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Staff interactions and individual influences on complaint behaviour in restaurants

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of early staff interactions and individual characteristics on customer complaint behaviour during restaurant dining. A two-stage mixed-methods design was employed: Study 1 surveyed 790 diners, measuring sociodemographic and personality variables alongside self-reported propensity to complain. Study 2 applied these findings in a longitudinal design tracking 98 customers across 994 restaurant visits over one year, capturing individual and situational factors, including staff interactions. Drawing on voice/exit theory and cognitive appraisal frameworks, findings identify redress orientation as a consistent predictor of complaint propensity, whilst empathy reduces both the likelihood of perceived dissatisfaction and willingness to raise issues verbally. Early staff interactions, particularly making customers feel special upon arrival, significantly reduced complaint propensity, as did service quality and friendliness. These findings contribute to the understanding of the individual and situational determinants of complaint behaviour in the UK hospitality industry.

Keywords

Personality measures, customer behaviour, complaining, restaurant, service satisfaction, server-customer interaction, tolerance

1. Introduction

The decision to complain in a restaurant is a difficult, often personal one that has received much attention in literature. Yet there is contention even when defining a complaint; Davidow and Sharabi (2010) describe it simply as an indication of a failure on the part of the service provider that needs effective resolution. Ha and Jang (2009) expand on this by stating that service failure is dependent on the frequency or severity of the error, or that it is simply a reaction to a customer's expectations not being met. In contrast, Barlow and Moller (2008) take a more positive view, suggesting that a customer complaint should not be perceived as negative but rather as a gift and an opportunity to improve and act on feedback. However, Bougie et al. (2003) describe a complaint as more of an angry exchange between the provider and a dissatisfied customer. There are contradictions here, possibly due to variations in how complaints are delivered and handled, some resulting in angry exchanges and compensation, others seen as feedback delivered in a kindly fashion and perhaps not even considered as a complaint.

In relation to hospitality, Susskind (2006) describes complaints as inevitable due to the extensive human element in the product, both in delivery and in receipt, which creates opportunities for errors. Whilst situational models of service quality, such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1985), focus on the gap between expectation and delivery, the complaint response literature has long recognised that dissatisfaction is a necessary but insufficient condition for complaint behaviour (Hirschman, 1970; Stephens & Gwinner, 1998).

Chebat et al.'s (2005) study agrees, highlighting the influence of customer perception on the complaint process, and suggesting that different customers will vary depending on their pre-conceived expectations. In fact, while dated, Fornell and Wernerfelt (1988) described a defensive marketing approach to “undersell” and avoid raising expectations beyond the

business's ability to deliver, thereby reducing complaints. These studies highlight both the individual and the situational elements of complaint behaviour (Akarsu et al., 2023).

Furthermore, Chebat et al. (2005) cite the phenomenon of non-complainers and highlight this forgotten segment of the market that has reason to complain when their expectations are not met but chooses not to. They argue that many customers do not complain even when faced with poor quality products, and that businesses are guilty of overlooking them. Johnston (1995) explains this by theorising that each individual has a unique tolerance level for service failure, which may depend on their personality type; that is, some complain immediately, others complain later, and others do not complain at all.

Attempts have been made to quantify this section of non-complainers, such as Goodman's (1999) Iceberg Theory, which claims that only 1 in 24 dissatisfied customers complain at the time of the issue, although this was a study of financial services. Yet the existence of the non-complainer is largely unresearched, according to Chebat et al. (2005). They claim that some customers may be too embarrassed to complain or feel sorry for the staff, which prevents them from complaining. Both of these factors suggest that individual differences play a role in the decision-making process regarding customer complaints. However, this suggests that 23/24 dissatisfied customers do not raise complaints for personal reasons, but neglects to consider the role of staff interactions in complaints. The extent to which staff interactions, which are extensive within a restaurant setting, moderate complaint responses remains underexplored, possibly due to the difficulty in capturing this through non-naturalistic, cross-sectional designs.

To help understand the motivations behind customers' complaint behaviour, this study aims to contribute by initially investigating and quantifying whether demographic and socio-economic factors, specific personality measures and meal circumstances influence a customer's decision to complain after purchasing food in a restaurant in the UK. It will examine the research question: Do customers exhibit significantly different complaint behaviours in UK restaurants, depending on staff interactions, individual factors or situational factors?

The present research employs an extended longitudinal design that captures restaurant experiences over a one-year period. This design increases the likelihood that participants encountered a range of dining experiences, including both satisfactory and unsatisfactory meals. This will enable analysis of restaurant visits with service errors and test whether individual factors such as situational factors, such as staff connection, customer mood, and service quality elements, impact behaviours. By including a range of tests that measure multiple personality types, as well as gender, age and income, it will also assess the impact of individual factors on complaint behaviour and provide evidence for Johnston's (1995) theory that each of us has an individual tolerance level for service failure before deciding to complain.

The paper reviews the literature on complaint behaviour and its determinants. It then describes the two-study mixed-methods design, comprising a broad online survey (Study 1) followed by a longitudinal study tracking customers' behaviour over a full calendar year (Study 2). Evidence of specific personality measures and early staff interactions that impact complaint behaviour is presented.

Throughout this paper, complaint propensity, dissatisfaction, and verbally raising an issue are treated as related but conceptually distinct constructs, reflecting, respectively, a general willingness to complain, an affective evaluation of a service encounter, and an observed complaint response, rather than as interchangeable terms for a single underlying construct.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 UK Customer complaint behaviour on encountering situational failures in service

The UK hospitality industry employed approximately 2.6 million people in March 2025, representing 7.1% of all UK jobs and making it the sixth largest UK industry by employment (House of Commons Library, 2025). Hospitality has also been identified as the UK's top-performing sector for social productivity, ranking highest across economic, geographic and social measures of inclusive growth (UKHospitality, 2025). The industry comprises a diverse range of organisations and businesses, including accommodation (e.g., hotels) and food and beverage (e.g., bars and restaurants), offering a variety of service types and operations (Ogbeide et al., 2017). As part of the hospitality sector, the restaurant industry plays a critical role in job creation and economic growth, generating a turnover of approximately £45.1 billion in 2021 and employing over one million people in the UK (Statista, 2023a; Statista, 2023b). Beyond its economic contributions, Symons (2013) suggests that restaurant experiences and visits reflect a social practice that may enhance comfort and pleasure, providing genuine social community and engagement. As such, restaurants offer a reasonable return on investment, contributing to a social phenomenon that enriches cultural life, often providing meaningful and memorable dining experiences (Beriss & Sutton, 2007; Yuan et al., 2023).

