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A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Business Complaint Management Expectations

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This study explores the complaint management expectations of 72 British and 74 German organizational buyers using automated online means-end laddering and a Hierarchical Value Map presentation. It conceptualizes the links between expected complaint resolution attributes by the buyer (i.e. means) and the buyer's value perceptions (i.e. ends). Unlike previous research, we highlight similarities and differences in the drivers behind and attributes of complaint management expectations across two countries (Germany and the UK). Even in countries appearing to be similar economically and culturally, we find differences in the desired attributes. British buyers, for example, emphasize softer complaint resolution attributes compared to Germans. Our study is the first to present a model of complaint management expectations incorporating the role of culture, and provides managerial directions on standardization and adaption of complaint resolution attributes. Furthermore, it evaluates justice dimensions (especially interactional justice) and their impact on perceptions of complaint management.

Effective management of complaints from organizational buyers is crucial because even in well-performing and close business relationships, failures may occur. Marketing managers have to ascertain how their company (i.e. the supplier firm) should best behave in order to remedy those occasions in which a complainant (i.e. the corresponding organizational buyer) voices dissatisfaction with a product, service, or process. The provision of a solution that addresses the dissatisfaction is best based on an understanding of the buyer's expectations and underlying motives. It is furthermore imperative to consider the impact of culture on such complaint management expectations. Such understanding answers important questions that have previously been highlighted by scholars (Hansen, Swan, and Powers 1996a; Homburg and Fürst 2005): what specific resolution characteristics are valued by the buying company (the complainant in a B2B setting) and how are they similar or different across cultures? Previous studies on complaint resolution have not answered these questions, and while there exists some research on complaint behavior in the B2B context, studies that investigate how buyers expect suppliers to deal with the complaints are scarce (with the exception of Henneberg et al. 2009 and Gruber et al. 2010), and do not investigate the cross-cultural similarities and differences.

Our aim is therefore to gain detailed insight into complaint management expectations and to identify attributes of complaint management that are uniform or variant across cultures. Dimensions of national character lead to distinct cultural and behavioral characteristics in terms of business interactions and expectations (Clark 1990). This calls for particular attention to national and cultural preferences to successfully manage business customer complaints, given that behavioral perceptions and expectations in a marketplace are critically influenced by national culture (Sparks and Tucker 1971). Thus, we chose two economically similar countries, the UK and Germany, and focused on the same industry (manufacturing) in both countries. These two countries provide the basis for a controlled cross-cultural comparison of complaint management

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expectations. According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), Germany and the UK are different in terms of their individualism and uncertainty avoidance dimensions, although similar across cultural dimensions such as masculinity, power distance and long-term orientation. In addition, Germany represents a much more low-context culture than the UK (Campbell et al. 1988; Djurssa 1994; Kotabe and Helsen 2004). Considering the cultures in the two countries, we found several similarities and differences in complaint management expectations among British and German buyers. We therefore introduce a model of business complaint management expectations that incorporates the role of culture.

In this study we analyze complainants' expectations regarding optimal complaint resolution, and also reveal the motivations underlying these expectations using *means-end laddering* (Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Laddering is an interviewing technique employed to reveal the relationships that exist between three concepts of meaning: the *attributes* of products, services or individuals ("means"); the *consequences* that these attributes represent for the respondent; and the *values* or beliefs which are strengthened or satisfied by the consequences ("ends") (Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Such cognitive concepts identified during laddering interviews can be presented in a graphical format showing a set of means-end chains known as a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM). Our research design is based on an online version of the means-end laddering technique, so-called automated online laddering.

Our research is important in three ways. First, we contribute to the research literature on complaint management by describing not only the attributes of complaint management desired by buyers, but also the drivers behind complainants' expectations (i.e. the motivations behind expected resolution characteristics). Our study is different from previous studies in this area (e.g. Gruber et al. 2010) in that we compare and contrast business complainants' expectations in different cultures by using a sample of participants spread across two countries. Unlike previous

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research, we delineate the similarities and differences in complaint management expectations across these two countries. Secondly, our study is the first to provide a model of business complaint management expectations and a set of propositions incorporating the role of culture. This is important, as managers working in an international environment need to understand which areas of complaint resolution can be standardized and which ones need to be adapted for particular countries (Botschen and Hemetsberger 1998). Thirdly, we discuss different dimensions of justice (especially interactional, but also procedural and distributive justice) and their relationship with perceptions of complaint management and evaluate them based on our results.

The article proceeds as follows: we provide a brief review of the literature on B2B complaint management. We then describe our research method, the chosen data analysis technique and introduce the findings. Lastly, we discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of our study, and outline limitations and directions for further research.

BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS (B2B) COMPLAINT MANAGEMENT

Research findings (although mostly using a business-to-consumer (B2C) perspective) point to the fact that many companies still manage complaints ineffectively (Homburg and Fürst 2007). The majority of complaining customers are dissatisfied with the way in which their complaints have been handled (Lewis and McCann 2004). This apparent lack of appreciation of customer complaints is surprising, given the potential seriousness of customer dissatisfaction in both the short and long term: negative word-of-mouth (Blodgett, Hill, and Tax 1997) and switching to competitor firms (Homburg and Fürst 2005) inevitably lead to lost revenues and higher costs (Hart, Heskett, and Sasser 1990). Companies that do not handle complaints effectively are essentially forgoing the chance of reinvigorating a relationship (Rothenberger, Grewal, and Iyer 2008).

Although a recent study by Alvarez, Casielles, and Martín (2010) underlines the importance of complaint management in inter-organizational (B2B) exchanges, the literature on complaint management in business marketing is rather scarce when contrasted with the well-developed B2C literature (e.g. Johnston and Mehra 2002; Tronvoll 2007). This shortcoming is surprising, as the business literature stresses the importance of effective relationship management (Håkansson and Ford 2002; Ojasalo 2004). Existing research in B2B tends to compare the different ways in which complaints are handled, or the effect that these activities have on buyer satisfaction (Durvasula, Lysonski, and Mehta 2000). These studies fail, however, to provide insights about organizational customer expectations regarding complaint resolution. Ingram's (2004) review of the sales management literature also highlights the need for further research that examines how recovery from service failure fits within customer-oriented relationship selling. However, Williams and Plouffe's (2007) assessment of the sales management literature over 20 years indicates that the area of complaint management remains still under-researched.

