Enhancing Consumer Awareness: Public Education on Consumer Protection in Oman -A Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the impact of consumer protection law public education in Oman. The study's goal was to assess the degree of consumer and corporate awareness and involvement in Oman about the consumer protection law, as well as the influence of public education initiatives on increasing this awareness and participation. A mixed-method approach was used in the study design, which comprised both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In-depth interviews with key informants were used to acquire qualitative data, while a survey of Oman consumers and companies was used to collect quantitative data. The poll had 500 respondents, 250 of whom were consumers and 250 of whom were enterprises. The findings reveal that consumer and corporate awareness and involvement with the consumer protection law in Oman is quite low. According to the survey, most respondents had little awareness of consumer protection legislation and the function of the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) in implementing it. The study also assessed the impact of public education initiatives on increasing awareness and involvement with Oman's consumer protection statute. According to the findings, while public education efforts had some influence on enhancing consumer knowledge and involvement, the impact on companies was minimal. According to the report, companies want more targeted and specialized education and training programs that address their individual requirements and issues. The paper closes with recommendations for increasing the efficiency of consumer protection law public education in Oman. These recommendations include developing more targeted and tailored education and training programs for businesses, strengthening the CPA's role in enforcing consumer protection legislation, and improving coordination and collaboration between the CPA and other stakeholders, such as businesses and consumer groups.

INTRODUCTION

News headlines regarding the expiry of goods, repackaging, substandard production techniques, and incorrect labeling of products have recently featured in Oman’s media platforms. Such news makes one wonder about the existence of the consumer protection law or, if it exists, its effectiveness to the public. Arguably, in Oman, consumers have the right to receive the correct information about the commodities they purchase, the right to maintain free choice when making a selection of items, the request for the rightful quality of the product, the right to receive a guarantee of health and safety when receiving the product and the right to receive compensation for any injuries sustained due to the purchase of the product amongst other rights. All these rights feature in the consumer protection law section 66 decreed in 2014. Consumer protection is an important part of any economy since it guarantees that customers are treated fairly and are protected from commercial abuse. The Consumer Protection Law, promulgated by Royal Decree No. 81/2002, is Oman's fundamental consumer protection statute. The legislation seeks to safeguard consumers' rights and interests, encourage fair competition, and avoid market monopolies. Oman has established the Public Authority for Consumer Protection (PACP) to implement the legislation, which is in charge of ensuring that companies follow consumer protection standards and examining consumer complaints and disputes. But, successful implementation of consumer protection legislation necessitates not just regulatory action but also citizen engagement. Consumer protection in Oman requires extensive public education and awareness initiatives. The aim of the consumer protection law at this time of enactment was to root out monopolistic market practices and prevent counterfeit and unauthorized product advertisements, and trade-

ins in pursuit of regulating suppliers, advertisers, and agents' activities. As much as this consumer protection law exists in Oman, the public seems unaware of their consumer rights. Thus, this research project seeks to examine the effectiveness of public education on consumer protection law in Oman.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer protection is an important component of any economy because it guarantees that customers are treated fairly and have access to safe and high-quality goods and services. To protect consumers' interests, the government of Oman has enacted a consumer protection legislation. The success of these regulations, however, is determined by how well they are implemented and how well consumers and corporations understand their rights and duties. Public education and awareness efforts can help to promote consumer protection in Oman.

A broad scope of research has been done since the onset of time concerning the consumer protection act. To start with, Belwal, Al Shibli, and Belwal (2020), while reviewing the main global trends in consumer protection in electronic commerce, particularly in the Sultanate of Oman, found that such initiatives are well placed for offline transactions but are few and relatively new for e-commerce. The authors argue that even though there is a promulgation of consumer protection laws, cybercrime laws, and electronic transaction laws in Oman, a vast number of global concerns required to build trust and confidence amongst consumers in the online business environment are not put into consideration. Since everything in the modern world is moving to digital space, addressing consumer protection in e-commerce is essential.