Yet despite its social and economic importance, the restaurant product is frequently characterised by service failure; Maxham and Netemeyer (2002) describe this service failure as an inevitable component of service quality, service encounters, and service performance. Fagel (1984) specifically reviewed the hospitality process in a restaurant, exploring guests' experiences within the context of 'hospitable' and 'inhospitable' outcomes. Adopting a qualitative approach, Fagel (1984) identified three core themes that chart the customer and restaurant process, including (1) the period before entering the establishment, (2) the visit within the first five minutes, and (3) the period of hospitality. Although dated, Fagel's (1984) work offers valuable insights into the personalised restaurant experience and the influence of norms and standards in the process of 'hospitality'. Importantly, it provides opportunities to explore the complexity and multiplicity of the service experience, such as the initial welcome (which immediately makes the customer feel special) and overall friendliness and service quality. This early period carries particular theoretical weight. Social psychology shows that people reach a global evaluation of others within moments and from little information: Asch (1946) demonstrated that a few traits, especially whether a person seems warm or cold, organise the whole impression that follows, and thin-slicing research shows that judgements formed within seconds of an encounter remain remarkably stable thereafter (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). Fiske et al. (2007) further identify warmth as the dimension judged first and weighted most heavily in person perception. Applied to dining, this suggests that the earliest staff interactions, the booking, greeting and seating, may disproportionately shape how the remainder of the visit is judged, cascading through to the customer's eventual satisfaction and complaint decision.

The theoretical foundations of complaint behaviour research are distinct from those of service quality measurement, and the present study is primarily situated within the complaint response literature. Hirschman's (1970) voice/exit model remains the seminal framework:

dissatisfied customers either voice their complaint, exit silently, or maintain loyalty despite dissatisfaction. Building on this, Stephens and Gwinner (1998) proposed a cognitive-emotive process model in which complaint behaviour is determined not by dissatisfaction alone, but by a sequence of appraisal processes, primary appraisal of the severity of the failure, secondary appraisal of the available coping resources, and emotion regulation, before a behavioural response is chosen. Attribution theory adds a further dimension: customers are more likely to complain when they attribute a service failure to the firm's controllability and stability (Weiner, 1986), which helps explain why the same objective failure produces different complaint responses across individuals. Justice theory (Schmitt et al., 2010) contributes a further layer, identifying sensitivity to fairness violations as a trait-level amplifier of complaint intention. Of these, voice/exit and cognitive appraisal theory provide the primary theoretical lens for the present study, since they most directly address the sequence from dissatisfaction to a behavioural response, i.e. attribution and justice theory are drawn on in a supporting role, to help explain why individuals appraise the same objective failure differently, rather than as four competing frameworks of equal weight.

Whilst SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1985) is not a complaint behaviour theory per se, it also provides a useful reference point for understanding the gap between expectations and delivery that creates the conditions for dissatisfaction. SERVQUAL conceptualises service quality along five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility. When delivery falls short of expectation on these dimensions, the conditions for a complaint response are created, but whether a complaint actually occurs depends on the individual and situational factors explored in this paper. The model's limitations in hospitality contexts have been well-noted (Augustyn & Seakhwa-King, 2005; Polyakova & Mirza, 2015), and the present study does not seek to extend SERVQUAL directly but rather to complement it with a complaint-response lens. Taken together, the complaint-response literature indicates that in-

meal quality shortfalls create the necessary conditions for dissatisfaction, while the appraisal process, shaped by early staff interactions, determines whether that dissatisfaction is voiced and H1 tests this cumulative logic directly. The first hypothesis is therefore:

H1 - Customer complaint propensity in restaurants is influenced by in-meal service quality dimensions and early staff interactions.

2.2 Individual elements impacting the customer complaint process

The consumer behaviour and marketing management literature on customer complaints has been widely researched (Arora & Narula, 2018). Often divided into the two distinct categories of high and low propensity complainers, the service literature provides a substantial understanding of the processes by which customers develop complaint behaviours and how they measure their service experience. Exploring and linking the psychology behind decision-making processes, previous research suggests that complaints are triggered and influenced, but not solely determined, by dissatisfaction (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998; Vásquez, 2014) and exposure to product or service failure (Barlow & Moller, 2008). In fact, research identified that complaint behaviour is influenced by socio-demographic factors such as demographic profiles of customers, including age (Meiners et al., 2021), gender (Joe & Choi, 2019), cultural background (Kim et al., 2014), explicit knowledge (i.e., education) (Singh, 1988) and income and occupation (Kumar & Kaur, 2020).

In addition, Sann, Lai and Liaw's (2020) work on service quality in the tourism industry explores how cultures of origin and hotel class (i.e., rating) influence online complaining behaviours. In their research, cultural backgrounds led to varied perceptions and expectations towards service delivery. Ekiz and Arasli's (2007) research on Turkish customers in five-star

hotels in Northern Cyprus suggests that only a small percentage of customers complain, as they generally seek to avoid the investment of time and the psychological burden.

Whilst socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, and income) provide some understanding of customer complaint behaviour, Jones et al. (2002) identify personality and behavioural variables as influential components in the hospitality service environment.

Personality and attitudinal factors that influence customers' propensity to complain may include price and quality consciousness, psychological stress, and locus of control (Gursoy, McCleary, & Lepisto, 2007; Jones, McCleary, & Lepisto, 2002). Albrecht, Walsh and Beatty (2017) investigate the moderating role of customer psychological entitlement, defined as the extent to which customers expect or demand preferential treatment over and above that of others (Martin, Strong & O'Connor, 2018). Focusing on individual (single customer) and group (multiple customers) service failures, Albrecht, Walsh, and Beatty (2017) argue that entitled individuals who possess characteristics associated with narcissism often display increased anger, are inclined to spread negative word-of-mouth, and exhibit higher complaint intentions. Psychologically entitled customers are further described by Fisk and Neville (2011) in their exploratory study on the impact of this personality type on restaurant staff; they exhibit adverse interpersonal outcomes, such as strain and burnout, with long-term consequences for well-being and health.

