

# A Qualitative Analysis of Customer Repeat Purchase Behaviour in the UK Mobile Phone Market

Dr. Muhammad Turki Alshurideh (Corresponding author)

Marketing Department, Faculty of Business

The University of Jordan, Amman 11942, Jordan

Tel: 96-6-535-5000 Ext: 24262 E-mail: m.alshurideh@ju.edu.jo

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## **Abstract**

By analysing mobile customer retention behaviour using a qualitative study, the determinants of customer retention are identified in the UK mobile telephone market. The probability that a subscriber will retain the same carrier is dependent on the interaction of behaviour setting and their positive experiences with anticipated positive utilitarian benefits.

**Keywords:** Customer retention, The Behavioral Perspective Model (BPM), Qualitative analysis

## **1. Introduction**

Customer retention is critical in the mobile phone market. The rapid change and reform of the market has increased the types of service offered on a subscription basis. The model of competition has shifted from acquiring new subscribers to retaining existing customers and luring customers away from rival companies (Kalakota & Whinston, 1996). As technology and mobile network penetration have both increased, how to attract rivals' subscribers and maximize customer retention have become urgent and timely concerns for mobile service providers (Seth et al. 2005; Kim & Yoon, 2004).

Previous research in this area has mainly focussed on the determinants of acquiring more subscribers rather than of retaining customers (exploring the geo-demographic determinants of consumption and the role of economic factors such as price (Jae-Hyeon et al., 2006; Yijiong et al., 2009; Wirtz & Chew, 2002). The existing literature does not sufficiently explore the factors motivating individuals to be loyal subscribers; further investigation is required into customer retention.

The aim of this study is to explore those factors by adapting a Behavioural Perspective Model (BPM). The paper is organised as follows: section 1 explains the research objectives; section 2 explains the BPM and its elements; section 3 presents the qualitative method of the investigation; section 4 provides the study propositions; section five provides the analysis and discussion; section six gives the conclusion and suggests further research.

## **2. Research objectives**

The consumer is usually not sure how much he will use a service in the future (e.g. mobile phones or credit cards), but nevertheless, he will frequently renew subscriptions to these services. The factors that affect consumer/supplier relationships and customer retention have been studied (White & Yanamandram, 2007). Understanding how consumers respond to a supplier's offering of reinforcements and utilities in the contractual behaviour context will define the main factors that maintain retention behaviour (Beckett et al., 2000; Choi et al., 2006; Pearlman, 2007). This study aims to provide a new explanation for consumer retention from a behavioural perspective and to define the main factors that affect retention behaviour by using a qualitative methodology. This study employs the BPM (Foxall, 1999) to explain consumer behaviour and predict retention based on the antecedents and consequences of learning contingencies in the mobile phone sector.

## **3. The Behavioural Perspective Model**

The Behavioural Perspective Model (BPM) of purchase and consumption (figure 1) is a new theory which provides a satisfactory explanation of consumer behaviour with respect to the setting in which the behaviour occurs (Foxall, 1990). This model has been used to analyse consumer behaviour in different situations (Fagerstrøm, 2005; Foxall, 1999; Foxall, 1998; Soriano et al., 2002). The model explains consumer behaviour with reference to antecedent and consequential learning contingencies and has many dimensions in applied behaviour studies (Foxall, 1995). The antecedent dimensions are divided into two categories: environmental influences and 'learned history'. Environmental influences include social and

physical surroundings, rules and temporal frame. The consumer's 'learning history' includes accumulated past knowledge, information and direct and indirect experience. Usually, the antecedent or pre-behaviour stimuli do not affect response, but they may affect the likelihood of reinforcement or punishment following a response. The consequential reinforcement and punishment that has been taken into consideration by the consumer is also considered in the model.

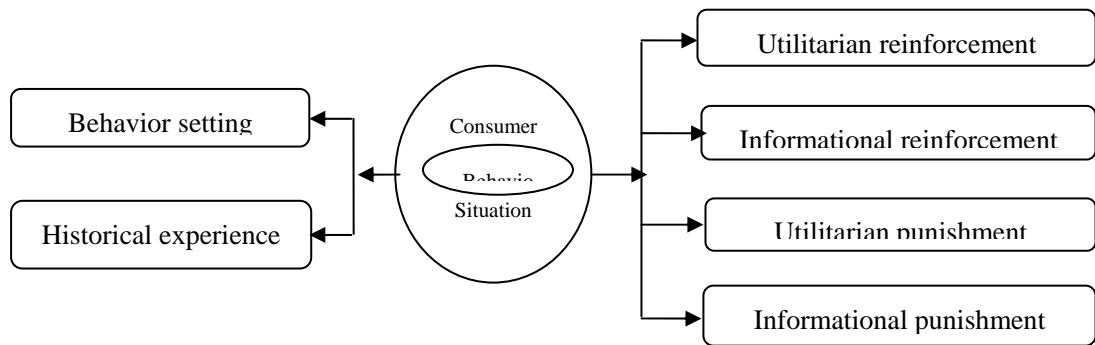


Figure 1. Summative Behavioural Perspective Model (Foxall et al. 2007)

