

# The Impact of Consumers Witness Front-Line Service Employee Complaints on Corporate Brand Attitudes

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## Abstract

In the past, the research on complaints mainly focused on employee-employer dichotomy, focusing on the impact of employee complaints on employee performance. But in the actual work, front-line service workers and consumers have a lot of service contacts. If consumers witness complaints from front-line service workers, what impact will it have on corporate brand attitude? Based on the third-party perception perspective and the theory of moral justice, with perception of corporate morality as the mediating variable, this paper verifies that perceived corporate controllability by first-line service employees' complaints can significantly affect consumer brand attitude, and introduces the boundary condition of perceived employee complaints. When perceived employee complaints are health factors, the more controllable the first-line service employees' complaints are perceived. The higher the perceived corporate ethics, the lower the consumer brand attitude. When perceived employee complaints are motivating factors, there is no difference in the impact of perceived corporate controllability and low perceived employee complaints on consumer brand attitude. The paper examines the impact of corporate controllability on consumers perceived by the complaints of front-line service employees witnessed by consumers. It also studies the spillover effect of employee complaints from the perspective of third-party perception, which has important guiding value for guiding the management of front-line service employees and sustainable development.

## Keywords

Complaints, Perceived Enterprise Controllability, Perception of Corporate Morality, Brand Attitude

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## 1. Introduction

Complaints are common in social life, for example, people often express their dissatisfaction with others. In the organizational context, employees often have a lot of grievances and dissatisfaction because of work or interpersonal problems, and complain about this dissatisfaction to the people around them in the workplace or in private. For example, among employees 1) complain about low salary, unfair distribution, bad working environment, unreasonable enterprise rules and regulations; 2) complain about the intensity of work, lack of dignity, lack of security and so on; 3) complain about tensions between superiors and subordinates or colleagues, or contradictions with other departments, which lead to many problems. Employee complaint is a negative behavior, so enterprises also try to manage this negative behavior of employees.

For the first-line service employees who work in the enterprise-consumer interface, in the process of providing products or services to consumers, there must be a large number of service contacts and interactions with consumers [1]. If front-line service employees complain about each other in the workplace, consumers may see and hear such complaints. Employee behavior, especially the behavior of front-line service personnel, plays an important role in brand building [2]. Allowing consumers to witness complaints among front-line service employees may run counter to efforts to create brands through employees [3].

The existing research on complaints is mostly about consumer complaints, but less about employee complaints. Research on employee complaints also focuses on the employee complaints within the enterprise [4]. Few studies have examined the impact of first-line service employees' behavior on consumers. The most relevant studies include third-party perception studies, and third-party also responds to events or actions [4]. Porath, Macinnis, Folkes [5] and Porath, Folkes [6] further validated that consumers' witness of uncivilized behavior of front-line service employees can affect consumers' inference of the whole enterprise. However, no scholars have specifically examined the impact of complaints among front-line service employees on consumers.

Therefore, the paper mainly explores the impact of witnessing complaints among front-line service employees on consumers' brand attitude. Through theoretical review, key event collection and empirical research, it is found that consumers will respond to complaints from front-line service employees, which verifies that perceived corporate controllability of witnessing front-line service employees' complaints will significantly affect consumers' brand attitude and witness front-line service employees' brand attitude. The higher the perceived corporate controllability, the lower the consumer brand attitude. At the same time, introducing the theory of moral justice, how employees are treated by enterprises will lead to consumers' judgment of corporate morality. In the judgment process, the greater the responsibility of the organization being investigated, the lower the perception of corporate morality. Therefore, the higher con-

trollability perceived from employees' complaints, the lower corporate ethics, and thus the lower brand attitude of consumers.

In addition, the paper divides complaint sources into two categories: health care factors and incentive factors, different complaint sources on consumers will also be different. When perceived employee complaints are health factors, witnessing front-line service employees complain that perceived corporate controllability has a significant impact on consumer brand attitude; when perceived employee complaints are incentive factors, witnessing front-line service employees complain that perceived corporate controllability has no significant impact on consumer brand attitude.

The paper first explores the impact of complaints among front-line service employees on consumers. In theory, it enriches the related research on employee complaints, provides a new research perspective for employee complaints, and has important guiding value for enterprises to shape and manage the behavior of front-line service employees in practice.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Employee Complaints and Consumer Witness Front-Line Service Employees Complaints**

People often express their dissatisfaction with others, this is very common in social life [7]. In the literature, the broadest definition of complaint is the expression of discontent, regardless of whether such discontent really exists or not [8]. Employee complaints are expressions of dissatisfaction with work and organization [9].

