JUSTICE FOR CONSUMERS COMPLAINING
ONLINE OR OFFLINE: EXPLORING
PROCEDURAL, DISTRIBUTIVE, AND INTERACTIONAL JUSTICE,
AND THE ISSUE OF ANONYMITY

Kendra L. Harris, The Harris Consulting Group
Lionel Thomas, Livingstone College
Jacqueline A. Williams, North Carolina A & T State University

ABSTRACT

The dramatic increase in online commerce over the past decade has raised concern over the perceived fairness of complaint handling methods in this venue. The study described in this article uses justice theory to determine whether respondents who sought complaint resolution online were satisfied in the same manner as respondents who used conventional complaint mechanisms. In this study of consumers residing in several different countries, authentic complaint experiences were analyzed. The authors found that both online and offline complaining consumers experienced justice (in general) in the complaint process. Procedural justice emerged as the dominant justice dimension, but new insight was gained with respect to how interactional justice was manifested in distinctly different ways for both online and offline complaining consumers. Some online consumers seek the anonymity that technology affords while a significant portion of the offline consumers seek the transparency and openness that many of the conventional complaint mechanisms offer (e.g. face-to-face and phone). Contrary to some other studies investigating justice perceptions and complaining behavior, distributive justice did not emerge as a top theme.

INTRODUCTION

The increase in online commerce suggests the need for an increase of investigations into online complaint activity. The primary purpose of the study described herein is to determine whether consumers who seek complaint resolution online are satisfied in the same manner as consumers who use conventional (offline) complaint mechanisms.

Justice theory is used to assess consumers’ perceptions of fairness in complaint handling methods. Our study is particularly interested in how interactional justice is experienced for online versus offline complaint consumers. This interactional dimension of justice becomes particularly worthy of further investigation when a technology interface is substituted for the human interface part of the complaint process. Thus, to the degree that an agent-to-consumer interaction is not as evident in an online environment, a deeper investigation of customer satisfaction and justice is warranted.

The marketplace continues to experience a healthy growth in the use of technology for furthering relationships and completing transactions between businesses and end-consumers. Global e-commerce sales are forecasted to exceed one and a quarter trillion dollars by 2013, with the United States remaining the largest online market according to the Interactive Media in Retail Group (IMRG) (Montaqim 2012). Furthermore, Forrester research predicts that U.S. online retail sales will reach $278.9 billion in 2015 (Indvik 2011). The evolution of the concept of cyber-Monday, as a follow-up to black Friday, provides additional evidence of this growth.

As commercial activity in general, and online commerce in particular continue to proliferate, entities such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Better Business Bureau (BBB) have continued to track consumer complaints. The FTC reported in 2011 that the top ten complaints it received included shop-at-home and catalog sales, and internet services (Federal Trade Commission 2012). In 2009, the Better Business Bureau (BBB) reported that complaints to it, increased by nearly ten percent (Council of Better Business Bureau 2010). The 2009 records included increases over the previous year for complaints on cellular phone service. In addition, there were increases for complaints on television, cable and satellite service, and banking
services. Internet shopping complaints were also among the top ten for the BBB.

As the exchange of goods and services are increasingly facilitated through technological means, a subsequent outcome continues to be the need for organizations to manage any consumer dissatisfaction that occurs during these exchanges. The research discussed in this article further explores whether consumers who seek complaint resolution online are satisfied in the same manner as consumers who use conventional complaint mechanisms.

**LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

**Customer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior**

According to the American Customer Satisfaction Index (2009), consumers involved in retail trade have been satisfied at the 70% level or above for at least the last decade: be it product or service-oriented businesses (Fornell, 2010). In other words, consumer-oriented businesses and their patrons enjoy, for the most part, a mutually beneficial exchange relationship. However, in some instances, customers are dissatisfied with some aspect of the exchange of their money for goods or services. According to Ahmad (2002) and Zemke and Bell (1990), a service delivery system fails when it cannot deliver service as promised. Whereas satisfaction has been associated with brand loyalty, goodwill, and repeat sales; conversely, dissatisfaction can lead to redress seeking behavior (i.e., a request for a refund, exchange, or repair, etc.) (Blodgett, Granbois, & Walters 1993; Ahmad 2002).

When a customer is dissatisfied, a company’s ability to recover from the complaint (i.e. solve the customer’s problem or otherwise appease the situation), can have significant ramifications in regards to customers’ perceptions of an organization’s competence, the product or services already purchased, repurchase intent, the quality of a firm’s other offerings, and customers’ post-complaint recovery behavior (Shankar, Smith, & Rangaswamy 2003; Harris, Grewal, Mohr, & Bernhardt 2006). When a customer’s dissatisfaction is not addressed or is mishandled, negative word-of-mouth and/or discontinued use of the product, service, or business can result (Martinez-Tur, Peiro, Ramos, & Moliner 2006). Schmidt and Kernan (1985) found that customers have described redress procedures (complaint handling) as a key component of the shopping experience and satisfaction guarantees. Hayes and Hill (1999) found that customer satisfaction is attributable in part to service success along with complaint and service recovery strategies. Therefore, online and traditional “brick and mortar” service providers and retailers have for many years been advised to focus on executing effective recovery strategies as opposed to striving for mistake free shopping experiences (Schmidt and Kernan 1985; Hayes and Hill 1999).

Complaint handling involves all of the processes that a company invokes after a service failure for the purpose of re-establishing a company’s credibility from the perspective of the consumer (Hart, Heskett, & Sasser 1990). This encompasses having the requisite processes in place for initiating appropriate service recovery strategies when a failure occurs. When customers are satisfied as a result of a post-complaint experience, they often will engage in repurchase behavior. Effective recovery strategies have been said to paradoxically lead to a situation whereby the customer will rate the encounter more favorably after a problem has been corrected than if the transaction had been correctly performed the first time (Etzel & Silverman 1981; McCollough & Bharadwaj 1992).

The literature is robust with studies that have focused on traditional mechanisms/processes for complaining and subsequent behaviors (Blodgett et al. 1993; Blodgett, Hill and Tax 1997; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998; Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999; Davidow 2003). The framework used is often post-purchase satisfaction, leading to re-patronage intention and/or word-of-mouth communication. Scholars have also investigated the effect of customers’ perceptions of fairness in the complaint process on their level of satisfaction, subsequent continued patronage, and favorable word-of-mouth (Blodgett et al. 1997; Tax, Brown, & Murali Chandrashekar 1998). It is this “fairness” construct that is the focus in our research.