Why apply the BPM? The model differs from others in two aspects (Foxall, 1999). Firstly, it takes account of variations in contingencies or reinforcement due to possible variations in the behavioural setting. Secondly, it categorises reinforcement as either utilitarian (deriving from functional and economic incentives) or informational (deriving from feedback). Utilitarian reinforcement is described by Foxall et al. (2004) as “the practical outcomes or purchase and consumption that derived directly from product and service possession and application”. Informational reinforcement is described by Foxall et al. (2004) as the symbolic, usually mediated by the responsive actions of others, and closely akin to exchange value. It results from many dimensions (including social status and prestige) and includes feedback and recommendations from others.

The BPM considers the full range of cause and effect in decision-making and can be applied to both initial choice of, and continuing loyalty to, a brand or supplier. Foxall (1995) claimed that the BPM covers a distinct gap in the literature. That is, applied behaviour analysis lacked an integrative model of consumer behaviour that considered antecedent and consequential dimensions and the effects of intervention based on a critical evaluation of behaviour theory (Foxall, 1995, cited Geller, 1989). The BPM has been used to investigate different marketing phenomena, such as consumer brand choice (Foxall & Schrezenmaier, 2003; Foxall et al. 2007), product search behaviour (Oliveira-Castro, 2003) and understanding and predicting online consumer behaviour (Fagerstrøm, 2005).

### 3.1 The behaviour setting

The consumer behaviour setting is defined as the “social and physical environment in which the consumer is exposed to stimulate signalling a choice situation” (Foxall, 2007). Both

utilitarian and informational reinforcement affects decisions positively in the behavioural setting. The behavioural setting can also exercise an aversive effect (Foxall & Greenley, 2000). Foxall (1998) identifies four dimensions: Temporal, Physical, Social and Regulatory factors (Figure 2). As this study will be conducted in one of the services sectors, the behaviour setting dimensions will include additional elements: place of purchase, employees, promotion and selling processes.

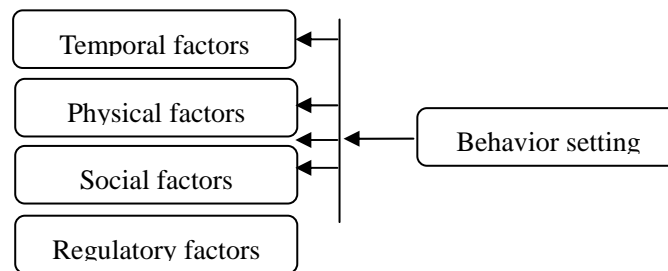


Figure 2. Different Behaviour Setting Dimensions divided according to Foxall (1999)

### *3.2 Learning experience*

There are many situations by which a consumer repeats the same behaviour (purchase) from the same provider. This type of behaviour can be predicted mainly by previous experience and by information relevant to the current buying task or choice. Meyer & Schwager (2007, p.118) defined the customer experience as “the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company”. The attitudes of a consumer who has directly purchased and consumed a product or a service should improve the probability of future purchase, especially if the consumer has a positive attitude towards the same purchasing object (Clow et al., 2005). This part will explore the effect of a consumer’s experience on evaluating options and on repeat buying behaviour.

### *3.3 Reinforcement and punishment*

Consumers tend to maximize overall benefits and minimize overall costs from their purchasing behaviour by considering a range of target objectives (Petersons & King, 2009). Thus, the question follows: what benefits do consumers seek through exerting their behaviour in different ways? Foxall (1999) describes three ways by which marketers manage the reinforcement available to consumers: by enhancing the effectiveness of reinforcement; controlling the schedule by which reinforcement is presented; and increasing the quality or quantity of reinforcement.

Punishment (defined as “the main distinct behaviour outcomes that reduce the chance of specific behaviour being repeated” (Foxall, 1999) can also be categorised as either utilitarian or informational. Utilitarian punishment represents the direct penalty that a customer incurs, such as increased mobile contract cost. Informational punishment represents the indirect consequences of the product and/or service buying and consumption, such as regret or negative social feedback (Foxall, 2007).

