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Studying international complaints: A multi-cultural analysis in two periods of time

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper first aims to examine associations between factors involved in business-to-business complaints management and results (satisfaction and loyalty) and analyses three types of distributors based on their cultural profile (domestic, low context and high context). Second, the paper investigates whether the identified associations remain stable over time.

Design/methodology/approach – Data from a sample of distributors for a manufacturing company were gathered during two periods of time. A factorial analysis of correspondences and a cluster analysis were carried out to visually represent the associations among clients, complaints and results in the associations among clients, complaints and results. The stability over time of these relationships was also analysed by calculating the correlations between the Euclidean distances on the two maps (one per year) and their mobility ratio.

Findings – The authors found significant evidence that clients from different cultures are associated with varying profiles of complaint and different result types and that certain associations remain stable over time.

Originality/value – While many studies have analysed complaint behaviour in B2C contexts, there is a lack of research from an international business-business relations point of view, leaving questions virtually unexplored. Second, the last phases of supply chain management, specifically complaints management, have been undeveloped, limiting the cultural factor to the general scope of negotiation. In this vein, this paper compares different complaint profiles and results, comparing culturally different customers/distributors. Third, research has mostly referred to a single period, while this paper investigates two different periods of time for the same company (and their distributors) to analyse the relevance of the stability (or not) over time of the associations identified. **Keywords** High/low context cultures, International complaints management, Business-to-business, Factorial analysis of correspondences, Cluster analysis, Complaints, International business

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

As [Andersson et al. \(2020\)](#) state, managers should create an organizational culture that facilitates satisfying international customer needs through investment in sales and market development strategies to gain international growth. Nowadays, sales processes no longer end with the closing of the sale but incorporate the after-sales stage, which is key to ensuring customer loyalty ([Askariyazad and Babakhani, 2015](#)). In this scenario, complaints management is a useful tool for companies that are looking to succeed in an international environment. In this scenario, although diverse factors can affect B2B relationships ([Pathak et al., 2022](#)), this paper focuses on B2B complaints, specifically regarding the possible differences related to the cultural context.

While many studies have analysed complaints behaviour in

international context and defends that firms with a global position must work harder at developing relationships with their customers if they want to offer them high value ([Assimakopoulos et al., 2017](#)). With high levels of global competition, organizations must provide products and services that satisfy their customers, especially in B2B contexts ([Narayan et al., 2021](#)).

Since the pioneering work carried out by [Hall \(1959\)](#) and [Hofstede \(2001\)](#), studies have shown that culture impacts many different outcomes at the individual level ([Blodgett et al., 2018](#)). In this sense, it is possible to classify customers into three major types: domestic (local) clients, high context (HC) clients and low context (LC) clients. The cultural factor is a key aspect of B2B relationships ([Blodgett et al., 2018](#)). Consequently, and in a complaint's management context,

business-to-customer contexts (e.g. Glanz *et al.*, 2002; Homburg and Fürst, 2005), there is a lack of research from a business-to-business (B2B) relations point of view (Kumar and Kaur, 2020). In this sense, this paper focuses on the B2B environment, investigating distributors' complaints management in an

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performance is expected to vary according to the cultural background of the partners.

In this context, the first objective of this paper is to analyse whether associations between culturally distinct distributors (domestic/local, HC and LC clients) and different profiles of complaints and results really do exist. If they do, the presence of different profiles resulting from cultural factors will be demonstrated. Secondly, given that most existing models that address the relevance of culture in labour relations assume cultural stability, emphasizing the adjustment between a given culture and certain management and motivation practices (Erez and Earley, 1993), our other objective will be to analyse these relationships longitudinally; that is, to discover whether the associations between culturally diverse distributors and their complaints profile and results remain unchanged over time or in other words if different performance models that are the result of cultural factors remain stable.

Therefore, this paper tries to add value to the previous lines in several ways. Firstly, although complaints may be the most accessible area, is still an untapped field that offers researchers and managers huge opportunities (Kumar and Kaur, 2021; Omid *et al.*, 2022). Secondly, and as stated before, most of the complaints studies focus on business-to-consumer relationships (Baliga *et al.*, 2021) in limited markets like tourism, hospitality or banking and forget the importance of the study of complaints in industrial contexts, living many industries and sectors untouched (Kumar and Kaur, 2020). Thirdly, complaints research has basically focused on LC cultures, mainly in the USA and European countries, and this LC approach raises questions related to these conclusions in other scenarios (Liu and McClure, 2001). Fourthly, more longitudinal studies analysing different periods are required to better understand the evolution of complaints (Haverila and Naumann, 2010). Finally, although it is possible to find different reviews in the B2B context, their scope is wide because they do not focus on any one sector (Madanaguli *et al.*, 2022).

To achieve the objectives described above and, in an attempt to fill the gaps previously stated, 142 local and international distributors for a manufacturer were interviewed (51 in 2012 and 91 in 2014). They self-reported on a complaints profile presented from three perspectives (importance/severity of the complaint, duration and resolution procedure) and the effect on its relationship with the manufacturer (satisfaction, loyalty and the number of complaints). The value of the study lies, therefore, in two substantial contributions. Firstly, while complaints management has been studied previously, the cultural factor has been limited to the general scope of negotiation (Ferraro and Briody, 2013), and as Dey *et al.* (2019) state, consumers' interaction in multicultural environments demand that international management and marketing scholars deepen their study of possible influences not only by host and home country cultures but also by other ethnic minority cultures, global consumer culture and more multinational cultures. Hence, the interest in addressing different complaint profiles, as well as different results, comparing culturally diverse customers/distributors and demonstrating that the final links of the supply chain differ cross-culturally. Secondly, research hitherto has mainly referred to a single period (e.g. Homburg and Fürst, 2005; Chakraborty *et al.*, 2007; Tronvoll, 2007;

Askariyazad and Babakhani, 2015). Hence, the relevance of the associations' stability (or otherwise) is identified over time.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1 Complaints management

The Oxford Dictionary (2011) offers a simple definition of complaint: "it is a statement that something is unsatisfactory or unacceptable" (Kumar and Kaur, 2020). Nowadays, in the era of post-globalization, companies are aware of the importance of handling these complaints correctly because of the competitive environment in which they operate (Kumar and Kaur, 2020). In this scenario, complaints management is identified with how a company deals with customer service problems (Álvarez *et al.*, 2010).