From the extant literature it appears that our current knowledge about the resolution attributes desired by complainants in a B2B setting is quite limited. While Hansen and colleagues' (1997) study offers a model of organizational buyer complaint behavior from pre-purchase to post-purchase stages, they do not address the issue of how buyers expect suppliers to deal with the complaints. Moreover, most previous studies infer managerial implications from investigating complaint behavior, but they fail to provide any context or motivation as to why certain complaint resolution behaviors provide value to the firms involved. What is needed for such a conceptualization to be developed is for the link between expected complaint resolution attributes ("means") and the buyer's value perceptions ("ends") to be explored as part of so-called *means-end considerations*.

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THE CONTEXT OF B2B COMPLAINT MANAGEMENT EXPECTATIONS

To better understand issues of complaint management expectations by complainants in an inter-organizational relationship, specific contextual aspects provide our study with a focus for the application of a structured qualitative research technique using means-end considerations. First, we focus on *managers with responsibility for relationship management*, because even though dissatisfied customer firms can choose from a variety of channels to voice their concerns, many complaints are still made in person to the employees of the supplier (Alvarez, Casielles, and Martín 2010; Hansen, Swan, and Powers 1996b).

We attempted to gather rich data on complaint management expectations in countries that are close neighbors (UK and Germany) and to further develop theory in this area. The UK is Germany's largest trading partner (Evans-Pritchard 2013) and therefore firms in these two countries are quite entwined in terms of B2B dealings. The two countries are fairly alike in terms of their industrial development and economic status. Thus, we control for economic variables, which represent other factors that influence buyer-supplier relationships and the way individuals perceive B2B interactions (Honeycutt, Ford, and Simintiras 2003). This setting suggests that not many cross-country differences, rooted in the cultures, should be expected. Therefore highlighting differences in culture was not our initial focus. We expected similar complaint management expectations to arise from respondents in these two countries, but interestingly, they differed on several attributes. When we delved deeper into the differences between British and German complaint management expectations, we found that these were aligned with differences in cultural dimensions outlined in frameworks by Hall (1976) and Hofstede and Hofstede (2005).

Studies investigating national cultures have tried to cluster and categorize countries based on their cultural dimensions. The UK and Germany have been categorized in both similar (Kale 1995) as well as different clusters (Javidan and House 2002). While Kale (1995) clusters these

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two nations in one group (together with Austria, Switzerland, Italy and Ireland, based on the GLOBE study (see Javidan and House 2002), the British are clustered in the Anglo cluster (comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa (White sample)) (Ashkanasy, Trevor-Roberts, and Earnshaw 2002), and Germans in the Germanic Europe (including Austria, Netherlands and Switzerland) by Szabo et al. (2002). Our study empirically examines to what degree these two relatively similar nations exhibit similarities or differences with regard to an important business aspect (i.e. complaint resolution expectations). By doing so we compare and contrast these two nations' business complaint management expectations and test the theories that outline cross-country similarities or differences in this specific business context.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Method

We use a semi-standardized interviewing approach based on laddering. Laddering helps to discover the salient meanings that individuals associate with products, services or behaviors. It focuses on the associations in the respondent's mind between three concepts of meaning: *attributes, consequences* and *values* (Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Attributes are the tangible and intangible characteristics of an offering (in our case the desired complaint resolution characteristics of contact employee behaviors). Consequences are the reasons why certain attributes are important to the respondents. They are the results, i.e. the benefits that respondents think they can gain from certain attributes (Gutman 1982). Values are the respondents' universal goals and the most personal and general consequences individuals (or organizations) are striving for (Rokeach 1973). Laddering involves revealing attribute-consequence-value chains (i.e. 'ladders') through the interviewer probes. This is a repetitive task, in which the interviewer

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repeatedly questions why something is important for the respondent, with the answer acting as the starting point for subsequent questions, until saturation is reached.

For the purpose of our study we decided to use an automated online laddering approach. Gruber et al.'s (2010) study provides a detailed examination of the validity and reliability of the use of online laddering in a B2B context. Our approach follows the paper-and-pencil version of laddering interviews where respondents have to write down up to four attributes that are of relevance, and then specify why each attribute is important to them. Botschen and Hemetsberger (1998) advocate this approach as it reduces interviewer bias and minimizes social pressure on the respondents. In our research design this traditional laddering approach is transferred to an online environment. The lack of an interviewer means that respondents are not influenced by the interviewers' verbal and nonverbal communication and appearance. As a consequence, social desirability bias and especially interviewer/interviewee bias are reduced (Duffy et al. 2005). Although face-to-face laddering interviews would have allowed probing and thus yielded contextual information, we believe that this was offset by the clarity of the mean-ends chains revealed (Russell et al. 2004). In fact, Russell et al. (2004) found that such a laddering technique yields a higher number of ladders than the traditional laddering interview.

Sample Size and Characteristics

Using a commercial list of the British and German manufacturing industry, we randomly selected medium sized companies (between 50 and 500 employees) in both countries. The focus on medium-sized companies reduced power asymmetries that could have biased the complaint handling expectations (Hansen 1997). Telephoning these companies, we identified those managers responsible for supplier relationship management. We ascertained whether the managers were influential in the purchasing and complaint decisions as well as the level of expertise these managers had in managing supplier relationships, and only used those both

knowledgeable and with at least 5 years of experience in their function. We decided to focus on

particular and close business relationships in one industry to ensure homogeneity of the case

analyses, and therefore fulfill the basic assumptions of the laddering technique (Grunert and

Grunert 1995). We allowed the respondents to choose and define 'close relationships'

themselves.

We collected data from 72 respondents from the UK, and 74 respondents from Germany,

yielding 146 responses in total. For this purpose, we had to contact 592 manufacturing companies

in the UK, and 836 in Germany. The resulting response rates of 12 percent for the UK and 9

percent for Germany are satisfactory, bearing in mind the difficult task of identifying specific

respondents in the companies (cold calling) as well as the demanding task inherent in laddering

designs (Grunert, Beckmann, and Sørensen 2001).

We next contacted non-participating companies from our sample in order to assess whether

or not non-response bias constituted a problem (Groves 1989). Given that we could not use the

Armstrong and Overton (1977) approximation (i.e. the hypothesis that late respondents are more

likely to be similar to non-respondents), we decided instead to follow the guidelines of

Schoorman, Mayer, and Davis (2007), and contacted a random sample of twenty non-respondent

companies in each country, asking them a subset of the questions. A t-test showed no significant

difference of group means between the sample and these non-respondents; thus, non-response

bias was unproblematic.