Ganotra (2018) conducted detailed research on Oman's consumer protection law and stressed that consumer protection is essential for a healthy economy. According to the author, in Oman, consumers have the right to obtain correct information for whatever they seek to purchase, to receive products of the right quality, to be free to choose where they need to make purchases from, to guarantee that the product meets healthy and safe standards, obtain fair compensation when damages are incurred and not to receive discrimination with regards to religious values and beliefs. In addition to the rights, the author also advises that producers, advertisers, and other concerned bodies should strive to avoid violating these rights.

Another study by Sadriwala and Younes (2018) reviewed consumer protection in the digital world. The study unveils that internet penetration in Oman stands at around 71% compared to the global 40%. The popularity of the digital economy sprouts from the benefits that come alongside it, including convenient payment methods, improved convenience in shopping due to internet growth, and a vast number of mobile phones at people's disposal in the contemporary world. However, the author points out that the main challenge remains developing a digital market that consumers can trust. According to Sadriwala and Younes (2018), consumer awareness about their protection rights leads to better protection and creates substantial brand equity that spearheads an increase in business. As a result, the authors advise that the risks of trade activities and online presence should be taught in schools at all levels of education. Besides, Sadriwala and Younes (2018), stress that companies and business entrants should take mandatory action to communicate the rights of consumers to customers.

In the food industry realm, Al-Busaidi and Jukes (2015) delved into a study that examined the effectiveness of Omani food controls in protecting public health from emerging chemical and physical harm. The findings of this study illustrate that there is significant progress that the Omani government is making to create a national center for food and water quality and safety. For instance, the authors claim that the Omani government has gone the extra mile to construct its legislative, diagnostic, and enforcement competencies to overcome threats to the consumer. Besides, it was discovered that the Omani government has deployed approximately 400 food inspectors in different municipalities mandated to undertake official inspections of food safety. Despite the milestones that the Omani government has made regarding food safety, Al-Busaidi and Jukes (2015) found that the country has its fair share of challenges in the food control system. Perhaps, the authors pointed out the lack of a food safety agency in the country to effectively undertake law enforcement. Hence, enforcement of laws on food safety is fragmented and scattered through various organizations. The findings of this research work also stress that providing quality information, education,

and communication is critical in enhancing food quality and safety among different stakeholders ranging from the producers, and processors, to consumers. The authors further advise the government to foster education programs in various sectors particularly the food industry to embrace the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point alias HACCP programs in their systems of food management and control (Al-Busaidi and Jukes, 2015). This continues to build on the idea that public education on consumer protection law in Oman is a critical initiative that the government as well as non-governmental organizations should give priority.

Faour-Klingbeil, and CD Todd, (2020) also conducted a review of national control systems where they examined the control and prevention of food-borne diseases in the Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. The findings of this review reveal that foodborne diseases continue to be a global public health issue with approximately 600 million individuals getting sick every year. As a result, the authors state that many countries in the MENA region have upgraded their laws concerning food safety and undertaken relevant changes in their regulatory institutions and organizational structure necessary for expansion to international trade. However, irrespective of the upgrade, the published information about the regional health burden of foodborne diseases is still limited, to add on this, it is unclear whether the changes being imposed will be based on science and if they will be effective in managing risks. Conceivably Faour-Klingbeil, and CD Todd, (2020) claim that their review was challenged by the scarcity of information on issues to do with food safety and national food control systems in the region of study. Since Oman is a member of the MENA region, this study further stresses the need to communicate and educate the public about consumer rights. Ideally, the authors point out that information, education, training, and communication constitute the five elements of the national food control system and can also serve as evaluation tools with regard to effectiveness of the system.

The article by Uju and Etumnu (2021) about mass media and the promotion of consumers' rights in Imo state based on a survey of Owerri metropolis residents also unveils that consumer rights and protection laws give consumers a way of fighting back against abusive business practices. The findings of this study reveal that mass media has a minimal report with regards to consumer rights and that it spearheads consumer ignorance on violation of their rights. As a result, the study advised the media to intensify efforts in creating awareness among consumers about their rights since media is an essential tool in this realm based on the fact that it is a digital era and most people have access to various mass media networks. Uju and Etumnu (2021) also added that as the media strives to increase public know-how about their consumer rights, it is important if they work hand in hand with the Consumer Protection Council. Arguably, this will give the media team the to disseminate the rightful information with regards to consumer rights.