Further evidence of individualism in complaint behaviour was provided by Tronvoll's (2011) study of customers' emotions when encountering service errors and their impact on the decision to complain. He highlighted irritation, anger, resignation, guilt and shame as identifiable factors. He concluded that these emotions varied in intensity and impact from one customer to another, but 97% of customers reported some emotional reaction.

The highlighted research suggests that, contrary to the SERVQUAL model, dissatisfaction does not always lead to complaint behaviour, as it depends on individual consumer propensity to complain. For instance, Hirschman (1970) stated the propensity to complain (PTC) is based on three factors: exit and do not complain, voice a complaint or gain loyalty. Previous research testing the propensity to complain following a service failure identified various barriers to complaining, including the zone of tolerance (Johnston, 1995) and personality factors such as empathy and self-consciousness (Jones et al., 2002; Susskind, 2004). This led Chebat, Davidow and Codjovi (2005) to introduce the concept of the non-complainer. These customers have cause to complain when faced with service failures but actively avoid voicing their complaints (Kwok, 2019; Meiners et al., 2021).

Table 1- A summary of the constructs, context, and main findings of the key studies reviewed above, situating the present study's contribution alongside them.

Study	Key constructs	Context	Main findings
Chebat, Davidow & Codjovi (2005)	Complaint propensity and non-complaining behaviour	Retail/service	Identified a distinct non-complainer segment; embarrassment and sympathy for staff help explain silence
Jones, McCleary & Lepisto (2002)	Personality and behavioural variables with complaint manifestations	Table-service restaurants	Personality and attitudinal factors (price/quality consciousness, locus of control) shape propensity to complain
Albrecht, Walsh & Beatty (2017)	Psychological entitlement with complaint intention	Individual and group service failures	Entitled customers show greater anger, negative word-of-mouth and complaint intentions
Sann, Lai & Liaw (2020)	Culture, hotel class and online complaining	Hotels	Cultural background shapes perceptions, expectations and online complaint behaviour

Kim, Lee & Mattila (2014)	Culture, price level and loyalty	Restaurants	Cultural and pricing context moderates complaint behaviour
Tronvoll (2011)	Emotions (irritation, anger, guilt, shame)	Service failure	Emotional reactions vary in intensity but are near-universal following failure
Dyussebayeva et al. (2020)	Locus of control, disclosure vulnerability	Service failure	High locus-of-control customers find public disclosure of a failure particularly difficult
Present study	Complaint propensity, dissatisfaction and verbal issue-raising; personality (empathy, redress, entitlement); early staff interactions	UK restaurants (survey and one-year longitudinal tracking)	Redress orientation predicts complaint propensity, empathy reduces dissatisfaction and voicing and early staff interactions (feeling special on arrival) reduce complaint propensity, extending the literature by modelling staff-interaction moderators alongside personality across actual dining events

Previous research identifies that non-behavioural or no-action responses may be influenced by situational, personal, and social factors (e.g., lack of time and access to appropriate communication channels), social pressures (e.g., social impression management, self-presentation and politeness) and the cost and benefits of complaining (Arora & Chakraborty, 2020; Singh, 1988). Whilst non-complainers avoid confrontational and direct behaviour, they may still engage in a variety of silent customer behaviours, including negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) and ‘exit’, that is, no re-purchasing intention (Istanbulluoglu, Leek & Szmigin, 2017). Consequently, non-complainers are a valuable group that should not be ignored. The decision to act on feelings of product and service dissatisfaction may therefore depend on the individual, whose personality and characteristics determine the significance of errors and failures that may result in complaint behaviour (Gursoy et al., 2007). This is best

described by Dyussembayeva et al. (2020), who suggest that the action of publicly disclosing a service failure and the resulting vulnerability dissuades many customers from complaining, interestingly highlighting customers with a high locus of control as finding this action particularly difficult. The second hypothesis is therefore:

H2 - Customer complaint propensity in restaurants is influenced by individual factors, including personality traits (extraversion, redress orientation, empathy, entitlement), complaint attitudes, and sociodemographic characteristics

Overall, the study of customer complaints in the service recovery literature is well-developed, particularly in the context of employee ineptitude and organisational inefficiency (Baker & Kim, 2018). Progress has been made in linking customer complaint behaviour to individual personality measures. Still, it has relied chiefly on measuring reactions to case studies rather than actual experiences (Berry et al., 2014), with some success, or finding no link to the Big Five Inventory personalities (Elmastas & Candan, 2018). This area of research is in development and requires further study, particularly within the restaurant setting (Min & Kim, 2020).

This could be achieved through a more comprehensive longitudinal study that tests multiple actual dining events, building on past studies that have examined personality measures, including price consciousness, the BFI-10 (Big 5), locus of control, and stress. In addition, price consciousness, or seeking value for money, may influence quality perceptions, as may justice, which is defined as a moral code that specifies which acts are wrong, as per Piironen (2024). Finally, entitlement, given the expectation of exceptional service, and redress, the need to rectify a fault, may also be factors.

Before testing these hypotheses, it is important to clarify the hypothesised role of each event-level variable. Drawing on service recovery theory (Davidow & Sharabi, 2010) and interactional justice frameworks (Schmitt et al., 2010), the present study distinguishes between three classes of event-level variable: 1) antecedents: factors present before or independent of the meal error, including pre-arrival mood, external irritation, and regular patronage; 2) direct predictors: in-meal quality dimensions (food, service, ambience) that reflect the error itself; and 3) potential moderators staff interactions such as friendliness, and immediately being made to feel special, which may operate by buffering the effect of dissatisfaction rather than acting as independent predictors of complaint.

3.0 Methods, analysis and findings

This study employed a combination of an online survey and a longitudinal approach to data collection across two distinct studies (Kallmuenzer et al., 2019). In this study, the investigation began with a broad sweep of the theoretical landscape to gather data using the method recommended by Malina et al. (2011), providing a foundation for the subsequent longitudinal study. An online survey with a range of questions measuring multiple personality traits and complaint behaviours was targeted at 1,000 members of the public.

From this initial study, significant measures linked to complaint propensity were re-measured using a more extensive longitudinal study that captured individual restaurant experiences over a one-year period, with a target of 1,000 visits from 150 participants. It was important to investigate a large number of restaurant visits to obtain sufficient instances of complaint failure to measure. Furthermore, all participants were required to complete relevant personality tests that could then be linked to their individual visits.