Automated Online Laddering Interview Process

We developed a detailed laddering explanation that was first pre-tested in both countries, based

on the suggested process outlined by Botschen and Hemetsberger (1998). Those managers

agreeing to participate in our study were sent an email with a link to our online laddering

interview website. The interview questions were framed so as to ask the respondents to consider a

particularly close business relationship with suppliers in which they had also experienced problems. They were then asked to think about how they and their company would have liked their complaint to have been addressed. In particular, respondents were asked about how suppliers ought to handle their complaints and what kind of qualities or complaint management characteristics they would expect from the suppliers' contact employees. For this purpose, during the automated online laddering interview, we asked respondents to write down in textboxes the three most important attributes or characteristics of a supplier's complaint management. We urged respondents to be as specific as possible. These attributes were then referred to in the subsequent laddering questions.

On the next computer screen, we gave respondents a large open text box to answer why the first attribute they had just identified was important to them. We used the piping logic of online market research to develop a conversation-like interviewing experience, which means that we piped respondents' answers into subsequent questions for a more personalized interview situation. For example, we asked: "*You have stated that one of the most important attributes or characteristics of a supplier in cases of complaints should be 'Understand the Problem'. Could you please explain to us what you mean by this and why exactly this attribute is important to you?*" In a second prompted text box, respondents subsequently specified why what they had indicated in the first box was important to them. A third (and additional boxes) appeared in the same way, again questioning why what they have just said is important to them, only if respondents actively requested them. We hereby followed the skip/branching logic of online market research that prevents respondents from having to look at unnecessary or unwanted textboxes. After having completed the laddering process for the first attribute, we then asked respondents to fill in text boxes for the second, third and fourth most important supplier attributes in the same way.

DATA ANALYSIS

Following recommendations by Reynolds and Gutman (1988), the laddering data were analyzed in three different stages. The first was to code sequences of attributes, consequences and values (constituting the 'ladder') in order to make comparisons across respondents. In order to do this, we used the decision-support software program Laddermap (Gengler and Reynolds 1993) that categorizes each phrase from the automated online interviews as an attribute, a consequence, or a value. During this phase we also developed categories so that comparable phrases and data points could be grouped together. Coding involved an iterative process of (re)coding data, splitting and combining categories, generating new or dropping existing categories, in line with content analysis techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Categories were identified through words and phrases that respondents had written in the text boxes, as well as from concepts derived from the literature review and also Schwartz's (1992) value list which provides an overview of generally held values. In this connection, Schwartz (1994, p. 21) defines values as "*desirable transsituational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity*". For example, individuals may wish to be rich or to be powerful entrepreneurs. Values also include affects (feelings and emotions) related to such goals.

Researchers using the laddering technique have a lot of latitude during the coding process (Grunert, Beckmann, and Sørensen 2001). As a consequence, we tried to be as sensitive to the respondents' understanding of the constructs as possible. This meant, for example, that we did not eliminate overlaps in the meaning of the constructs if they were clearly intended by our respondents (one example of such an overlap are the constructs of Trust and Confidence). Due to the chosen online approach, context information that would have been helpful for the coding process was not available. Thus, two researchers with expertise in analyzing laddering data, but with limited knowledge of the B2B area, did the initial independent interpretation of the data.

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After re-conciliation of coding differences, a third researcher with experience in B2B research independently coded the data and compared the findings with the initial conceptualization. Again, differences were reconciled, with Tables 1-3 showing all identified and agreed concepts.

Insert Tables 1-3 about here

In the second stage, the number of associations between the constructs on different levels (attributes/consequences/values) was calculated by aggregating individual means-end chains across the various respondents, which resulted in an 'implications matrix', detailing the associations between the constructs. This acts as a bridge between the qualitative and quantitative elements of the laddering technique by showing the frequencies with which one code (construct) leads to another (Deeter-Schmelz, Goebel, and Kennedy 2008).

In the third stage, we generated a Hierarchical Value Map (Gengler, Klenosky, and Mulvey 1995) that consists of nodes representing the most important attributes/consequences/values, and of lines indicating links between concepts. Associations between constructs are cut off at level four, meaning that linkages had to be mentioned by at least four respondents to be represented in the HVM. Higher cut-off points increase the interpretability of the map but result in information loss. The chosen cut-off level of four kept the balance between data reduction and retention (Christensen and Olson 2002).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Similarities between British and German Complaint Management Expectations

Using data collected from seventy-two UK buying companies, nine attribute constructs of expected complaint resolution behaviors by contact employees in close supply relationships are above the cut-off level (see Figure 1). The German HVM uses data from all seventy-four

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German buying companies and here nine attributes present the lowest level of abstraction with regard to the complaint resolution management expectations (see Figure 2). The sizes of the circles in the figures illustrate the frequency with which respondents mentioned a certain concept.

Insert Figures 1 & 2 about here

The dominant attributes in both HVMs are Take Quick Action and Understand Problem, two constructs which relate to the cause of the problem that had initiated the buying company to complain to the supplier in the first place, as well as to the quick resolution of the situation. The next step on the ladder focuses on the consequences. Here we found it to be of pivotal importance to both British and German respondents that complaint management results in a Solution (i.e. to finding a resolution to the problem causing the complaint). This finding is in line with other studies (Trawick and Swan 1981). Other important consequences in the HVMs are the Managerial and Financial Benefits that cover aspects of counteracting the possible negative economic problems associated with the cause of the complaint (this could be the non-delivery of raw materials from a supplier causing a manufacturing production line to shut down with resulting financial losses).

Apart from these consequences, some processes also exhibit a large degree of perceived importance to the buying company: Effective Resolution Handling and Taking Problem Seriously both show the customer that the supplier is not only committed to dealing with a complaint situation (intent to act) but is also able to tackle the problem itself (results-oriented action). British and German respondents also desire that suppliers prevent future problems from happening. The link between Solution and Prevention of Future Problems corroborates previous findings showing that buying companies want suppliers to avoid the reoccurrence of failures that

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could otherwise lead to high levels of dissatisfaction (Primo, Dooley, and Rungtusanatham 2007).

