

## Cultural Influences and Complaint Behavior of Older Consumers in International Markets: A Comparative Study

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**Abstract** – This paper examines how cultural differences impact the complaint behavior of older consumers and outlines the implications for complaint management by internationally operating companies. Through a systematic literature analysis, this study investigates how cultural dimensions such as individualism versus collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance shape the behavior of older consumers. The findings highlight that in individualistic cultures like the U.S. or Germany, complaints are more frequently and directly expressed, as individual rights and fairness are central values. In collectivist cultures like Japan or China, however, the need for social harmony predominates, leading to complaints often being avoided or expressed indirectly. Additionally, high power distance in some cultures, such as China, serves as a barrier to complaint behavior, especially when complaints need to be directed toward authority figures. Age-related limitations and socioemotional selectivity theory further reinforce this behavior, influencing whether and how older individuals voice complaints. This study demonstrates that a thorough understanding of the cultural influences on the complaint behavior of older customers is essential for the success of globally operating companies. Culturally adapted complaint management strategies contribute to improved customer satisfaction and loyalty, ultimately providing companies with competitive advantages in an increasingly globalized market. The paper also identifies research gaps, such as the need for further studies on specific subcultures and ethnic groups and the role of digital channels in the complaint behavior of older consumers.

**Keywords** - Culture, Complaint Behavior, Older Consumers, Economics of Population Aging

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## 1 Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, complaint management is a crucial factor for internationally operating companies aiming to build and maintain long-term customer relationships (Yilmaz, Varnali, & Kasnakoglu, 2016; Ateke, Asiegbu, & Nwulu, 2015; Van Doorn et al., 2010; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002; Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998). This topic is particularly relevant with regard to the growing market of older consumers, who, due to demographic shifts, represent a significant target group (Moschis, 2003; Meiners et al., 2011; Meiners & Seeberger, 2010; Meiners & da Silva Santana, 2014). The expectations of older consumers regarding products and services differ from those of younger consumers, as they prioritize harmony, reliability, and social appreciation. Younger consumers often value prompt, direct feedback and utilize modern channels such as social media or chat tools for complaints, whereas older consumers, due to traditional communication preferences and cognitive barriers (e.g., lower digital affinity), frequently rely on classical communication channels such as telephone or letter (Davidow, 2003; Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985). A well-designed complaint management system provides older customers with an opportunity to voice their concerns while enhancing their satisfaction and loyalty to the company (Blodgett, Hill, & Tax, 1997).

Numerous studies have examined the consumption and complaint behavior of older customers, showing that this behavior differs in many aspects from that of younger consumers (Meiners, Reucher, & Khan, 2024; Meiners, Reucher, Khan, & Spille, 2021; Gorn, Tse, & Weinberg, 1991; Marmorstein, Grewal, & Fische, 1992). A significant aspect is the higher resignation tendency among older individuals, meaning they are less likely to voice complaints even if dissatisfied with a product or service (Bearden & Oliver, 1985). This reluctance may be attributed to various factors, including lower affinity for using complaint channels, a desire to avoid conflict, and age-related limitations in mobility and communication (Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985). These characteristics of older consumers' complaint behavior underscore that traditional approaches to complaint management may not be well-suited to the specific needs of this demographic.

The cultural dimension of complaint behavior is another factor gaining importance in academic discussion. Studies show that cultural values and norms significantly influence how people handle conflicts and problems, including the expression of complaints (Hofstede, 1984; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). People in collectivist cultures are more likely to avoid complaints or express them indirectly, while complaints in individualistic cultures tend to be more openly and directly presented (Chan & Wan, 2008). While these cultural differences in complaint behavior are well-documented, few studies focus specifically on older consumers and how their cultural background shapes their complaint behavior.

Although cultural differences in consumer behavior are widely researched (de Mooij, 2019), a notable gap exists in studying the complaint behavior of older consumers across cultures. Most studies on complaint behavior focus on younger target groups or examine older consumers from a single-cultural perspective, failing to adequately consider cultural variables (Moschis, 2003).

Given the growing global presence of companies and the diversity of customer groups, understanding the cultural differences in the complaint behavior of older people is essential. For example, an older consumer in a highly collectivist culture like Japan might hold back complaints to preserve social harmony, while a consumer in more individualistic cultures like the U.S. might address complaints directly to assert personal interests (Hofstede, 1984; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The research question of this paper is thus: How does cultural conditioning affect the complaint behavior of older consumers in different countries or ethnic groups? To further explore this, the study also addresses the following sub-questions: How do age-related cognitive and social factors interact with cultural norms to influence the complaint behavior of older consumers in different markets? What role do digital communication channels play in shaping the complaint behavior of older consumers across individualistic versus collectivist cultures? Additionally, how do cultural dimensions like power distance and uncertainty avoidance specifically impact older consumers' willingness to use formal versus informal complaint channels?