**Justice Theory and Complaining Behavior**

Constructs used to illuminate satisfaction have included service quality (Parasuraman et al.
Distributive justice addresses the parity in the remedy received by the consumer. That is, distributive justice looks at the compensation that might have been received by the complaining consumer, in exchange for their troubles (Austin 1979; Mccoll-Kennedy & Sparks 2003; Karatepe 2006). In such cases, an individual measures the degree to which the remedy of the problem sufficiently makes the individual “feel whole” in regards to the offers by the establishment.

Procedural justice addresses the way the process of handling the complaint issue was settled. Procedural issues may include whether the problem could be handled on the premises or whether the customer had to write to headquarters or phone a customer service line to plead his/her case (Blodgett et al. 1997; de Matos, Fernandes, Leis, & Trez, 2011).

Interactional justice looks at the consumer’s satisfaction with the level of care and empathy provided by the agent of the service provider while the problem was being eradicated. It is the “interpersonal treatment [one] receives from another person” (Adams 1965; Bies 2001, p. 91). This is of particular interest to the authors of this article, again because interactional justice is customarily manifested when the consumer interacts with an individual who represents the company to which the problem is attributed. That agent- to-consumer interaction is not as evident in an online environment, and therefore warrants deeper investigation. Thus, the interactional dimension of justice becomes particularly worthy of further investigation when a technology interface is substituted for the human interface part of the complaint process.

With respect to complaint handling when traditional mechanisms (e.g. phone, mail, etc.) are used, Tax et al (1998) contended that justice theory provided good theoretical underpinning for addressing satisfaction with respect to complaint scenarios. However, various justice dimensions emerge as dominant depending on the study and their contexts.

Tax et al. (1998) found that all the justice dimensions were factors. In their study, distributive justice focused on financial loss and apology. They noted that apology, as a construct, represented emotional costs as well as financial costs. Their findings for procedural justice emphasized customer convenience and firm follow-up. Interactional justice included issues related to communication and behavior. These authors concluded that complaints that were left unhandled were considered unfair.

Clemmer and Schneider (1996) concluded that distributive justice was the most important factor for predicting customer satisfaction. Smith et al (1999) corroborated this finding using an experimental design scenario in which consumers evaluated various failure/recovery scenarios using an organization that they recently patronized. Distributive justice emerged as the justice dimension accounting for a relatively large percentage of the overall effect of perceived justice on satisfaction. Martinez-Tur (2006) also concluded that distributive justice was critical in predicting customer satisfaction.

These findings contradict works in relationship marketing that assume social interaction is the key to satisfied customers, and therefore procedural and interactional justice would be key to customer satisfaction (Hartline and Ferrell 1996). Goodwin and Ross (1992) suggested that procedural and interactional fairness were the key dimensions upon which consumers responded to service failures. Their research was characterized by an experimental design that manipulated levels of complaint outcome; apology, voice, and type of service.
Apology and voice figured prominently when consumers were offered a monetary or gift incentive after service failure. When there was no tangible offering, apology and voice ceased to have the same level of effect. An, Hui, and Leung (2001) determined in part, that when service providers give voice to their customers, that has led to higher perceived justice and more positive post-complaint behaviors.

Meta-analysis research has yielded insight into differences in findings based on a few conditions such as using students as the subjects in experimental design research. Gelbrich and Roschik (2011) found that the relationship between justice perceptions and satisfaction depends on the target group, the industry and the complaint type. Interestingly, distributive justice emerges as having great importance when the complainers are students.

### Technology and Complaining Behavior

The technology issue brings an additional dimension to the study of consumer complaining behavior. Complaint satisfaction in an online environment has received some attention but its juxtaposition against the traditional offline environment has been limited.

A key point of our investigation involves the question of whether consumers experience complaint satisfaction in an online environment in the same way they experience complaint satisfaction in a conventional setting. As previously mentioned, justice theory is particularly instructive in this inquiry in that justice theory espouses three forms of justice: distributive, procedural, and interactional. Interactional justice specifically addresses consumers’ satisfaction with the individual who represents the company with which a consumer has a complaint. This interactional dimension of justice becomes particularly worthy of further investigation when a technology interface is substituted for the human interface part of the complaint process. We posit, to the degree that an agent-to-consumer interaction is not as evident in an online environment, a deeper investigation of customer satisfaction and justice is warranted.

Bitner, Brown & Meuter (2000) inquired whether the same interpersonal service encounter in a traditional setting is relevant in a technology-based environment. In a related study, Parasuraman and Grewal (2000) ask whether consumers’ perception of the transaction value depends on their ready access to employees. Robertson, McQuilken and Kandampully (2012, p. 21) posited that when self-service technologies are in use, “service guarantees...specifically multiple attribute-specific guarantees, are associated with consumer voice complaints following self-service technology failure.”

This area of inquiry is still relatively new. However, the preponderance of the studies that have addressed online complaint behavior, have done so in a discreet fashion. That is, most studies did not include complaint behavior from consumers in an online environment as compared with complaint behavior from consumers in a traditional environment.

Holloway and Beatty (2003) generated a typology of online service failures. They narrowed the categories of online service failures to: delivery problems, website design problems, customer service problems, payment problems, security problems, and a few miscellaneous items. Pointing out that the lack of human interaction is a fact that is unique to solving online service failures, these authors concluded that retailers are not adequately recovering from their service failures.

Previously, Kelley, Hoffman and Davis (1993) analyzed retail failures and recoveries, identifying fifteen different types of retail failures and twelve unique recovery strategies. Later, Forbes, Kelley and Hoffman (2005) did another study in which they focused on e-commerce retail failure and recovery strategies. They found ten e-tail failures and eleven e-tail recovery strategies used by e-commerce firms.

In a study that addressed the online environment exclusively, Abdul-Muhmin (2011) posited a model for determining the repeat purchase intentions of online consumers who had previously bought online. This inquiry resulted in the finding that experience with online purchase problems did not have a significant relationship to overall satisfaction (Abdul-Muhmin 2011).

In a study by Maxham, III and Netemeyer (2003) whereby online customers were instructed to file their complaints by phone to a customer service office, these authors found that all the justice dimensions were significant or influential in shaping customers’ perceptions of fairness. Chang and Wang (2012) found that distributive justice was an effective recovery criterion by
consumers. Lin, Wang and Chang (2011) had previously found that only distributive justice has a significant positive influence on repurchase intention, and only interactional justice has a significant negative influence on negative word-of-mouth. They also found that influences on customer satisfaction, word-of-mouth, and repurchase intention, come from both the interaction between distributive justice and procedural justice and the interaction between distributive justice and interactional justice.