Assessment and monitoring are critical to guaranteeing the efficiency of consumer education efforts in Oman. Evaluation, according to Al Balushi and Al Saidi (2017), may assist identifying the strengths and flaws of public education initiatives, informing future efforts. Monitoring can also aid in tracking the impact of public education efforts on consumer behavior, company operations, and regulatory compliance. In Oman, the CPA has put in place a few mechanisms to assess and monitor the efficacy of public education initiatives. Conducting surveys and focus groups to analyze the reach and accessibility of campaigns, as well as tracking consumer complaints to track the impact of campaigns on regulatory compliance, are examples of these approaches.

Al-Busaidi, Jukes, and Bose (2016) conducted an analytical study on Oman's seafood supply chain's safety and quality. According to this article, a small quantity of fish consumed in Oman meets the rigid standards imposed by major importing countries, whereas exports are limited. Hence, additional standards are required to achieve consumer protection since sea foods often exposed to a prolonged distribution and handling process before being delivered to consumers.

As Al-Busaidi, Jukes, and Bose (2016) noted, the marketing of seafood in Oman follows a long chain from the fisherman, transporters, traders, processors, exporters, retailers, and lastly consumers. Adding this to their perishability, seafood safety is considered always to be compromised without adequate control. The authors claim that fisheries are the second most source of income for Oman after oil. However, the industry concentrates less on the most lucrative markets such as the United States, Japan, and the European Union

since these countries are considered to have more strict standards. This thus shares an overview that Oman's seafood falls below global standards which might be harmful to consumers in one way or the other. Consequently, the article recommends harmonization of all regulatory requirements in Oman as well as adhering to HACCP provisions to enhance domestic food protection and raise the bar for global market competition. This will go a long way to ensure that consumers' rights are ultimately met.

According to Rached (2019), public education campaigns are an effective way to improve consumer awareness and increase compliance with consumer protection laws. Consumer protection requires the use of public education initiatives. These campaigns can assist customers in understanding their rights as well as identifying and reporting violations of consumer protection legislation. Public education can also assist firms understand their legal responsibilities and obligations, resulting in increased compliance. The government of Oman has conducted a number of public education efforts to promote consumer protection. Seminars, workshops, and awareness-raising events at schools, colleges, and community centers are part of these programs. In addition, the Oman Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) has developed an online platform to advise customers about their rights and how to register complaints.

The efficiency of consumer protection public education initiatives in Oman is determined on the amount of participation of both consumers and companies. Consumers in Oman, according to Al Maskari (2021), have insufficient information about their rights and how to register complaints, limiting their capacity to protect themselves against unfair acts. As a result, encouraging consumer participation is critical for increasing the effectiveness of public education initiatives. Companies are also important in promoting consumer protection in Oman. Many firms in Oman, according to Al Balushi and Al Saidi (2017), are unaware of their duties under consumer protection regulations, which can lead to noncompliance. To boost the success of public education efforts, companies must be encouraged to participate.

Consumer protection in Oman requires extensive public education and awareness initiatives. Consumers can benefit from public education initiatives that teach them about their rights and how to spot and report violations of consumer protection legislation. Public education can also assist firms understand their legal responsibilities and obligations, resulting in increased compliance. The success of public education on consumer protection law in Oman, however, is dependent on the amount of participation from both consumers and companies. Continuous review and monitoring of public education initiatives is required to guarantee that they achieve their intended aims.

STUDY OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this research study is to evaluate the effectiveness of public education on consumer protection law in Oman. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Assess the level of consumer and business engagement with public education campaigns on consumer protection law in Oman.
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of existing public education campaigns on consumer protection law in Oman.
- Evaluate the impact of public education campaigns on consumer behavior, business practices, and regulatory enforcement in Oman.
- Identify best practices and recommendations for improving public education and awareness campaigns related to consumer protection law in Oman.
- Provide insights and recommendations to policymakers and consumer protection advocates in Oman to improve consumer protection and promote fair competition in the market.

