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Item Type	Working paper
Authors	Sullivan, Vivienne;Adamson, Ivana
Publisher	University of Wolverhampton
Download date	2025-05-16 23:25:57
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/2436/11412

Has the Russian Consumers' Attitude Changed in Recent Years?

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Working Paper Series June 1999

Number **WP005/99**

ISSN Number **ISSN 1363-6839**

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The Working Paper Series is edited by Kate Gilbert

Abstract

This study examined consumers in the post-Soviet Russia and their willingness to make effective consumer choices. A sample of consumers (n=79) took part and were asked to explore the concept of 'consumer rights'. They were asked :

- to report an incident in which they complained about an unsatisfactory product or service
- to describe the outcome of the complaint, and provided the outcome of the complaint was unsatisfactory, and
- how they resolved the problem.

Finally, the sample was asked to discuss the Russian product/service providers' attitudes towards customer complaints.

The results suggest that the concept of 'consumer rights' does not have much meaning for the majority of Russians, and no statistically significant differences based on age or education were found. However, gender differences were found to be statistically significant ($F=3.089$, $p<.05$).

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Introduction

Consumerism is embedded in modern marketing, and while Weber (1930) suggested that the pursuit of profit in a rational and systematic way was underpinned by a Protestant sense of duty, hard work and asceticism, Gabbott and Hogg (1998) suggested that economics were the dominant force, based upon the assumption of rationality. Other observers might consider that the culture of a society determines the society's beliefs, values and norms, cognition and signs and what constitutes non-normative behaviours. However cultural transmission of common meanings in the marketing systems (Douglas & Isherwood, 1980) communicates not only about the quality and quantity of economic goods (McCracken, 1981), but reflects the accepted practices and behaviours which impact upon consumer socialisation.

In 1962 the US Government's Bill of Rights declared American consumers had the rights to safety, to be informed, and to be heard: this led to rapid development of the consumer movement beginning in 1964. This was attributable to the growing level of general discontent with poorly-made or hazardous products, coupled with inadequate warranties and widespread malpractice in the marketplace.

While consumers in the West can express their approval or disapproval of company policies by their propensity to purchase, the Soviet Union was a different type of society and by the 1960s Russian income was just beginning to lift above subsistence level and move towards 'primary living' needs (Yanowitch, 1979). Rapid Russian industrial advances created labour problems as a predominantly peasant population was transformed.

Life for the ordinary citizen in the former Soviet Union was predictable, drab and stagnant. But the recent collapse of the Soviet Union has brought changes including commercial confusion and has demonstrated a present inability to identify positive opportunities (Adamson, 1997). The changes of power shifted from old established relationships (Salmi, 1996) but in the early 1990s there was an influx of Western businesses, management 'know-how' and consumer goods (Adamson, 1991), but the Western reformers who had successfully used the Thatcherite model of economic reform in Poland found that whilst the Poles had had the desire to liberate themselves from the Russians by emulating the West, Russia itself was very different (Meek, 1998).

In 1993 the Russian Government transferred industry ownership - via voucher privatisation schemes - into 'working collectives' (Mellow, 1997) but former Russian managers had only previously experienced decision-making within a 'planned economy' and were ill-prepared for autonomy in a Western sense.

In the late 1990s, it is apparent that Russian reformation has not been built on the foundation stones of a market economy and still has no legal structures to enforce mutual obligations, corporate responsibilities or transparent accounting systems (*The European*, 1998). Companies can collapse without bankruptcy. and court judgements and commercial cases are routinely ignored (Meek 1998).