In a very recent study, Wu (2013) found that distributive and interactional justice contribute to satisfaction, but procedural justice does not. Chang, Lai and Hsu (2012) engaged in a study that explicitly expanded knowledge regarding satisfaction with recovery of online services (SROS). They point out that, “Collectively, literatures of online service recovery studies suggest that different types of service failures are encountered by consumers in online service settings [therefore]... Different remedy strategies and the level of choice options are needed to be considered when executing online service recovery.” (pg. 2,200)

A few examples of empirical research have been published where comparisons of a number of aspects of the online environment to that of the traditional environment have been made. Shankar et al (2003) evaluated overall customer satisfaction and loyalty. They found that satisfaction in the online environment had parity with satisfaction offline. They also found that customer loyalty was higher online. Cho, Im, Hiltz, & Fjermestad (2002) conducted a side-by-side comparison of post-purchase evaluation factors, and determined that online customers are less likely to complain even if they are more dissatisfied than offline customers in similar situations. These online customers are also more considerate of costs associated with complaint handling. However, both online and offline customers are inclined to continue to patronize an establishment if the complaint handling and service recovery processes are good.

Harris, Grewal, Mohr, and Bernhardt (2006) found that online customers were more apt to blame themselves when a service failure occurred, and that offline customers had a stronger satisfaction with service failure recovery. In a different study Harris, Mohr, and Bernhardt (2006) concluded that since online consumers are more apt to blame themselves for service failures, managers could consider providing less compensation or remuneration for online consumers than for offline consumers.

**Anonymity/Pseudonymity**

There are certain freedoms that online shopping and complaint handling afford. Given the ability to shop and handle complaints in the comfort of one’s own home, consumers can appreciate the freedom from time restraints and/or crowds. This also affords a certain level of anonymity that consumers are gravitating towards.

The internet, for some consumers, is a venue whereby the possibility of receiving unfair treatment can be mitigated by the anonymity of the complaint handling venue. Fromkin (1999, p. 115) states, “Anonymity may turn out to be the only tool available to ordinary people that can level the playing field against corporations and governments that might seek to use new data processing and data collection tools in ways that constrain the citizen’s transactional or political freedom. Thus, their main line of defense against being profiled is likely to be anonymous communication or pseudonymous transactions.” Sheehan and Hoy (1999) studied online consumers’ responses to privacy concerns. They determined that as privacy concerns increased, registration for websites decreased. They also noted that as consumers’ privacy concerns increased, their behavior that would be considered complaint oriented decreased. Kehoe, Pitkow and Morton (1997) state that one way the internet differentiates itself is in its ability to allow patrons to participate anonymously.

In summation, distributive justice refers to the customer perception of equitable compensation; procedural justice explores the ease of filing and resolving a complaint; and interactional justice focuses on the amount of interaction and concern displayed by the company/offender (Martinez-Tur et al. 2006; McMahon-Beattie 2011). With the increase in online consumerism, interactional justice becomes particularly worthy of further investigation when a technology interface is part of the complaint process. Thus, to the degree that an agent-to-consumer interaction is not as evident in an online environment, a deeper investigation of customer satisfaction and justice is warranted.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As indicated previously, distributive justice refers to the customer perception of equitable compensation; procedural justice explores the ease of filing and resolving a complaint; and interactional justice focuses on the amount of interaction and concern displayed by the company/offender (Martinez-Tur et al. 2006; McMahon-Beattie 2011). With the increase in online consumerism, we believe that interactional justice becomes particularly worthy of further investigation when a technology interface is part of the complaint process. Thus, to the degree that an agent-to-consumer interaction is not as evident in an online environment, a deeper investigation of customer satisfaction and justice is warranted.

This study extracted qualitative feedback on consumers’ authentic complaint experiences and ultimately their satisfaction with the complaint process for online and offline situations. The basic research questions for this study were two-fold:

1) Will online and offline complaint respondents demonstrate significant differences in the way in which they perceive justice in the complaint handling process?

2) Will offline complaint respondents have a greater expectation of interactional justice than online complaint respondents?

METHODOLOGY

With the underpinning of justice theory (distributive, procedural, interactional), the purpose of this study was to determine whether there were differences in consumers’ complaint satisfaction based on consumers’ use of traditional complaint mechanisms (e.g. phone, mail, fax) versus their use of online/internet options for initiating and conducting the complaint process. To extract these pieces of information, consumers were not only asked to rank popular complaint options (telephone, mail, fax, face-to-face, and online) in order of preference – but consumers were also asked to evaluate their satisfaction. This piece is a portion of a much larger instrument that looked at modeling the justice theory components and their antecedents in an effort to compare customer satisfaction with online and traditional complaint methods. The complete instrument also contained demographic questions.

The instrument as a whole was pre-tested using a convenience sample of 34 consumers. Some of the respondents in this pre-test were undergraduate and graduate students. Others in the convenience sample included individuals who attended an international multi-cultural marketing conference, and others were members of two professional business organizations. The pre-test did not lead to any adjustments to the questions used for this study.

The sample for this research was drawn from a population of individuals pursuing or hoping to pursue graduate degrees who utilized a standardized testing service. 10,921 individuals from 90 countries that included the U.S., India, Japan, and the United Kingdom were sent an e-mail letter requesting that they complete an independent survey on the testing service company’s website regarding their most recent complaint experience. The Chief Information Officer of the testing service company provided a letter of endorsement that accompanied the solicitation e-mails. In addition, drawings were held for testing aids materials the testing service organization sells. These incentives were intended to increase response rate.

Prospective respondents were asked to articulate an authentic goods or service encounter experience they had that resulted in the need to launch a complaint. This is known as the critical incident method. Malhotra (1996) states that asking respondents to address an actual problem that they have experienced provides authenticity and a higher level of external validity. This technique has been used in quite a few consumer behavior research projects (e.g., Evardsson and Ross 2001; Roos 2002; Gremler 2004).

Qualitative data were gathered. Questions allowed respondents the opportunity to; 1) offer rationale for their preferred choice of complaint mechanisms (online versus offline [traditional]); 2) provide greater detail about their complaint experience; and 3) suggest possible solutions to their situation. Open-ended questions included: 1) Please explain the reason you preferred your first ranked preference; and 2) If you do not particularly prefer using the online option, please explain why.

Effective analysis of qualitative data requires the systemization and quantification of text (Taylor-Powell & Renner 2003).
Systemization is the analysis of text which eliminates biases in classification formation that support the researcher’s hypothesis, and quantification is the process by which qualitative data are altered into a form amendable for statistical methods (Berelson 1952; Holsti 1969).