In the process of providing products or services for consumers, front-line service employees working in the enterprise-consumer interface will inevitably have a large number of service contacts and interactions with consumers [1]. Service contact is the interaction between the customer and the service provider. The objects of service contact are not only limited to the interaction between the customer and the service provider, but also all other elements in the service delivery process that can affect the customer perception [10] [11]. Customer contact with frontline service employees includes both direct contact, such as complaints in front of customers, and indirect contact [5], such as in clothing stores, employee complaints heard by customers in fitting room. Therefore, when front-line service employees complain in the workplace, even if the front-line service staff who complained about behavior did not interact with the consumer, the consumer can see and hear such complaints.

According to the third-party perception model of employee treatment, the organization's treatment of employees will cause reactions from other colleagues, consumers, investors and other third parties [4]. Consumer witness front-line service employees complain that as a third party, they indirectly obtain information about how employees are treated through employee complaint content.

## 2.2. Perception of Corporate Controllability and Brand Attitude

Previous studies have shown that third parties respond to the treatment of employees [12] [13]. The response is mainly based on the negative impact on employees and the attribution of responsibility after obtaining information [14]. People spontaneously attribute observed behaviors or events [15] [16] [17], and classified into three dimensions: stability (behavior or occasional occurrence of behavior or events), attribution of responsibility (because of the responsibility of the company or the responsibility of the employee or the responsibility of other parties) and controllability (behavior) Or the cause of the event is that the enterprise can control or the enterprise is uncontrollable) (Weiner, 2000) [18].

Based on responsibility attribution, the paper focuses on perceived enterprise controllability. This dimension will lead to the division of service failure into perceived high controllability factors and perceived low controllability factors. When consumers attribute service failure to high controllability factors, consumers believe that service failure is the enterprise can control. Less control is caused by uncontrolled [19]. When consumers attribute service failure to low controllability factors, that is, consumers believe that service failure is caused by uncontrollable and uncontrolled enterprises, and the satisfaction of enterprises is relatively high. From the consumer perception perspective, Liu verifies the influence of consumers' controllability attribution on other customers' inappropriate behaviors on satisfaction [20]. Albrecht based on the dimension of perceived controllability, the consumer perception of employee emotions (including positive emotions and negative emotions) is divided into the factors of perceived corporate controllability and perceived enterprise uncontrollability. When consumers perceive the cause of employee emotions, they are enterprises. When it is uncontrollable, whether the employee's emotions are positive or negative, the consumer's reaction is more favorable [21].

Brand is defined as a relationship partner with its own personality from the perspective of service perception [22] [23]. Service brand is based on the relationship between customers and employees [24]. Therefore, the interaction between consumers and employees greatly affects the overall experience of consumers on the brand [25].

The controllability dimension will affect the judgment of responsibility. The higher the consumer's perceived controllability, the more judged the responsibility of the enterprise, the lower the consumer brand attitude [21] [26]. Based on previous research, Hypothesis 1 is proposed as follows:

H1: Witnessing the frontline service staff complained that the higher the controllability of the perceived business, the lower the consumer brand attitude.

According to the definition of employee complaints, the paper explores the source of employee complaints from the perspective of employee job satisfaction. Based on the two-factor theory, this paper divides perceived employee complaint sources into two categories: one is health care factors, that is, consumers perceive employee complaint sources as factors that enterprises must

achieve, such as employee complaints about company deduction of wages, failure to implement effective supervision, inequality of leadership; the other is incentive factors, that is, consumers perceive employee complaint sources as the best but not necessary factors for enterprises to achieve. For example, employees complain about the lack of promotion opportunities and low sense of achievement. When perceiving employees' complaints as health factors, consumers' perception of health factors is the basic factor that enterprises must achieve, which is regarded as the responsibility of enterprises, thus reducing their brand attitude towards enterprises [26] [27] [28]. When employees complain that the source of incentive is the incentive factor, consumers' perception of incentive factor is the basic factor that enterprises do not have to do, and they will not blame enterprises too much, [29] which is not enough to affect its brand attitude to the enterprise. Based on previous research, Hypothesis 1 is proposed as follows:

H2: Perceived employee complaints moderate the impact of witness front-line service employee complaints on consumer brand attitudes. When perceiving the source of employees' complaints as a health factor, the higher controllability perceived by front-line service employees, the lower brand attitude of consumers; when perceiving the source of employees' complaints as an incentive factor, there is no difference in the impact of high or low controllability perceived by front-line service employees on brand attitude of consumers.