Cognitive social theory (Bandura, 1986) and March (1994) both aid in its understanding, trying to explain how decisions happen. The cognitive social theory (Bandura, 1986) proposed that the evaluation of behaviour change depends on three factors that constantly influence each other: environment, people and behaviour (Glanz *et al.*, 2002). Meanwhile, March (1994) identified two particularly relevant approaches in complaints management: procedural and human. The procedural approach is the one the company has in place to provide redress to complainants and accommodate their needs (Homburg and Fürst, 2005) by resolving the complaint. The human approach contemplates the existence of a positive attitude towards complaints (Johnson *et al.*, 2001) and a constructive attitude towards failures, seeing them as a learning opportunity for the organization (Tax and Brown, 1998). So, a complaint is a lesson learned and promotes improving the product and/or future service so customer loyalty is maintained. Both aspects of the present study will help us to understand how the efficient management of complaints may improve.

Additionally, more recently, Leszczyński *et al.* (2022) present the concept of business paradigm, a theoretical extension of the industrial marketing purchasing actor's theory, to the detention of the sociological and psychological characteristics of the business actors. The authors state that this paradigm presents two dimensions: cognitive (how the actors view and do business) and social (how businesspersons cluster business communities). This paradigm can help to understand business actors' behaviours (Leszczyński *et al.*, 2022).

Thus, according to the previous approaches, a company can deal with customer problems due to failures in its products and/or services in two ways. Firstly, from the perspective of the company supplier, establishing a general-homogeneous procedure for managing complaints and claims that contemplates and acts, in a standardized way, on those factors of the management process that the customer considers most important. Secondly, from the perspective of the company customer, particularizing the management procedure. That is, distinguishing different types of customers according to their cultural context to adjust to their needs according to their particular reactions expected at each stage of the process.

The literature points out that complaints management cannot be considered from a global perspective but must be analysed in various other ways (Johnson *et al.*, 2001). In this sense, the competitive advantage of some companies is not the service or products offered but rather the attention to customer

complaints and resolution; that is, the complaints management (Ghazzawi and Alharbi, 2019).

Good complaint management allows companies to get better results in terms of satisfaction, customer loyalty and the number of complaints (Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002; Álvarez *et al.*, 2010; Lee and Hur, 2019; Morgeson *et al.*, 2020). As Küster *et al.* (2020) stated, literature supports these relationships and recognizes that there are diverse models that try to explain the antecedents and effects of satisfaction and loyalty, with complaint management occupying different positions, for example, the European Customer Satisfaction Index model (ECSI Technical Committee, 1998) or other customer satisfaction models related to this (Swedish Customer Satisfaction Barometer, Norwegian Customer Satisfaction Barometer, American Customer Satisfaction Index). Additionally, these authors underline the relationship between customer satisfaction, the number of complaints and management costs incurred in resolving them.

2.2 Culture and complaints management

People from different countries tend to communicate slightly differently because of cultural differences, sometimes leading to misunderstandings (Nishimura *et al.*, 2008; Pavlović, 2019; Babbitt, 2023). In fact, among the types of failure that cause complaints, we find a wide variety of communication problems that lead to slowness, administrative errors, unwanted products and so on. Thus, such misunderstandings can be translated into different complaint profiles, depending on the cultural environment in which they occur. Therefore, manufacturer-customer communication is a key factor in understanding the profile of the complaint. This is where cultural differences play an important role since this manufacturer-customer communication (and, by extension, potential complaints) will have much to do with the client's cultural identity. That is why, in the next section, a literature review is conducted that classifies clients according to their culture. This will lead to a better understanding of the different complaints' profiles.

Culture influences nearly all facets of firms' marketing activities in today's global marketplace (Budhathoki *et al.*, 2018). As with many other aspects of our behaviour, the way we handle complaints and customer reactions is conditioned by cultural assumptions (Babbitt, 2023) because when negotiating within our own culture, it is possible to operate effectively at the intuitive or unconscious level but when we enter international negotiations, the scene changes drastically (Ferraro and Briody, 2013). Thus, understanding international business can be further complicated because people often speak different languages or different forms of the same language depending on the social situation (Ferraro and Briody, 2013). Clients may, therefore, be culturally distant. It has been shown that even today, circumstances favour the convergence or divergence of cultures. This enables us to classify more precisely the clients of every company according to their culture of origin. In effect, it lets us see how different cultures exhibit different values, attitudes, morals, behaviours and linguistic styles, all of which can greatly affect the process and outcome of our negotiations and, by extension, the complaints that arise.

In general, we can differentiate between the two major cultural scenarios (HC and LC) that differ from the domestic

environment in which a company operates. This differentiation was initially introduced in 1959 and was described in detail by anthropologist Edward Hall in his book *Beyond Culture* (1976) to understand the basic differences in communication styles and cultural issues (Kittler *et al.*, 2011; Manrai *et al.*, 2019). According to Hall (1976), the messages exchanged in a HC culture carry implicit meanings with more information than the words used, while in an LC culture, the messages have a clear meaning, without any implication beyond the words used. So, in an LC culture, it is very important to be explicit for being fully understood.

For this reason, cultural values impact companies' tactics (Manrai *et al.*, 2019), and firms cannot communicate in the same way with customers operating in different cultures since their information needs and the way of interpreting the messages issued will be very different. That is why the complaints profile (severity, duration and resolution procedure) will differ in various cultural scenarios. The next section deals with such divergences in more detail.

2.2.1 Different complaints profiles in different cultural contexts

According to Ferraro and Briody (2013), certain general principles of intercultural negotiation can be applied to most, if not all, international situations. The authors argue that successful international trade negotiation occurs in a climate of cooperation in which needs are met and both parties benefit. They also indicate that building relationships requires negotiators to take the time to get to know each other; for example, while for many Americans (*LC par excellence*), a signed contract represents the closure of a deal, for the Japanese, a signed contract is considered as the opening of a relationship (*HC par excellence*). All this leads us to anticipate that complaints management and relationships must be adapted to the client's cultural context, and domestic procedures cannot be extended to countries where this is different. Regarding customer results (satisfaction, loyalty and the number of complaints presented), it can be observed that the highest satisfaction levels may be due to a more positive perception of the quality of complaints management, which could be the case among domestic clients. The reason could be proximity to the customer. Hansen *et al.* (1996) point out the importance of managing pre-complaint behaviour and assert that an ineffective response to the buyer's claim harms the seller's reputation, possibly resulting in a loss of loyalty and a change of supplier.