To maintain data integrity and authenticity while removing the doubt of bias, qualitative responses were coded independently by three researchers that were all given the same instructions with regard to the coding process. Each researcher analyzed each of the statements and extracted all themes present. If the themes were extracted by two or more researchers, it was used. If the theme did not meet this criterion for a given question, it was not included.

After the themes were extracted, they were uploaded into the CATegory Package (CATPAC) which counted the frequency of the responses. CATPAC is a self-organizing software package that organizes words by frequency, representative percentage of words based on total words responded, case frequency and case percentage (Krippendorf 1980; Thomas & Mills 2006). This is all based on the classifications after data smoothing which is a standardization procedure used to eliminate the misspelling or pluralizing of words impacting the frequency total for a response (Krippendorf, 1980; Woelfel 1990). After this standardization, the software calculates the frequency for each term while also giving the percentage of total words. This process of taking the results of direct quotes from respondents to open ended questions and quantifying these results by extracting themes from these statements is a methodology that was successfully used by Thomas & Mills (2006). This approach was also used in a study of online product or customer service failure or success, using a third party consumer evaluation website (Goetzinger, Park and Widdows 2006).

FINDINGS

The Sample

A total of 1,821 of 10,921 surveys were returned for a 16.67% response rate. Of those 1,821, there were 516 usable surveys from respondents who described a formal complaint situation. These respondents came from 56 different countries. The U.S. represented 56% of the sample. The countries outside of the U.S. with the most respondents included, India, Canada, the United Kingdom, The People’s Republic of China, Brazil and Peru.

Thirty percent (30%) of the 516 respondents used an online method of complaining whereas seventy percent (70%) of the respondents engaged in a traditional complaint process. Thirty three percent of U.S. respondents complained online. Twenty five percent of respondents outside of the U.S. complained online. Fifty nine percent of the respondents who complained by fax were outside of the U.S.

Of the 516 respondents, fifty-nine percent (304) were male; thirty eight percent (196) were female. Three percent (16) did not specify gender. Nearly half were already college graduates. Fifteen percent held master’s degrees, while 25% had completed some post-graduate work. Approximately half of the respondents earned more than $50,000 annually.

Consumers’ Rankings of Complaint Methods

Respondents were asked to rank the following complaint methods from 1 (most preferred) to 5 (least preferred): phone, online, face-to-face, mail, and fax. The rankings were then given the following values: “1” = 5 points; “2” = 4 points; “3” = 3 points; “4” = 2 points; and “5” = 1 point. These point values were then used to calculate a complaint method score. Complaining via the telephone (176), online (161), and face-to-face (141) were the most preferred methods overall, ranking 1st, 2nd, and 3rd respectively. Complaining via the mail (33) and fax (5) ranked 4th and 5th. Table 1 shows the method, total score, number of individuals that preferred the given method first, the number of comments provided as justification for why they preferred the complaint method, and a summary of the rationales.
## TABLE 1

Reasons for Ranking Complaint Method 1st in Order of Preference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method*</th>
<th>Total^ Score</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent Rated 1st</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Reason #+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>2024</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>speed (100), feedback (47), human contact (44), convenience (41), simple (36), accuracy (27), accountability (25), anonymity (9), wide reach (5), tone (2), cost effective (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>1828</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>speed (75), convenience (63), simple (47), paper trail (40), feedback (24), accuracy (17), cost effective (16), anonymity (11), wide reach (7), tone (3), accountability (1), only option (1),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>1596</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>feedback (57), serious (55), human contact (45), speed (33), accuracy (29), body language (22), accountability (10), simple (3), record (1), tone (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail</td>
<td>1222</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>paper trail (21), serious (10), feedback (5), accountability (4), accuracy (4), speed (3), anonymity (2), convenience (2), simple (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fax</td>
<td>1014</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>paper trail (3), speed (3), accuracy (2),</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These rankings were in line with the mechanisms the respondents reported that they actually used in filing their complaint. Those results were that 198 (38.4%) of the respondents complained by phone, 151 (34.1%) complained using an online method (e-mail or web), eighty (15.5%) complained face-to-face, seventy complained by mail (13.6%), and seventeen (3.3%) complained by fax.

For each of the methods indicated as actually being used for filing complaints, themes emerged regarding why that method was chosen. These themes are indicated in Table 2. We ranked the top ten themes. In doing so, only twelve themes in total emerged between the online and offline respondents. Eight of the themes that emerged were the same for both online and offline respondents. Those eight themes were all procedural justice themes. Two additional procedural justice themes ranked in the top ten for either online or offline complaint consumers. The final two themes were interactional justice themes.

The common procedural justice themes were: speed, convenience, ease, paper trail, accuracy, resolution, acknowledgement, accountability. Two themes, cost and seriousness, were among the top ten themes for one genre, but not the other. Cost ranked number eight for online complainers, but number seventeen for offline complainers. Seriousness ranked number six for offline complainers but ranked number fourteen for online complainers.

A key finding was that anonymity and human interaction emerged as themes representing how interactional justice is experienced for online and offline respondents respectively. Anonymity ranked seventh for online complainers, but ranked twelfth for offline complainers. Conversely, human interaction ranked second for offline complainers, but twelfth for online complainers.

### Phone Grievances

When asked to justify choosing the telephone as their preferred method for filing a grievance, the following themes emerged: speed, feedback, human contact, convenience, simplicity, accuracy, accountability, and anonymity. Speed in this instance relates to the speed of the complaint process - or the time it takes to file the complaint and receive a resolution. Respondents commented that the telephone is the “fastest, most reliable way to complain” and the “response is faster.” Strongly related to the speed was the desire for acknowledgement of the complaint and perceived likelihood of a resolution. Many respondents provided comments resembling the idea that the telephone provided a venue where “you can usually get an answer to the question or issue during the first encounter.”

Another theme represented among some of the phone and face-to-face respondents was interaction with a person. Interaction with an individual facilitated explaining your grievances and otherwise providing clarity, knowing that the company is properly handling your complaint, and expediting a resolution. This is evident in the following illustrative response: “You can better receive a direct answer for the steps that will be taken. You are able to ask questions and receive immediate answers and then you are able to follow up with more descriptive questions in certain cases.”