Answering these questions is relevant for improving complaint management in internationally operating companies, allowing for better alignment with the specific needs and expectations of a globalized, older customer base. Understanding the influence of cultural values and norms on older customers' complaint behavior could help companies enhance satisfaction and loyalty within this demographic, ultimately gaining competitive advantages.

The aim of this study is to analyze and understand the cultural influences on the complaint behavior of older consumers. This understanding should enable internationally operating companies to develop culturally specific complaint management strategies that meet the specific needs of older customers. The findings aim to provide recommendations for effective and differentiated complaint management, aligned with the cultural particularities of the older target group.

This paper is based on a literature review and analyzes existing research findings and theoretical models on cultural conditioning, complaint behavior, and aging. It specifically draws on studies addressing cultural differences in consumer behavior, as well as theoretical models such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions (1984) and theories on collectivist and individualist cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Building on these models, the study examines how cultural differences influence the complaint behavior of older consumers across different countries and ethnicities.

This study thus contributes to addressing an existing research gap in the culturally specific examination of older consumers' complaint behavior. It demonstrates that a culturally sensitive adaptation of complaint management is essential for companies in international markets to effectively serve a growing, diverse, and often demanding customer base.

## 2 Theoretical Background

In the study of cultural differences and their impact on consumer behavior, cultural models such as those developed by Hofstede and Schwartz provide important explanatory frameworks. These models form the basis for understanding how cultural values and norms shape consumer behavior across different countries and ethnic groups. In the context of older consumers' complaint behavior, theoretical approaches from gerontology are also significant, particularly the socioemotional selectivity theory, which illuminates the specific needs and behaviors of older adults. Additionally, this chapter presents typical cultural patterns in conflict resolution and complaint expression to comprehensively explain the complex influences of culture and age on complaint behavior.

### 2.1 Cultural Dimensions by Hofstede and Schwartz

Geert Hofstede is a pioneer in cultural research and has developed fundamental cultural dimensions that are frequently used to explain cultural differences in behavior. Hofstede's model includes several dimensions, of which individualism versus collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance are especially relevant for understanding complaint behavior (Hofstede, 1984).

"Individualism vs. Collectivism" is a dimension describing whether a society values individual independence (individualism) or group belonging (collectivism). In individualistic cultures, such as the U.S. and parts of Europe, people often place greater importance on personal freedom and self-interest and are thus more likely to express complaints directly (Hofstede, 2001). In contrast, in collectivist cultures like Japan and China, norms of restraint and harmony preservation are prevalent, leading to complaints being less frequent or more indirect (Triandis, 2001). This cultural conditioning significantly impacts how older adults express complaints, as they tend to avoid conflict and prioritize harmony, further reducing their willingness to complain in collectivist cultures.

"Power Distance" describes the degree of acceptance of hierarchies and authority within a culture. In high power distance cultures, such as India or Mexico, it is customary to interact with authority figures respectfully and deferentially. Complaints may therefore be perceived as disrespectful, decreasing the likelihood that older adults in such cultures will voice complaints (Hofstede, 2011). In cultures with low power distance, such as Germany or the Netherlands, there is less acceptance of hierarchical structures, which normalizes complaints and direct feedback (Smith et al., 2002).

"Uncertainty Avoidance" refers to the extent to which members of a culture feel comfortable in uncertain or unknown situations. In high uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as Greece or Portugal, people tend to minimize risks and prefer clear structures (Hofstede, 2011). This can lead older adults in these cultures to avoid complaints to prevent potential conflicts and uncertainties. In low uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as Sweden or Singapore, the acceptance of risks is higher, which can increase the willingness to complain.

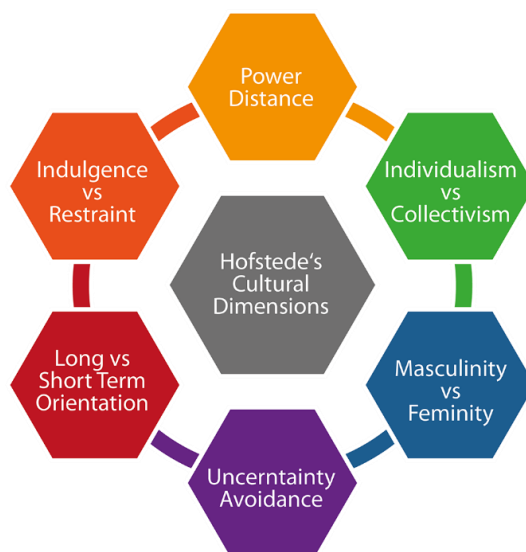


Figure 1: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Model (centerforhciva, 2023)

In addition to Hofstede's model, Schwartz provides a value model based on universal value dimensions that also sheds light on cultural differences. Schwartz distinguishes values such as self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, and tradition, all of which can affect how people respond to conflicts and problems (Schwartz, 1992). Regarding complaint behavior, older adults from cultures with a high tradition value may hesitate to complain to adhere to social norms and expectations.