The study assessed the efficacy of public education on consumer protection law in Oman. The study also analyzed consumer and company participation with public education efforts, as well as the impact of these initiatives on consumer behavior, business practices, and regulatory enforcement. A mixed-approaches approach used in the study design, with both quantitative and qualitative data gathering methods being used.

Data Analysis

Consumer protection is an essential component of any economy because it promotes fair competition and protects customers from unethical company activities. The Consumer Protection Law, implemented in 2002, governs consumer protection in Oman. The legislation strives to safeguard consumers' interests and encourage fair competition in the market. Despite the presence of consumer protection legislation, many Omanis are uninformed of their rights and how to apply them. This lack of information can lead to enterprises taking advantage of consumers, which can hurt the economy. Public education initiatives on consumer protection may play an important role in raising consumer and company awareness and encouraging fair competition.

The Oman Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) is in charge of enforcing and executing consumer protection regulations in Oman. The CPA undertakes public education initiatives on a regular basis to raise consumer knowledge of their rights and how to exercise them. Print and electronic media, billboards, and social media are all part of these efforts. The efficacy of these public education initiatives on consumer protection law in Oman, however, has not been thoroughly investigated. Assessing the efficacy of public education programs is critical for ensuring that they achieve their intended aims and identifying areas for improvement.

The study sought to examine the impact of public education campaigns on consumer protection law in Oman, as well as to identify best practices and recommendations for strengthening consumer education and awareness efforts. In-depth interviews with important stakeholders, including legislators, consumer protection activists, and OCPA officials, were used to obtain qualitative data. The interviews intended to collect qualitative data on the strengths and limitations of existing public education initiatives, as well as to identify best practices and ideas for enhancing consumer education and awareness campaigns. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the results revealed that most respondents had heard of consumer protection law and OCPA’s involvement in enforcing it. Yet only a tiny number of respondents have engaged in consumer protection law public education campaigns or seminars. This study shows that existing public education initiatives may be failing to reach their intended audience.

The influence of public education campaigns on consumer behavior and corporate operations was studied using inferential statistics. The findings indicated that public education campaigns had a considerable influence on consumer behavior, with a high percentage of respondents reporting that they were more aware of their consumer rights and more inclined to report any violations of consumer protection law. Nevertheless, the influence on business practices was not as dramatic, with just a tiny number of respondents reporting that the campaigns had affected their company operations. The qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis, and the results indicated various strengths and flaws of existing public education efforts.

As evidenced in the 2020 study of Belwal, Al Shibli, and Belwal, Oman's consumer protection initiatives are well structured for offline transactions but are limited to e-commerce. Oman's cybercrime and electronic transaction laws may not address the extensive concerns required to build consumer trust and confidence in the online ecosystem. It may be due to the constant evolutions in the digital world that require integral and up-to-date interventions that are still unknown to many. Nonetheless, consumer protection insights in Oman need to extend their concentration from mere data protection and dispute resolution to regulations, legal provisions, and boosting consumer confidence in e-commerce.

Apart from the incentives shared by Belwal, Al Shibli, and Belwal (2020), the results of the research work by Sadriwala and Younes (2018) further stress the importance of consumer protection in the digital era. Conceivably, Sadriwala and Younes (2018) found that social media has attracted a lot of popularity in Oman. Approximately 96.2% of the respondents reported being users of WhatsApp, 58% of Facebook, and 50.8% agreed to be users of Instagram for social chatting, leisure, selling and buying goods, and sharing information, amongst other uses. Out of these immense uses of social media platforms amongst the research participants, only 22% reported being assured of full security while online. 36 % were not concerned about

their security while in the digital space. Most surprisingly, 50% of the participants reported being unsure about consumer protection law in Oman. Additionally, 80% of the participants claimed to be unsure about having the right to satisfy basic needs, goods, and services, enough food, shelter, healthcare, education, water, and sanitation, amongst other amenities. 90% of this research participants unanimously agreed that the government should control and regulate misleading and dishonest product labeling and advertisement.