### Online Grievances

The main justifications for preferring to complain online focus on the issue of simplicity and the time it takes to file a complaint, have it addressed and receive feedback. Simplicity emerged when respondents specifically mentioned some of the difficulties related to filing a complaint by phone, manifested in the following comment, “Email is the easiest mode for me meaning I don’t have to wait for lengthy periods on hold for example and then not have a written response returned.” Also, respondents stated that, “Online was the fastest way of sending the complaints and getting answers without wasting much time.” Filing complaints online was also largely categorized as convenient. Respondents appreciated the idea of being able to “register an online complaint at their own time,” “doing it at any time from home,” and “being able to address the complaint at their own convenience, not the company’s.”
Justice for Complaining Consumers

The most insightful finding for online complaint consumers was the theme of anonymity. These consumers enjoyed the absence of face-to-face interaction, preferring to remain anonymous. This anonymity was perceived to remove stereotypes and tone from the facts. Sentiments on this issue included, “less confrontational … don’t have to argue.” The ability to contact, explain, and receive feedback along with written documentation of the process were also noted as reasons for preferring online complaint methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Justice Theory Dimension</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Online @ Comments</th>
<th>Offline # Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>immediacy of complaint delivery &amp; resolution</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROCEDURAL</td>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>availability/accessibility of complaint filing method</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Easy</td>
<td>simplicity of filing and communicating throughout the process</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paper trail</td>
<td>written record of complaint</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>ability to convey accurate information</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>results of the complaint process</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>company’s notification of awareness of complaint</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>knowing that a company’s representative is actively addressing my concern</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>expense to customer of filing complaint</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seriousness</td>
<td>feeling that the company is genuinely concerned about the failed experience</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anonymity</td>
<td>the absence of face-to-face interaction and the ability to remove stereotypes from the facts</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human interaction</td>
<td>the ability to interact with an individual</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Ranking of theme within complaint group
^ Ranking bolded if the theme represented a representative percentage of responses
% Representative percentage of the theme within the complaint category
# Total Traditional Comments 683
@ Total Online Comments 304

TABLE 2
Comparison of the Top Themes Extracted From Qualitative Analysis of Reasons for Preferring Online and Conventional (Phone, Face-to-Face, Mail & Fax) Complaint Methods
This written format was also associated with the respondent’s ability to explain their grievance and otherwise provide clarity without fear of confrontation. These aspects were viewed as increasing the likelihood of a resolution. The following statements represent these themes: “I am able to describe in full details as I go through the event mentally which is not possible when I call or even go face-to-face” and “Having sent an e-mail I have something written to prove that I really complained.” Online was also preferred because individuals from other countries were able to file complaints with relative ease.

**Face-to-Face Grievances**

Respondents who preferred filing grievances face-to-face felt the interaction with the company representative increased the likelihood of getting a resolution and ensured that the company was effectively handling their complaint. This was evident in the following illustrative responses: “Usually, people don't like confrontation. If you go to them in person they have no choice but to deal with you and you can quite possibly avoid the other routes;” and “By addressing the issue through a face-to-face interaction, it is a lot easier to ensure that you will get a resolution.” These respondents also felt that they were able to explain their grievances and otherwise provide clarity while interpreting the nonverbal cues of the company representative.

Respondents also thought that this interaction ensured that the company was taking their complaint seriously and allowed for the filing process to be expedited and run much more smoothly. These ideas are represented in the following statements: “You are there in person and hopefully the person receiving the complaint can judge your anger and concern;” and “I think they are more willing to try to understand your situation and work things out when there is a real person there.” Also, the idea of being able to hold the representative they are speaking to accountable for managing their complaint, provided them with some perceived security.

**Mail and Fax Grievances**

Respondents viewed the option of faxing their complaint in a very similar light as mailing – paper trail, speed, and accuracy. Justification for preferring to use the mail to file complaints highlighted interest in written documentation of the complaint. This documentation was thought to ensure that the company knows that the consumer wants results, and therefore results in acknowledgement of the complaint and likelihood of a resolution. Respondents commented that filing the response via mail provided them with “proof of the date, time, and text of the complaint” and represented a “more legit and formal” grievance submission. The U.S. mail also provided them with the option of getting a return receipt. The ability to file their complaint in writing provided respondents with anonymity and a “good way to present facts and explain a situation which shows intent and determination.” Respondents felt that the formal nature of the mailed complaint ensured that their grievance would be taken seriously, and they “could send it to multiple locations (like a corporate customer service office, a regional and or/district office, and to the location where the dissatisfaction occurred).” **Table 3** (next page) is a depiction of complaint mechanism choices relative to the anonymity/human interaction need of the respondents.

Following is a description of the various grievance methods and the corresponding themes for those methods.

**Comparisons of Online and Offline Themes**

**Table 4** shows a summary of the justifications provided by individuals that preferred to complain via online methods. This chart also shows the theme, the frequency and representative percentage of total online comments, and sample comments from the respondents.
Table 3 shows a summary of the justifications provided by individuals that preferred to complain via traditional offline methods. The chart shows the theme, the frequency and representative percentage of total offline comments, and sample comments from the respondents.

The first research question for this study was, “Will online and offline complaint respondents demonstrate significant differences in the way in which they perceive justice in the complaint handling process?” Our findings suggest that online and offline complaint respondents had far more common interests and preferences with respect to complaint satisfaction. Primarily, they both were keenly focused on procedural justice. The top theme for both online and offline complaint respondents was speed with 25.3% of online complaint respondents making mention of this concern and 20.4% of the offline complaint respondents indicating this factor. In fact, eight of the same themes regarding procedural justice emerged for both groups and each group had one additional procedural justice theme that was not unveiled as a top theme by the other group. Cost was a top ten theme for online respondents but not in the top ten for offline complaint respondents. It ranked eighth, accounting for 4.6% of the responses for online respondents. (It accounted for only .1% of offline responses.) For offline complaint consumers, seriousness was a top ten theme, but not online respondents. It ranked sixth for offline consumers, accounting for 7.2% of their responses. (It accounted for only .7% of online responses.)

In addition, two themes (one for each group) emerged for interactional justice. Anonymity emerged for online consumers, while human interaction emerged for offline consumers. There were no top ten themes for distributive justice for either group.

The second research question that guided this study was, “Will offline complaint respondents have a greater expectation of interactional justice than online complaint respondents?” In fact one interactional justice theme emerged for each respondent type. These themes reflected differing preferences or requirements for interactional justice for conventional (offline) complaint respondents as compared to online complaint respondents.