3.1 Study 1 Method

In the first stage of the study, quantitative data were collected through an online questionnaire sent to UK residents aged 18 and above. Dissemination techniques included taking advantage of the xxxx(University anonymised for this report)'s database of participants for research and the onsite hotel's (xxxx) customer database, as well as QR codes on xxxxx restaurant tables. To increase the geographic and demographic diversity of participants, the online study recruitment platform Prolific was utilised to expand and refine the survey's reach. This final batch was intended to ensure a more broadly representative spread of participants, better reflecting the UK population. The survey included a question about country of origin to allow exclusion of participants based on location, thereby removing culture as a variable and its potential impact on data (Kim et al., 2014).

The questionnaire, delivered online via Qualtrics, consisted of 90 questions, randomised where appropriate, and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was piloted extensively beforehand using confederates from the University staff. To minimise any bots completing the survey, it included an initial reCAPTCHA question. Due to the length and complexity of the survey, it also contained a credible response question to ensure the quality of responses (see supplementary documents).

Across both studies, the definition of a complaint was “bringing an issue with the restaurant experience to the attention of staff”, using Davidow and Sharabi's (2010) logic that the severity of the feedback is not a measure of complaining. This definition enabled the capturing of all serving errors made and all methods of feedback to staff, and was reiterated to participants at each step of the study. Responders were asked how often they had “verbally fed back an error to staff or management” as the primary measure, as well as how often they

had “complained to staff or management” on average in their last ten meals as a precaution, in case responders had not understood the definition, testing for correlation and repeating testing if appropriate. This measure of complaint propensity was used throughout Study 1 as the dependent variable, whereas Study 2 split complaint propensity into dissatisfaction and verbally raising an issue as the dependent variables, to test the assumption that dissatisfaction automatically ends in a complaint.

Another key question to tests the automation of complaints from dissatisfaction, asked participants about their attitudes to complaining, with options including: “complaining is a normal part of customer interaction if there is a fault”, “complaining would very much depend on the situation”, or “complaining is an act of last resort”. In addition, the survey also captured socio-economic and demographic data, as well as reasons for complaining and not complaining in restaurants. It then measured personality traits of the responder using the Big Five Inventory-10 (BFI-10) Personality Test (Digman, 1997), which is widely accepted as an efficient method for assessing multiple personality traits and recently tested by Stone et al. (2022) with strong validity results.

In addition to testing BFI-10, due to the negative result by Elmastas and Candan (2018) and given the restaurant product’s unique social aspect, a further six measures were tested using validated scales from the literature. Measures deemed worthy of investigation were entitlement (Boyd & Helms, 2005), redress (Richins & Verhage, 1985), justice (Schmitt et al., 2010), price consciousness (Lewis & Shoemaker, 1997), stress (Cohen et al., 1994) and locus of control (Barnett & Lanier, 1995) using three randomly selected questions from each of their question lists to avoid extending the survey completion time beyond a reasonable level. It is acknowledged that using three randomly selected items reduces scale validity; however, pilot testing indicated that full question sets extended completion time beyond one

hour and were untenable. Traits yielding significant results in Study 1 were re-measured in Study 2 using fully validated scales.

3.1.1 Study 1 Results

A total of 1001 responses were obtained. After excluding partially complete responses (19), non-credible responses (36), non-UK residents (39), and missing consent areas (117), 790 complete responses remained, broadly in line with the 18+ adult population in the UK but with a slight gender bias noted.

To validate whether the dependent variable was suitable, a correlation test was carried out between the two questions “In the last 10 restaurant visits, how often did you verbally raise an issue to staff or management?” and “In the last 10 restaurant visits, how often did you verbally complain to staff or management?”. The two variables are highly correlated, with a Pearson Correlation of $r=0.755$, and so the measures were averaged and combined.

The distribution of the dependent variable was outside of acceptable ranges (skewness $g_1 = 3.522$), with a range of 0 - 10 and a mean of 1.59 (SD = 1.71), indicating an overall complaint rate of 15.9%. The sample was therefore square-root transformed, as per Ahrens et al. (1990), which corrected the distribution (skewness $g_1 = 0.377$), indicating that the data can be used for ordinal regression analysis.

We examined the relationship between the reasons-for-complaining items, the complaining-attitudes item, and the complaint-propensity dependent variable using ordinal logistic regression. As implied by the Pearson goodness-of-fit test ($p = 0.121$) and the Deviance test ($p = 1.0$), the model fits the data well. The proportional odds assumption was assessed using the test of parallel lines (0.756) and was within acceptable ranges. Due to the number of

predictors being tested, a correlation matrix was used to perform a factor analysis, yet no two variables formed distinct, meaningful sub-dimension factors.

The primary reasons for complaining, as given, were “I just want the problem resolved” (4.45/5) and “to make the business aware to help them improve” (4.15/5), with both high and low-propensity complainers scoring this measure high. However, the “desire for compensation for the disappointment” (2.57/5) scored significantly higher among high-propensity complainers ($\beta = 0.146$, $p = .025$), suggesting monetary reward or redress as a possible motivator for people who complain the most.

The second category of predictor, complaining attitude, which split the respondents into 3 categories, whether they rarely complained (13.9%), routinely complained (24.2%) or were making a judgement (61.9%), was a strong predictor of complaining propensity ($\beta = 0.910$, $p < .001$). This result adds further weight to the argument that complaining decisions are subject to an individual element, thereby supporting H2.

Table 2. Ordinal logistic regression results for reasons for complaining and complaint attitudes, with complaint propensity as the dependent variable, including mean scores for complaint reasons.

Reason for complaining	Coefficient (β)	SE	Wald Statistic	Sig.	Mean score (SD)
I just want the problem resolved	-.056	.095	.348	.555	4.45 (.759)

I want the business to be aware of the problem so they can improve	.139	.084	2.747	.097	4.15 (.870)
I am due compensation for the disappointment of the experience	.146	.065	5.054	.025*	2.57 (1.12)
I don't think restaurants should get away with not delivering what they promised	.125	0.078	2.562	.109	3.74 (.990)
Complaint attitude	.910	.120	57.174	<.001**	

We next examined reasons for not complaining and the propensity to complain (dependent variable) using ordinal logistic regression. In this test, the Pearson goodness-of-fit test ($p = 0.234$) and the Deviance test ($p = 1.0$) indicate that the model fits the data well. A correlation matrix was used to perform a factor analysis; however, no two variables formed distinct, meaningful sub-dimension factors, and the proportional odds assumption was assessed using the test of parallel lines (0.432), which was within acceptable ranges.

