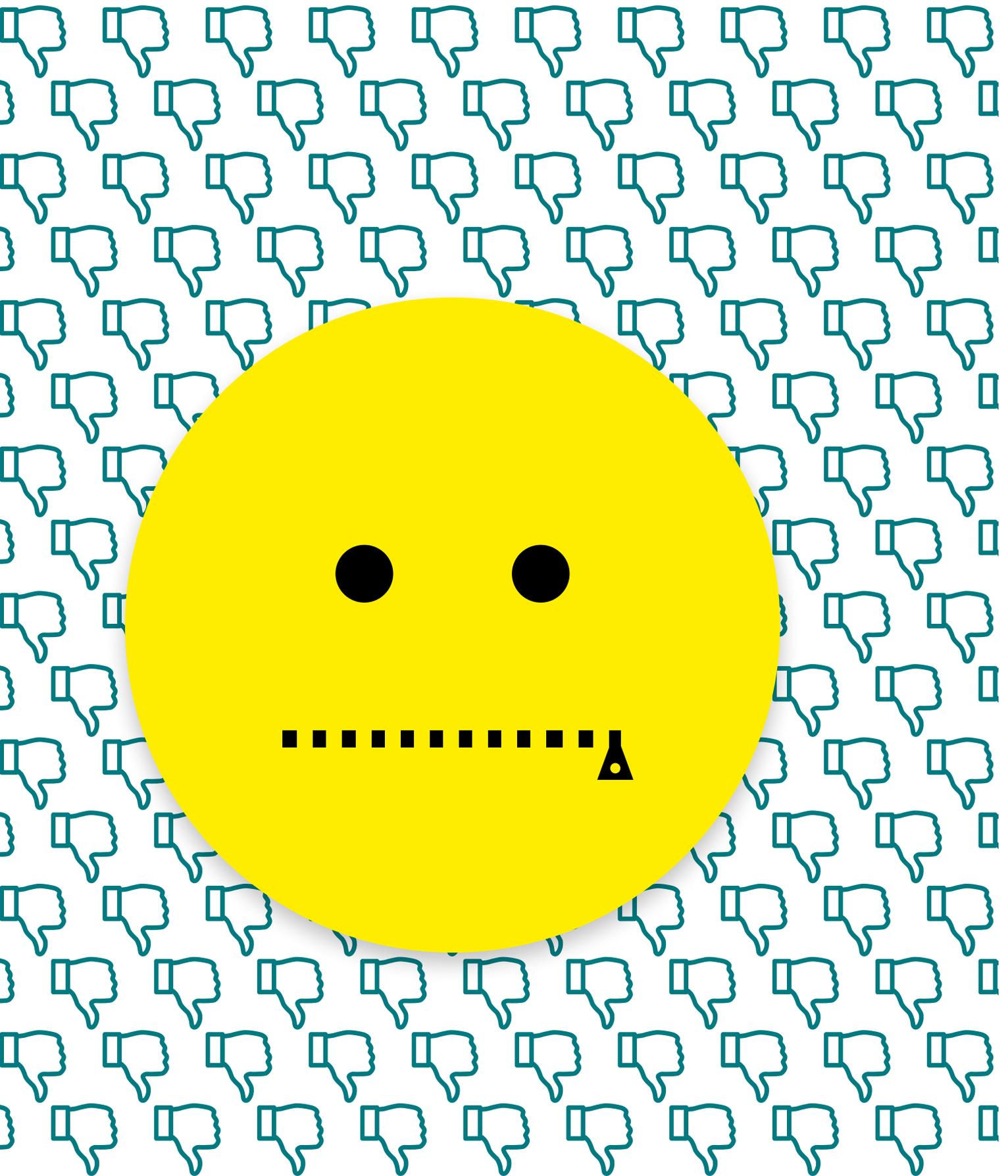
issue, this research aimed to identify the factors that influence non-complaining beliefs, intentions and behaviours among the dissatisfied customers in the hospitality context via a systematic review of literature. Here dissatisfied customers who do not complain to service providers after service failure are referred to as 'non-complainers'. By gaining an in-depth understanding of the reasons for not complaining and the factors influencing dissatisfied customers' non-complaining beliefs, intentions and behaviours, hospitality businesses could possibly eliminate the non-complaining barriers and encourage more dissatisfied customers to share their negative experiences with service providers.