On the value level, British and German customers identify four constructs which could be seen as antecedents as to why complaint resolution management is of importance to them: Maintain Supplier Relationship, Maintain Customer Relationship, Network Effects, and Reputation. The value constructs that the study identifies exemplify the inherent interdependence that is evident in close relationships. The dominant value that both groups mention is Maintain Supplier Relationships. With successful complaint resolution, customer companies see the benefits which accrue from close relationships with strategically important suppliers, and which complaint situations potentially jeopardize. What was interesting was that a concern for down-stream exchanges mirrors this expectation: given that Maintain Customer Relationship is identified as another value, this implies that threats to supplier relationships also have implications for the buying company's own downstream customers. Without good and close supplier relationships, other exchange partners (and ultimately final customers) cannot be satisfied as the necessary resource ties and pooled capabilities may be missing (Henneberg and Mouzas 2008; Stabell and Fjeldstad 1998).

Furthermore, trust appears 22 times in the two maps and is linked to Maintain Supplier Relationships in both HVMs. Trust is often perceived as a crucial aspect of close business relationships (Morgan and Hunt 1994). In Aggarwal et al.'s (2005) study, trust leads to both the buyer's satisfaction with the supplier and the buyer's future interaction expectations with the supplier. Our findings therefore qualify the commonly seen pivotal position of trust within the context of close business relationships.

Differences in British and German Complaint Management Expectations

Several soft attributes that are not directly problem-related were found to exist in the UK HVM: Empathy, Honesty and Openness to Suggestions while only Honesty appeared in the German HVM. These relationship atmosphere-related attributes (Håkansson 1982; McNally and Griffin 2007) suggest that UK business customers desire a certain level of personal touch, which has already been shown to have a significant impact on customer satisfaction in high-contact service industries such as airlines (Babbar and Koufteros 2008). The absence of empathy in complaint management personnel has been found to cause negative emotions in the customer and reduce satisfaction with complaint resolution (McColl-Kennedy and Sparks 2003). Our findings reflect this as displaying Empathy seems to indicate Effective Resolution Handling to the customer. Interestingly, however, for UK respondents, the width of the line in the HVM reveals that Honesty is strongly and directly linked to the value Maintain Supplier Relationship. One more attribute is directly linked to this value as well: Openness (suppliers should be open for suggestions). This lends support to the idea that frontline personnel should try to customize their solutions based on customers' feedback (Aggarwal et al. 2005). The fact that the aforementioned concepts are directly linked to the value Maintaining Supplier Relationships shows their perceived importance for UK buyers, as in laddering studies attributes are normally linked to consequences first, which are then linked to values.

The consequence of Quality Assurance plays a more important role in Germany (German respondents mentioned it twice as often as British study participants), especially ISO certifications, which are part of service delivery agreements such as Just-in-Time delivery to manufacturers. German respondents also hope that suppliers learn from the complaint to prevent future problems, whereas UK companies expect suppliers to have prevention methods and controls in place. Furthermore, German respondents mentioned Trust more than twice as often, and the concept is therefore more strongly connected to Maintain Supplier Relationship than in

the UK sample. UK respondents link Take Problem Seriously directly with the value Maintain

Supplier Relationship and the emphasis on this concept is much stronger than in the case of

German companies.

The five attributes of Proactiveness, Transparency, Direct Contact, Competence and

Cooperate appear in the German HVM but not in the UK HVM, while another five attributes

Commit Resources, Empathy, Motivation (i.e. be motivated and willing to do the best possible),

Openness and Prevention Methods and Controls appear in the UK HVM only. One theory that

can be used to explain these differences is that of Hall's (1976) high-context versus low-context

cultures. Hall's (1976) theory is relevant here because the focus is on personal interactions.

Behaviors linked to such interactions (such as communication) are presumed to vary across

cultures (Hall 1976). In low-context cultures, information exchange tends to be explicit,

embedded in words of precise and unambiguous meaning. In high-context cultures, on the other

hand, information exchange is more implicit, embedded in shared experiences and assumptions

conveyed through verbal and non-verbal cues (Djurssa 1994).

Hall (1976) places UK and Germany in the same general low-context culture category so at

first glance it seems the two countries have very similar patterns of interpersonal behavior.

However, when positioned on a continuum of high-context to low-context cultures, Germany is

found to be a much more low-context culture than the UK (Campbell et al. 1988; Djurssa 1994;

Kotabe and Helsen 2004). This is also supported by research by Djurssa (1994) where

communication in German business culture is found to be more 'direct' than in English business

culture. Preferences for Direct Contact and information-sharing processes (Transparency) in the

German map reflect this. The aforementioned focus on Quality Assurance is also an indication of

the emphasis on more concrete signs of quality and therefore the need to provide more direct

reassurance during complaint resolution. We argue that this represents a manifestation of the

cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance, which is defined as the degree to which the members of a society are risk averse and prefer a structured situation (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Germany scores higher on the uncertainty avoidance cultural dimension than the UK, and this is reflected in our findings where German buyers seem to be less tolerant of uncertainties in complaint resolution situations.

Germans also tend to place greater emphasis on the task and skills of the individual in business interactions, and this is also mirrored in their emphasis on Competence. Research indicates that in low-context German business exchanges, the professional competence of the individuals involved is key (Schroll-Machl 2003). In the German map, the Solution to the complaint, and therefore task completion, is what engenders Trust and maintains supplier relationships. On the other hand, studies have found that in the higher-context British business culture, more value is placed on personal relationships (Djurssa 1994) and a more soft-selling approach is preferred (Campbell et al. 1988), compared to a German business culture. Thus, softer relationship aspects are highlighted in the UK HVM where the British seem to place greater importance on complaint resolution attributes such as Motivation, Empathy, Openness and Honesty.

At the value level, German respondents stressed the importance of Network Effects and its connection to the value of Maintain Customer Relationships more than UK companies did. The construct Network Effects integrates the relevance of both customer and supplier relationships within the overall framework of the wider business and supply chain network (e.g. Jüttner, Christopher, and Baker 2007; Lusch, Vargo, and Tanniru 2010). German respondents also mentioned a value ("Achievement") that did not appear in the UK sample. We would have expected to find this value in the UK map too as achievement is a typical Anglo-American value complex and the UK is a more individualist country compared to Germany (Hofstede and

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Hofstede 2005). However, as less than four UK respondents mentioned the concept, it did not make the cut-off level for the resulting value map. The German tendency to be goal-oriented and achieve completion of the task at hand (Schroll-Machl 2003) appears to be more dominant in our findings. Budde et al. (1982) suggests that German senior managers identify personal success with corporate success more closely than British managers. This might be the reason achievement is a more sought after outcome among the German managers.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Theoretical Contributions

Our study contributes to the literature of marketing theory and practice in three ways. First, it develops the conceptual links between expected complaint resolution attributes, i.e. "means" and the buyer's value perceptions, i.e. "ends" based on a means-end approach. Secondly, it allows for the development of a model of complaint management expectations incorporating the role of culture and a set of propositions suggesting which specific resolution characteristics are valued by the buying company (the complainant in a B2B setting) and how they are similar or different across cultures. Thirdly, it evaluates different dimensions of justice on perceptions of complaint management. A detailed discussion of these contributions follows.