But marketing and consumer-care concepts are still unrecognised in Russia, while western market economies recognise that focusing on customer care and service quality are key components in establishing and sustaining a competitive advantage (Pistrui, 1997) Russia today is a producer's market, where demand is in excess of supply. Quality of service contributes significantly to increased market share, return on investment, and lower production costs (Phillips *et al*, 1983) in the West but the fall of communism in Eastern Europe poses a variety of problems including that of refocusing the customer as a strategic marketing component rather than as an essential purchaser. Although post-modernism offers the Western world a philosophical basis for more creative, spontaneous and adaptable marketing with the focus on globalisation and relationship marketing (Brown, 1994) the Russian marketplace has, for the past 30 years of consumerism development, passed them by. Western commercial companies view their good relationship with companies as their long-term viability (Conlon & Murray 1996); when this relationship becomes strained and customers choose to complain (or not), organisations wishing to keep their customers respond in an appropriate way (Best & Andreason, 1997). Indeed Abel, Festinger and Sarat (1981) suggested that the life-cycle of customer complaints can be divided into three stages:

- perceiving a problem (naming)
- voicing a complaint (blaming)
- resolving the complaint (claiming)

However since the Russian consumer has had no participatory experience of complaint mechanisms he is less likely to appreciate its effectiveness as a consumer tool.

The objective of this paper is to explore some basic beliefs and attitudes concerning the consumer satisfaction concept, and the perceptions of how companies respond to customer complaints in Russia.

Hypotheses

1. The younger generation of Russians would be clearer about consumer rights and expectations from manufacturers than the middle and older age groups.
2. Historically, Russian men were not involved in the running of their homes, therefore, they would be less aware about the customer satisfaction issues.
3. In the former Soviet Union holding strong views, attitudes and beliefs regarding goods and services different from those held by the state was frowned upon and punishable in law. It was expected that questionnaires would be viewed with mistrust, completed unwillingly, and answers about products/service providers dissatisfaction would be equivocal.
4. The majority of Russians, due to their present low earning capacity, do not consider themselves as 'consumers' or Russia as a 'consumer society' within the Western sense of the word.

Methodology

According to Crouch and Houseden (1998), in underdeveloped markets the information required may not be available or may be of dubious quality. This proved to be the case in

Russia as questionnaires were viewed with suspicion, filled in with reluctance and answers about products/ service providers regarding customer dissatisfaction were often evasive. Similar problems encountered when trying to research data regarding personal opinions in what is still an effectively 'closed' society. With many traditional marketing sampling approaches rendered unsuitable the 'snowballing technique' helped access seventy nine respondents, of which forty five were women, and thirty four men.

Moscow was chosen because it is economically the most active city in Russia.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part 1 was designed to obtain demographic profiles, and Part 2 explored the respondent's attitudes as consumers. Each respondent was administered a questionnaire in a 'one-to-one' situation, and paid a nominal sum (US\$1) to complete a questionnaire.

For analysis the respondents were divided into five groups according to age, each containing sixteen to twenty two members, except the '55+ years' group (group 5), which contained only seven members (six out of seven were female).

The SPSS+ statistical package was used to evaluate the results.

Results and Analysis

Part 1. The demographic profile

Table 1 is a cross-tabulation summarising the sample profile. Group 5 (55+ years) because of the low numbers, was included for illustrative purposes, and was not a part of the sample analysis.

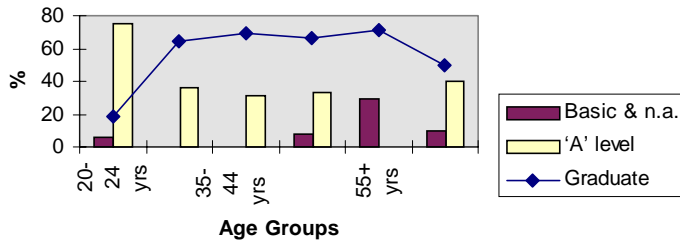
Marital status and children

The above table shows that with the exception of Group 1 (20-24 years), where 50% women respondents were married, and 100% men were unmarried, 50% of the women and 13% of the men were parents. In Group 2 (25-34 years) 36% of women and 27% men were single. In Group 2 91% women, and 82% men were parents. In Group 3 (35-44 years) this figure decreased for women to 75%, and increased for men to 88%. For Group 4 (45-54 years) the entire sample were parents, with 13% remaining in the 'single' category.

Education, occupation and income

The sample consisted mainly of graduates (two thirds). That may be expected when using the snowball technique of data collection, although Group 1 comprised 25% graduates. Figure 1 shows the age and education distribution for the sample.