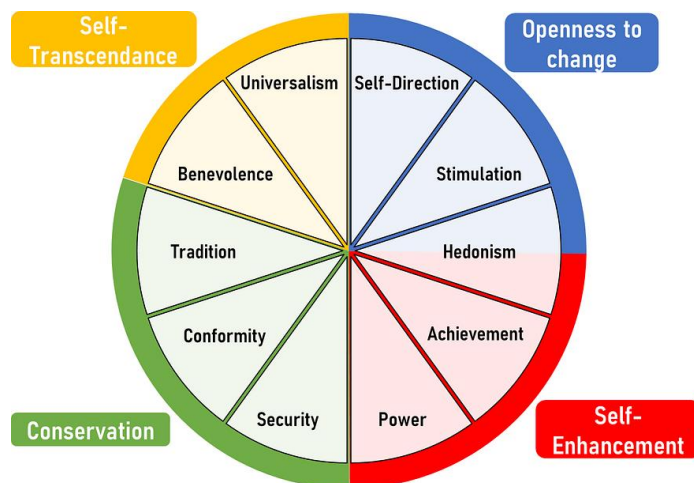


Figure 2: Schwartz's Universal Value Model (Pastorelli, 2020)

## 2.2 Complaint Behavior and Gerontology

The complaint behavior of older adults is influenced by age-related physiological and psychological changes. These changes include cognitive impairments, reduced mobility, and a generally decreasing willingness to actively seek out conflicts (Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985). Studies show that older adults often exhibit a greater tendency toward resignation, meaning they complain less often, even when dissatisfied with a service or product (Antonides & Van Raaij, 1998; Bearden & Oliver, 1985). Reasons for this could include less familiarity with modern complaint channels and a stronger orientation toward harmony and conflict avoidance.

An important theoretical approach to explaining older adults' behavior is the "socioemotional selectivity theory" (Carstensen, 1992). This theory posits that older people increasingly base their decisions on emotional goals and short-term satisfaction rather than long-term goal achievement. The theory explains why older people tend to become more peaceful and avoid conflict, often choosing to accept a negative experience rather than undertake the effort of a complaint.

This age-related focus on emotional well-being and harmony may be even more pronounced in collectivist cultures, where people are often taught to be restrained in social interactions from a young age (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, age-related changes have an amplifying effect on the pre-existing tendency for conflict avoidance in collectivist societies, further dampening the complaint behavior of older adults.

## 2.3 Influence of Culture on the Perception of Consumer Rights and Forms of Complaints

Cultural differences significantly influence how people perceive their rights and how they express complaints. In individualistic cultures such as the U.S., consumer rights are often emphasized, and complaining is seen as a legitimate means of asserting one's claims (de Mooij, 2019). In these cultures, complaints are viewed as part of a dialogical process in which companies and consumers exchange their interests. Older consumers from individualistic cultures may therefore feel more encouraged to express complaints, as they actively perceive their rights as consumers and consider defending their interests to be self-evident.

In collectivist cultures, however, such as China, Japan, or South Korea, there is strong social pressure to maintain harmony and avoid direct conflicts (Triandis, 2001). This can lead older adults in these cultures to suppress complaints or find alternative, indirect ways of expressing dissatisfaction. For instance, they may be more likely to silently accept a negative experience or switch providers without voicing a formal complaint. This can be problematic for companies, as silent customer attrition is difficult to identify and address.

Another aspect is the importance of different communication patterns in various cultures. High-context cultures, such as Japan or Arab countries, often value implicit communication, where information does not need to be explicitly stated to be understood (Hall, 1976). In these cultures, complaints may be

expressed implicitly and without direct confrontation, meaning that older consumers may express dissatisfaction through subtle hints or indirect remarks. In low-context cultures, such as the U.S. or Germany, direct and clear communication is preferred, so complaints are more likely to be openly and explicitly expressed (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

In summary, cultural models such as those of Hofstede and Schwartz offer valuable perspectives for understanding the complaint behavior of older consumers across different cultures. Age-related changes and culturally specific communication patterns strongly influence how older people respond to conflicts and whether they voice or withhold complaints. A deep understanding of these influences is essential for developing international complaint management strategies that meet the cultural and age-related expectations of this demographic.