In this way, we observe that the complaints profile and claims are not homogeneous among clients but are associated with the cultural context from which they come (Madon and Singh, 2023). Claims and processes for handling complaints are of great importance because they have the potential to generate an adverse effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Anderson *et al.*, 1994; Rust *et al.*, 1995; Tronvoll, 2007; Sarantidou, 2017). Thus, customer experience with a complaint can be decisive in achieving customer satisfaction and winning loyalty (Calvo-Porral and Otero-Prada, 2021). This situation arises frequently in both HC and LC cultures since the distance between manufacturer and client causes distortions. Customers from an HC culture are collectivistic, empathic and grateful (Wang, 2007), so failures are not considered serious or liable to have any lasting effect if they can be resolved efficiently. In contrast, customers from an LC culture are

individualistic, high-trust dependent and less empathic (Wang, 2007), so complaints will be serious and may have long-term ramifications, such as low satisfaction and a loss of custom.

These differences were first explained by Copeland and Griggs (1988), who insisted that not everyone possesses the attributes needed for success in international businesses. How complaints are adapted to each cultural context is crucial (Halverson and Tirmizi, 2008). Harnessing the synergy of multicultural teams can lead to more creative approaches to problem-solving and decision-making (Marquardt and Horvath, 2001). In all, customers from different cultures will be associated with different complaints profiles and different perceptions of satisfaction and loyalty (result variables) because the cultural distance can be relatively large and can become a crucial aspect in developing an effective and efficient flow of communication in international channels of distribution (Rosenbloom and Larsen, 2003).

More specifically, firstly, HC clients who desire to be diplomatic and avoid embarrassment tend, over time, to be associated with fewer complaints (Ferraro and Briody, 2013). In fact, consumers with a high collectivistic orientation cannot complain because of cultural norms that inhibit that kind of behaviour (Patterson *et al.*, 2006). The absence of complaints, however, does not necessarily mean that the clients are happy; they may feel unhappy, make negative comments about the supplier through word of mouth, and hire a different one next time (Patterson *et al.*, 2006). However, their empathy (Wang, 2007) and gratitude are such that they have greater resilience.

Secondly, in the case of domestic customers, companies are more likely to implement recovery actions more suitable to the presented complaints because employees are sensitive to the cultural orientation of individual customers (Patterson *et al.*, 2006). Likewise, according to Usunier *et al.* (2005), since the clients are culturally related, they make fewer complaints, which means better outcomes for the supplier.

Thirdly, LC clients are usually linked with complaints of shorter duration, though there may be many (Halverson and Tirmizi, 2008). These clients need rules and formal contracts because they belong to a high-trust society (Wang, 2007). So, if a company fails to satisfy these clients, the consequences will be serious and durable.

Thus, considering previous lines and based on the cognitive social theory (Bandura, 1986) and the works of Hall (1959, 1976), we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Customers who are culturally different (domestic, HC and LC) are associated with different complaint profiles.

2.2.2 Stability of associations between client profiles of complaints and results

Erez and Earley (1993) point out that cultures change very slowly, so they may be considered as a relatively stable characteristic. But they may differ (Rosenbloom and Larsen, 2003). According to Hall (1976), HC cultures tend to be more stable, and their communication lines are more economical, faster, efficient and satisfactory. In contrast, LC cultures tend to change rapidly and drastically. But this also means that LC communication can fail due to over-information, which makes it difficult to decipher cultural distinctions.

As Nishimura *et al.* (2008) state, the cultural context can also change and evolve. For example, while Japan and other Eastern countries are HC cultures, they are becoming more LC with the increased cultural influence of the West. Despite this, cultural diversity, as was pointed out in the previous section, means that the profiles of complaints and claims remain heterogeneous and depend on the particular client (domestic, HC or LC) and, consequently, the type, quantity, and duration of the complaints presented by each client based on their cultural identity remain stable over time.

In sum, the complaints patterns expect stability from the same clients. Similar behaviour is expected in clients from the same cultural backgrounds, even over time. This is, irrespective of the time period, when faults occur, HC clients are usually the most disappointed because they are the most formal and least empathic. So, their loyalty and satisfaction levels will be strongly affected by errors. In contrast, LC clients will tolerate faults more because they are more empathic and collectivistic, and their complaints will be less serious and durable because empathy means understanding, consideration, forgiveness and engagement (Whang, 2007). Thus, considering previous lines and based on Hall's (1976) assumptions, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. The association between culturally different clients (domestic, HC and LC) with diverse complaints profiles remains stable over time.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and research approach

The engineering company that is the subject of this study was established in Spain in 1989. This was the year the Berlin Wall fell, and the world began to change dramatically. Since then, the firm has extended its network of independent distributors to five continents; these operate as sales subsidiaries. Currently, it has commercial teams covering 61 countries.

To find suitable participants, we contacted the sales departments of the different client companies, covering the different sales income levels. In the first stage, customers were grouped into three categories according to their culture: domestic/local, HC and LC companies. To do this, we follow the proposal of Hall (1976), Copeland and Griggs (1988), Kittler *et al.* (2011). Appendix offers the classification. The manufacturer company can be classified as an HC one. Its customers located in the same country are denominated local or domestic.

Next, the three types of clients were asked about two groups of variables: claims that had been presented to the manufacturing company and their results (satisfaction, loyalty to the manufacturing company and the number of complaints). Therefore, the satisfaction and duration of complaints were added in line with Parasuraman *et al.* (1988), loyalty according to Spreng *et al.* (1995), severity of complaint in line with Morris and Reeson (1978), complaint resolution procedures according to Clemmer (1993) and frequency of complaints following Spreng *et al.* (1995).

The questions were asked longitudinally in 2012 and 2014 to achieve the second objective. A probabilistic sampling procedure was followed; the selection of clients to be

interviewed was carried out randomly, without considering the presence or absence of complaints or claims. The sample comprised 142 client-distributors in all 51 in 2012 and 91 in 2014. Table 1 shows the sample profile.

As we can observe, domestic customer distributors are a small proportion of the sample. Usually, they are individual firms that sell products for personal use by the final consumer (e.g. a floor lamp) or offer installation services to their customers. HC and LC distributors represent a bigger proportion of the sample. The company offers them technical products. These distributors sell technical solutions to their final consumers. These are usually customer distributors with whom the company has a long-standing relationship.

3.2 Data analysis techniques

Firstly, to test *H1*, a factorial correspondence analysis (ANAFACO) was applied to generate perceptual maps for each period (2012 and 2014). Each map represents the associations between the three types of client (domestic, HC and LC) and the 13 attributes considered for comparison; these relate to the claims' management (severity, time and procedure) and results (satisfaction, customer loyalty and the number of complaints). The distance between these attributes and the three types of clients allows a more accurate characterization of each type of client based on the attributes to which they are most closely located. This visual representation simplifies the interpretation of the data and the analysis of the similarities and differences between the different types of customers, depending on the percentage of appearances of each attribute for each type of customer (the frequency matrix). Secondly, a cluster analysis was applied to each map to design a strategy that allowed us to define groups of homogeneous clients. Finally, to compare the stability of the relationships in two different years, the Spearman correlations between Euclidean distances between pairs of points on each of the maps were analysed. Additionally, the mobility ratios between the clusters identified in both years were calculated.