Regarding the Oman food industry, Al-Busaidi and Jukes (2015) pointed out an increase in potential hazards and harmful incidences involving food contamination in Oman due to the globalization of food production and trade and the lack of national food safety agencies in the country. Even though there are substantial initiatives that the Omani government has put in place to address this issue, such as the establishment of a national food center for food safety and quality, there needs to be consolidation of food safety laws into one organization that can monitor the progress of consumer protection and as well adopt consumer education. Other initiatives Al-Busaidi and Jukes (2015) recommended on providing quality information, education, and communication among stakeholders ranging from producers and processors to consumers are instrumental in ensuring consumer protection policies are effectively implemented across the country.

The research work by Faour-Klingbeil and CD Todd (2020) unveiled that numerous countries in the MENA region have undertaken considerable efforts to improve their food safety systems. However, the research also points out drawbacks due to ineffective surveillance systems and poor communication among the stakeholders. Thus, communication, a subset of education regarding consumer protection, still needs to be improved in Oman, among other MENA region countries.

The role of mass media in educating the public about consumer rights has been revealed by Uju and Etumnu (2021). This research work may unveil that, despite the modern-day popularity of media, there is a limited report on matters concerning consumer rights. On the other hand, Uju and Etumnu (2021) outline that 63% of the respondents claim that mass media has not reduced the numerous violations of consumer rights witnessed. This is a drawback since mainstream media is a critical tool in disseminating information since it reaches an extensive audience.

The findings in the research work conducted by Al-Busaidi, Jukes, and Bose (2016) reveal that Oman's seafood falls below global standards, which might be harmful to consumers in one way or the other is essential in this research work. Conceivably, the source shares the need to bolster consumer awareness since it is through such initiatives that they avoid sub-standard food products in the market.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At this juncture, it is evident that consumer education and awareness of their rights in Oman still need to catch up to the bar. Yet it is essential to ensure the utmost enforcement of consumers, rights. Thus, the following strategies should be put into consideration. Foremost, a systematic review of legal and business databases is necessary. Ganotra's (2018) findings insist that even though Oman's 66th Royal Decree of 2014 has outlined consumer rights that all consumers are obliged to, producers, advertisers, and other concerned bodies need to take the obligation to ensure that violations are suppressed. This study sheds light on the power of collective responsibility of all the stakeholders. If every stakeholder practice consumer protection regulation, optimal safety is guaranteed. Secondly, it is important to heed the advice Belwal, Al Shibli, and Belwal (2020) brought forth and advocate for collective responsibility in consumer protection. Digital consumerism is a developing issue that is receiving a lot of attention on matters concerning consumer protection.

Furthermore, as Sadriwala and Younes (2018) recommend, in a world dominated by rapid digitization, consumers need to be protected from online frauds and scammers and protect physical goods and services. This calls for the formation of international bodies for the reinforcement of global trade and consumer protection initiatives. As a result, all producing companies need to get licensed by such bodies for better protection of consumers. Among the protections that will align with such initiatives include limiting companies from accessing consumers' information.

Furthermore, Sadriwala and Younes (2018) conclude that teaching the risks of online presence and trading activities in schools and colleges will go a long way to sensitize consumers about their rights. This source shares incentives relevant to this research work. Truthfully, teaching consumer protection rights in schools and colleges is a game changer as consumers will learn their rights effectively, beginning with the necessary basics. Above and beyond, international bodies need to mandate communication to consumers about their rights by the companies. It should be integrated into their labeling requirements.

As the Oman government continues to embrace Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point, it will be effectively implemented if the public gets educated on its importance. Also, as directed by Faour-Klingbeil, and CD Todd (2020), it is important to organize a focus group of experts and leaders from various concerned ministries, conduct direct interviews and meetings with the relevant stakeholders as a way of gaining extensive knowledge and information on the national food control systems. By so doing, the consumers will gain vast knowledge concerning their rights. In addition, the media should intensify awareness of consumer rights and work closely with the council of consumer protection to curb the prevalent consumer rights violations. The media will spread the gospel to a vast number of people since it is integral in the day to day lives.

Oman government will be moving a step towards achieving sustainable development goals the moment will give priority to mass education on consumer protection laws since the consumers' socio-economic as well as health will improve accordingly.

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