### 3 Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review to explore the research gap regarding the cultural conditioning of older consumers' complaint behavior. Given the exploratory nature of this research, a qualitative analysis of relevant theoretical and empirical studies was conducted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The aim of the literature selection was to identify studies focused on cultural models, gerontology, and complaint behavior across various cultural contexts, particularly examining older consumers.

#### 3.1 Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted in three phases to ensure thoroughness and relevance. The following academic databases were utilized: JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected for their comprehensive coverage of research in psychology, sociology, gerontology, and consumer behavior.

**Phase 1:** In the initial phase, a broad search was conducted using general search terms, such as "cultural differences," "complaint behavior," "seniors," "older consumers," and "aging." Additionally, specific keywords were included to narrow down relevant studies: "Hofstede," "Schwartz," and "socioemotional selectivity theory." These keywords were chosen to capture studies that explore the intersection of cultural influences and the behavior of older consumers.

**Phase 2:** In the second phase, filters were applied to refine the search results. The inclusion criteria were set to focus on studies published between 1980 and 2024 to ensure the inclusion of both foundational theories and the latest developments in the field. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and academic book chapters were considered to maintain the credibility of the sources. Keywords were combined using Boolean operators (e.g., "AND," "OR") to refine the search scope, ensuring that the literature

addressed specific intersections, such as "older consumers AND complaint behavior" or "cultural dimensions AND seniors."

**Phase 3:** In the final phase, additional filters were used to exclude non-relevant studies, such as those not specifically addressing older consumers or cultural factors. Studies focusing solely on younger consumers or unrelated areas of consumer behavior were excluded. Manual screening of abstracts and, when necessary, full-text reviews were performed to confirm the studies' relevance to the research questions. Additionally, citation tracking was employed to identify seminal works frequently cited in the literature, particularly those exploring cultural conditioning and gerontology.

### 3.2 Data Analysis Approach

The analysis of the selected literature followed a thematic synthesis approach, as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). This method was chosen to identify recurring themes and patterns within the studies that relate to the complaint behavior of older consumers in different cultural contexts. The thematic analysis allowed for the categorization of findings into key areas, such as:

1. Cultural Conditioning: Studies examining how cultural dimensions (e.g., individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance) impact complaint behavior (Hofstede, 1984; Schwartz, 1992).
2. Gerontology and Age-related Factors: Research exploring how socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992) and age-related cognitive and social changes affect older consumers' willingness to voice complaints.
3. Consumer Behavior: Studies focusing on the differences in complaint behavior between older and younger consumers, with a particular focus on communication channels, such as digital versus traditional methods (Bearden & Oliver, 1985; Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985).

The thematic synthesis involved systematically coding the extracted data and organizing it into meaningful categories. This process facilitated the identification of gaps in existing research, particularly regarding the interaction between cultural values and age-related consumer behavior. Furthermore, it highlighted the need for more culturally adapted complaint management strategies tailored to older consumers.

### 3.3 Ensuring Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the literature review, the following measures were taken:

- Reproducibility: Detailed documentation of the search process, including keywords, filters, and databases used, ensures that the methodology can be replicated by other researchers.
- Peer Review Verification: Only studies published in peer-reviewed journals or credible academic sources were included to maintain the quality of the findings.



- Cross-checking Results: Citation analysis was conducted to confirm the inclusion of influential and widely recognized studies in the field.

By adopting this structured and comprehensive methodology, this study aims to provide robust insights into the cultural influences on the complaint behavior of older consumers, contributing to the development of effective complaint management strategies for international companies.

The methodology of this study is based on a systematic literature review to explore the research gap regarding the cultural conditioning of older consumers' complaint behavior. As this is an exploratory research topic, a qualitative analysis of relevant theoretical and empirical studies was conducted. The objective of the literature selection was to identify studies addressing cultural models, gerontology, and complaint behavior in various cultural contexts.

## 4 Findings

The following section presents the study's findings on the complaint behavior of older consumers across different cultures, focusing on the cultural influences that significantly affect complaint frequency, intensity, and channel preference. First, complaint behavior by cultural background is explored, showing how specific cultural values and norms shape the ways complaints are expressed. Subsequently, Section 4.2 analyzes common barriers and motivations that influence this behavior. Lastly, concrete case examples illustrate the connection between cultural conditioning and complaint behavior in various countries.

