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RESPONSIVENESS TO COMPLAINTS: RECOVERY VIA CUSTOMER PROTEST WEBSITE AND ITS IMPACT ON PROFITABILITY

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1- INTRODUCTION

There is extensive literature that discusses the relationship between stakeholder satisfaction and a company's financial results (Harrison & Wicks, 2013). In particular, there has been a specific interest on the relationship between the financial performance and the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of customers (Wensley, 2000; Clarkson, 1995)). Knox and Oest (2014) consider that consumer recovery after a complaint is one of the main challenges of today´s firms, viewing complaint in digital plataforms as a critical event in the relationship with consumers. Therefore, without a good complaint handling strategy, the company's performance and reputation may be hindered (Bach & Kim, 2012).

A theoretical model linking customer complaints to profitability was proposed by Johnston (2001), according to which satisfaction, process improvement and employee attitude act as mediators. Many dissatisfied consumers are not willing or able to complain to companies due to the lack of appropriate channels (Homburg & Fürst, 2007). Very frequently, in addition, companies are not prepared to handle complaints (Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2002) and often obstruct or postpone solutions in order to discourage complainants but start to answer them when they resort to third-party protection agencies (Ryngelblum, Vianna & Rimoli, 2013). That was a typical situation before the dissemination of the Internet, when complaint processes were slow and sometimes inconvenient (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). With the internet, consumers use the online environment to (1) complain against companies (Casado-Díaz, Mas-Ruiz & Sellers-Rubio, 2009) and to (2) make purchase decisions (Chen & Lurie, 2013), being more sensitive to negative information like complaints. Online complaints harmed big companies, reaching a larger audience, with higher visibility (Bach & Kim, 2012). Stauss and Schoeler (2004) detailed the effects of complaints on profitability, researching complaining management profitability and listing the costs and benefits involved.

Although the impact of complaints on profitability has been identified in the offline context (Blodgett & Li, 2007), in the case of complaint to an online third-party, contrary to expectations, the main evidence was that the perception of justice of complaint handling processes was not related to the companies' short-term performance and influenced the long-term performance negatively (Yilmaz, Varnali & Kasnakoglu, 2016). Therefore, it is a subject not well explored and with controversial results.

Based on these arguments, the main objective of this research is to analyze if the handling consumer complaints made through an online third party has an impact on companies' profitability. As specific objective, the research proposes to identify, among the main metrics adopted by a third-party to evaluate the results from online complaint handling, which one is the most relevant to analyze the impact on profitability. This paper presents a theoretical model, with conceptual contributions, and empirical results supporting it.

2 CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Consumer Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction, and Financial Performance