We develop a model of complaint management expectations based on the means-end approach. In this context, the means represent 'complaint management attributes'. These are the complaint management characteristics that the buyers are seeking, i.e. expecting in cases of complaint situations. The consequences in the means-end approach are the 'complaint management preliminary outcomes'. In other words, they outline the benefits that the complaint management attributes represents for the buyer. Finally, the values are the "complaint management ultimate outcomes"; they are the underlying aims strengthened by the preliminary

outcomes of the complaint management. A preliminary model of complaint management expectations incorporates the role of culture and our study is the first to do so in the area of complaint management expectations.

Insert Figure 3 about here

In our model, we present a number of complaint management expectations that are consistent across the studied cultures and we highlight several expectations that are moderated by the buyer's culture. As illustrated in Figure 3, complaint management expectations include three sets of attributes (i.e. complaint management attributes). First, after complaining, a customer company expects to perceive a seller's demonstration of competence (i.e. the customer wants to see that the supplier shows the willingness and ability to understand the problem). Secondly, the customer expects some behavioral characteristics. Universally, buying companies expect to observe quick action; such expectations appear to be consistent across cultures. Globalization and its homogenizing forces contribute to the emergence of more unified business expectations and perceptions (Honeycutt, Ford, and Simintiras 2003; Yip 1989). Additionally, buyers expect a set of behaviors that are relevant to how the supplier deals with the problem that has caused the complaint. This set of behavioral characteristics is influenced by culture, which is one of the main attributes of diversity and heterogeneity in business-to-business interactions (Corsaro et al. 2012). In other words, the way in which the customer wants the supplier to behave in order to solve the problem (e.g. the supplier committing resources or implementing prevention methods or controls) depends on the setting. Thirdly, the customer expects to observe a certain seller attitude. This includes primary attitudinal characteristics, such as honesty and taking responsibility, which are consistent across cultures. It also includes attitudes that are related to the supplier's approach towards managing the complaint. These are culture-dependent. For instance, for German

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customers, within a lower context culture (Hall 1976), transparency and proactiveness is expected, which is not emphasized by UK customers. On the other hand, for the higher context culture (i.e. UK) empathy is important. Cultural predisposition and adaptive communication competence helps developing and maintaining buyer-seller relationships (Bush et al. 2001). Our model therefore suggests that:

Proposition 1: The buyer's perception of complaint management attributes encompasses the seller's demonstration of competence, seller's behavior, and seller's attitude; and they all have an impact on the complaint management preliminary outcomes.

Proposition 2: Complaint management attributes include factors that are universal (i.e. the seller's demonstration of competence) and factors that are particular to the culture (i.e. the seller's behavior and seller's attitude).

Proposition 2.1: The seller's behavior, as one of the complaint management attributes, includes two sub-factors: primary behavior, which is universal (i.e. not culturally sensitive), and instrumental behavior, which is particular (i.e. culturally sensitive).

Proposition 2.2: The seller's attitude, as one of the complaint management attributes, includes two sub-factors: primary attitude, which is universal, and approach, which is particular.

The customers expect certain complaint management attributes, because these lead to some preliminary outcomes (i.e. the means-end approach consequences). These are consequences that include (1) a solution to the problem which has caused the complaint, (2) preliminary (buyer-seller) relationship outcomes, and (3) buyer benefits. Universally, customers want the problem to be solved (i.e. solution and resolution handling outcomes). They also look for relationship-related outcomes (i.e. confidence and fairness perception), which are benefits relevant for the continuation of a relationship with that specific supplier. Finally, they seek their own interest,

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including primary benefits (such as financial and managerial benefits) that are universal, and soft benefits (e.g. satisfaction and learning outcomes) that are culture-dependent. Thus:

Proposition 3: The buyer's perception of complaint management preliminary outcomes encompasses solution, preliminary buyer-seller relational outcomes, and buyer's benefit; and they all have an impact on complaint management ultimate outcomes.

Proposition 4: Complaint management preliminary outcomes include factors that are universal (i.e. solution and preliminary buyer-seller relational outcomes), and factors that are particular to the culture (buyer's benefit).

Proposition 4.1: Buyer's benefits, as one of the complaint management preliminary outcomes, include two sub-factors: preliminary benefits, which are universal, and soft benefits, which are particular.

The ultimate outcomes of complaint management expectations (i.e. the means-end values) are mostly universal. They include direct outcomes (related to the specific buyer-seller relationship), and indirect relational outcomes. In addition, personal or organizational values can be considered as the ultimate outcomes by the customer, depending on the culture. As previously noted in the literature, some aspects of ultimate B2B expectations and business goals vary based on national cultures (Kale and Barnes 1992). The results of our exploration posit that:

Proposition 5: The buyer's perception of complaint management's ultimate outcomes encompasses direct relational ultimate outcomes, indirect relational ultimate outcomes, and personal/organizational ultimate value.

Proposition 5.1: Complaint management's ultimate outcomes include factors that are universal (i.e. direct relational ultimate outcomes and indirect relational ultimate outcomes), and factors that are particular to the culture (personal/organizational ultimate value).

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To understand the expectations of complaining companies regarding aspects of complaint resolution activities associated with contact employees of a supplier firm, a laddering technique was used as it offers a rich research design that determines the underlying means-end considerations otherwise hidden from quantitative research. In particular, the study enriches the existing limited stock of knowledge on the management of complaints in business-to-business relationships by providing a more thorough understanding of the supplier attributes (both characteristics and behaviors) that complaining buying firms desire. It also specifically identifies the underlying business logic (i.e. buying company's values) on which these complaint management expectations are based. The results outline how first level characteristics relating to *interactional aspects* of complaint management resolution are linked in the minds of customers to *procedural and distributive equity dimensions* on the second and third level of consequences and values (Patterson, Cowley, and Prasongsukarn 2006). The importance of soft interactional aspects of effective complaint management such as Empathy, Honesty and Openness to suggestions indicates that complaint handling is not only about rectifying the situation (distributed outcome) but it includes the way in which this is done (interaction and process). This finding backs the importance of frontline managers for the complaint management process (Perrien, Paradis, and Banting 1995).