#### 4. Methodology

The present study adapted a qualitative research design to elicit the required data and achieve the study purposes. Three focus groups of mobile phone users were conducted, recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed via three main steps illustrated by Shapiro & Markoff (1994). Firstly, code categories were created and defined as explained in table (1). Secondly, the text was converted (by theme) into symbols defined by the code. Finally, subsets of themes or symbols were grouped together in scales to define the main factors and their repetition. Focus groups were used for several reasons: they are a convenient method for interviewing a number of people who are familiar with mobile phone usage and contracts (Calder, 1977). Also, the method is considered an excellent technique for collecting data when specific opinions are important (Garee & Schori, 1996) and when language and conceptualisation used to describe particular terms or ideas is of interest (Basch, 1987).

Table 1. Asammuary of study factors and related codes

No.	Codes	Study items
1-	BS	Behaviour Setting
2-	EX	Experience
3-	UR	Utilitarian Reinforcement
4-	UP	Utilitarian Punishment
5-	IR	Informational Reinforcement
6-	IP	Informational Punishment

Three focus groups of potential end users of mobile phone services have been conducted in the UK. Each focus group comprised 5 to 7 participants with a variety of experiences of UK mobile phone operators and services. The groups' discussions were guided by the researcher, using a predetermined set of semi-structured questions. They lasted between 90 and 120 minutes each. Focus group questions were designed by reviewing consumer behaviour literature with respect to different BPM themes. The questions were reviewed and revised by two independent scholars to ensure their appropriateness for this study.

The methodology of coding and analysing the focus group discussions is guided by Belk (1974 & 1975a, b) and Nicholson et al. (2002). For instance, the statement "It is good to have a place, an outlet, a person you can talk to about different kinds of offers", was coded as (*physical-place+*, *physical-employee+*) according to the positive influence of mobile shop availability and of employee interaction. The statement "It is useless to have a mobile phone shop", was coded as (*physical-place-*) due to the negative influence of mobile shop availability. All texts were transcribed following the same method to accurately capture all positive and negative effects upon all BPM elements.

#### 5. Propositions

Based on the BPM, the study could posit the following:

**Proposition 1**

With respect to the type, level, and nature of utilitarian reinforcement offered by different mobile service operators in the market place within a specific contracted period: the greater the amount of utilitarian reinforcement provided by the contracted mobile operator, the greater the positive effect on customer retention behaviour (including renewal and upgrade).

**Proposition 2**

With respect to the type, level, and nature of behaviour setting elements (place, employee, promotion, social factors, process, temporal and regulation): the greater the effect of behaviour setting elements, the greater the positive effect on customer retention behaviour (including renewal and upgrade).

**Proposition 3**

With respect to the length of consumer/supplier relationship: the greater the effect of subscribers' positive experience in dealing with the existing mobile service provider, the greater the positive effect on customer retention behaviour (including renewal and upgrade).

**Proposition 4**

With respect to the type, level, and nature of informational reinforcement received by a subscriber during a specific contracted period: the greater the amount of informational reinforcement received, the greater the positive effect on customer retention behaviour (including renewal and upgrade).

**Proposition 5**

With respect to the type, level, and nature of utilitarian punishment offered by different mobile service operators in the market place within a specific contracted period: the less utilitarian punishment offered by the contracted mobile service operator, the greater the positive effect on customer retention behaviour (including renewal and upgrade).

**Proposition 6**

With respect to the type, level, and nature of informational punishment received by a subscriber during a specific contracted period, the less informational punishment received, the greater the positive effect on customer retention behaviour (including renewal and upgrade).

**6. Analysis and Discussion**

Following the coding process, a 2x10 contingency table (2) reveals significant differences in the frequency counts of positive and negative behaviours towards the main factors that suppliers maintain affect mobile contract buying and retention behaviours.