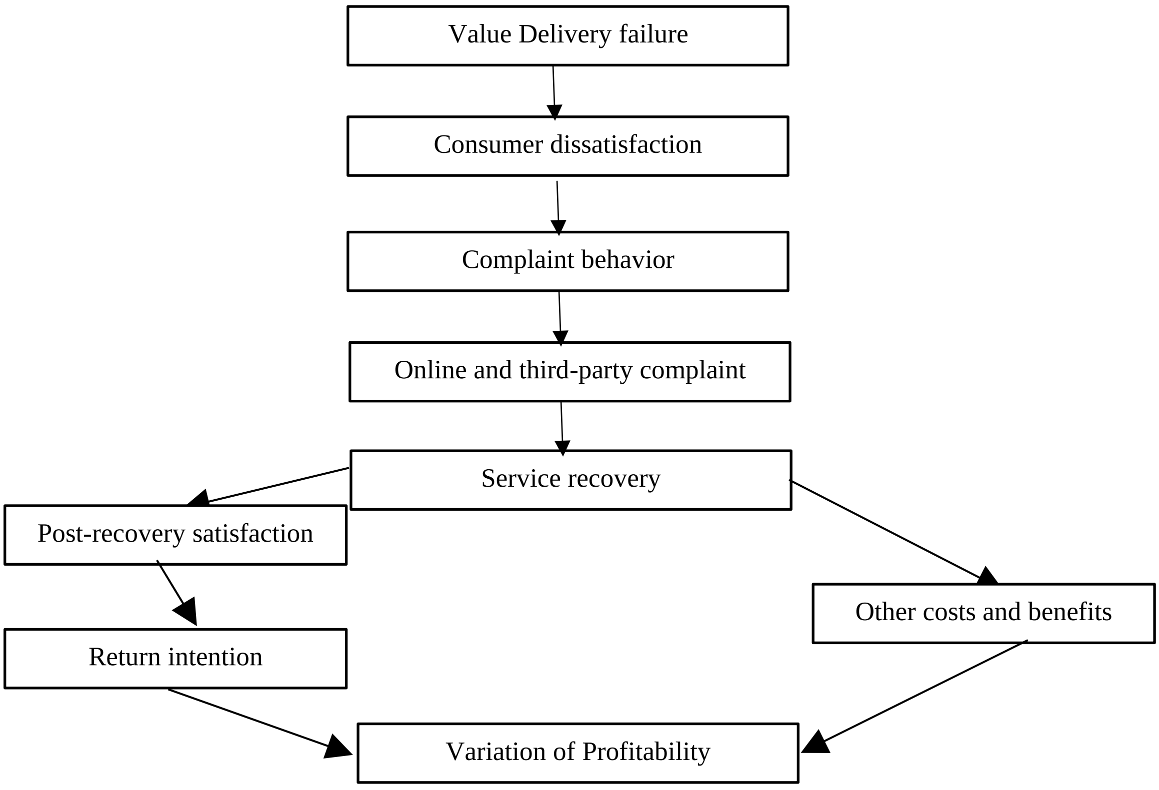
Literature related to effects of consumer complaints on financial performance focus into two major streams: (1) consumer satisfaction as the relevant background and (2) complaints as related to dissatisfaction, a construct apart from satisfaction. Zairi (2000) affirms that handling complaints and managing consumer satisfaction are compatible concepts. Casado-Díaz et al (2009) analyzed the relationship between complaints to third parties and financial return, stating that it is necessary to study the link between consumer satisfaction and economic return of companies. The relationship between consumer satisfaction and financial performance has been vastly evidenced in the literature of Marketing (Morgan, Anderson & Mittal, 2005), considering financial results like operating margin, return on investment, accounting returns (Anderson, Fornell & Mazvancheryl, 2004), cash flow and market value (Solcansky, Sychrova & Milichovsky, 2011).

However, there is evidence that dissatisfaction is not simply the opposite of satisfaction. Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman (1959) proposed the theory that satisfaction and dissatisfaction are different constructs, initially being used to argue that the factors leading to the satisfaction of the employee at work are different from those leading to dissatisfaction (Chow & Zhang, 2008). Luo and Homburg (2008) view satisfaction and complaint as separate constructs, proposing that satisfaction is an asset of the company and complaint is a liability. Albeit being different constructs, they are related and considered an integrated model. Goetzinger, Park and Widdows (2006) affirm there are attributes that lead only to consumer satisfaction, other attributes which lead only to dissatisfaction and yet other attributes which have an impact on both. Moreover, according to Luo (2009), it is more important to study negative experiences than positive ones. Chen and Lurie (2013), consider that people attribute a higher value to negative information than positive ones, in a phenomenon called negativity bias.

2.2 From Negative Experience to Profitability

The theoretical model proposed for this study seeks to establish the relations between several constructs and theoretical lines, from the consumer's negative experience to the company's profitability, including complaints made to third parties and on the internet, as shown in picture 1.