Figure 1: Age and Educational Attainment
(n=79)



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Table 1. Personal profiles of the whole group

Age & Gender %																		
Sample	20-24 years (n=16)			25-34 years (n=22)			35-44 years (n=16)			45-54 years (n=18)			55+ years (n=7)			whole group (n=79)		
	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	F	M	Total	F	M	Total
Status																		
<i>single</i>	50	100	75	36	27	32	13	25	19	8	17	13	33	-	16	27	41	34
	50	-	25	64	73	68	87	75	81	92	83	87	67	100	84	73	59	66
No. of Children																		
<i>0</i>	50	87	69	9	18	21	25	12	18	-	-	-	-	100	14	15	32	24
<i>1</i>	50	13	31	91	64	77	50	25	38	50	67	56	67	-	57	62	41	52
<i>2</i>	-	-	-	-	18	9	25	50	38	25	33	28	33	-	29	16	24	19
<i>≤3</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	6	25	-	17	-	-	-	7	3	5
Education																		
<i>basic & n.a.</i>	13	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	17	8	17	100	29	14	6	10
<i>A level</i>	63	89	75	36	36	36	38	25	31	25	50	33	-	-	-	34	47	40
<i>graduate</i>	25	13	19	64	64	64	62	75	69	75	33	66	83	-	71	62	47	50
Occupation																		
<i>professional</i>	13	-	6	27	36	32	13	13	13	33	33	33	50	-	43	27	24	25
<i>skilled/clerical</i>	25	13	19	18	9	14	25	38	32	50	33	44	-	-	-	27	21	24
<i>unskilled</i>	25	50	38	45	45	45	50	13	32	-	34	11	17	100	29	27	35	32
<i>unemployed</i>	25	13	19	9	-	4	13	-	6	-	-	11	33	-	28	11	3	5
<i>n.a.</i>	12	24	18	-	9	4	-	25	13	17	-	12	-	-	-	7	15	14
Income per month																		
<i>≤\$100</i>	31	18	25	9	9	9	38	13	25	33	33	33	83	100	92	31	18	25
<i>\$200-500</i>	65	76	70	86	86	86	62	74	68	59	67	61	17	-	8	65	76	70
<i>\$600-1K</i>	4	6	5	5	5	5	-	13	7	8	-	26	-	-	-	4	6	5

* in all groups gender is equally distributed, except groups 45-54 years, F=12, M=6, and 55+ years, F=6, M=1

Since the fall of the former Soviet Union educational values of the school leavers seem to have changed as less than 50% continued their education after obtaining their university entrance qualifications.

Group 1 (after Group 5, - the female retirement age) shows the highest number of unemployed people (19%), 38% were in unskilled occupations, with 6% professionals (all women).

In group 2 only half of the graduates were professional, but in group 3, one fifth were professional. The remaining respondents were clerical or unskilled workers.

Irrespective of age, education or employment, most of the sample earned between \$200 and \$500 per month, and the two highest earners were men in the 35-44 years group (7%), and women in the 45-54 years group (26%).

Table 1 shows the impact on attitudes to education and the inability of the Soviet educated population to benefit from their qualifications effectively in the job market.

Most western consumer goods are more expensive in Moscow than in western countries. With average salaries less than \$500 and property prices in Moscow high with a one room flat (in 1998) costing around \$40 000, disposable income is low.

Part 2: The consumer is always right

On the ‘customer rights’ issues Figure 2 shows statistically significant differences between genders. Using a Likert-type scale, 29% men ‘strongly agreed’, and 41% ‘agreed’ that a ‘customer is always right’, while 27% women ‘agreed’, and 51% ‘disagreed’ that customer is always right.