## Methods

In this study, I examined six online databases for key secondary sources: Business Source Premier/EBSCO Host, Emerald, Sage Premier Journals, Science Direct, and Taylor and Francis Education Collection. Journals that relate to consumer behaviour, consumer marketing and marketing studies were reviewed. These journals were in the context of hospitality and restaurant services and included the International Journal of Hospitality Management, International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research, Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management and Cornell Hospitality Quarterly. I also adopted the PRISMA (preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses) flowchart in order to review the literature systematically. Figure 1 (p6) shows the flow of article selection for systematic review. The literature review protocol was formulated as follows:

- 1. Identification:** The keywords used for the search included 'propensity to complain', 'customer complaint behaviour', 'motives or motivation', 'non-complaining' and 'silent customer' in titles, keywords or abstracts.
- 2. Screening:** Academic papers were screened for using terms such as 'hotel industry', 'restaurant industry', 'service industry' or 'hospitality industry' in their titles, keywords or abstracts; academic or research papers. In addition, duplicate entries were deleted and search results that were in the form of books, magazine, press articles, editorial notes,





etc. were excluded. Subsequently articles were excluded where the full text was not available.

**3. Eligibility:** There are specific criteria needed for including and excluding literature for this type of study (Prayag et al., 2018). The next evaluation process focused on abstracts to determine their eligibility. The inclusion criteria include: (i) the articles had to be in full-text journals with research methodology and theoretical framework or model; (ii) the articles had to be focussed on consumer behaviour, service related, marketing, or hospitality; (iii) The articles had to have a clear presentation of findings and discussion; (iv) for up-to-dateness, only the newest journals were selected. In contrast, exclusion criteria were defined as: (i) no detailed description of research methodology; (ii) studies that focus on other industries or fields.

**4. Included:** For quality assessment of the literature, this research applied three criteria to assess the quality of the articles that had been published. These quality assessment criteria included: (i) sufficient use of secondary sources with appropriate citations; (ii) sound methodology with aims and objectives of the study, explanation on the methods and approach adopted for primary research, and (iii) some original contribute of knowledge with adequate presentation of the findings.

#### Factors influencing dissatisfied customers' non-complaining beliefs, intentions and behaviours

After reviewing the relevant literature related to the search criteria, the findings were summarised, analysed and categorised – based on different themes with an accompanying explanation. Past research has examined the factors that influence customer complaint behaviours in the hospitality industry and in the restaurant setting. Drawing on research conducted by Tronvoll (2008), Stephens and Gwinner (1998), Voorhees *et al* (2006) and other secondary sources, this study proposes non-complaining behaviours fall into five main constructs: situational factors; individual factors; service provider and market factors; social factors, and resources factors.

**(1)** Situational factors mean that dissatisfied customers, who do not complain, are affected by considerations such as the extent of service failure; the cost and benefits of complaining; the probability for success; the importance of the product or service; the social climate, and attribution of blame. Here we see that the cost-benefit of complaining may include the time involved, cognitive effort and stress, and