### **2.3. The Mechanism of Perceived Controllability Affecting Brand Attitudes**

Employee complaints reflect how employees are treated by the organization [14]. Morality is the key causal mechanism of third party perception and judgment [30]. How employees are treated by enterprises will lead consumers (as a third party) to judge corporate ethics. When employees complain about health factors, consumers perceive that health factors are the basic factors that enterprises must do but fail to do. They will think that enterprises violate ethical norms, and thus perceive that enterprises are immoral. When the source of employee complaints is the incentive factor, because the consumer perception incentive factor is the complaint caused by the non-basic factors that the enterprise does not have to do but fails to do, it does not violate the ethical norms, so it will not cause the enterprise immoral perception. Consumers' moral perception of enterprises will affect their brand attitude, satisfaction and repurchase intention of enterprises [31] [32] [33]. Based on previous research, Hypothesis 3 is proposed as follows:

H3: Perception of corporate ethics mediates the impact of witnessing front-line service employees' complaints on consumers' brand attitudes. Witness that the higher controllability perceived by front-line service employees, the lower corporate ethics perceived, thus the lower brand attitude. Only when the perceived source of complaints is health factor, the effect of witnessing front-line service staff complaints on perceived corporate ethics is significant. When the

perceived source of complaints is incentive factor, there is no difference between the perceived impact of high and low controllability of front-line service staff complaints on perceived corporate ethics.

Based on the goals of this research and other theoretical studies, this study proposed the following structure in **Figure 1**.

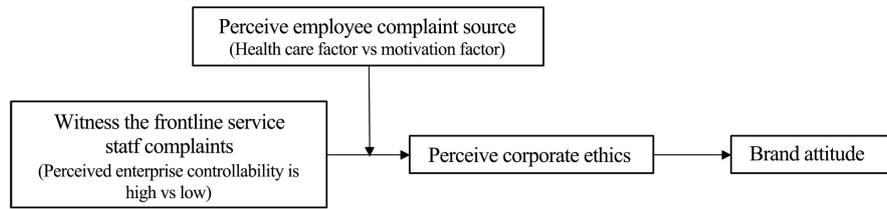
### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Sample and Data Collection

The paper uses Critical Incident Technology (CIT) to conduct exploratory research to analyze how consumers perceive complaints from front-line service employees. The content of the questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part is a subjective question. Respondents are asked to recall the complaints they see and hear from front-line service employees as consumers. We define the key event as the complaint between front-line service employees that the respondents see or hear in the consumer context from the perspective of consumers. The specific question is: Please recall that in the past year, have you ever seen or heard complaints from front-line employees as consumers in consumer occasions (such as shopping malls, restaurants, etc.)? Please describe this experience in as much detail as possible. Including: 1) When did the incident happen? 2) What consumption situation did the event take place in? 3) What did the employees say? What did you do? 4) Your thoughts and feelings at that time. 5) Will it affect your opinion of the brand? What is the impact? Why? The second part is the basic personal information of the respondents.

A total of 150 samples were collected through questionnaires published on the Internet. 101 of them believed that they had witnessed complaints from the perspective of consumers. That is 67.3% of consumers believed that they had witnessed complaints from front-line service employees. Among them, 63 were women, accounting for 62.3%; 38 were men, accounting for 37.6%, aged 18 - 48 years. According to the Criteria of Critical Incident Law, this study deleted the complaints of front-line service employees that were not witnessed from the perspective of consumers, and eventually got 95 effective critical incidents. Consumer scenarios focus on restaurants, shopping malls and supermarkets. **Table 1** shows some typical events.

The rest of the data collection was completed through the online survey platform "Questionnaire Star" and on-site experiments. The experiment uses a situational simulation method consisting of two parts: the first part allows the subject to read the situation carefully and imagines that he is the consumer in the situation. The second part is to let the participants evaluate the perceived controllability, corporate ethics and brand attitude of the perceived employee complaints. The third part allows participants to report basic demographic information and answer their views on the purpose of the experiment. The entire experiment took about 5 minutes. After deleting the questionnaire with too short response time and obvious regularity, a total of 271 valid questionnaires were obtained.