### 4.1 Complaint Behavior by Cultural Background

Consumer complaint behavior is strongly influenced by cultural conditioning, with substantial variation in the frequency, intensity, and choice of complaint channels between different cultures (Furrer, Liu, & Sudharshan, 2000). These differences reflect deeply rooted values and norms that guide consumer behavior and influence their expectations for the complaint process (Hofstede, 1984; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998; Lee & Cotte, 2009). For older consumers, this cultural conditioning is often more pronounced, as their values and behaviors have been solidified over decades, making them less adaptable to new, digital complaint channels and changing social expectations compared to younger consumers (Moschis, 2003).

#### 4.1.1 Frequency and Intensity of Complaint Behavior

The frequency and intensity of complaints are generally higher in individualistic cultures, such as the U.S. and Germany, compared to collectivist societies like Japan or China. In individualistic cultures, expressing complaints is viewed as a legitimate means of asserting individual rights. In the U.S., for example, consumers frequently and intensively use complaint management to voice dissatisfaction and seek solutions for the encountered issue (Singh,

1990). Studies indicate that American consumers formulate complaints with greater intensity through direct and clear communication and are also more likely to demand compensation or corrections (de Mooij, 2019). This reflects a culture that places high importance on customer satisfaction and individual rights. However, older American consumers often prefer a more formal and detailed complaint, usually in writing, and are less inclined to use digital platforms. In contrast, younger consumers frequently utilize social media or online reviews to make issues known publicly and in real-time (Davidow, 2003).

In collectivist cultures like Japan, there is a lower propensity to express complaints. Here, the need for harmony in social interactions is emphasized, leading consumers, especially older individuals, to avoid complaints to prevent conflicts (Triandis, 2001; Voorhees, Brady, & Horowitz, 2006). However, younger consumers in Japan have a tendency to use anonymous or indirect channels like online review platforms, with which older Japanese consumers are generally less familiar. The latter often prefer to express criticism subtly or avoid it altogether (Lin & Miller, 2003). A study by Nakata (2009) on Japanese consumers showed that complaints are often viewed as potentially harmful to social harmony, leading to dissatisfaction being accepted or indirectly expressed. In these cultures, complaint intensity is often lower, with consumers preferring subtle cues over direct confrontations (Hofstede, 2011). For older consumers, the need to avoid conflict and maintain harmony is further emphasized, resulting in even greater restraint compared to younger age groups, who are more open to direct criticism in globalized and digitalized environments (Carstensen, 1992).

#### **4.1.2 Differences in Choice of Complaint Channels**

In addition to frequency and intensity, preferred complaint channels also vary significantly between cultures. In individualistic cultures, direct complaint channels such as email and social media are preferred, as they allow for quick, straightforward communication. American consumers often use these digital channels to express complaints publicly or privately and seek a prompt response (Davidow, 2003). Younger consumers are more likely to choose platforms like social media for maximum visibility, while older consumers prefer personal or more formal channels such as letters and phone calls due to lower familiarity with digital channels and a preference for a more individualized response (Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985). Digital communication, on the other hand, enables a more anonymous and less emotional interaction, helping to lower thresholds for complaints. In Germany, too, written complaint channels are commonly used, with consumers frequently providing detailed explanations and expectations (Klein & Dawar, 2004).

In cultures with high power distance and collectivist values, like China and South Korea, personal contact is often preferred, or complaints are generally avoided. Studies show that older Chinese consumers prefer personal channels such as in-person contact or communication through third parties, such as family or friends, to voice complaints (Lin & Miller, 2003). This tendency towards indirect communication in complaint situations aligns with the desire to respect social hierarchy and minimize potentially negative emotional reactions (Smith et al., 2002). Conversely, younger Chinese consumers are

increasingly attracted to alternative, anonymous complaint channels in online forums and review platforms, allowing them to voice criticism without violating social norms of direct politeness. However, older consumers often perceive these indirect options as less trustworthy or impersonal (Meiners et al., 2021).

In conclusion, cultural differences influence complaint behavior in terms of both frequency and intensity as well as the choice of channels. While consumers in individualistic and low power-distance cultures express complaints more openly and intensively, consumers in collectivist and high power-distance cultures prefer subtle or indirect channels for complaints. Younger consumers within a culture often exhibit a more pragmatic and contextually flexible approach to the complaint process and increasingly use digital channels, while older consumers tend to adhere to culturally ingrained traditional patterns. These differences highlight the need for international companies to incorporate not only cultural preferences but also generational differences into their complaint management strategies to ensure broader customer satisfaction (Moschis, 2003).