Figure 1 – Theoretical Model – Authors, 2022



The consumer's negative experience, described in literature as value delivery failure, defined as "a real or perceived problem occurring at some point during the customer-company interaction" (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo & Sese, 2016, p. 849). There are two main streams of literature related to service failure: (1) consumer complaining behavior and (2) service recovery, which can be taken together to understand the complaint handling process (Kim et al., 2010). From the moment a value delivery failure occurs, an almost inevitable consequence is consumer dissatisfaction (Kau & Loh, 2006). An unfavorable experience presents cognitive, emotional, and behavioral impacts, such as negative emotions and disconfirmation of consumers' expectancies. The negative disconfirmation of expectancies occurs when the performance of a product is worse than expected (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015).

Consumer dissatisfaction leads then to consumer complaint (Chelminski & Coulter, 2011; Stauss, 2002). According to Einwiller and Steilen (2015, p. 196), complaint is "an expression of dissatisfaction for the purpose of drawing attention to a perceived misconduct by an organization." Several factors influence the intention of consumers to complain against a company, like their level of dissatisfaction, attitude about complaining, self-confidence and perceived probability of success in complaint handling (Fernandes & Santos, 2007).

After the occurrence of dissatisfaction, consumers will define which actions will be used to deal with the feeling (Kim et al., 2010). Several alternatives consumers may choose after feeling dissatisfied: (1) do nothing (Kim et al., 2010), (2) change provider (Blodgett, Hill & Bakir, 2006), (3) ask for reimbursement (Blodgett et al., 2006) and (4) spread negative word of mouth (Blodgett et al., 2006; Kau & Loh, 2006). When a consumer is dissatisfied with a purchase situation, there is a tendency to express disagreement in the way of a complaint and, according to Wu (2013); this is influenced by the perception of justice by the consumer.

A complaint may be directed to several audiences. A first possibility is when a consumer talk with close people, like relatives and friends, mainly recommending them not to buy a product or from a specific company (Bach & Kim, 2012; Blodgett et al., 2006). Another option is to complain directly to the company (Chelminski & Coulter, 2011). Moreover, finally, a consumer may complain to a third party, a public or private agency (Casado-Díaz et al., 2009). Those alternatives are likely results from a lower consumer satisfaction (Matos & Leis, 2013).

The advent of the internet nurtured the creation of the electronic word of mouth and online complaints, including to third parties. Electronic word of mouth is "any statement based on positive, neutral, or negative experiences made by potential, actual, or former consumers about a product, service, brand, or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Kietzman & Canhoto, 2013, p. 147).

The internet became a useful, easy, and accessible channel, increasing the probability consumers express their frustrations by complaining online (Andreassen & Streukens, 2013), and also meeting the criteria of availability and accessibility desired for third parties involved in complaining processes (Hogarth, English & Sharma, 2001). Managing complaints effectively is vital to improve the financial performance of companies (Andreassen & Streukens, 2013); service recovery is a crucial activity to reduce damages caused by service failure, with its consumer relationship and dissatisfaction problems (Kau & Loh, 2006). Service recovery is defined as responses given by companies when facing service failure (Andreassen & Streukens, 2013), actions to seek and handle service failure (Johnston, 2001) or actions taken by companies to investigate the consumer dissatisfaction (Kau & Loh, 2006).

According to Karatepe (2006), the commonest ways companies answer complaints in a good management are to attempt to redeem themselves (reimbursements or gifts, for example), to develop tools and procedures to make the complaining process easier, to expedite answers to complaints, apologize, explain about the problem, to give interpersonal attention and to use the effort of frontline employees to recover from a service failure. Two of the main results expected from service recovery are the post-recovery satisfaction and the resulting return intent (Kuo & Wu, 2012). Post-recovery satisfaction is defined as the overall satisfaction of consumers with the remedial action taken by companies after service failure (Kuo & Wu, 2012) and it is known by different names in the literature, like complaint satisfaction, secondary satisfaction, complaint response satisfaction and service recovery satisfaction. Besides the consumer's propensity to complain, post-recovery satisfaction may be also influenced by the three dimensions of justice perception by the consumer: distributive, procedural, and interactional justice (Homburg, Fürst & Koschate, 2010; Karatepe, 2006). Procedural justice is related to the feeling of justice perceived by consumers about the process of complaint handling, distributive justice is about the quality of compensation offered by the company and interactional justice is about the behavior of companies' employees during the complaint handling process (Brock et al., 2013; Gruber, 2011).