Table 2. The Consumer is always right

Age Groups (years)	Strongly Agree		Agree		Don't Know		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	F %	M %	F %	M %	F %	M %	F %	M %	F %	M* %
20-24 (n=16)	-	13	-	50	13	13	63	25	25	-
25-34 (n=22)	-	27	36	45	-	9	64	18	-	-
35-44 (n=16)	-	25	38	38	13	-	38	38	13	-
45-54 (n=18)	8	67	33	17	8	-	42	17	8	-
55+ (n=7)	-	-	17	100	33	-	50	-	-	-
WG** (n=79)	2	29	27	41	11	6	51	23	9	-

* there is an equal distribution in groups between women and men except the 45-54 years group (F=12 and M=6), and 55+ years group (F=6, M=1) ** whole group

Table 2 shows the distribution between gender and age groups. Disregarding Group 5, the highest scores for a ‘Strongly Agree’ category was group 4 (67%). Equally high scores were in the ‘Disagree’ category for women group 2 (64%) were closely followed by group 1 (63%).



Figure 2 illustrates the gender attitudinal differences for the whole group. Multivariate Anova was used to evaluate the level of variability between and within groups for a number of dimensions: ‘Customer is always right’, ‘Complained about a product/service’, ‘response to the complaint’, ‘did you go there again?’ and ‘why?’.

Groups for the purpose of statistical analysis were varied according gender, age, education and income. The only statistically significant results ($F=3.089$, s.s. at $p<.05$) were obtained for the gender variable and ‘the customer is always right’ variable.

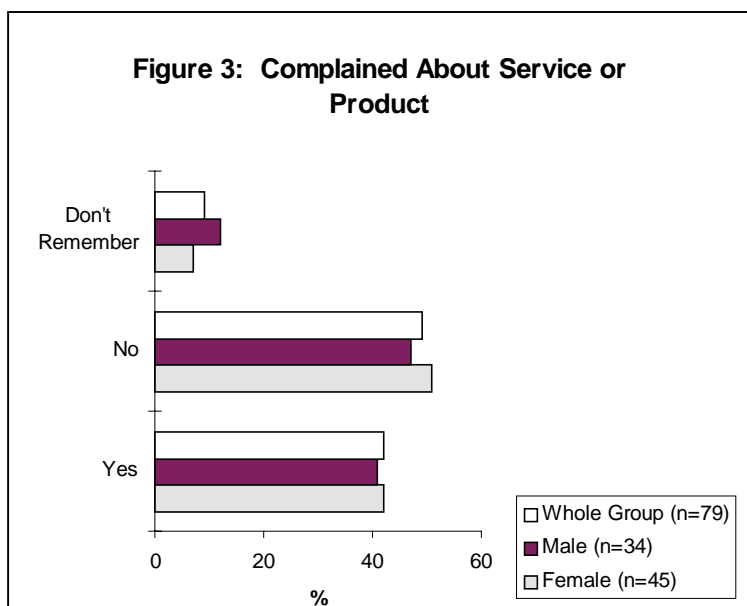


Figure 3 suggests that men strongly believed in customer rights, with the scores for the male/female/whole groups on the ‘complained’ dimension almost identical, but slightly more men ‘forgot’ if they had ever complained about goods or services. All respondents reported that initial reaction complaint was rudeness, but was eventually positively resolved.