## 4.2 Common Barriers and Motivations in Complaint Behavior

The complaint behavior of older adults is influenced by numerous culturally driven barriers and motivations. These factors determine whether and how older adults express dissatisfaction and the cultural values and norms that come into play. Both structural barriers, such as power distance, and individual needs, such as the desire for justice, significantly impact the complaint behavior of older consumers (Hofstede, 1984; Carstensen, 1992). Compared to younger consumers, older adults often show a heightened restraint that is reinforced by both cultural and generation-specific social norms (Moschis, 2003).

### 4.2.1 Barriers to Complaint Behavior

A major barrier influencing the complaint behavior of older consumers is the culturally embedded "power distance." In high power distance countries, such as Japan, hierarchical structures and respect for authority figures are highly valued (Hofstede, 2011). This leads older adults in these cultures to hesitate to voice complaints, especially if they must be directed at younger or higher-ranking individuals. A study by Nakata (2009) shows that older Japanese consumers often avoid complaints or express them indirectly through third parties to avoid potential conflicts and maintain social harmony. This reluctance stems not only from concern over losing respect but also from cultural expectations to behave with restraint in social interactions (Triandis, 2001). Conversely, younger consumers are more likely to express criticism in hierarchical cultures via social media, as they are less bound by traditional expectations of conflict avoidance. Older consumers often prefer personal, less confrontational communication that upholds social order (Lin & Miller, 2003).

Another hindrance is "uncertainty avoidance," which is strongly pronounced in cultures such as Greece and Portugal (Schwartz, 1992). People in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance find unpleasant situations or conflicts particularly stressful and therefore tend to avoid complaints to minimize uncertainty

and potential negative consequences (de Mooij, 2019). For older adults already dealing with age-related limitations, this barrier is often further amplified, as cognitive and physical constraints make the effort of complaining even more challenging (Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985). Younger consumers in these cultures often feel encouraged by digital communication to express complaints more directly and with less effort, as they experience digital platforms as more accessible and less risky. In contrast, older consumers view this as an additional hurdle, leading to increased reluctance (Blodgett, Hill, & Tax, 1997). This combination of cultural conditioning and age-related challenges causes older consumers in such cultures to often silently accept dissatisfaction, even when unhappy with a company's products or services.

#### **4.2.2 Motivations for Complaint Expression**

On the other hand, there are also culturally driven motivations that encourage older people to express complaints. A key factor in individualistic cultures like the U.S. is the "need for justice." In individualistic cultures, complaint behavior is considered a legitimate means of advocating for personal rights and ensuring fair treatment (Singh, 1990). For older adults, the motivation to complain can therefore stem from a strong desire for fairness and the assertion of personal claims. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) note that the feeling of being treated fairly, especially in cultures that value individualism and direct communication, is a major incentive to complain. American consumers often see complaints as a necessary means to ensure companies respond appropriately to their needs (Davidow, 2003). In contrast, younger consumers in individualistic cultures frequently express their complaints via public reviews and social media, allowing for quick and public responses. Older consumers, however, often prefer personal or written channels that they find more suitable for conveying their concerns (Meiners et al., 2021).

In collectivist cultures like China, Japan, or North Korea, the motivation to voice complaints is influenced by the need for "social harmony" and emotional balance (Triandis, 2001). The socioemotional selectivity theory posits that older adults are generally more inclined to prioritize emotional goals and thus behave more reservedly and conflict-avoidant in social interactions (Carstensen, 1992). In these cultures, a complaint could potentially disrupt harmony and evoke negative emotions, leading older consumers to forgo expressing dissatisfaction. Instead, they seek alternative ways to meet their needs, such as switching providers without filing a formal complaint (Lin & Miller, 2003). Younger consumers in these cultures increasingly express themselves indirectly via review portals or anonymous platforms, allowing them to bypass social norms, whereas older consumers are often less familiar with and thus more hesitant toward these channels (Moschis, 2003).

In conclusion, the barriers and motivations for complaint behavior among older adults in different cultures can be attributed to culturally driven values and norms. While younger consumers more frequently use digital and anonymous channels that reduce cultural barriers, older consumers' complaint behavior is still shaped by traditional norms and personal inhibitions. These generation-specific differences make it essential for international companies to

consider both cultural and age-related preferences in complaint management to adequately address the needs of both groups (Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985).

### 4.3 Case Examples and Cultural Differences

Analyzing cultural differences in complaint behavior reveals that the ways in which complaints are expressed or avoided are strongly shaped by cultural values and norms. Different cultures exhibit significant differences that influence both the frequency and the method of communication in complaints. These differences are illustrated in the following case examples from the U.S., Japan, and Germany, demonstrating the impact of cultural conditioning on the complaint behavior of older consumers.