The quality of recovery and complaint handling management can be measured by post-recovery satisfaction and return intent, but those processes together can lead to several other positives results for a company: (1) improvements in consumers' trust (Kau & Loh, 2006); (2) loyalty (Blodgett & Li, 2007; Kau & Loh, 2006); (3) general satisfaction (Nyer, 2000); (4) positive word of mouth (Kau & Loh, 2006; Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2002; Orsingher et al., 2010); (5) consumer-company relationship (Orsingher et al., 2010; Sitko-Lutek, Chuancharoen, Sukpitikul & Phusavat, 2010; Stauss, 2002); (6) reputation and goodwill (Sitko-Lutek et al., 2010); (7) processes streamlining (Johnston, 2001); (8) market share (Homburg & Fürst, 2007; Sitko-Lutek et al., 2010); (9) employees attitude and retention (Johnston, 2001) and (10) products evaluation (Nyer, 2000). They also are related to the reduction of several costs: (1) reimbursement and devolution of products (Sitko-Lutek et al., 2010); (2) advertising (Homburg & Fürst, 2007); (3) keeping consumers versus winning them back (Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2002; Sitko-Lutek et al., 2010). However, the results from complaint handling efforts that companies are really interested are the financial ones (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2016).

A theoretical model linking complaint management to profit was proposed by Johnston (2001), suggesting that the complaint handling process leads to (1) consumer satisfaction and consequently to consumer retention, (2) improvement of company processes and (3) improvement of employees' attitude and retention. Taken together, they would result in a better financial performance for the company. The results of this study showed that it is not that the complaint process that lead to better performance by itself, but instead those intermediating variables like consumer satisfaction and consumer retention. However, maximization of consumer profitability could result from a balance between retaining current consumers and acquiring new ones (Reinartz, Thomas & Kumar, 2005).

Stauss and Scholer (2004) stated that consumer complaint handling management should be considered as a profit center and not only as a cost center and provided details about the composition of the profitability generated from complaint handling, including benefits and costs of the process. Research about the ways a good management of consumer complaints benefit companies' financial performance still present results that are contrary to expectations. It is the case of a study by Yilmaz et al. (2016), who did not find a relation between companies' short-term performance and perception of justice in consumer complaint handling processes, for consumers as well as managers.

However, the impact of complaints on profitability has been confirmed in other studies, like one conducted by Blodgett and Li (2007). Specifically, in the case of complaint to third-parties, Casado-Díaz et al (2009) consider that there are several impacts on the financial performance of companies, like profitability, cash flow and future value to shareholders. Financial results usually adopted for the calculation of profitability for a company are the operating profit and the net profit. Which are then compared to total assets, equity and income of the company. Such indicators draw the attention of analysts and influence decisions involving the company under analysis. Profitability ratios show the combined effects of the management of liquidity, assets and debts over operational results, which result from the company's decisions and policies. To measure profitability, one the main indicators is the Return on Assets (ROA). However, there is great diversity in the ways proposed to calculate ROA. Jewell and Mankin (2011) analyzed eleven different ways to calculate ROA, considering all of them valid depending on the context and none of them definitive.

3 METHODS

This paper is based on an empirical, quantitative study, investigating data with the use of discriminant analysis model. Companies were selected, initially from the IBrA index which is composed of 132 different shares and was created to provide an ample view of the Brazilian stock market. Being companies listed at the stock exchange, they are obliged to make financial statements publicly available. Data to measure their profitability were taken from Economática. The website ReclameAqui (www.reclameaqui.com.br) was selected as the online third-party consumer-complaining agency. ReclameAqui is the largest consumer defense website in Latin America, being of easy access and understanding for the consumer. It publishes complaints from consumers and provides opportunity for companies to answer those complaints, acting as intermediary between consumers and companies. ReclameAqui provides indicators related to post-recovery satisfaction (grades given by consumers to companies after the handling of their complaints) and return intent.