For offline respondents human interaction received the second highest number of comments (14.8%). As predicted, the idea of human interaction was downplayed by online respondents receiving only .9% of responses. Anonymity received the seventh highest number of comments by online respondents with 4.9% of comments. Offline complaint respondents’ comments on anonymity were only 1.6% of the total responses.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>Immediacy of complaint delivery &amp; resolution</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>&quot;It’s the fastest way of communication and can be tracked of &quot;; &quot;E-mailing or filling out a web form is the fastest way to delay a complaint - no waiting on hold &quot;; &quot;Speed is the biggest factor, no need to wait for an operator.&quot;; &quot;Online is the fastest way of sending the complaints and getting answers without wasting much of time.&quot;; &quot;efficient in time&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>Availability/accessibility of complaint filing method</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>&quot;sav[es me time and I can do it whenever I have the chance and wherever I am.&quot;; &quot;E-mail is readily available, easy to use, and can be written/read at one's convenience.&quot;; &quot;Ease of use, immediacy even when remote.&quot;; &quot;I can complain at midnight from home&quot;; &quot;I can do it when I think of it.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy</td>
<td>Simplicity of filing and communicating throughout the process</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>&quot;For the ease of use…&quot;; &quot;it is the easiest for me&quot;; &quot;Its simple to use&quot;; &quot;eas...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paper trail</td>
<td>Written record of complaint</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>&quot;Because the company cannot say that they did not receive the message.&quot;; &quot;have a record that is easy to handle afterwards&quot;; &quot;the facts of the situation can be resolved in writing, great for later problems if they continue to be left unresolved.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>Ability to convey accurate information</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>&quot;All details of the complaint can be provided and documented and it does not require long waits &quot;; &quot;E-mail allows one to think over what they want to say and ensures that the business received it right away&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>Results of the complaint process</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>&quot;I ranked them in that way considering the amount of time I invest in making the complaint, and the time of response.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymity</td>
<td>The absence of face-to-face interaction and the ability to remove stereotypes and tone from the facts</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>&quot;...completely explain my position without interruption&quot;; &quot;less confrontational, don't have too argue...&quot;; &quot;Plus it forces me to slow down and be less angry about the problem.&quot;; &quot;words feel more rational and reasonable&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>Amount of money to file</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>&quot;Inexpensive&quot;; &quot;cost least time and money on the part of the customer.&quot;; &quot;Because i live in Peru. The fastest and cheapest mean to complain is the email&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>Company’s notification of awareness of complaint</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>&quot;Ease of communication and confirmation that complaints have been received and subsequently dealt with…&quot;; &quot;Immediate access and potential for immediate resolution.&quot;; &quot;most responses are fairly quick&quot;; &quot;you get responses easier&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Knowing that a company’s representative is actively addressing my concern</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>&quot;...subject to confidence that the receiving company actually has the commitment to using the technology appropriately.&quot;; &quot;Serious&quot;; &quot;they have to read the comment I think it is taken more seriously&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>human interaction</td>
<td>Interaction with individuals</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>&quot;...will reach the person in real time, where he can analyze the nature of complaint&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some comments addressed multiple themes
N = 194 respondents; n = 304 total responses
### TABLE 5
Qualitative Results from Conventional Complaint Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Comments *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>immediacy of acknowledgement and resolution</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>&quot;I can get answers immediately;&quot; &quot;A complaint should be handled immediately;&quot; &quot;Launching a complaint through phone is easy and additional information can be easily exchanged during the first interaction;&quot; &quot;efficient.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>human interaction</td>
<td>the ability to interact with an individual</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>&quot;Dealing directly with humans is more effective;&quot; &quot;I don't have the time to meet someone face to face, but strongly prefer to actually talk to a person;&quot; &quot;I like to be able to explain exactly what I mean and to modify my explanation as the representative responds.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>results of the complaint process</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>&quot;By addressing the issue through a face-to-face interaction, it is a lot easier to ensure that you will get a resolution.;&quot; &quot;Quickest way to fix the problem.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>availability/accessibility of the complaint filing method</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>&quot;Phone is convenient;&quot; &quot;you can perform wherever you want;&quot; &quot;You can speak directly to a rep.;&quot; &quot;can be done from anywhere;&quot; &quot;I can call from work at my convenience;&quot; &quot;I have no time to go to an office or to send papers.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>the ability to convey accurate information</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>&quot;It gives better opportunity to explain the problem and get feedback on the same;&quot; &quot;clear communication;&quot; &quot;Because in this situation I can ask easily what is on my mind and can get answer as clear as I need;&quot; &quot;Should there be clarification needed, the problem could be resolved on the spot;&quot; &quot;Nothing is lost in the translation.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>feeling that company is genuinely concerned about the failed experience</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>&quot;Least likely to forget about it;&quot; &quot;Face-to-face, you can understand my concerns better and the manager just can't brush you off;&quot; &quot;To me it seems more legitimate and formal if done by letter to the company's corporate office.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy</td>
<td>simplicity of filing and communicating throughout the process</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>&quot;Easiest to communicate in person;&quot; &quot;much easier to convey why you are unhappy, and talk about the whole situation;&quot; &quot;Easy to do &amp; can be done the minute you find a problem.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>knowing that a company representative is actively addressing my concern</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>&quot;It's easier to explain the situation to an actual person - plus, you KNOW that someone is there receiving your complaint;&quot; &quot;I would like to have the name of a person should I have to refer back to complain again;&quot; &quot;It gets more personal when you face someone and it is not so easy to simply dismiss or pass the issue along to someone else.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledge ment</td>
<td>company's notification of awareness of the complaint</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>&quot;Quick reply;&quot; &quot;You get instant feedback on your complaint;&quot; &quot;I know that I am being heard;&quot; &quot;I know that someone actually hears me;&quot; &quot;immediate attention.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paper trail</td>
<td>written record of the complaint</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>&quot;Mail provides the best form of documentation;&quot; &quot;Provides a written and authenticated record for future reference;&quot; &quot;You have a receipt record and it makes it official w/ signature.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body language</td>
<td>the ability to interpret nonverbal cues</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>&quot;Face-to-face allows me to see their body language to truly tell if they care about my problem;&quot; &quot;They can see you, read your body language and you can see how they react, versus the opposite;&quot; &quot;Facial expression allows for more understanding of my disappointment in the product/service.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymity</td>
<td>the absence of face-to-face interaction and the ability to remove stereotypes from the facts</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>&quot;You have a live conversation without having the person see you and take certain factors into consideration (age, race, etc.) when handling the problem;&quot; &quot;The phone allows you some distance to not be put on the spot or be easily shrugged off by a salesperson/rep, yet affords an immediate way to resolve the situation without it escalating.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some comments address multiple themes

^ Tone (2), cost (1), and customized (1) were also themes that were mentioned; N = 322 respondents; n = 683 total comment


**DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

**Interactional Justice for Online and Offline Complaints**

A couple of earlier studies on consumer complaint satisfaction that used justice theory as an underpinning have resulted in findings that illuminate the importance of interactional justice. This is particularly the case in research on relationship marketing (Goodwin and Ross 1992; Hartline and Ferrell 1996). Our research provides more specific insight on interactional justice based on consumers’ authentic complaint occasions in both online and offline genres.