#### 4.3.1 Case Example U.S.: Direct Complaints and Sense of Entitlement

In the U.S., a highly individualistic culture, the willingness to complain is high (Mattila & Patterson, 2004). American consumers view complaints as a legitimate means of asserting individual rights and as part of the customer interaction (Hofstede, 1984). Studies show that older Americans often express complaints openly and directly, particularly if they feel their expectations for quality and service have not been met (Singh, 1990). This attitude is rooted in a strong sense of entitlement, arising from a desire for fairness and justice. Davidow (2003) found that American consumers often use written complaint channels such as email or online reviews, as these provide a direct and publicly visible form of communication. Complaints in the U.S. are often explicitly stated and aim for a quick solution or compensation, reflecting this culture's sense of entitlement (de Mooij, 2019).

#### 4.3.2 Case Example Japan: Indirect Complaints and Need for Harmony

In contrast, Japan is characterized by a collectivist culture with high power distance, where social harmony and respect for authority are of great importance (Hofstede, 2011). Complaints are frequently avoided or expressed indirectly to maintain social balance (Nakata, 2009). Older Japanese consumers tend to express complaints through subtle hints or indirect remarks rather than directly addressing the issue (Mattila & Patterson, 2004; Triandis, 2001). For instance, they might hint at a negative experience by subtly signaling dissatisfaction to staff without explicitly filing a complaint. This indirect form of communication is encouraged by the need for harmony in Japanese culture, allowing individuals to express dissatisfaction without causing conflict or violating social norms (Lin & Miller, 2003).

#### 4.3.3 Case Example Germany: Matter-of-Fact Complaints and Expectation of Precision

Germany, as a culture with relatively low power distance and a strong value for directness and precision in expression, displays a specific complaint behavior. Older German consumers often express complaints in a matter-of-fact, structured manner, including detailed problem descriptions and concrete solutions (Hofstede, 2011). Studies show that German consumers prefer formal complaint channels like letters or emails, where they communicate their

expectations for service quality directly (Klein & Dawar, 2004). This direct and formal approach reflects the high importance of precision and reliability in German culture, where open complaints are viewed as constructive opportunities to improve services (Schwartz, 1992).

These three case examples demonstrate that cultural values, such as individualism, power distance, and the need for harmony, substantially influence how complaints are expressed or avoided in different cultures. While in individualistic and low power-distance cultures like the U.S. and Germany, complaints are openly and directly formulated, collectivist cultures like Japan show marked restraint. There, maintaining social harmony is valued more, leading to indirect communication or even avoidance of complaints (Triandis, 2001). These differences pose a challenge for international companies that must adapt their complaint management strategies to the specific cultural expectations and communication styles of their customers.

In summary, older consumers' complaint behavior is strongly shaped by cultural conditioning, and companies targeting a global customer base should consider cultural values and communication norms. By developing culturally sensitive complaint processes, companies can optimize their interactions with older consumers and improve customer satisfaction across various markets.

## 5 Discussion

This chapter interprets the study's findings in the light of Hofstede and Schwartz's theoretical models and discusses implications for international complaint management among older consumers. The study's results demonstrate that cultural values and norms, especially the dimensions of individualism/collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, have a significant impact on complaint behavior. These insights provide a comprehensive basis for developing actionable recommendations for companies to effectively serve a diverse older clientele.

### 5.1 Interpretation of Results in the Context of Theories

Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions provide a robust framework for explaining the differences in complaint behavior among older consumers. The results confirm the hypothesis that individualistic cultures, where the assertion of individual rights is encouraged, exhibit more direct complaint behavior. In cultures like the U.S. or Germany, where individualism is prominent, older consumers' complaint behavior is characterized by open and direct communication (Hofstede, 2001). Consumers from these cultures regard complaints as a legitimate way to assert personal rights and ensure fair treatment (Singh, 1990). This aligns with justice theory, which suggests that the need for fairness is a primary motivator for complaints (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In contrast, complaint behavior in collectivist cultures like Japan or China is often more indirect and reserved, driven by a strong cultural emphasis on social harmony (Triandis, 2001). In these cultures, older individuals tend to avoid conflicts and are less likely to express complaints directly, so as to preserve

relationships with service providers or other consumers (Nakata, 2009). This restraint can be explained by socioemotional selectivity theory, which posits that older individuals tend to prioritize social and emotional goals, thereby minimizing negative social interactions (Carstensen, 1992). The cultural dimension of power distance further reinforces this behavior by emphasizing respect for authority and social hierarchies, leading to an avoidance of complaints towards higher-ranking individuals (Hofstede, 2011).