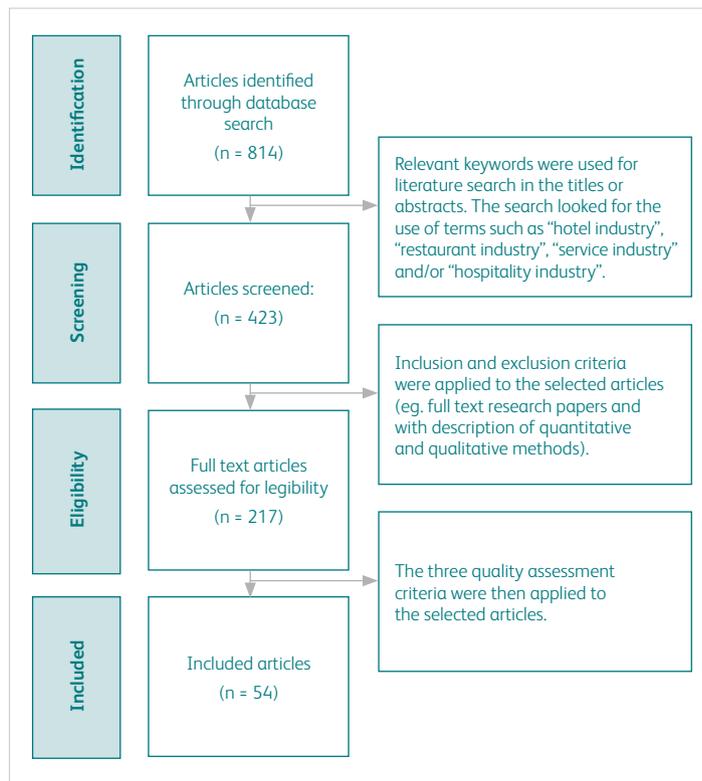


FIGURE 1 Systematic literature review selection procedure

other costs involved (i.e. telephone, mailing, and legal fees) while the benefits of complaining may include tangible (i.e. refunds, exchange products, and other monetary benefits) and intangible (i.e. happy, relaxation, and good feeling) components.

**(2)** Individual factors drive or restrain dissatisfied customers from complaining due to their demographics, personality, cultural background and personal experience.

**(3)** Service provider and market factors are issues related to service providers and market competition. Specifically, service provider factors include the reputation, reliability, responsiveness and accountability of service provider. In addition, the organisation-initiated recovery and accessibility of complaint channels offered by the service providers may prevent customers from complaining. Whereas, market factors such as the type of store, degree of market competition may discourage complaining behaviour.

**(4)** Social factors include the social pressures and contribution of the opinion of any given referent that influence non-complaining behaviour such as friends and family.

**(5)** Resource factors may include the skills and environment factors that deter the customers from complaining and might include them lacking complaining skills and knowledge; their lack of time, and their lack of will/effort.





*By gaining an in-depth understanding of the reasons for not complaining and the factors influencing dissatisfied customers' non-complaining beliefs, intentions and behaviours, hospitality businesses could possibly eliminate the non-complaining barriers and encourage more dissatisfied customers to share their negative experiences with service providers*

### Conclusion

Given the importance of complaining customers to hospitality businesses, an extensive body of studies has primarily focused on the motivation and antecedents of complaining behaviour (Trovoll, 2008; 2011). Here, this study argues that the reactive profiles of non-complaining customers are very different and, therefore, the motivation and attitudes that influence their non-complaining behaviour are different from those that predict complaining behaviour. This study identifies the factors that influence non-complaining beliefs, intentions and behaviours among the dissatisfied and non-complaining customers in a hospitality context via a systematic review of literature. The antecedent factors identified from the literature are: situational factors; individual factors, and service provider factors. Social factors and resources may also have significant impact on influencing dissatisfied customers' non-complaining beliefs, intentions and behaviours. Hospitality businesses will benefit from this study (which is on-going), by understanding why some of their dissatisfied customers do not complain, thus not giving the opportunity to the business to rectify the negative image shaped in their minds. This understanding will help businesses re-evaluate their customer complaint procedures and, possibly, introduce innovative ways that will remove some of the barriers and will entice these non-complaining customers to change their behaviours and provide feedback to the business about their negative experiences.

Although these categories of antecedent factors provide some insight into why customers do not complain, an empirical exploration of antecedent factors for non-complaining can help researchers better understand the non-complaining phenomenon. Hence, for the next phase of this study, a conceptual framework incorporating these five relevant constructs will be adopted and developed through the Reasoned Action Approach developed by Fishbein *et al* (2010) in order to examine its relative importance in shaping their non-complaining beliefs, intention and behaviour.

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### Keywords

Hospitality, dissatisfied customers, non-complaining beliefs, behaviour, systematic literature review