The final sample of companies is composed of all companies that were included in the IBrA stock index and were also evaluated by their consumers at ReclameAqui with (1) post-recovery satisfaction and (2) return intent indicators for the years 2012, 2013 and 2014 (data available at ReclameAqui during the research). This resulted in a sample of 55 companies from eleven industries. Unfortunately, authors did not have access to more updated information. The variable Return Intent (RI) was measured as the percentage of consumers who responded they would buy again from the same companies after having their complaint being answered through ReclameAqui. The grade given by these consumers to the companies after service recovery was used as a proxy for Post-Recovery Satisfaction (PRS). For both RI and PRS, different variables were created for each year in the 2012-2013-2014 period, on a scale ranging from a minimum of 0% to a maximum of 100%. ROA was calculated as follows: Operating Earning/Average Total Assets.

Operating earnings are related to the year of 2014. To calculate the average total assets, the balance sheets for the four quarters of 2014 and the last quarter of 2013 were used. However, ROA results were converted into qualitative variables in order to allow for the use of discriminant analysis. The medians of the ROA of the 55 companies on the sample were calculated. Those companies whose ROA were above the median were classified into the High ROA group and the remaining ones into the Low ROA group. The use of the median instead of the average ROA to classify the companies allows the creation of two different groups of similar size and reduce distortions caused by outliers.

The statistical model used in this study to conduct the discriminant analysis is shown below. The stepwise method used in the discriminant analysis of the models selects the independent variables which best explain companies included among the ones with higher profitability versus ones that have lower profitability, as measured by their ROA in 2014.

$$ROA_{2014} = \alpha + \beta_1 RI_{2012} + \beta_2 RI_{2013} + \beta_3 RI_{2014} + \beta_4 PRS_{2012} + \beta_5 PRS_{2013} + \beta_6 PRS_{2014}$$

ROA = Return on Assets, in 2014 - RI = Return Intent, in 2012, 2013 and 2014 - PRS = Post-Recovery Satisfaction, in 2012, 2013 and 2014

4 Analyses and Results

Descriptive statistics are shown in table 1. On a scale from 0% to 100%, the lowest return intent occurred in 2012 (only 10%) and the higher in 2013 (87.1%). The year of 2014 presented both the lowest and the highest levels of post-recovery satisfaction (10.5% and 82.9% respectively). The average return intent increased every year, from 43.5% in 2012, to 45.5% in 2013 and 49.7% in 2014. Post-recovery satisfaction also improved during the period, with its average value increasing from 41.8% in 2012, to 43.3% in 2013 and 48% in 2014. The relative dispersion of return intent fell from 41.5% in 2012, to 38.8% in 2013 and 28.4% in 2014, according to the coefficients of variation. In the case of post-recovery satisfaction, the coefficient of variation decreased from 34.1% in 2012 to 32.2% in 2013 but had an increase to 33.1% in the following year. Descriptive statistics show that return intent and post-recovery satisfaction results from service recovery improved on average in every year from 2012 to 2014, while their variation decreased.