4. Analysis and discussion

Following the methodology proposed in previous studies and to test the two hypotheses, the results of the study are shown below.

Table 1 Sample profile

	Domestic clients		High-context clients		Low-context clients	
	2012 n ¼ 3	2014 n ¼ 32	2012 n ¼ 36	2014 n ¼ 42	2012 n ¼ 12	2014 n ¼ 17
Interviews	6%	35%	71%	46%	24%	19%
Medium sales incomes	32,586 e	71,897 e	61,293 e	264,688 e	64,190 e	640,413 e
Minimum sales incomes	13,825 e	3,881 e	249 e	6,679 e	1,138 e	21,475 e
Maximum sales incomes	50,572 e	364,839 e	228,137 e	4,413,552 e	596,403 e	3,339,385 e
Products	Domestics and technical products		Technical products		Technical products	
Clients	Little distributor		Big distributor		Big distributor	
Context	High		High		Low	

Source: Authors' own work

4.1 Results for 2012 and 2014 (H1)

To test *H1*, as explained above, we present the main results obtained in each period (2012 and 2014). With only two factors retained (the two-dimensional solution shown in Figures 1 and 2), up to 100% of the total variability of the data (cumulative variance) can be explained in both periods. Likewise, factors 1 and 2, that is, the first and second dimensions, explain, respectively, 56.1% and 43.9% of the data variability (explained variance) in 2012 and 91.1% and 8.9%, respectively, in 2014. The contributions of the dimensions to the inertia of the points (OTR) were analysed to interpret the axes. These values are shown in Table 2. In the best case, the dimension explains 100% of the points' variability.

Related to the first dimension or X-axis, in 2012:

- The positive part shows *domestic/local customers* (OTR ¼ 51.6%) next to highly desired attributes such as high satisfaction with the product and the service (OTR ¼ 99.7% and 98.5%, respectively) and high sales incomes (OTR ¼ 75.8%) but also to unwanted attributes such as the number of complaints (OTR ¼ 70.3%).
- In the negative part, *LC clients* (OTR ¼ 96.4%) are close to property service complaints (OTR ¼ 99.8%), other highly desired properties such as high recommendation intention (OTR ¼ 74.4%) and high satisfaction with after-sales service (OTR ¼ 83.9%).

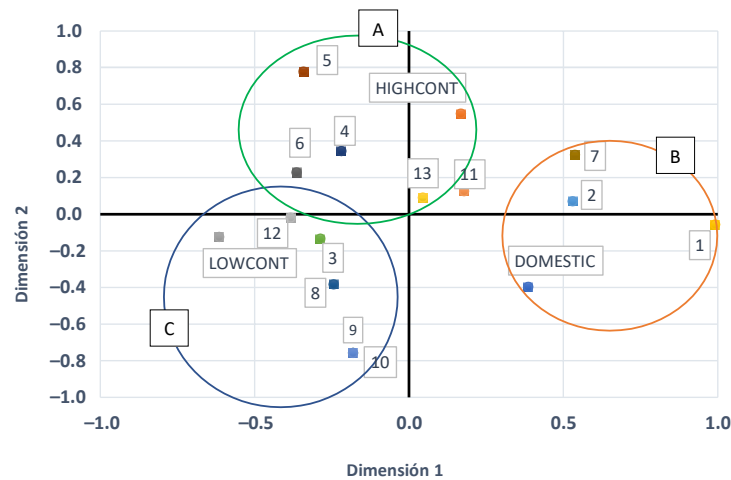
In 2014, we can observe that:

- The negative part shows *domestic/local clients* (OTR ¼ 94%), close to properties such as global satisfaction (OTR ¼ 93.7%), satisfaction with the product, with the service and with the after-sales service (OTR ¼ 98.3%, 92.9% and 99.3%, respectively), repurchase intention and recommendation (OTR ¼ 97.5% and 99.9%, respectively).
- The positive part shows *LC clients* (OTR ¼ 98.8%) associated with high sales incomes (OTR ¼ 65.7%), a large number of complaints (OTR ¼ 91.2%) and serious and durable complaints (OTR ¼ 96.5%, 99.7%), both in service (OTR ¼ 99.7%) and product (OTR ¼ 56.6%).

The second dimension or Y-axis:

- The positive part shows *HC clients* (OTR_2012 ¼ 90.3%; OTR_2014 ¼ 63.0%) next to desired properties such as global satisfaction (OTR ¼ 68.5%) and repurchase intention (OTR_2012 ¼ 82.2%) but also to unwanted ones such as product complaints (OTR_2012 ¼ 78.2%; OTR_2014 ¼ 51.6%).

Figure 1 Joint representation of the three types of customers and the 13 attributes in 2012



DOMESTIC	DOMESTIC	0.387	-0.398
HIGH CONTEXT	HIGH CONTEXT	0.168	0.548
LOW CONTEXT	LOW CONTEXT	-0.614	-0.125
VARIABLES RELATED TO RESULTS			
1	High product satisfaction 2012	0.992	-0.058
2	High service satisfaction 2012	0.530	0.070
3	High post-sales service satisfaction 2012	-0.287	-0.134
4	High global satisfaction 2012	-0.219	0.343
5	High rebuying intention 2012	-0.341	0.777
6	High recommendation 2012	-0.364	0.227
7	High sales 2012	0.538	0.323
11	Large number of complaints 2012	0.179	0.124
VARIABLES RELATED TO COMPLAINTS PROFILE			
8	Complaints presence2012	-0.244	-0.384
9	Serious complaints 2012	-0.181	-0.758
10	Durable complaints 2012	-0.181	-0.758
12	Service complaints 2012	-0.383	-0.019
13	Product complaints 2012	0.045	0.090

Source: Authors' own work

- In the negative part, there are negative properties related to complaints, gravity and duration (OTR ¼ 68.8%, 93.9% and 93.9%, respectively).

T3 As Table 3 summarizes, we can observe differences between both periods.

Two cluster analyses were applied to the data on the perceptual map in 2012 and 2014, using X and Y coordinates as grouping variables to obtain elements with related properties (homogeneous in the X and Y coordinates).