**Figure 1.** Research structure.

**Table 1.** Examples of complaints by front-line service employees witnessed by consumers.

Complaint source	Complaint content	Examples
Health care factors	Salary and welfare	Hearing employees complain about poor pay, one employee said that his employer usually pays far less than his peers, lacks other benefits and deducts wages for various reasons.
	The work	On Saturday evening, I went to a buffet with my friends. I heard a waiter chatting with his colleagues. They said that they were tired and stressed every day.
	Work overtime	I heard the staff said that the task is heavy every month, there are only a few days off, and I don't want to work overtime if I don't work overtime. I don't know where to go.
	System	When I heard employees complain that the company's system is unreasonable and squeezed employees, as long as one day of sick leave is given, there is no work-study award. Even if there is a doctor's sick leave paper, it is necessary to deduct full attendance.
Motivating factors	Superior	When I tried the clothes in the fitting room, I heard two salespersons complaining about their supervisors giving them too much performance pressure and expressing dissatisfaction.
	Fulfillment	I heard employees complain that they work the same every day and feel bored.
	Company's activities	I heard that the employees complained that they could travel abroad. Later, the company felt too much trouble and expensive, so they changed places.

(Chart source: authors sorted according to the content of the questionnaire).

### 3.2. Questionnaire Design

This study includes three core variables: perceived corporate controllability, perceived corporate ethics, and brand attitude. The measurements are derived from or adapted from existing research. Among them, perceived enterprise controllability uses “I think the reason for employee complaints is that the enterprise can control” “I think the enterprise can prevent the reasons for employee complaints” and “I think the enterprise can avoid the reasons for employee complaints” [27] [34]; Perceive corporate ethics with “dishonest/honest” “insincere/sincere” “swearing/indecent” “untrustworthy/trustworthy” [35]; Brand attitude with “I have a good impression of the brand” “The brand can attract me” and “I feel positive about the brand” [36]. All variables were measured using the Likert 7-point scale. Among them, 1 means completely disagree, and 7 means complete agreement.

### 3.3. Research Method

- Literature review. Collect and sort out the previous research results and research status of important variables such as employee complaints, service contacts, witnessing front-line service employee complaints, perception of corporate ethics, deduce the logical relationship between variables in this paper, build a theoretical model, and preliminarily draw research hypotheses.
- Critical Event Method. Since no scholars have studied the impact of complaints on consumers before, this paper first uses the critical event method to conduct exploratory research to confirm that complaints do exist among front-line service employees, and consumers can indeed see or hear complaints among front-line service employees, which provides a basis for empirical research.
- Experimental study. On the basis of the research hypothesis, the hypothesis is verified by experimental method. Through the situation description, the first experiment is the shopping scene in the mall, and the second experiment is the dining scene in the restaurant. The subjects are asked to imagine themselves as consumers in the situation, and then answer the relevant questions.
- Data analysis. This paper uses SPSS 20.0 statistical software to analyze experimental data. The analysis methods include descriptive statistical analysis, reliability and validity analysis, variance analysis, regression analysis, Bootstrap analysis and so on.

## 4. Research Results

### 4.1. Analysis of Basic Information

Most of the subjects of the study were female and most were between 21 and 30 years old. Most of the subjects graduated from college. **Table 2** shows the analysis of basic information of the respondents.

### 4.2. Factor Analysis and Reliability Analysis

The results are presented **Table 3**. All tests achieved significant levels.

### 4.3. Analysis of Correlation

The correlation coefficient between perceived enterprise controllability and perceived corporate ethics in **Table 4** is  $-0.261$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), which is significantly negatively correlated; the correlation coefficient between perceived enterprise controllability and brand attitude is  $-0.276$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), which is significantly negative. Correlation; the correlation coefficient between perceived corporate ethics and brand attitude was  $0.376$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), which was significantly positively correlated.