TABLE 1 – DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS - Authors

Variable	Year	Minimum	Maximum	Average	St. Var. Deviation	Coef. Var.
Return Intent	2012	10.0%	84.7%	43.5%	18.1%	41.5%
	2013	10.9%	87.1%	45.5%	17.6%	38.8%
	2014	10.1%	86.7%	49.7%	19.1%	38.4%
Post-recovery Satisfaction	2012	18.4%	80.1%	41.8%	14.3%	34.1%
	2013	15.1%	81.8%	43.3%	13.9%	32.2%
	2014	10.5%	82.9%	48.0%	15.9%	33.1%

Table 2 presents the correlation matrix of the variables. The highest correlations are found between return intent and post-recovery satisfaction of the same years. The correlation between those two variables for the year of 2013 was 0.915, being the highest one found in the matrix, followed by the year of 2012 with a correlation of 0.905 and the year of 2014 in third with

0.893. The results suggest a tendency to exist a high return intent when there is a high post-recovery satisfaction in the same year, being consistent with previous research showing that return intent is a direct result of post-recovery satisfaction (Kuo & Wuo, 2012; Orsingher et al., 2010). The lowest correlations are from the most distant years, with a 0.573 correlation between return intent of 2012 and post-recovery satisfaction of 2014, and 0.597 between return intent of 2014 and post-recovery satisfaction of 2012.

TABLE 2 – CORRELATION MATRIX - authors

		Return Intent			**Post-recovery satisfaction**		
		2012	2013	2014	2012	2013	2014
Return Intent	2012	1	0.848	0.695	0.905	0.786	0.573
	2013	0.848	1	0.812	0.786	0.915	0.695
	2014	0.695	0.812	1	0.597	0.705	0.893
Post-recovery satisfaction	2012	0.905	0.786	0.597	1	0.849	0.617
	2013	0.786	0.915	0.705	0.849	1	0.715
	2014	0.573	0.695	0.893	0.617	0.715	1

When the 55 companies are divided between those with High ROA and Low ROA, the averages for the independent variable are as shown in table 3. On average, return intent and post-recovery satisfaction increased every year for companies with Low ROA. For companies with High ROA, this is still true for return intent, but not for post-recovery satisfaction since there was a slight decrease in the average values from 47.1% in 2012 to 47% in 2013.

TABLE 3 – DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS BY PROFITABILITY GROUP - authors

Variable	**Year**	**ROA**	**Average**	**Standard Deviation**
Return Intent	2012	Low	36.8%	19.1%
	2013		40.0%	18.9%
	2014		45.5%	21.8%
Post-recovery Satisfaction	2012		36.7%	15.3%
	2013		39.8%	14.4%
	2014		45.0%	17.3%
Return Intent	2012	High	50.5%	14.1%
	2013		51.2%	14.4%
	2014		54.0%	15.1%
Post-recovery Satisfaction	2012		47.1%	11.1%
	2013		47.0%	12.7%
	2014		51.2%	13.9%

The group of companies with High ROA has, on average, higher return intent and also higher post-recovery satisfaction than the group of companies with Low ROA in all three years under analysis. So, companies with better results from service recovery via a third-party complaint website also have better profitability for any independent variable (return intent or post-recovery satisfaction), in any year of the study (2012, 2013 or 2014). Those results show the relationship between complaint handling and profitability found by Blodgett and Li (2007) in an offline context appears to be also valid for online complaints.

In order to identify which independent variables are best to differentiate the group of companies with high profitability from the group of lower profitability, a discriminant analysis was run using the stepwise method. Since the independent variables are strongly correlated to each other, choosing the stepwise method instead of including all variables together avoids potential multicollinearity issues. Results are shown in table 4. Intent return and post-recovery satisfaction for the year of 2012 are statistically significant at 1% and for 2013 they are significant at 5% and 10% respectively. For 2014, they are not significant. The variable with higher capacity to discriminate between groups is the return intent of 2012, since it is the independent variable with lowest Wilks's lambda.

The discriminant function coefficient is positive (at 0.059), and the High ROA group classification function coefficient is higher than the coefficient for the Low ROA group (0.177 and 0.13 respectively). Those results suggest that companies with the higher return intent in 2012 will also be companies in the group of high ROA profitability ratios in 2014. The Box's M test has a non-significant result of 0.123, showing that this discriminant analysis is in accordance with the necessary assumption of homogeneity of variance. The canonical correlation of 0.381, when squared, shows the explanatory power of the function of 14.5%.