It was decided to retain the three groups in the final solution according to the following criteria:

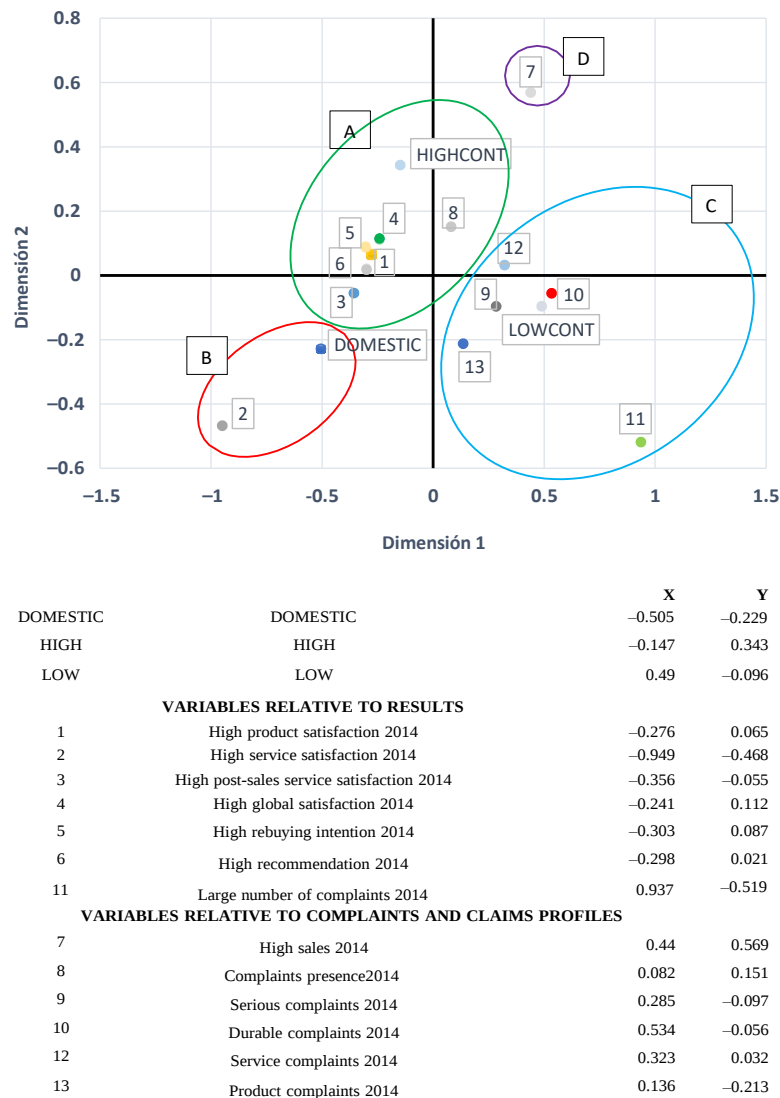
- Ensuring that the structure of retained groups explains at least 65% of the total variability of the data ($d \leq 65\%$) and that the incorporation of an additional group would explain less than an additional 5% 10% of the total variability ($Dd \leq 5\%$ 10%) (Lewis and Thomas, 1990; Flavián and Polo, 1998; Bigné *et al.*, 2002) (Table 4). This criterion verifies the solution since the incorporation of four groups explains barely 8.5% of the total variability.

T4

- Verifying that the groups retained in the final solution differ significantly from each other concerning the grouping variables used (coordinate axes). To this end, the cluster analysis was applied using the K-means method (Punj and Stewart, 1983; Bigné *et al.*, 2002). In 2012, for the solution of the three groups, the grouping variables (axes X and Y) differed significantly (F ¼ 17.353, p ¼ 0.000; F ¼ 9.139, p ¼ 0.003). In 2014, for the solution of the four groups, effectively, the grouping variables (axes X and Y) differed significantly (F ¼ 6.592, p ¼ 0.007; F ¼ 12.964, p ¼ 0.000).
- Observing where the dendrogram is abruptly broken after applying the hierarchical cluster analysis in its ward mode (Reger and Huff, 1993; Bigné *et al.*, 2002). Again, the solutions of the three groups in 2012 and four groups in 2014 are the ones for which the dendrograms are abruptly broken.

All this is represented in Figure 1 (2012) and Figure 2 (2014).

Figure 2 Joint representation of the three types of customers and the 13 attributes in 2014



Source: Authors' own work

In sum, for 2012 and based on the results of the perceptual map and the subsequent cluster analysis, it can be concluded that:

- Group A: The *HC* client is associated with the most positive results since it is perceived to be the most satisfied in global terms (4), and the most loyal since it has a high repurchase intention (5) and recommendation (6), despite having submitted many complaints (11), especially product complaints (13). It would be a loyal client to the company, even if it presents complaints about the product. This result is congruent with the findings of [Rosenbloom and Larsen \(2003\)](#) and [Wang \(2007\)](#). The first authors conclude that when a *HC* firm interacts with another *HC* company, it operates in a small cultural distance situation. [Wang \(2007\)](#) remarks that relationships with *HC* clients (e.g. China) are very close. For example, Chinese *guanxi* relationships often materialize based on kinship, extended family or friendship. This leads to stable and satisfactory links between the manufacturer and its distributors. The latter may complain,
- but they understand and appreciate the manufacturer, so their satisfaction does not vary substantially, and they will remain loyal.
- Group B: The *domestic/local* client is characterized by positive results as well since it is associated with high sales incomes (7) and presents high satisfaction with both the product (1) and the service (2). It would, therefore, be a customer satisfied with the product that sells and the service. As [Tseng et al. \(2018\)](#) pointed out, domestic/home country clients show a better predisposition for the domestic/home firm than for foreign ones.
- Group C: The *LC* client is associated with negative properties since it is the most linked to complaints profiles (8), namely, serious (9) and long-term complaints (10); it also claims many service problems (12). Despite this, satisfaction with the after-sales service is high (3). It would be a client with a high complaints profile and, therefore, has little affinity with the company. This result is similar to

Table 2 Contributions of the dimensions to the inertia of the properties (OTR)