### 4.4. Hypothesis Testing

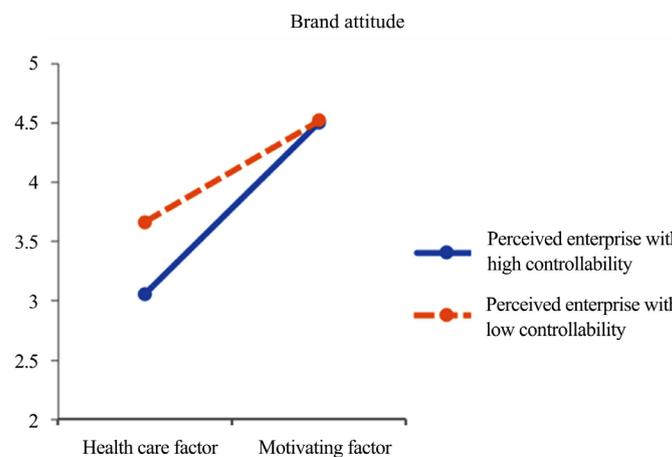
Using one-way ANOVA, when perceiving the source of employees' complaints as a health factor, we can see that the perception controllability of front-line service employees' complaints has a significant impact on brand attitude ( $F(1.66) =$

9.69,  $p = 0.003 < 0.05$ ). The mean difference of perceiving the impact of high controllability of enterprises and low controllability of enterprises on brand attitude is 3.06 and 3.67, respectively. Certificate front-line service employees complain that the higher the perceived controllability of the enterprise, the lower the attitude of consumers to brand. H1 has been verified.

To further test the moderating effect of perceived employee complaint sources on the relationship between witness front-line service employee complaint and brand attitude, a general linear model was used to analyze the results. The results showed that the interaction between perceived enterprise controllability and perceived employee complaint sources was significant ( $F(1.133) = 3.97$ ,  $p = 0.048 < 0.05$ ). Simple effect analysis was carried out. When perceived employee complaints are health factors, perceived enterprise controllability which witnessed front-line service employee complaints has a significant impact on consumer brand attitude ( $F(1.134) = 5.76$ ,  $P = 0.018 < 0.05$ ). When perceived employee complaints are motivating factors, perceived enterprise controllability which witnesses front-line service employees' complaints has no significant impact on consumer brand attitude,  $F < 1$ . H2 has been verified in **Figure 2**.

According to the intermediary analysis procedure proposed by Zhao *et al.* (2010), and referring to the intermediary analysis model (model 8) proposed by Preacher *et al.* (2007) and Hayes (2013), Bootstrap intermediary variable test was carried out. Perceived corporate ethics mediated the interaction between witnessing front-line service employees' complaints and perceiving the source of employees' complaints on brand attitude [29] [37] [38].

When perceiving the source of employees' complaints as a health factor, the mediating effect of perceiving corporate ethics is significant. The confidence interval of Bootstrap test is (LLCI = 0.0080, ULCI = 0.289) without 0. When perceiving the source of employees' complaints as an incentive factor, the mediating effect of perceiving corporate ethics is not significant, and the confidence interval (LLCI = -0.0399, ULCI = 0.659) contains 0. H3 has been verified.



**Figure 2.** The moderating effect of perceived employee complaint source on the relationship between witnessing front-line service employee complaint and brand attitude (Chart source: authors sorted according to the content of the questionnaire).

**Table 2.** Analysis of basic information.

Items		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	107	39.5%
	Female	164	60.5%
Age	16 - 20	14	5.2%
	21 - 30	228	84.1%
	31 - 40	26	9.6%
	41 - 50	3	1.1%
	Below high school	9	3.3%
Education background	University	69	25.5%
	Master	184	67.9%
	Above doctor's	9	3.3%

(Chart source: authors sorted according to the content of the questionnaire).

**Table 3.** Factor analysis.

Variables	Factor Loading	Cronbach $\alpha$
Perceived enterprise controllability	-0.357	0.882
Perceived enterprise ethics	0.518	0.87
Brand attitude	0.524	0.87

(Chart source: authors sorted according to the content of the questionnaire).

**Table 4.** Correlation matrix of the Three Variables.

Variables	Perceived enterprise controllability	Perceived enterprise ethics	Brand attitude
Perceived enterprise controllability	1		
Perceived enterprise ethics	-0.261**	1	
Brand attitude	-0.276**	0.376**	1

Note: \*\*p < 0.01 (Chart source: authors sorted according to the content of the questionnaire).

## 5. Conclusions and Discussion

### 5.1. Conclusions

First, from the perspective of third-party perception, this paper verifies that the perception of corporate controllability by front-line service employees will significantly affect consumer brand attitude, and the higher the perception of corporate controllability by front-line service employees, the lower the consumer brand attitude. Witnessing complaints from front-line service employees will lead to consumer thinking. When consumers think that complaints from front-line service employees are caused by employees' dissatisfaction caused by controllable but uncontrollable control of enterprises, consumers will judge it as

the responsibility of enterprises and consumers' brand attitude is lower. That is, how an enterprise treats its employees will significantly affect consumers' perception of the enterprise.