The primary reason for not complaining in restaurants was not wanting to upset the staff (3.23/5), with a significant variation between high and low propensity complainers ($\beta = -0.229, p = .001$), indicating that this is a considerably stronger deterrent for low-propensity complainers than for high-propensity complainers, and suggesting empathy as a variable warranting further examination in Study 2. Furthermore, the reason “I never complain, I am

just not that type of person” also differed significantly between low and high-propensity complainers, suggesting that individual disposition plays a role in complaint behaviour, thereby supporting H2.

Table 3. Ordinal logistic regression results for reasons for not complaining, with complaining propensity as the dependent variable, including mean scores for not-complaining reasons.

Reason for not complaining	Coefficient (β)	SE	Wald Statistic	Sig.	Mean score (SD)
I never complain. I am just not that type of person	-0.445	0.065	47.04	<0.001**	2.84 (1.327)
There wasn't an opportunity to complain, or I didn't have time	0.064	0.065	0.958	0.328	2.85 (1.12)
There was no point; nothing would be gained	0.024	0.064	0.143	0.705	2.72 (1.21)
I didn't want to embarrass myself or others, or for the staff to think badly of me	-0.005	0.073	0.005	0.946	3.12 (1.29)
I didn't want to upset the staff or get them into trouble	-0.229	0.071	10.494	0.001**	3.23 (1.22)

I was worried about possible repercussions	-0.052	0.059	0.785	0.376	2.73 (1.34)
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The next test examined whether respondent complaint propensity was related to individualised factors, such as personality traits, and to socio-economic and demographic factors, using ordinal logistic regression. As implied by the Pearson goodness-of-fit test ($p = 0.846$) and the Deviance test ($p = 1.0$), the model fits the data, and a correlation matrix presented that no two variables formed distinct, meaningful sub-dimension factors and the proportional odds assumption was assessed using the test of parallel lines (0.162) and found to be within acceptable ranges.

The results reveal that neither gender, age, nor income acts as a predictor of complaining propensity, contrary to prior research linking demographics to complaint behaviour (Meiners et al., 2021; Joe & Choi, 2019). However, personality measures of extraversion ($\beta = 0.151$, $p = .001$), entitlement ($\beta = 0.289$, $p < .001$) and redress ($\beta = 0.184$, $p < .001$) were each significant predictors, indicating that greater extraversion, entitlement, and redress orientation were each associated with more frequent complaining. These findings provide partial support for H2: the personality and attitudinal components of the hypothesis are supported, whilst the demographic component is not.

Table 4. Ordinal logistic regression results for personality measures, age, gender and income as predictors for complaining propensity.

Individual measures	Coefficient (β)	SE	Wald Statistic	Sig.
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Age	.090	.053	2.841	.092
Income	.014	.048	.085	.770
Gender	-.046	.146	.099	.753
Extraversion	.151	.046	10.36	.001**
Agreeableness	-.071	.065	1.165	.280
Conscientiousness	-.029	.064	.199	.656
Neuroticism	.014	.065	.050	.824
Openness	.022	.066	.108	.748
Locus of control	.040	.062	.420	.517
Justice	-.031	.084	.138	.710
Price consciousness	-.019	.063	.091	.763
Entitlement	.289	.062	21.526	<.001**
Stress	.098	.063	2.393	.122
Redress	.184	.053	11.847	<0.001**

3.1.2 Study 1 Discussion and hypothesis

Study 1 findings are consistent with the cognitive-emotive process model of complaint behaviour (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998), in which the decision to complain reflects not simply dissatisfaction but individual differences in appraisal and coping. The significant effects of extraversion, entitlement, and redress orientation on complaint propensity align with attribution and justice frameworks: those higher in redress sensitivity are more attuned to

fairness violations and more motivated to pursue rectification (Schmitt et al., 2010), whilst extraverted individuals may face lower social costs in voicing dissatisfaction (Gursoy et al., 2007). Johnston's (1995) zone of tolerance concept provides a complementary account of why the same service failure crosses the complaint threshold for some diners but not others. Study 1 presents evidence of the individual-level personality measures that modulate this threshold, and Study 2 now tests whether these same traits predict actual complaint behaviour in naturalistic dining events

3.2 Study 2 Method - Longitudinal study

The second study measured actual dining experiences over one year for multiple customers to test whether personality measures impacted actual complaint behaviour, as well as the circumstances surrounding the meal. All participants from Study 1 were asked to leave their contact details if they were interested in participating in the second study, and 401 agreed to do so. Participants were contacted by email and offered a £20 voucher for the on-site hotel at the xxxxx(anonymised). Out of the 401 who initially volunteered, 150 went on to complete the personality survey and begin the longitudinal study in July 2022.

To test whether personality measures affect complaint behaviour, the Big5, as well as four additional personality measures, were tested with a separate test (see Table B). The order of the personality measure questions was randomised per participant within the survey, and items were reverse-coded where appropriate for analysis. The Big5 was included as a broad measure, but also to measure extraversion, given its significant result ($p = .001$) and the data were carried over from Study 1. Entitlement was measured, as it met the target of statistical significance in Study 1 ($p < 0.001$), using the list of nine questions from Boyd & Helms (2005) available in the supplementary documents. Redress was also presented as highly

significant ($p < 0.001$) in study 1 and was measured using 15 questions suggested by Richins and Verhage (1985). Empathy was additionally included as a personality measure using question lists from De Corte et al. (2007) given the significant result on reasons not to complain of “I don’t want to upset anyone” as well as multiple open comments such as “I feel sorry for them”, “I don’t like to upset anyone” and “I don’t have the heart to make them feel bad”. Finally, assertiveness was measured using question lists from Rathus (1973), based on qualitative responses in Study 1, such as “I don’t like the attention when complaining”, “I don’t like the fuss” and “I prefer to avoid difficult conversations” which correlates with Chebat, Davidow and Codjovi’s (2005) conclusion that some customers are simply avoiding difficult conversations.

Upon completing the personality test, participants were then given a link to a short survey (piloted once more using confederates from University staff eating out in xxxxx restaurant), to be completed following each restaurant visit over the one-year study period (see Table C), including questions on expectations, quality, and outcomes (White & Arzi, 2005).