Attribute number	Characteristic/Attribute	Marg. profile	2012			Marg. profile	2014		
			Dim 1 (X)	Dim 2 (Y)	Total		Dim 1 (X)	Dim 2 (Y)	Total
<i>Results</i>									
1	High product satisfaction	0.089	0.997	0.003	1.000	0.084	−0.983	0.017	1.000
2	High service satisfaction	0.106	0.985	0.015	1.000	0.047	−0.929	0.071	1.000
3	High post-sales service satisfaction	0.089	−0.839	0.161	1.000	0.066	−0.993	0.007	1.000
4	High global satisfaction	0.107	0.315	0.685	1.000	0.101	−0.937	0.063	1.000
5	High rebuying intention	0.074	0.178	0.822	1.000	0.104	−0.975	0.025	1.000
6	High recommendation	0.109	−0.744	0.256	1.000	0.103	−0.999	0.001	1.000
7	High sales	0.038	0.758	0.242	1.000	0.066	0.657	0.343	1.000
11	Large number of complaints	0.040	0.703	0.297	1.000	0.055	0.912	0.088	1.000
<i>Complaints' profile</i>									
8	Complaints presence	0.079	0.312	−0.688	1.000	0.086	0.484	0.516	1.000
9	Serious complaints	0.068	0.061	−0.939	1.000	0.072	0.965	0.035	1.000
10	Durable complaints	0.068	0.061	−0.939	1.000	0.069	0.997	0.003	1.000
12	Service complaints	0.048	−0.998	0.002	1.000	0.071	0.997	0.003	1.000
13	Product complaints	0.085	0.218	0.782	1.000	0.076	0.566	0.434	1.000
<i>Domestic</i>		0.356	0.516	0.484	1.000	0.295	−0.940	0.060	1.000
<i>HC</i>		0.330	0.097	0.903	1.000	0.308	0.370	0.630	1.000
<i>LC</i>		0.314	−0.964	0.036	1.000	0.397	0.988	0.012	1.000

Source: Authors' own work

Table 3 Contributions of the dimensions to the inertia of the client points and the properties

	2012			2014		
	Attributes	Clients	Attributes		Clients	
Explained by the negative dimension Axis X	3 High post-sales service satisfaction 6 High recommendation 12 Service complaints	Low-context	1 High product satisfaction 2 High service satisfaction 3 High post-sales service satisfaction 4 High global satisfaction 5 High rebuying intention 6 High recommendations		Domestic	
Explained by the positive dimension Axis X	1 High product satisfaction 2 High service satisfaction 7 High sales 11 Large number of complaints ç	Domestic	7 High sales 9 Serious complaints 10 Durable complaints 11 Large number of complaints 12 Service complaints 13 Product complaints		Low-context	
Explained by the negative dimension Axis Y	8 Complaints presence 9 Serious complaints 10 Durable complaints	High-context	8 Complains presence		High-context	
Explained by the positive dimension Axis Y	4 High global satisfaction 5 High rebuying intention 13 Product complaints					

Source: Authors' own work

those obtained by [Rosenbloom and Larsen \(2003\)](#), who found that when a LC firm (distributor) interacts with an HC company (our manufacturing company), they operate in a large cultural distance situation. As [Wang \(2007\)](#) observes, LC companies do not have close relationships. They follow the rules strictly, and failure is not an option. This type of client quickly loses affinity with a company when problems emerge.

For 2014, we can conclude that:

- Group A: The HC client, despite submitting complaints (8), shows a high global satisfaction (4), related to both the product (1) and the post-sales services (3), with a high rebuying intention (5) and recommendation (6). Once again, it is loyal, even though it submits complaints. As we have already remarked, close and durable links are established with HC partners. Given that it belongs to a

Table 4 Explained variance for the different groups' solutions

	Increase in the variance explained when adding another group ($Dd \leq 5\%$)		Total variance pending to be explained ($d \leq 65\%$)	
	2012 (%)	2014 (%)	2012 (%)	2014 (%)
Solution from 4 to 5	6.2	5.3	47.2	45.7
Solution from 3 to 4	8.5	9.1	53.3	50.9
Solution from 2 to 3	14.1	15.3	61.9	60.0
Solution from 1 to 2	24.1	24.7	75.9	75.3

Source: Authors' own work

low-trust culture (Wang, 2007), product and service failures do not really come as a surprise. For this reason, it remains loyal and satisfied despite making complaints.

- Group B: The *domestic/local* client shows high service satisfaction (2). Again, it is satisfied with the service. This result is consistent with that of Siu (2019), who also found that customers show more service satisfaction with local companies.
- Group C: The *LC* client submits many complaints (11), related to both services (12) and products (13), seriousness (9) and durability (10). It shows a high complaints profile and, consequently, little affinity with the company. LC countries belong to a high-trust culture, so they are associated with serious and durable complaints because failures are not expected (Wang, 2007). If trust is broken, distributors' affinity with the manufacturer is hardly damaged.
- Group D: Customers who buy more from the company are isolated from the rest (7) (this is an *outlier*). In 2014, high sales volume was associated with domestic clients.

The results lead us to accept *H1*, since, in both years, there is a significant association between the attributes concerning complaints and results (satisfaction/loyalty and sales) and the different types of clients (domestic/local, HC and LC). In this sense, and following Torelli and Stoner (2019, p. 589), our results show that clients "respond one way or another depending on the context. In other words, people can respond flexibly to globalization stimuli to adopt, or even integrate foreign meaning and practices into the self, while rejecting them and embracing local customs that provide a sense of epistemic security instead in a different context".

4.2 Comparing 2012 and 2014 (H2)

To test *H2*, the results obtained from the 2012 data were compared with 2014. To this end, two steps were taken. Firstly, the correlations between Euclidean distances between pairs of points in Figures 1 and 2 were calculated. Secondly, the mobility rate among groups in both years was obtained. The Pearson correlation between both maps was low, negative (-0.041) and non-significant ($p = 0.510 > 0.05$). However, since the parametric correlation is applied to cases where the distribution of the data follows a Gaussian or normal curve, and given that the data obtained in the natural sciences and social sciences rarely fit the normal curve, a non-parametric correlation tool (Spearman's Rho calculator) was used (Spearman, 1904).

As Table 5 shows, the 2012 and 2014 maps display a low (0.218) but significant correlation ($p < 0.01$). Thus, the distances (associations) between the types of clients with the

Table 5 Perceptual maps comparison

	Map 2012	Map 2014
Map 2012	1.000	0.218 ^{ww}
Map 2014	0.218 ^{ww}	1.000
Correlation coefficient Rho de Spearman: ("Significant at 0.01 level)		

Note: ^{ww} $p < 0.01$

Source: Authors' own work

attributes related to complaints, claims and results remain relatively stable if both maps are significantly correlated.