Our research framing focuses on interactional justice as it emphasizes on the relational nature of B2B encounters. However, the results show that a combination of different aspects of fairness perceptions play a role in B2B complaint management expectations. Interactional justice is expected as the complainer seeks for understanding the problem, empathy, honesty, taking responsibility, direct contact and openness. Procedural justice is also relevant as the buyers look for taking quite action, committing resources and quality assurance. Finally, distributive justice is also pursued as the buyer expects financial benefits and maintaining supplier and customer

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relationships. This suggests more granular results compared to the study of Brock et al. (2013), which suggested that interactional justice drives satisfaction with complaint handling only in B2C markets. Our findings show that in long term business relationships interactional justice plays a key role. However, it is complemented by procedural and distributive justice considerations.

Our study goes beyond previous research in complaint management by providing a detailed understanding of the supplier attributes (both characteristics and behaviors) that complaining buying companies desire across two countries. We also identify the underlying business logic (the customer company's sought after business outcomes) on which buyers in the UK and Germany base their complaint management expectations; a cross-country aspect that has not been addressed in any other study. Although most of the concepts categorized as higher-level consequences and values in the UK and German HVMs are similar, the lower-level complaint resolution attributes connected to these concepts differ significantly between the UK and Germany. This indicates that the key differences lie in the areas of interpersonal communication and behavior, rather than business objectives. With both Germany and UK being Western European countries, it is easy to ignore the subtle cultural differences that abound between them. However, our research indicates that there are substantial differences in patterns of behaviors sought during complaint resolution that suggest the importance of culturally dependent ways of communication. That these differences are due to the existence of more general cultural factors is pointed out by other studies indicating the consistency of contrasting business cultures in British and German companies (Chapman et al. 2008). The differences we found in British and German buyers' complaint management expectations are in line with differences in national cultural dimensions outlined by Hall (1976) and Hofstede and Hofstede (2005). Clark (1990) argues that there exists a model distribution of traits or a pattern of tendencies in each nation and it is this

point that makes the concept of national culture important and influential in interpersonal interactions.

Our findings and propositions back the importance of frontline managers for the complaint management process (Perrien, Paradis, and Banting 1995). Furthermore, our propositional development of complaint management expectations across nations contributes to a body of the literature that calls for better understanding of cross-cultural B2B interactions, taking a polycentric approach (Kale and Barnes 1992; Kim and Oh 2002). Previous studies have advocated categorizing UK and Germany in both the same (Kale 1995) and different clusters (Javidan and House 2002). According to the GLOBE study, UK and Germany are in different clusters and our study showed some differences but more similarities that lead us to conclude that the two countries could actually fit the same cluster typology, in line with Kale's (1995) clustering. However, there could be significant cultural variations within regions within a country (e.g., in Germany) and there should be studies at different levels (e.g., industry level) or at least consider other possible explanations for identified differences (like those mentioned in Blodgett et al.'s (2006) article).

Managerial Implications

Our analysis reveals that companies need to address issues of effective complaint management not just as isolated managerial activities with limited benefits for the parties involved. Rather, these should be seen as being part of a wider activity set of strategic networking activities, which potentially impact upon whole business systems (Ford et al. 2003). Our research results furthermore show that both UK and German respondents value honest suppliers who *genuinely* care about their buyers and show openness in listening to problems. Our findings echo the importance of frontline contact personnel possessing both analytical and problem-solving skills (e.g. competence, understanding the problem) as well as the more affective and interpersonal

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communication skills (e.g. empathy, honesty) so that they are able to resolve conflicts in line with the general relational atmosphere within long-term relationships with buyers (Newell et al. 2011). Given that the possibility of improving an employee's willingness to help customers through training appears to have limits (Teng and Barrows 2009), companies should focus on recruiting individuals who *inherently* want to help buyers. Authenticity in frontline employee behavior also contributes to improved employee performance when the employee's authentic behavior conforms to the customer's display rules, that is, expectations of behavior (Schaefer and Pettijohn 2006). Furthermore, 'surface acting', which involves modifying facial expressions and showing emotions which are not authentically felt by the service employee, has been found to be positively related to stress and negatively related to job satisfaction (Grandey 2003), with negative results on how such employees are perceived by the complaining buyer. Therefore a good person-job fit may reduce the degree to which surface acting is needed (Schaefer and Pettijohn 2006).

Teng and Barrows (2009), based on an extensive literature review, also suggest that companies could either use Hogan, Hogan, and Busch's (1984) service orientation index (SOI) or biodata inventories to select appropriate service personnel. The use of advanced role-play techniques (e.g. the use of live audio recordings of interactions between employees and angry complainants instead of relying merely on simulated interactions) could also help for recruitment and training purposes (Stokoe 2011, 2013). Companies should also reward frontline employees for treating (complaining) buyers with respect and showing care for them (Helms and Mayo 2008). Management should emphasize the benefits of handling complaints to their contact employees and set a good example with regard to customer orientation and complaint management traits. Research shows that informal on-the-job managerial coaching is more effective for increasing frontline employees' commitment towards quality of complaint handling

than some of the more conventional approaches towards human resource development such as off-the-job formal training and rewarding (Elmadağ, Ellinger, and Franke 2008). Managerial coaching also appears to have a stronger influence on employee job satisfaction and performance than highly structured training (Elmadağ, Ellinger, and Franke 2008).

Suppliers should keep buyers informed about improvements that were introduced after they complained. For this purpose, frontline employees have to be instructed to communicate to buyers in such a way that they are assured that the company is not only interested in solving the current problem but also wants to eliminate the root cause (Homburg and Fürst 2007). Process recovery communication, that is, feedback to customers that describes how an organization has executed complaint-based process improvements positively affects customers' overall satisfaction, repurchase intentions, and word-of-mouth intentions through higher perceptions of the supplier's relationship investment and overall justice (Vaerenbergh, Larivière, and Vermeir 2012). It must also be kept in mind that buyers place high priority on the frequency of the communication they receive from suppliers, and want to be communicated with in an aligned and consistent fashion (Rutherford, Anaza, and Phillips 2012). Our findings reiterate the need for such quick and transparent updates on the resolution process to be communicated to buyers.