Responders were asked about their expectations of service, ambience, food, friendliness, and overall quality prior to arrival, as well as the actual quality of each received. They were also asked whether they were “immediately made to feel special,” whether the dining was a special occasion, their mood on entry, the restaurant's standard, whether it was a special occasion and whether they were a regular at the restaurant as potential factors. Respondents were asked to complete the survey within 24 hours of each restaurant visit, and a monthly email reminder was sent to encourage continued engagement and address any FAQs or issues that might have arisen.

Over the survey period (July 1st, 2022, to July 1st, 2023), a total of 1,010 responses were gained from 103 active participants (47 participants did not complete the personality test and were excluded). A further five participants had fewer than three completed activities and were therefore excluded (alongside their eight visits) as being too inactive (defined as having completed fewer than three surveys). Finally, eight visits were incomplete and rejected, leaving 98 participants and 994 data visits. Seven participants made errors in their codes and could not be matched to the original study, preventing the carry-forward of socio-economic, demographic, and complaint-attitude data. However, their longitudinal surveys were used wherever possible. Overall, dining experiences captured by the study were spread across the full range of restaurants in terms of quality (from budget to fine dining), with varying group sizes, bills, positive and negative experiences, and the proportion of the participants' three complaint attitudes was broadly in the same proportions as study 1. As these variables are theorised to operate at different stages of the complaint process, some as antecedents, others as situational moderators, Study 2 was split into two sections with two dependent variables. The first measured levels of dissatisfaction by asking "were there any issues with your meal" and recording either satisfaction, minor, medium or major issues. The second dependent variable measured whether, upon encountering an issue, they either choose not to raise it at all, to speak to staff briefly, to speak to management, or to complain but not take things further or to complain and then put a further complaint in writing.

3.2.1 Study 2 Findings

The overall self-reported error rate for the study was 25.25% (251/994), that is, respondents reporting dissatisfaction due to a meal fault in the survey, irrespective of whether this was communicated to staff. 12 (1.2% of all meals) responders described this fault as major (e.g.

very slow and poor service, rude staff, major food error, etc.), 50 (5.1% of all meals) reported significant errors (e.g. inattentive staff, slow service, significant food error, etc.) and 189 (19.1% of all meals) reported minor errors (e.g. missed a drink, minor service errors, minor food error) with the remaining 736 (74.6%) reporting satisfactory or better dining experiences.

Drawing on Hirschman's (1970) voice/exit framework and cognitive appraisal theory (Stephens & Gwinner, 1998), we first examined whether objective service quality dimensions predicted whether diners reported dissatisfaction, i.e. a meal issue, treating quality shortfall as a necessary but potentially insufficient condition for complaint behaviour. To avoid any responder disproportionately influencing results and to take advantage of the longitudinal element of the study (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), we employed linear mixed model effects to examine satisfaction and quality predictors of meal issues (pseudo- $R^2 = .26$; residual variance = $.30$, $SE = .01$). Service satisfaction was the strongest predictor ($B = -0.14$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher service satisfaction was associated with fewer reported errors. Friendliness satisfaction was also a small but significant predictor ($B = -0.05$, $p = .034$), as were overall satisfaction ($B = -0.11$, $p = .002$).

Situational factors of immediately being made to feel special ($B = -0.05$, $p < .001$) reduced the chances of dissatisfaction. The direction of the effect of being made to feel special is consistent with the hypothesis, though its interpretation warrants caution: rather than acting as an independent predictor, this variable may reflect successful early service recovery or the quality of the server-customer relationship, which in turn reduces the likelihood that a subsequent error is perceived as complaint-worthy. The present design cannot disentangle these possibilities, and future work should consider measuring staff interaction quality and service recovery separately. Interestingly, both food and ambience satisfaction were non-

significant but aligned negatively, in accordance with the SERVQUAL model, as were regularity, mood and the restaurant standard, yet whether the meal was a special occasion ($B = 0.04, p = .013$) increased the probability of finding fault, suggesting tolerance for error is less when it is an important meal.

Table 5. Linear Mixed Model Parameter Estimates: Satisfaction Ratings and Situational Factors Predicting Meal Issues (N = 994)

	<i>B</i>	SE B	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Intercept	1.58	.056	27.99	<.001
<i>Satisfaction ratings</i>				
Food satisfaction	-.04	.02	-1.63	.104
Service satisfaction	-.14	.02	-6.08	<.001*
Friendliness satisfaction	-.05	.02	-2.12	.034*
Ambience satisfaction	-.01	.02	-.57	.572
Overall satisfaction	-.11	.03	-3.17	.002*
<i>Situational factors</i>				
Immediately being made to feel special	-.05	.01	-4.25	<.001**
Regular visitor	-.04	.03	-1.51	.131

Special occasion	.04	.02	2.48	.013*
Restaurant standard	-.01	.01	-.87	.381
Irritated by a non-restaurant event	.015	.01	1.21	.225
Irritated by a restaurant error	.017	.02	1.00	.316

Note. Dependent variable: *Were there any issues with your meal?* Marginal and conditional pseudo- $R^2 = .26$. Residual variance = .30 ($SE = .01$). $AIC = 1634.95$, $BIC = 1639.84$.

To examine whether individual differences modulate the dissatisfaction/complaint relationship, consistent with the cognitive-emotive and attribution frameworks outlined in the literature review, a linear mixed model examined individual predictors of reported meal issues (pseudo- $R^2 = .04$; residual variance = .35, $SE = .02$). Three predictors were significant. Higher empathy ($B = -0.07$, $p = .029$) and conscientiousness ($B = -0.04$, $p = .035$) were negatively associated with meal issues, suggesting more empathic and conscientious diners were less likely to report problems. Age was also a significant negative predictor ($B = -0.01$, $p = .002$), indicating that older diners were less likely to report dissatisfaction. Contrary to the SERVQUAL model, this result suggests that the decision to perceive an error as a problem reflects individual differences among diners. All other predictors were non-significant,

Table 6 Linear Mixed Model Parameter Estimates: Complaint Dispositions, Personality, and Demographics Predicting Meal Issues (N = 994)

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Intercept	1.43	.29	4.87	<.001

Personality traits

Agreeableness	-.034	.02	-1.47	.140
Neuroticism	-.018	.025	-.74	.459
Openness	.012	.02	.50	.614
Conscientiousness	-.043	.02	-2.11	.035
Extraversion	-.009	.016	-.55	.582
Assertive	-.01	.03	-.28	.781
Redress	.03	.03	1.08	.283
Entitled	.02	.03	.67	.502
Empathy	-.07	.03	-2.18	.029

Demographics

Age	-.01	.003	-3.11	.002
Income	.02	.016	1.27	.203
Gender	-.04	.05	-.77	.443

Note. Dependent variable: Were there any issues with your meal? Marginal and conditional pseudo-R² = .04. Residual variance = .35 (SE = .02). AIC = 1472.23, BIC = 1476.88.