The predominant finding is that interactional justice does not have the same meaning (emphasis/importance) for online complaint consumers. Offline respondents ranked human interaction as their 2nd most important theme. Human interaction ranked twelfth for online complaint consumers. Online respondents ranked anonymity as their 7th most important theme. Online respondents enjoyed the absence of the face-to-face interaction. They also preferred filing a complaint without being interrupted, having an argument or being judged based on stereotypes. Conversely, some offline complaint consumers who used the “face-to-face” mechanism actually viewed the “confrontation” aspect of the complaint process as being conducive to getting a more favorable outcome.

Interactional justice is at the heart of understanding how online complaint consumers perceive justice in the absence of human interaction. In general, respondents who preferred the human interaction felt that their preferred method expedited the complaint resolution process. Some of these consumers preferred the face-to-face mechanism but interestingly some of the individuals who preferred the phone gravitated to the benefits of the human interaction. With the face-to-face mechanism, complaint filers could read the body language of the company representative. With the phone mechanism, the grievance filer could interpret the tone of voice or written language. Respondents viewed this as an important factor in achieving a desired result.

For these conventional complainers, interactional justice meant that the consumers wanted the tangible human interaction. This was evidenced by the conventional complainers being happy about making themselves known to the companies to which they were complaining. The online complainers, conversely, enjoyed the anonymity the use of technology afforded them. These online complainers were happy about not being known to the companies to which they were complaining.

These findings provide insight for justice theory in general and justice theory as it applies to the online environment in particular. The two interactional justice themes that were revealed are surrogates for the most poignant intuitive differences between the needs of online consumers versus the needs of offline consumers. Some online complaint consumers as well as some phone, mail and fax complaint consumers seek the anonymity that technology or some other form of the “lack” of close physical contact affords. Offline consumers seek the transparency and openness that predominantly face-to-face or on occasion, phone encounters afford.

**Anonymity and Pseudonymity**

The efficacy of human interaction is a generally accepted tenet of justice theory, and interactional justice in particular. However, we found that some consumers view the human interaction aspect of complaint handling as a less favorable attribute. These consumers perceive that they will get a more positive complaint handling outcome in an anonymous context such as an online exchange. One condition under which this sentiment can prevail is the worst case scenario whereby consumers feel there is a chance that they will not be treated fairly by the business. This can manifest when businesses and governments gather data on individuals or have them under surveillance. This can lead to “…fears of abuse or misuse, and even suspicions of discrimination and manipulation” (Zarsky 2004, p. 1,302). This concept is outlined in the human interaction/anonymity matrix in Table 3. The matrix accommodates all the key varieties of complaint handling mechanisms (phone, online, face-to-face, mail, and fax).

Aside from the obvious demarcation between high and low human interactions, juxtaposed against high anonymity, there lies the concept of Pseudonymity. In the context of complaint handling, Pseudonymity is viewed in two ways. On the one hand, consumers are not
completely anonymous when complaining online, or by mail or fax. They do use some kind of moniker as an identifier. This moniker may or may not provide their true identify (e.g. in the case of an e-mail address). Sheehan and Hoy (1999) suggest that technology affords consumers the opportunity to not have their behavior associated with their authentic self.

Indeed a small portion of phone complaint consumers enjoyed the anonymity of not “facing” a company representative. However, they enjoyed the human interaction regarding discerning voice intonation. These blurred lines present further evidence of Pseudonymity in that the complainer is not completely anonymous.

The other aspect of Pseudonymity is that in a few instances in analyzing the qualitative feedback from the respondents, we found that some of the online complainers viewed human interaction in the form of guardianship over the process as being essential to ensuring that the complaint process was run well.

**Procedural Justice for Online and Offline Complaints**

The common eight procedural justice themes speak to a consumer-centered complaint handling process that, regardless of venue (online versus offline), creates the perception that the company is genuinely concerned about the consumer’s post purchase experience. Essentially, respondents overwhelmingly expressed that the strength of a complaint process lies in the way in which the complaint is handled. Hence, the fairness aspect or equity is predominantly tied to process, or procedural justice. This finding generates exceptional implications with respect to designing and monitoring complaint handling within a business.

According to this research, what is required with handling complaints is a timely and dependable process that keeps the consumer informed about the progression of the complaint and the status of the complaint with respect to bringing it to a close. While providing these characteristics, the process needs to be convenient, easy, accurate, and speedy. When a company receives a complaint, the company needs to acknowledge that the complaint has been received and the company needs to acknowledge that it will work to rectify the complaint.

The company also needs to indicate its accountability. Respondents desired the company that “wronged” them to receive and maintain evidence of the complaint in an efficient manner. Consumers preferring to use online, mail, and fax complaint methods were adamant that having a paper trail was necessary. This written record of filing a complaint, confirmation of receipt, and resolution provides a sense of security or “ensures” that the complaint will be taken seriously. Finally, respondents were clear that they wanted an actual resolution to their issue.

In addition, with respect to procedural justice, the ability to file a complaint from any place and at the convenience of the complaint filer was of great importance. This concept of convenience is related to time, distance, and technique. A significant portion of the respondent pool was international. They communicated that the idea of being able to file a complaint 24 hours a day, from any country, with access to the company, using the most practical means available, was deemed integral. Some of the comments that help to illustrate the concept of convenience are as follows: “It can be done from one's house as opposed to going to the post office, going to where a fax is accessible, or traveling by car to speak face-to-face”; “I have … 24 hours free access to internet and [it’s] less cumbersome”; “As I reside in Vietnam, e-mail is a simple fast and cheap way to launch complaint.”; and “Since I use my PC every day… it’s the most convenient way to communicate.”

Two of the additional themes that were important to the online and offline respondents independently were cost (for online consumers) and seriousness (for offline consumers). These too, are procedural justice themes. For online consumers, cost was one of the top ten important themes. Respondents felt that if they experience some dissatisfaction with the product or service at the fault of the product/service provider – then the complaint filing process should be able to be completed requiring minimal investment of time on the consumer’s part. With respect to seriousness, offline consumers wanted to know that the company was genuinely concerned about the failed experience. The efficient communication on the part of the company makes the respondent feel that their complaint is being taken seriously.
Distributive Justice for Online and Offline Complaints

It is particularly notable that none of the distributive justice dimensions were ranked in the top ten themes. Our findings contradict those of Clemmer and Schneider (1996) and Smith et al (1999) for which distributive justice emerged as having dominant importance. The findings from our study also contradict Chang and Wang (2012) who specifically found compensation and apology (distributive justice dimensions) to be two of the four critical attributes of service recovery.