TABLE 4 – DISCRIMINANT ANALYSIS

		Dependent Variable ROA 2014	
Independent Variable	Year	Wilks's Lambda	Signif.
Return Intent	2012	0.855	0.004
	2013	0.898	0.017
	2014	0.950	0.101
Post-recovery Satisfaction	2012	0.866	0.006
	2013	0.934	0.057

	2014	0.962	0.152
Box's M Significance		0.123	
Variable selected by stepwise method		Return Intent 2012	
Significance of selected variable		0.004	
Canonic Correlation		0.381	
Discrimination function coefficient		0,059	
Group classification function coefficients Low		0,13	
High		0,177	

Bowman and Narayandas (2004) and Helgesen (2006) studied the link between consumer satisfaction and financial performance, stating that consumer profitability is largely based on consumer loyalty. Since consumer loyalty and return intent are close concepts, results obtained from the discriminant analysis seem to suggest that there are similarities in the ways profitability is impacted by satisfaction and dissatisfaction. This gives strength to the view that satisfaction and complaints should be taken together into an integrated model, as proposed by Luo and Homburg (2008).

5- FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The main objective of this paper is to analyze if the handling of consumer complaints made through an online third-party impacted on companies' profitability. Results from descriptive statistic and discriminant analysis, from a sample of 55 companies in several industries, suggest profitability is indeed affected by third-party online complaint handling results. Quality in complaint handling seems to be improving, with return intent and post-recovery satisfaction increasing every year. Companies who are the best ones according to those indicators also tend to be the ones with higher profitability, as measured by ROA (Return on Assets). It has also been proposed as a specific objective to identify, among the main metrics adopted by a third-party to evaluate the results from online complaint handling, which one is the most relevant to analyze the impact on profitability. With the use of the stepwise procedure in a discriminant analysis, the conclusion is that the variable which is best suited to discriminate high profitability companies from the low profitability ones in 2014 is the return intent of 2012. There is however high correlation between return intent and post-recovery satisfaction of each year. The explanatory power of the function linking return intent of 2012 to ROA of 2014 is 14.5%.

This article contributes to the existing theory linking consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction, complaint behavior, service recovery and profitability, in the context of complaints made via internet to third parties, also empirically testing the impact, on companies' profitability, of the handling of complaints made by consumers through a specialized website. So, the findings from this study reinforce the view that better results in complaint handling tend to lead to a better level of profitability in companies, including complaints made via the internet to third-party agencies. These results also suggest the intention of a consumer to buy again from the company after complaint handling is more relevant than the satisfaction of the consumer with the process. So, return intent should be the metric of choice to evaluate the quality-of-service recovery, instead of the satisfaction obtained after dealing with the complaint. Those conclusions have practical implications for marketing management, showing the importance of complaint handling for the financial performance. Companies that pay attention to complaints made in the online environment by their consumers have a lower risk of losing clients and profitability. However, this impact does not necessarily occurs in the short-term, but especially in the long-term, so goals and objectives established for marketing professionals should also include a long-term perspective and not only short-term results. Otherwise, marketing professionals may not care enough about complaint handling, since the resulting profitability may take longer to be achieved. Companies seeking profitability also benefit from focusing on return intent when planning and controlling service recovery.

This study has some limitations. First, the sample is composed only by public companies. Second, the sample only includes companies which were evaluated at the chosen complaints website ReclameAqui and, therefore, with a history of complaints with their customers. Third, data available at the website during the research were only for the period between 2012 and 2014, with yearly indicators. Further studies may be able to overcome those limitations. Seeking data from companies outside the stock exchange, particularly smaller ones. Using other sources with data about quality in complaint handling since new alternatives for the expression of dissatisfied consumers are created and will improve. Longer periods of time could help to measure the impact on financial performance along the years, or quarterly data might be used instead of yearly results. With a sample including more companies for a longer period, it might be possible to find significant results for specific industries too.

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