We then tested whether, once the decision had been made that the responder was dissatisfied, the diner then verbally raised the issue. Among the meals where responders reported being dissatisfied due to an error made ($k = 251$), 99 (39.4% of meals with errors, 10% of all meals) admitted an issue but chose not to raise it, and 117 (46.6% of meals with errors, 11.8% of all meals) raised the error with staff briefly. This suggests that, despite the significant error rate in restaurants, customers either forgive errors, do not wish to raise them, or staff are proficient at handling them when reported in 86% of cases.

From the remaining 35 meals (14% of meals with errors, 3.5% of all meals) that were reported to management, the majority were then resolved (21), with 12 not resolved but no further action was taken by the customer, leaving 2 not resolved and the customer complained in writing, significantly lower than the 1/24 found by Goodman et al. (1999) for financial services, although this may simply be due to the ease of raising an issue in a restaurant environment as opposed to financial environments, or it may be due to the building relationships in this particular product.

The next test used only those meals where an error was reported ($k = 251$) using a linear mixed model, and examined whether quality ratings and situational factors predicted verbally raising a meal issue (pseudo- $R^2 = .08$; residual variance = .68, $SE = .06$). Two measures were significant predictors, the level of irritation on arrival due to an earlier error ($B = 0.07$, $p = .035$) presented positively, indicating that greater pre-arrival irritation was associated with a higher likelihood of verbally raising an issue. In addition, irritation caused by something outside of the restaurant's control was approaching significance ($p = .064$). Whereas immediately making the customer feel special presented negatively ($B = -0.06$, $p = .052$), meaning that in addition to influencing responders to overlook errors (in the earlier test), this also made them less likely to raise errors at the time. Satisfaction with food, service, friendliness, ambience, and overall experience were all non-significant, as were visit

regularity, meal importance, and restaurant type. This suggests that staff-related situational variables do predict whether a diner who experienced an issue chooses to raise it verbally.

Table 7 Linear Mixed Model Parameter Estimates: Satisfaction Ratings and Situational Factors Predicting Verbally Raising a Meal Issue (N = 251)

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Intercept	2.66	.33	8.06	<.001
<i>Satisfaction ratings</i>				
Food satisfaction	-.03	.06	-.46	.649
Service satisfaction	.01	.05	.19	.847
Friendliness satisfaction	.04	.06	.68	.498
Ambience satisfaction	-.05	.06	-.89	.375
Overall satisfaction	-.10	.10	-1.10	.271
<i>Situational factors</i>				
Made to feel special	-.06	.03	-1.95	.052
Regular visitor	-.02	.10	-.18	.861
Meal importance	-.02	.05	-.33	.743

Restaurant type	.02	.04	.53	.596
Irritated (not to do with the restaurant)	.07	.04	1.81	.064
Irritated (by an earlier restaurant error)	.06	.03	2.12	.035

Note. Dependent variable: Did anyone verbally raise the issue? Marginal and conditional pseudo- $R^2 = .08$.

Residual variance = .68 ($SE = .06$). AIC = 657.04, BIC = 660.52.

A linear mixed model examined individual difference predictors of verbally raising a meal issue (pseudo- $R^2 = .129$; residual variance = .586, $SE = .06$). Redress-seeking was a significant predictor ($B = 0.17$, $p = .028$), indicating that diners with a stronger disposition to seek redress were more likely to speak up. In addition, extraversion ($B = 0.08$, $p = .059$) but not entitlement emerged as a significant positive predictor, which is notable given its significance in Study 1. This discrepancy may suggest that entitled individuals overreport their propensity to complain in self-report surveys but do not act accordingly in practice, whereas extraverted individuals do, or, alternatively, that they are more responsive to staff efforts to make them feel special and therefore more willing to overlook errors and not report them.

Empathy was a strong negative predictor ($B = -0.168$, $p = .015$), suggesting that more empathic diners were less likely to raise an issue verbally (in addition to forgiving errors in the first test). All other complaint, personality, and demographic predictors were non-significant.

Table 8 Linear Mixed Model Parameter Estimates: Complaint Dispositions, Personality, and Demographics Predicting Verbally Raising a Meal Issue (N = 251)

	<i>B</i>	SE B	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Intercept	2.296	.765	3.00	.003
<i>Personality traits</i>				
Agreeableness	-.05	.07	-.71	.426
Neuroticism	.018	.06	.29	.775
Openness	.08	.07	1.16	.245
Conscientiousness	-.004	.05	-.09	.927
Extraversion	.08	.04	1.9	.06*
Redress	.17	.08	2.21	.028
Entitled	-.02	.05	-.38	.705
Empathy	-.168	.07	-2.44	.015
<i>Demographics</i>				
Age	-.004	.005	-.761	.448
Gender	.10	.125	.793	.429

Income	.009	.04	.217	.829
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Note. Dependent variable: Did anyone verbally raise the issue? Marginal and conditional pseudo- $R^2 = .129$.

Residual variance = .586 (SE = .06). AIC = 497.9, BIC = 502.2

Across both studies, the evidence for H2 is mixed and warrants careful reflection. In Study 1, demographic variables (age, gender, income) did not predict self-reported propensity to complain, despite prior literature suggesting they should (Meiners et al., 2021; Kumar & Kaur, 2020), yet in Study 2, this null finding was replicated, possibly suggesting cultural differences from global studies by the UK cohort.

With respect to personality, results were more consistent across studies but not identical. Redress orientation emerged as a significant predictor of both self-reported propensity to complain in Study 1 ($\beta = 0.184, p < .001$) and actual verbal complaint in Study 2 ($B = 0.17, p = .028$), providing the most robust cross-study support within H2. Empathy was not tested in Study 1 but emerged as a significant negative predictor of both perceiving meal issues ($\beta = -0.07, p = .029$) and verbally raising them ($B = -0.168, p = .015$) in Study 2. Extraversion, significant in Study 1 ($\beta = 0.151, p = .001$), also replicated in study 2 ($B = 0.08, p = .059$).