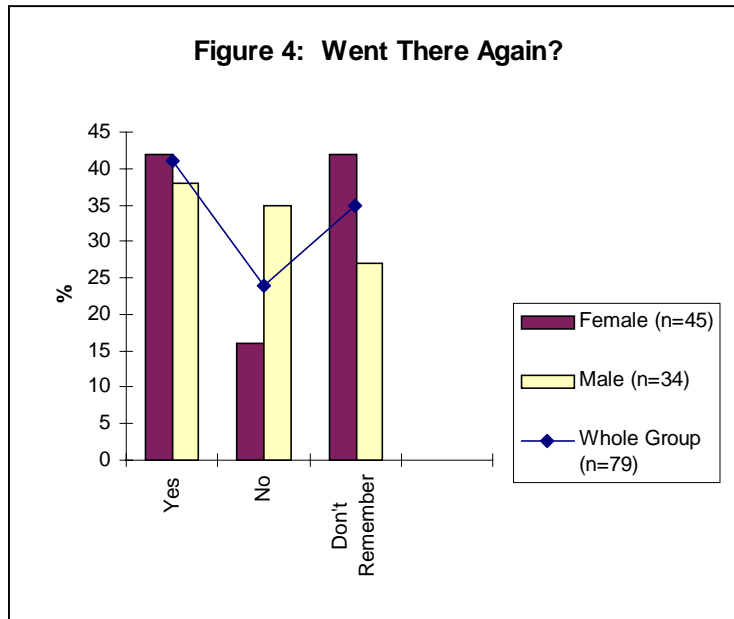


Figure 4 illustrates that dissatisfaction with a product/service was high but 42% women reported that their behaviour was not affected since they returned. Some respondents indicated that they did not recollect a repeat visit. The whole sample (including 'don't know' category) when asked 'Why they went there again?' reported that convenience and a lack of alternatives were main reasons.

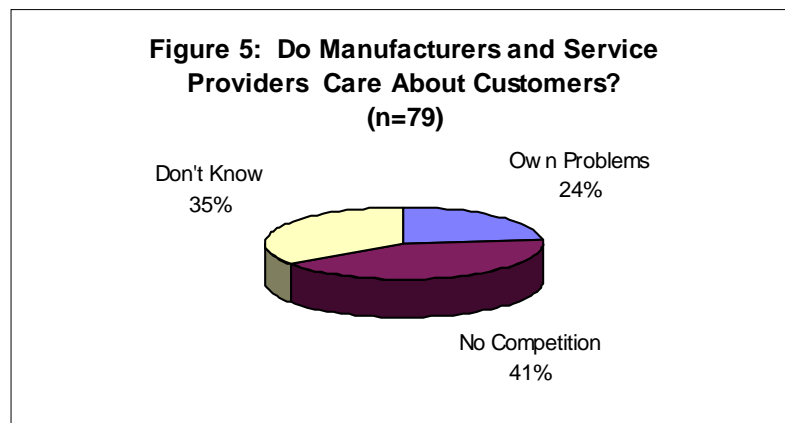


Figure 5 summarises responses to 'how in their experience manufacturers/service providers react to customer complaints', 'if their attitude is justified' and 'how would they explain the manufacturer/service provider' attitude'. 41% reported that lack of competition allows goods and services to be offered on a 'take-it-or-leave-it' premise, 24% believed that manufacturers had enough problems without worrying about customers, and 34% did not have an opinion.

Multiple regression was used to evaluate the results, but no relationships were found to be statistically significant. This reflects uniformity rather than variability within and between groups in the sample.

Discussion

The first hypothesis predicted that young Russians would be clearer about their customer rights. This was not borne out by the results as there were no statistically significant differences between age groups.

The second hypothesis predicted that Russian men would not be particularly aware about consumer issues, since generally they have not been involved in running homes. This was refuted, men as strongly agreed that consumers are always right. However, even where consumer choice does exist, this may not be reflected by having realistic or economic choices, Although 16% of women did change their service provider it for most consumers alternative shopping opportunities are not practical.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that 'attitudinal' questions would yield evasive answers, and this was clearly indicated showing that 49% of the sample (51% women and 47% men) did not remember if they had ever complained, 35% (42% women and 26% men) did not recollect if they had continued to use the same outlet subsequent to complaint, and although 41% believed that lack of competition gives rise to manufacturers' indifference to customer complaints, 35% did not know, or declined to answer if this indifference was justified. There were no statistically significant variances between groups.

Hypothesis 4 was clearly not refuted. Although Russia is a large and potentially attractive market to Western manufacturers and services providers, it is remote from the generally understood concept of a 'consumer society' as the industrialised world understands. Welsh (1996) suggested that companies in the industrialised West usually approach complaints with some speed and openness, without assuming whether the customer is either right or wrong, unlike our respondents.

Although the sample was small the researchers note that their findings would seem to closely resemble the work of others in this area with Russian companies and consumers far removed from the western level of consumer-orientated development. Nevertheless despite the recent economic and political changes in Russia there seems to have been minimal effect on consumer behaviour by average Russian shoppers and thus emergent businesses must expect to adapt appropriate consumer marketing tools rather than rely too much on Western consumer marketing practices.

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