While standardization of services may maintain service quality (Vargo and Lusch 2004), it appears that complaint management services still need some adaptation to local contexts to achieve buyer satisfaction. Influential employees' international experience is strongly linked to international diversification in high-performing firms (Herrmann and Datta 2005). Boundary spanners should be selected and trained to exhibit adaptive qualities and cultural understanding to ensure successful management of internationally diverse buyers. Excellence in exhibiting all the complaint management behaviors found in this study is a desirable goal but service personnel cannot always maximize each of these complaint management behaviors, and trade-offs between

them must often be made (Winsted 1999). It is all the more important for suppliers to understand which of these attributes and behaviors are most important to their buyers and how this might differ in different cultures. A key contribution of our study is that we provide a starting point for complaint management personnel to evaluate which attributes are most significant and why.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This study only involved one industry (manufacturing), which means that the results cannot be easily generalized beyond this particular setting. However, generalization can never be achieved in any one study, but is an empirical question that requires comparisons over different studies (Greenberg 1987). Thus, what is needed is similar research with different sample populations from different industries. Previously, Blodgett, Hill and Bakir (2006) have argued that different complaint behaviors (particularly in consumer settings) in different nations can be a result of various competitive and structural factors, such as retailers' return policies. Similarly, structural and situational factors can contribute to our study's identified differences. Further research should therefore investigate to what degree culture was responsible and to which degree other factors played a role.

This study showed that although some countries were segmented into the same cultural cluster (Kale 1995), there exist surprising and considerable differences among them. This calls for further intra-cluster research investigating particular and culture-based similarities and differences in specified contexts. This study introduces a set of propositions, which are based on our exploratory research. The propositions suggest the effects between the main components of complaint management expectations. They also describe sub-components regarding their universality or their contingencies on cultural aspects. Future research is needed to examine these propositions. In line with this examination, future research is invited to operationalize complaint management expectation factors. Further research could also investigate whether buying

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companies' expectations differ greatly from what suppliers believe buyers want. In this connection, Bitner, Brown, and Meuter (2000) suggest that companies may not always know their customers' service quality expectations. Similarly, Mattila and Enz (2002) found a large gap between customer and employee perceptions regarding service quality expectations. Thus, an interesting area of further research would be to collect dyadic data from *both* buyers and their matched suppliers. The resulting hierarchical value maps could highlight different views (i.e. gaps) and compare multiple perceptions of the complaint process. Revealed discrepancies in perceptions could not only increase employees' and management awareness, but also provide implications for training and recruitment of employees.

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Table 1

Overview List of All Attributes

Attribute	UK	Germany	Example Verbatim
Commit Resources	n=9	-	"need to commit time and people to problem"
Competence	-	n=12	"do possess relevant skills"
Cooperate	-	n=11	"have to work closely together as a team"
Direct Contact	-	n=7	"I want one person who directly deals with my issue"
Empathy	n=10	-	"can understand what problems mean to us "
Honesty	n=12	n=13	"I want to be told the truth"
Motivation	n=12	-	"be willing to do the best s/he (i.e. the supplier) can do"
Openness	n=9	-	"should be open to listen"
Prevention Methods and Controls	n=4	-	"should have prevention controls in place"
Proactiveness	-	n=8	"offer me information before I ask for it"
Take Quick Action	n=36	n=37	"want them to deal with problem quickly"
Take Responsibility	n=11	n=9	"want them to take responsibility for the problem"
Transparency	-	n=9	"share information and facts and give insights"
Understand Problem	n=22	n=20	"should understand why problem occurred"

Note for Tables 1-3: The constructs appear in alphabetical order; n refers to the frequency with which this construct was mentioned (a cut-off level of four was applied).

Table 2
Overview List of All Consequences

Consequence	UK	Germany	Example Verbatim
Effective Resolution Handling	n=30	n=43	"indicates that complaint is dealt with"
Confidence	n=7	-	"this increases my confidence in them"
Financial Benefits	n=31	n=30	"to save money"
Fulfill Obligations to our Customers	n=12	n=9	"this is fundamental to delivering to our customers"
Learning	-	n=8	"learn for the future"
Managerial Benefits	n=26	n=44	"avoid internal production and planning issues"
Prevention of Future Problems	n=30	n=27	"to stop problem from reoccurring"
Quality Assurance	n=6	n=17	"ensure quality of products"
Satisfaction	-	n=18	"then I am satisfied"
Save Time	n=19	n=10	"it saves time, otherwise delays"
Solution	n=50	n=58	"to solve the problem correctly"
Take Problem Seriously	n=17	n=11	"good supplier takes any complaint seriously"
Take Someone Seriously	n=9	n=9	"so I feel I matter to the supplier"
Trust	n=6	n=16	"have to trust that they do what they say"

Table 3
Overview List of All Values

Value	UK	Germany	Example Verbatim
Achievement (Success)	-	n=12	"so that we are successful"
Maintain Customer Relationship	n=15	n=21	"otherwise risk losing customer"
Maintain Supplier Relationship	n=36	n=32	"avoids having to procure another supplier"
Network Effects	n=14	n=16	"pass pressure from our customers on to our suppliers"
Reputation Benefits	n=9	n=8	"otherwise our reputation is impacted"