The use of authentic scenarios when analyzing justice theory in combination with qualitative research methods, resulted in procedural justice emerging as the dominant preferred justice dimension of both online and offline respondents. Conversely, research studies on justice theory that operationalize experimental design, and use undergraduate students (mostly from the U.S.), often result in findings that place greater interest on distributive justice (Gelbrich and Roschh 2011).

The absence of a distributive justice theme corroborates consumers’ needs at a basic level for an expeditious, easy, convenient, communicative process that is brought to an explicit conclusion. “Apology” was conspicuously absent from the findings. In the past, “apology” has been a major issue in justice theory. The absence of apology and the absence of distributive justice themes as primary themes corroborates Davidow’s assertion that apology represents psychological compensation and is therefore a distributive justice theme (Davidow 2003).

The classification of an apology in the justice typology continues to be an insightful one. Traditionally, the act of apologizing has been said to be a simple response that is not costly and satisfies the consumer (Zemke 1994). The findings in this paper that procedural justice is a key point for eradicating problems suggests that consumers are seeking more tangible evidence, as would be provided through the complaint satisfaction process, that a company is genuinely and authentically seeking to solve a problem.

Comments from respondents regarding the necessity for procedural justice also provided insight into their feelings regarding distributive justice. In essence, consumers viewed that there would be parity in the remedy (distributive justice) in part because of the speed and feedback in the process. The speed and feedback efficiency suggested that the company took the complaint seriously and was doing its very best at solving the problem in a way that would make the consumer whole. Therefore, the person complaining was inclined to be receptive to the outcome irrespective of the value of the restitution. Hence, the way the problem was handled held more importance to the respondents than a required need to receive restitution. These sentiments also echo the Cho et al (2002) study stating that online consumers are concerned with costs as they relate to the time it takes to engage in the complaint handling process.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

An important insight from this study was the recognition of differences in the ways in which offline (conventional) and online (web-based) complaint consumers interpret interactional justice, one of the three justice theory dimensions. Our finding was that the key aspect of interactional justice (human interaction) is not regarded as being an essential aspect of a successful complaint handling process for all consumers who complain. Although for offline consumers, human interaction ranked the second highest theme regarding their perception of justice, this theme ranked twelfth in priority for online complaint consumers. Interestingly, anonymity ranked seventh for online consumers and only twelfth for offline consumers. Some online consumers actually prefer a complaint mechanism for which contact or interaction with a company agent is not explicitly a part of the complaint process. This would be particularly true of consumers who do not view confrontation as an essential aspect of receiving equitable treatment in the complaint process. It is also true of consumers who might perceive that companies could be biased in their complaint handling. In this regard, consumers’ option to have anonymity in the complaint handling process is a favorable attribute. Therefore companies can leverage the online complaint option as a way to demonstrate that those companies provide equitable, unbiased, and expedient resolution to complaints.
Another important finding from this research was that procedural justice was found to be an integral part of the process for both online and offline complaint respondents. Eight of the top themes for both sets of respondents were held in common and were procedural justice themes.

Of significant note as well was the fact that distributive justice did not emerge among the top ten themes for either online or offline complaint respondents. We attribute this latter finding, in part, to the use of authentic complaint scenarios in the study, not relying exclusively on students as subjects, and the international profile of the sample pool of consumers.

Cho et al. (2001, p. 906) state, “Well implemented complaint management, as an e-business’ defensive strategy, will have a great impact on … web assessment issues, such as technological and operational issues.” One way our research has managerial application is in how a business can operationalize its complaint handling processes whether it is transitioning from a “bricks and mortar” operation to an “online” venue or simply mechanizing the complaint process. There may be some services that cannot be optimally executed online. However, for those services that can be moved to the online environment, companies need not have fear of alienating or otherwise antagonizing their customer base. On the contrary, for some consumers, the ability to use technology for the complaint process, and thus in some cases avoiding “confrontation” with a company representative, is in fact preferred. Technology also affords these consumers with a level of anonymity that they often seek.

Future research is needed to reveal the balance of justice dimensions in quantitative empirical explorations based on critical incidents when online and offline venues are juxtaposed. Given that the use of authentic scenarios here resulted in procedural justice emerging as the dominant preferred justice dimension of both online and offline respondents, further research in other online contexts is needed for strengthening the generalizability of the findings. In addition, insight on what motivates one’s degree of anonymity sought would assist managers in understanding and catering to customers’ preferences for complaint handling interaction as we move toward a higher intensity of technological interactions around the world.

Anonymity can be a double-edged sword for online complaint handling. The side of technology anonymity that may serve the consumer, might also cause distress for companies. Consumers are now capable of airing their complaints by writing reviews, blogs, tweets, and posting YouTube videos. According to research from EURO RSCG Worldwide, 43% of Internet users feel less inhibited online, displaying bolder behaviors and more aggressive methods of consumer complaints (“Consumers Free to Speak Their Mind Online” 2009). Technology has opened up avenues to consumers that can assist or make it difficult for businesses to keep control of their complaint handling and customer satisfaction mechanisms. These conditions deserve further investigation.

Another fruitful area of future study lies in an analysis of differences in preferences of American consumers versus consumers from other parts of the world. These analyses could also look at consumers in developed countries versus consumers in developing or emerging economies.

Finally, given new forms of technology such as Skype and social media, businesses can simulate the face-to-face contact if desired. These new forms of technology may prove to be the optimal bridge between online and offline interactions. These technologies may also enhance the convenience factor.

REFERENCES


Consumers Free to Speak Their Mind Online


Justice for Complaining Consumers


Send correspondence regarding this article to one of the following:

Dr. Kendra L. Harris
Harris Consulting Group
P.O. Box 2032
Cary, NC 27512-2032
Email: klharris2000@aol.com

Lionel Thomas, PhD, MPM, CDM, CFPP
Assistant Professor
Livingstone College
Ballard Hall Rm 201
701 West Monroe Street
Salisbury, NC 28144
Email: lthomas@livingstone.edu

Jacqueline A. Williams, PhD
Associate Professor
Marketing, Transportation and Supply Chain
North Carolina A&T State University
School of Business and Economics
Merrick Hall, Room 344
Greensboro, NC 27411
Email: drjakkiwilliams@aol.com