Consequently, it can be concluded that the two maps have much in common. Therefore, regardless of the passage of time, there are different types of customers associated with complaints and claims attributes and certain stable levels of loyalty and satisfaction. This is because each client works in a cultural context that is associated with certain skills, interpretations and intercultural training. This influences its behaviour and interaction with incidents that arise and its interpretation of the results from the manufacturing company. For example, as Berg and Holtbrügge (2010) point out, several empirical studies have found that Americans put more emphasis on fast results, while Chinese people usually have a much longer time perspective. Similarly, cooperation in global teams can be challenged by differences in power distance, masculinity, avoidance of uncertainties and individualism (Hofstede, 2001). In addition, different native languages can lead to communication problems and misunderstandings (Chen *et al.*, 2006). Likewise, team members who prefer LC communication may find that HC team members have a reserved and ambiguous communication style, while HC team members may perceive others as offensive and rude (Hall, 1976). In addition, and to corroborate this statement, once the correlation between the two maps has been analysed, the following analysis shows the extent to which the composition of the clusters remains stable over time (2012 and 2014) (Table 6).

Firstly, a set of attributes are grouped in both years: global satisfaction, high repurchase intention and high recommendation intention. These three attributes, related to results, are associated in both years with HC clients. These define the first cluster of HC clients, the *outstanding group, for results: loyalty/affinity with the company* (Group A).

Secondly, service satisfaction was associated with domestic customers in both 2012 and 2014, leading to Group B, which we call the *outstanding group for service: affinity with the service*, and which is linked to domestic customers.

T6

Table 6 Group membership in both years

		Cluster to which they belong in 2012	Cluster to which they belong in 2014	% of times that has been assigned to the same group
1	High product satisfaction	B	A	50
2	High service satisfaction	B	B	100
3	High post-sales satisfaction	C	A	50
4	High global satisfaction	A	A	100
5	High rebuying intention	A	A	100
6	High recommendation intention	A	A	100
7	High sales volume	B	D	50
8	Put complains	C	A	50
9	Serious complaints	C	C	100
10	Durable complaints	C	C	100
11	Big quantity of complaints	A	C	50
12	Presence of high product complaints	C	C	100
13	Presence of high service complaints	A	C	50
14	Domestic client	B	B	100
15	HC client	A	A	100
16	LC client	C	C	100

Source: Authors' own work

Thirdly, service complaints (both serious and long-term claims) remain associated with LC clients in both years. These attributes give their identity to Group C, which we call the *non-affinity group* and which is associated with LC customers.

Additionally, there exists a fourth group (Group D), which has attributes that do not clearly belong to any of the previous clusters and is, therefore, ambiguous. Its attributes are not associated with any client (satisfaction with the product, satisfaction with the post-sales service, presence of complaints, sales volume and a high quantity of complaints, usually related to the product).

In sum, four main clusters have been identified over time: a cluster of clients who show loyalty/affinity with the firm (HC clients), a cluster of clients who are satisfied with the service (domestic clients), a cluster of clients who are dissatisfied (LC clients) and an ambiguous cluster. Having defined the groups,

T7 the ratios of mobility between the groups are shown in Table 7.

The mobility ratio is 62.5% (10/16); only 37.5% (100%–62.5%) of clients and attributes are assigned to different groups in one year and the other. Thus, we can conclude that firstly, distances between pairs of points in the 2012 map correlate significantly with distances between pairs of points on the 2014 map (0.218, $p < 0.01$), and secondly, although the intensity of the relationship is not very high, the mobility ratio between the groups in one year and the other is not far from unity ($RM \frac{1}{4} 0.625 > 0.55$). This leads us to conclude that the results obtained

from both years are highly convergent, and so $H2$ is accepted. The association between culturally different clients (domestic, HC and LC) with diverse complaints profiles and results remain stable over time. Table 8 summarizes these results.

T8

5. Conclusions and managerial implications

This paper has tried to analyse the cultural differences in B2B international complaints management and the role played by time, considering a manufacturer and its local and international distributors in two periods. It must be noted that because of the date of the data, these conclusions and managerial implications should consider the actual situation of the environment. In this sense, the technological advances, the dynamic economies and the uncertainty that companies face may lead to a change in thinking.

5.1 Conclusions

Two main contributions can be drawn. Firstly, and in line with Black and Mendenhall (1990), our results show that the type of customer-distributor culture (domestic, HC and LC) is associated with their complaint and grievance behaviour and with their responses in terms of satisfaction and loyalty with the manufacturing company.

Table 7 Comparison of the composition of the groups: mobility ratios between groups

		2014				Ratio [1] [2]
		Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	
2012	Group A	4	0	2	0	RM $\frac{1}{4}$ RGii $\frac{1}{4}$ 10/16 $\frac{1}{4}$ 0.625 62.5%
	Group B	1	2	0	1	
	Group C	2	0	4	0	

Notes: RM $\frac{1}{4}$ Mobility rate $\frac{1}{4}$ number of attributes belonging to the same group/total number of attributes; If it takes the value of 1 it means that 100% of the attributes are assigned to the same group; If it takes the value of 0 it means that no attribute is assigned to the same group

Source: Authors' own work

Table 8 Clients and profiles in different cultures

GROUP A	GROUP B	GROUP C	GROUP D
Affinity with the company	Affinity with the service	No affinity	Ambiguous
Global satisfaction	Service satisfaction	Serious complaints	Product satisfaction
Rebuying intention		Durable complaints	After-sales service satisfaction
Recommendation intention		Service complaints	Complaints presence
HC client	Domestic client	LC client	Number of complaints
			Product complaints
			Sales

Source: Authors' own work

Secondly, and according to [Hall's \(1976\)](#) assumptions, there is a stable relationship between the cultural context of the company-customer, some characteristics of complaints and certain outcomes in terms of satisfaction, number of complaints and loyalty. However, the relationship found is more complex than initially suggested.

In sum, our research has allowed us to conclude that there is a relatively stable pattern amongst the three types of clients (domestic, HC and LC) about a particular set of properties (i.e. their complaints, claims and results profiles).

In short, and as a result of this study, it is possible to draw three conclusions for each type of customer distributor, which are discussed below.

Firstly, the fact that the domestic customer (distributors in their own country) is associated, in a stable way, only with a high level of satisfaction with the service provided by the manufacturing company is relevant. If the handicap of physical and cultural distance is removed, one would expect a large number of positive associations between these customers and the manufacturer, in line with [Black and Mendenhall's \(1990\)](#) statement: "The empirical literature provides cautious support for the proposition that cross-cultural training has a positive impact on cross-cultural effectiveness". From this point of view, according to the results obtained, we can see that the service offered by the manufacturing company to customers from the same country of origin will intensify the positive effects. We must, therefore, focus on the search for other factors that provide added value, facilitate good relations and encourage convergence with domestic customers, such as personality, group-level phenomena, situational elements or the characteristics of the components of the after-sales service, which could also be studied in the international sphere. In this sense, the composition of the after-sales team, its relationship with the customer/customer complaints and their impact on results could be analysed.