Figure 1
Hierarchical Value Map of All UK Respondents
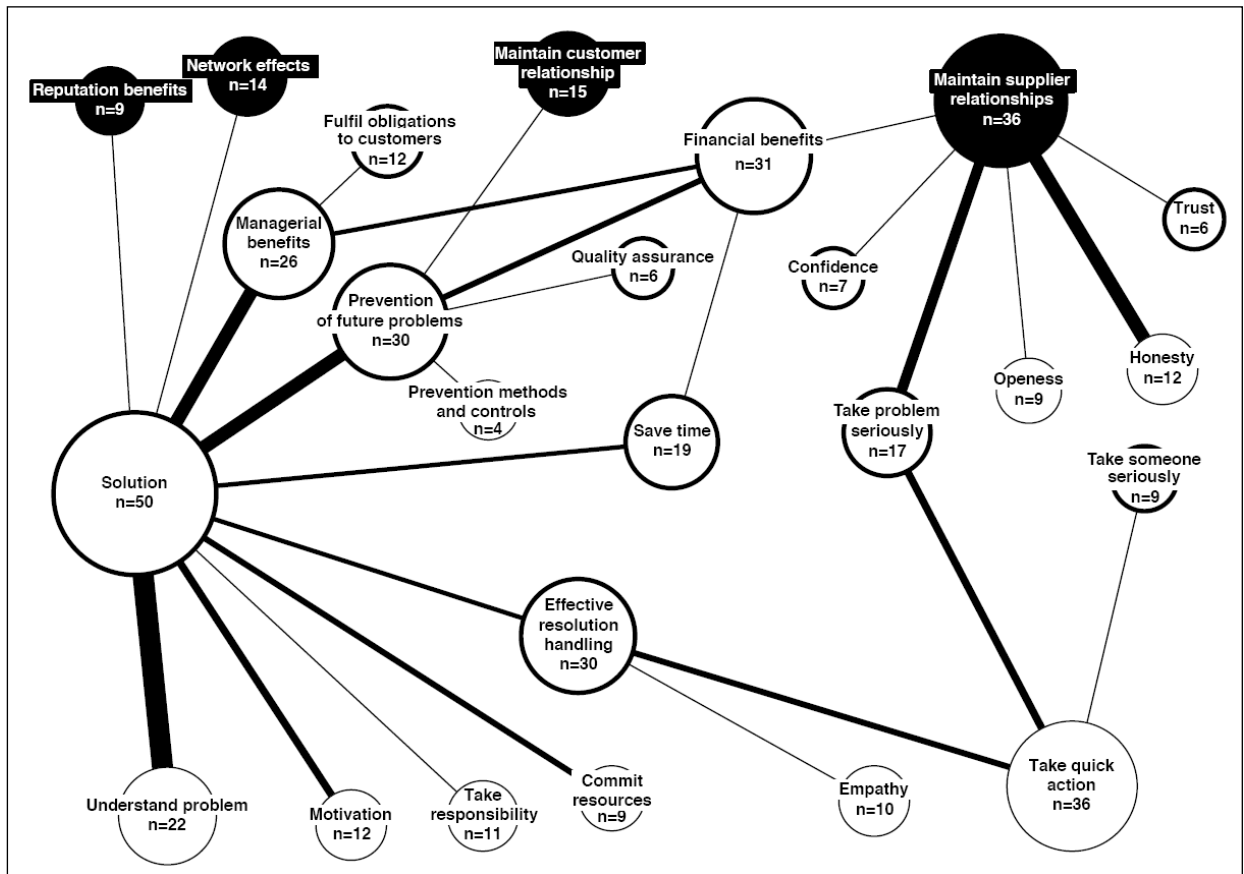
 Note for Figures 1 and 2: Attributes=white circle (thin border), consequences= white circle (thick border), and values=black circles

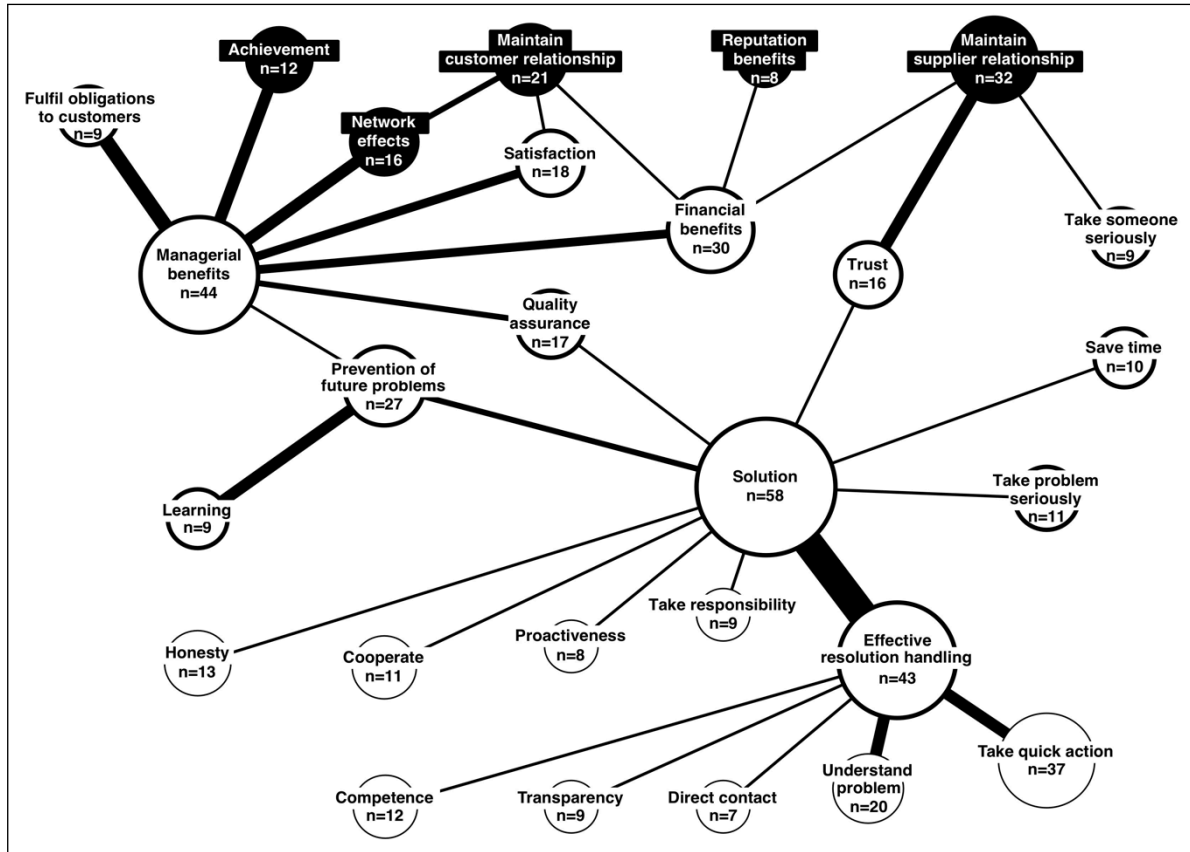**Figure 2**
Hierarchical Value Map of All German Respondents

Figure 3
Means-End Model of Complaint Management Expectations with Cultural Moderation Effects