Schwartz's (1992) model of universal value dimensions complements these perspectives, highlighting values like tradition and harmony as significant in collectivist societies. The findings indicate that older consumers in cultures with a strong focus on traditional values tend to suppress or subtly express complaints rather than providing direct feedback. These cultural values influence not only the complaint behavior itself but also the choice of complaint channels. While consumers in individualistic cultures frequently utilize digital and written complaint channels, such as email or social media, to openly communicate their concerns (Davidow, 2003), consumers in collectivist cultures prefer personal, indirect communication channels or express dissatisfaction through trusted individuals within their social networks (Smith et al., 2002).

## 5.2 Implications for International Complaint Management

The following practical recommendations can help internationally operating companies optimize their complaint management strategies to better serve older consumers across diverse cultural contexts:

- Develop culturally sensitive complaint management strategies to align with older consumers' diverse communication preferences.
- In individualistic cultures, implement direct and open digital communication channels for efficient complaint resolution.
- In collectivist cultures, offer discreet, personalized feedback options, such as third-party mediators, to respect social harmony.
- Provide training for employees to handle complaints in culturally appropriate ways, particularly in high power distance societies.
- Tailor employee training to promote straightforward and solution-oriented communication in individualistic contexts.
- Design user-friendly complaint processes that consider the physical and cognitive limitations of older adults.
- Implement accessible complaint systems to encourage older consumers to voice concerns without frustration.
- Offer personalized support services with trained staff to assist older consumers through the complaint process.
- Integrate cultural and age-specific insights into complaint management to enhance customer loyalty and satisfaction.
- Use complaint management as a tool to build empathetic customer relationships and foster long-term loyalty among older clients.

## 6 Conclusion and Outlook

This study demonstrates that older consumers' complaint behavior is significantly influenced by cultural conditioning. The analysis of various cultural dimensions, such as individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, provides a comprehensive understanding of how cultural values and norms shape the frequency, intensity, and preferred channels for complaints (Hofstede, 1984; Schwartz, 1992). The results show that older consumers in individualistic cultures, such as the U.S. or Germany, express complaints more openly and frequently, often with the goal of asserting individual rights and ensuring fairness (Singh, 1990; Davidow, 2003). In contrast, in collectivist societies like Japan and North Korea, there is a strong emphasis on harmony, which leads to complaint avoidance or indirect expression to avoid social conflict (Triandis, 2001; Nakata, 2009).

The study also highlights that power distance in cultures with firmly established hierarchical structures, such as China or India, deters older consumers from lodging complaints against higher-ranking individuals or companies (Hofstede, 2011). Simultaneously, high uncertainty avoidance, as in Portugal or Greece, affects complaint behavior by raising the threshold for voicing complaints. These cultural barriers are further amplified in older individuals due to age-related limitations, indicating that both cultural and individual factors shape complaint behavior (Carstensen, 1992; Gilly & Zeithaml, 1985).

Considering these cultural differences is crucial for companies operating on an international level to achieve success in complaint management. The ability to respond to the specific cultural expectations and needs of older customers enables companies to enhance customer satisfaction and foster long-term loyalty. A culturally sensitive complaint management system that includes preferences for direct or indirect communication methods and respects social hierarchies can build trust and strengthen older customers' loyalty (de Mooij, 2019; Lin & Miller, 2003).

However, the results of this study also provide points for future research. An in-depth exploration of specific cultures could offer further insights into the nuances of complaint behavior among older consumers, demonstrating how cultural conditioning specifically impacts various dimensions of complaint behavior. For example, investigating subcultures within larger national cultures, such as regional differences in India or cultural diversity in the U.S., could contribute to a more nuanced perspective. Additionally, comparative analyses between various ethnicities within multicultural societies could prove useful in examining the interaction between ethnic and cultural conditioning and age-related factors on complaint behavior (Smith et al., 2002).

Another area for future research would be examining the interaction between cultural and psychological factors influencing older consumers' behavior. Longitudinal studies on the evolution of complaint behavior in older adults over time could help us better understand how complaint behavior shifts alongside changing cultural and social conditions. Finally, it would be valuable to analyze the role of digital channels in older consumers' complaint behavior across different cultures, as digitalization and the increasing use of online



complaint platforms may alter the behavior and expectations of this demographic (Davidow, 2003).

In conclusion, a deep understanding of cultural conditioning in older consumers' complaint behavior is essential for the success of globally operating companies. Implementing a culturally sensitive complaint management system enables companies to meet the specific needs of older customers from diverse cultural backgrounds, thereby fostering sustainable and positive customer relationships. This study has made significant contributions by addressing a previously underexplored area of research: the cultural determinants of complaint behavior in older consumers. It also offers valuable insights for future studies in this important yet underexamined domain.

## 7 Author

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