However, entitlement did not replicate as a significant predictor in Study 2, which may reflect the difference between self-reported complaint propensity and actual complaint behaviour, a distinction the two-study design was specifically intended to probe. H2 is therefore partially supported, with personality traits providing more consistent evidence than demographic variables

In terms of situational factors, taken together, Study 2 findings provide partial support for H1. Service satisfaction ($\beta = -0.14, p < .001$), friendliness satisfaction ($\beta = -0.05, p = .034$),

overall satisfaction ($\beta = -0.11$, $p = .002$), and being made to feel special ($\beta = -0.05$, $p < .001$) each significantly predicted whether responders thought there was a meal issue, consistent with the hypothesis that situational service quality and staff interactions influence dissatisfaction, yet only being made to feel special ($B = -0.06$, $p = .052$) influenced verbally raising this issue.

Situational factors, visit regularity, and restaurant standard were non-significant in both the 'meal issues' and 'verbal complaint' models. Yet the factor of the occasion's importance did influence the probability of finding fault ($B = 0.04$, $p = .013$), but not the probability of raising it, possibly to avoid ruining the occasion. Whereas irritation at an earlier error by the restaurant did not influence the identification of a fault but did increase likelihood to raise one ($B = 0.07$, $p = .035$). H1 is therefore supported with respect to service quality and staff interaction dimensions, but only partially with respect to customer mood or occasion-related variables

4.0 Discussion and Implications

This study provides evidence supporting Johnston's (1995) levels of customer tolerance theory by linking personality traits to complaint behaviour during actual dining occasions. In particular, this research has found that high levels of empathy tend to reduce both the likelihood that a customer will become dissatisfied and the likelihood that they will raise the issue when they are dissatisfied, consistent with the non-complainer typology identified by Chebat et al. (2005). By contrast, seeking redress as a personality trait has the opposite effect, increasing the likelihood of dissatisfaction and of raising a complaint when dissatisfied. In theoretical terms, these findings provide stronger empirical support for existing propositions

within the voice/exit and cognitive-emotive appraisal frameworks, rather than proposing a new theoretical mechanism. Specifically, they offer restaurant context evidence for the role of personality types, such as empathy and redress orientation, in shaping the dissatisfaction to voice pathway.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that early staff interactions are significantly associated with complaint behaviour, specifically, making the customer feel special upon arrival is associated with reduced dissatisfaction and complaint propensity. This is consistent with thin slicing and warmth primacy theory (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993; Fiske et al., 2007), whereby the impression formed in the first moments of an encounter can cascade through to the customer's evaluation of the entire visit, making the earliest staff interactions disproportionately influential. Furthermore, the customer's mood on entry after an earlier error by the restaurant increases the probability of raising a complaint when dissatisfied, and on special occasions, deficiencies in friendliness, overall quality and service quality increase the probability of finding fault. This finding is consistent with early interactions with staff (errors pre-arrival and the welcome) being associated with the overall direction of the dining experience and end-of-meal outcomes, although the observational design means these relationships should be interpreted as associations rather than as evidence of a causal effect.

4.1 Practical Implications

The findings have implications for complaint management in the restaurant industry, where service errors are acknowledged as a driver of customer dissatisfaction. An increased understanding of the importance of early interactions, such as the greet-and-seat, as well as the booking process, has the potential to reduce dissatisfaction and verbal complaints. As

thin-slicing theory suggests this early impression cascades through to shape judgement of the entire visit, this greet-and-seat moment merits particular managerial attention. For example through consistent training on the initial greeting, prompting acknowledgement of waiting guests, and a warm, personalised seating process. By contrast a poor welcome or errors to arrival with the booking process, could generate a disproportionately negative impression. In addition, restaurants need to be wary that important meals are subject to more scrutiny than typical meals.

Furthermore, the influence of empathy on dissatisfaction and on the decision to raise issues verbally raises concerns that customers may withhold feedback that could be useful to the business. This highlights the importance of checking in with tables during a meal and underscores the need for emotional intelligence among restaurant staff and managers to sensitively elicit feedback from reticent diners. The feasibility of these practices will vary across restaurant formats, staffing levels and customer preferences, i.e. fine-dining venues with lower table-to-server ratios may find regular check-ins straightforward. Whereas high-volume or counter-service formats may need to rely more on structured touchpoints, such as a brief prompt at the end of the meal, rather than continuous in-meal monitoring.

These recommendations are intended to inform general service design, staff training and communication practices, rather than to suggest that staff can reliably identify an individual customer's empathy or redress orientation in the moment. In practical terms, the coefficients for being made to feel special and for empathy are modest in magnitude, so their managerial value lies less in individual interactions and more in the overall culture of the business. For instance, small, repeatable improvements to the welcome and staff attentiveness are less

likely to transform any one visit, but may meaningfully reduce the propensity to complain when applied consistently across a high volume of covers.

4.2 Limitations and future research

In Study 1, multiple personality measures were tested, but to ensure the survey had a reasonable number of questions, three randomly selected questions from lists were used, in addition to the BFI-10 (Big 5). These abbreviated measures, drawn from validated scales of 12 to 18 items, offer reduced psychometric precision relative to full scales. However, Study 1 adopted a broad exploratory approach to identify variables warranting further investigation in Study 2, and conclusions are not based solely on Study 1 findings.

A further limitation of the present event-level analysis is that the predictor variables are not all conceptually equivalent. Some, such as pre-arrival mood and external irritation, are antecedents to the meal experience, whilst others, such as immediately being made to feel special, may be better characterised as moderators of the dissatisfaction/complaint relationship, or even as proxies for service recovery. Similarly, regular patronage likely reflects relationship quality rather than a situational factor in the conventional sense. Future research should test an explicitly hierarchical model, entering antecedent variables earlier and examining whether staff interaction variables moderate the relationship between objective service failures and complaint behaviour. This would allow a more precise account of the causal architecture underlying complaint propensity in the restaurant context

A related limitation concerns external validity in that the findings are derived exclusively from UK restaurant settings, and complaint behaviour may differ across other hospitality

sectors, such as hotels or leisure venues, as well as across cultural contexts with different norms around voicing dissatisfaction (Kim et al., 2014; Sann et al., 2020). Future research replicating this design in other hospitality sectors and national contexts would help establish the generalisability of the present findings.

To further expand the study, it could be beneficial to experiment with controlled errors in service and measure complaint response. The notion that early interactions from staff set the general direction of travel for customers is an interesting concept for future research and could be measured by experimentation.

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