Secondly, certain types of customer-companies will be more affine to the manufacturing company, regardless of their situation in the field of complaints. These are customer-companies from HC cultures with high overall satisfaction, high recommendation and repurchase intentions. Based on the literature review, it makes sense to think that HC customers will be more diplomatic in their responses to the manufacturing company, also HC, and will tend to complain less, seeking courtesy and the desire to avoid embarrassment rather than the truth, as argued by [Ferraro and Briody \(2013\)](#). Following these authors, let us take the example of Japan (HC), where communication aims to achieve consensus and promote

harmony. According to these same authors, societies with a high degree of uncertainty avoidance, such as Greece, Portugal and Japan (HC), try to minimize these unstructured situations as much as possible, maintaining strict laws and regulations, providing safety and security measures, adhering to absolute truths and rejecting unorthodox ideas. This leads us to conclude the ineffectiveness of using a written questionnaire with HC clients. If we want to get conclusive answers from these customers, we must engage in closer communication, not just verbal. The company has HC distributor-customers in Japan, India, Singapore, Mexico, New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Thailand, Israel, Chile, Morocco, the Philippines and Qatar.

Thirdly, at the other extreme, LC customer-companies such as Singapore, Denmark, Hong Kong and the USA are comfortable with fewer rules and simpler organizational structures. It has also been corroborated that LC customers are associated with numerous serious and long-lasting service complaints. This may be due to potential misunderstandings and their serious consequences in a cross-cultural situation, as pointed out by [Mendenhall and Oddou \(1985\)](#). Time, effort, reputation and even contracts can be lost due to cultural ignorance ([Ferraro and Briody, 2013](#)). In this regard, the literature has also shown us that some cultures see time as a tangible commodity that must be used efficiently, such as Switzerland and the USA. We have also seen that comprehensive and structured feedback with the customer improves their perception of how agile their complaint is being resolved ([Gilly, 1987](#)), increasing the likelihood that the employee will offer the customer the opportunity to explain their problem, and thus increasing their perception that the process is under control ([Homburg and Fürst, 2005](#)). However, no association is observed between these types of LC customers and their levels of satisfaction or loyalty. Therefore, LC customers represent a new target population for which it is urgent to find out which determining factors would be relevant to improve their levels of satisfaction and loyalty in a stable way, lowering their profile of complaints and claims. The countries of origin of the LC customers-distributors studied are Slovenia, Switzerland, Poland, UK, Czech Republic, Belgium, Portugal, Malta, The Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Italy, Denmark, Croatia, Lithuania, Romania, Russia, Greece, Hungary, Estonia and Slovakia.

[Halverson and Tirmizi \(2008\)](#) argued that not all dimensions contribute equally to understanding differences in consumer behaviour. Motivation can also be a cause of differentiation and this can be influenced by how a complaint has been developing, the effectiveness of after-sales service or the number and severity

of complaints. Thus, we leave some of these dissertations open for future research.

5.2 Managerial implications

As a result of the results and conclusions reached, the following managerial implications can be established aimed at those responsible for handling complaints in international B2B contexts.

Firstly, the physical proximity of the company-customer to the manufacturing company (domestic customers in the same country) provides a competitive advantage concerning the service provided by favouring satisfaction with this service. The opportunity to improve service provision, as a strong point against the competition, and, above all, to strengthen other aspects related to the product that are going unnoticed in this market sector, should not be overlooked.

Secondly, it was also found that customers belonging to HC cultures (HC grouping) are highly satisfied with their supplier and show a high level of loyalty, both in terms of intention to repurchase and intention to recommend to other customers. For this reason, when initiating commercial relations in the international sphere, it is recommended to visit, in the first instance, those clients with a presence in similar countries and to strengthen this empathy that is conducive to business.

Thirdly, an opportunity for improvement is detected in commercial relations with LC customers. Thus, it is recommended to work on reducing the time taken to resolve complaints, to pay more attention to service complaints and to promote preventive actions to minimize serious complaints as far as possible. This is because LC customers are more demanding and rational and like work to be done within a stipulated time. Moreover, as Hall (1976) points out, in this LC context, it is very important to be explicit to be fully understood.

Finally, insofar as the longitudinal study demonstrates stability over time concerning the managerial implications alluded to above, before initiating any international business activity, it is recommended to study the physical and cultural proximity of the potential client company in depth. Similarly, given that it is difficult to change established relationships in the long term, it is recommended to review and reinterpret the messages conveyed by customers to adapt to each case, thus fostering a mutually beneficial business cooperation environment. In this respect, multicultural after-sales teams foster empathy with customers and improve results.

5.3 Limitations and further research

Like any study, this one is not without limitations that open the door to future research. In this sense, the main limitation of this study is that just one manufacturing company from an HC country was investigated. Would we have obtained the same results if the firm belonged to an LC culture? Future research could involve other companies and their clients (i.e. subsidiaries).

Another point of considerable theoretical importance that was not considered in this paper is cultural change and convergence and divergence in an era of globalization. If cultures from different parts of the world converge, standard and culture-free business practices will eventually emerge and the inefficiencies and complexities associated with disparate beliefs and practices will disappear (Leung et al., 2005).

Finally, due to the digital era that companies are facing, along with possible pandemics such as COVID, possible studies could be aimed at analysing how these contexts affect complaint handling in B2B environments.

In addition, while people's behaviour during negotiations is influenced by their culture, other factors might also be at work and these could be considered in future studies (Ferraro and Briody, 2013).

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Ta1 Appendix

Table A1 Grouping of countries in HC and LC levels

High-context (more common in Asia than in Europe)		Low-context (more common in countries with less racial diversity)
Afghans	Indonesia	Germany
Africans	Italy	Australia
Latin America	Ireland	Austria
Arabs	Israel	Belgium
Argentina	Japan	English Canada
Brazil	Lithuania	Denmark
Bulgaria	Malaysia	Scandinavia
French Canada	Malta	Finland
China	Mexico	England
Colombia	Nepal	Norway
Korea	Pakistan	New Zealand
Croatia	Persia	Switzerland
Ecuador	Poland	USA
Slovakia	Portugal	
Slovenia	Czech Republic	
Spain	Romania	
This Slav	Russia	
Estonia	Southern USA	
Philippines	South Slav	
France	Taiwan	
Greece	Thailand	
Hawaii	Thai	
Hungary	Turkey	
Hong Kong	Vietnam	
India	Vietnam	

Source: From Hall (1976), Copeland and Griggs (1985), Kittler et al. (2011)

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