Secondly, it defines the boundaries of the impact of witnessing the complaints of front-line service employees on consumers' brand attitudes. Complaints from different sources have different effects on consumers. Only when perceived employee complaints are health factors, witnessing front-line service employees complain that perceived corporate controllability has a significant impact on consumer brand attitude. When perceived employee complaints are incentive factors, there is no difference in the impact of perceived corporate controllability between front-line service employees and consumers' brand attitude.

Thirdly, by introducing the theory of moral justice, it proves that consumer witnessing the complaints of front-line service employees will cause consumers' perception of corporate ethics, thus affecting brand attitudes. How employees are treated by enterprises will lead to consumers' judgment on corporate ethics. In the process of judgment, the greater the responsibility of the organization being investigated, the lower the perception of corporate morality. Only when the organizational behavior violates the ethical norms, can the enterprise be perceived as immoral. Therefore, the higher the perceived controllability of the enterprise, the lower the perceived ethics of the enterprise, and the lower the consumer brand attitude. And only when consumers perceive employees' complaints as health factors, consumers think that enterprises violate ethical principles or ethical standards; when consumers perceive employees' complaints as incentives, consumers think that enterprises have not violated ethical standards.

## **5.2. Theoretical Contribution and Management Enlightenment**

The paper examines the impact of perceived corporate controllability on consumers by consumer witness front-line service employees, and provides important guidance value for the management of front-line service employees and the promotion of sustainable development.

The theory of moral justice is introduced to verify the mediating role of perceived corporate morality. The theory of moral justice emphasizes the important role of morality and provides different ideas for solving management problems in enterprises. Based on the theory of moral justice, this paper verifies that how employees are treated by enterprises will lead to consumers' judgment of corporate morality, and adds empirical research on the theory of moral justice in management issues.

The moderating effect of perceiving the source of employee complaints was discussed. Complaints caused by different sources of complaints reflect different problems and contradictions, which can affect consumers' perception of corporate ethics, thus clarifying the boundary of witnessing the impact of complaint behavior of front-line service employees on consumers' brand attitude.

For enterprises, more attention should be paid to the complaint behavior of

front-line service employees in management, such as establishing staff counseling mechanism, increasing psychological counseling to reduce the negative emotions of employees. At the same time, enterprises should do a good job in influencing employees' job satisfaction, and actively explain to stakeholders the uncontrollable internal management factors in order to alleviate stakeholders' negative perceptions and subsequent reactions, and further properly publicize employees' internal responsibilities, so as to promote the brand building and sustainable development of enterprises.

### **5.3. Research Limitations and Future Research Prospects**

This study has limitations and shortcomings: 1) The purpose of this study is to reveal the impact of witnessing front-line service staff complaints on brand attitudes in consumer situations, so the results may be difficult to extend to the impact of employee complaints in non-consumer situations on enterprises. However, with the development of social networks, media and so on, the number of third parties in non-consumer situations will increase, and there will be no further development. To study the impact of employee complaints on brand attitudes in non-consumer situations. 2) The research background is that front-line service employees complain about the third party (enterprises or other employees, etc.) rather than complain about each other. Whether the research conclusions can be applied to front-line service employees' mutual complaints remains to be further verified. 3) Using situational descriptive stimulus ignores the impact of complaints from front-line service employees on consumers. 4) The attitude of front-line service employees who complain or their interaction with consumers may have an impact on the results of this study. The relationship between consumers and front-line service employees has not been further verified. 5) Perception of corporate ethics only partially mediates the impact of witnessing front-line service employees' complaints on consumers' brand attitudes, while other influencing mechanisms remain to be explored. Step analysis. These deficiencies should be improved and perfected in the follow-up study.

This study only considered the moderating effect of perceived employee complaint sources, but did not further explore that consumers with different characteristics may have different perceptions of complaints. Third parties believe that unfair events can be considered fair by another third party, and vice versa. The interpretation of the enterprise or its agent may also affect the perception of the third party, effectively reducing the impact on the brand. In future research, we can consider such moderating variables as increasing the relationship between consumers and employees, consumers' moral identity, and consumers' public self-awareness.

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## Author Contributions

Zhang Jihua developed the idea, motivation, and research question of the paper and contributed to the discussion. Tan Ming outlined and revised the manuscript. Wang Ningning made substantial contributions to the design of this study.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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