Table 1. Contingency table of frequency counts of customers' reports of positive and negative behaviours received from suppliers' practices

		Case												Total
		BS+	BS-	EX+	EX-	UR+	UR-	UP+	UP-	IR+	IR-	IP+	IP-	BS+
Positive behaviour	Count	378	0	66	0	289	0	48	0	48	0	24	0	853
	Expected Count	<b>240.3</b>	156.4	<b>42.0</b>	26.7	<b>183.7</b>	42.6	<b>30.5</b>	33.1	<b>30.5</b>	18.4	<b>15.3</b>	33.7	<b>853.0</b>
Negative behaviour	Count	0	246	0	42	0	67	0	52	0	29	0	53	489
	Expected Count	137.7	<b>89.6</b>	24.0	<b>15.3</b>	105.3	<b>24.4</b>	17.5	<b>18.9</b>	17.5	<b>10.6</b>	8.7	<b>19.3</b>	<b>489.0</b>
Total	Count	378	246	66	42	289	67	48	52	48	29	24	53	1342
	Expected Count	378.0	246.0	66.0	42.0	289.0	67.0	48.0	52.0	48.0	29.0	24.0	53.0	<b>1342.0</b>

Note: Pearson chi-square value under "Asymp. Sig" is 0.00 and less than 0.00 -  $P < 0.001$ , d. f. = 11, N of Valid Cases = 1342

In general, the analysis in table (1) shows that the main factor affecting consumer behaviour is utilitarian reinforcement (UR) – the count of 222 positive instances was around 105 higher than expected. From the participants' perspective, positive and negative utilitarian reinforcement were both important, with 289 and 67 repetitions respectively. Statistically, the results show that utilitarian reinforcement has a positive effect on consumer buying behaviour, which supports proposition 1. This is because consumers tend to maximize the direct benefits gained from purchased items from the same suppliers. This notion is approved by Duk et al. (2002), who mention that the basic consumer behaviour premise is that demand patterns result from choice behaviour, where consumers choose a product to maximise their utility. The main mobile contract elements highlighted by the participants were number of minutes, number of messages and the mobile handset. Evaluating mobile price bundles took account of five dimensions, articulated by one of the participants as follows:

“When I went to the mobile supplier's outlet, the main things that I considered were: number of minutes, number of messages, cost, contract length and handset type; I worked with those five dimensions.”

Mobile firms usually provide different utilitarian reinforcement (e.g. mobile phone types and features) between 18 month contracts and 12 month contracts. Horvath & Sajitos (2002) studied the role of mobile design on buyer decision process and consumer response. The authors explain that consumer relation to product form is dependent on their personal characteristics, surrounding products, utilities, experience, enjoyment of use and the contribution to the fulfilment of the object's purpose. Therefore, suppliers should increase the quality and quantity of utilitarian reinforcement delivered to both existing and potential new

subscribers to increase the retention behaviour rate (Ferguson & Hlavinka, 2006). This was confirmed by one of the participants, who mentioned that “I do not think that there is a need to change my supplier because everything I need is available in my current mobile and contract.”

The contingency table (1) shows that the second element positively affecting mobile subscribers and retention choice is the behaviour setting dimension (BS), which is mainly controlled or affected by mobile suppliers and their managements' activities. There was a balance of 132 positive mentions of BS, 105 more than expected. Positive and negative behaviour setting elements gained 378 and 246 repetitions respectively. This shows that behaviour setting elements have a positive statistical effect on consumer retention behaviour, which supports proposition 2. Explaining the importance of behaviour setting dimensions is critical because it explicates the recognition of situational variables that can substantially enhance the ability to explain and understand consumer behavioural acts (Belk, 1975a and 1975b). Thus, organizations usually try to attract and retain consumers by managing the different marketing relationship activities that form the marketing mix (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002). Therefore, marketing activities directly or indirectly influence consumer retention behaviour by affecting consumer experience (Henkel et al., 2007; Hume et al., 2007; East et al., 2013) or by generating shifts in belief and attitude (Schouten et al., 2007) and controlling the situation setting in which the relationship behaviour may appear (Bhate, 2005).

To explain the effect of the behaviour setting elements more and to find which elements are more important to consumers, appendix (1) shows a contingency table of the main behaviour setting elements affecting consumer behaviour: suppliers' employees, promotion, place factors, social effect factors, time factors, selling process, and regulatory factors. The positive and negative influences values are 55, 35, 19, 16, 2, 2 and -3 respectively. Suppliers' employees have a great influence on consumer purchase and on usage of contracted wireless telecommunication services. This is because employees can affect consumer behaviour directly with face-to-face communication (Greene et al., 1994), friendly behaviour received by customers (Hicks et al., 1996) and prompt service both in store and on telephone helplines (Potter-Brotman, 1994). As mentioned by one participant “My first contact was with the salesman. His behaviour and how he convinced me was more important than what actually they offered me”. The negative influence of physical factors numbered 246 cases. The majority of negative claims concerned mobile stores that were unable to upgrade mobile contracts or solve consumers' issues directly. Therefore, consumers usually call customer service units because they do not receive prompt service from mobile sales stores. This may be due to employees' limited resources such as number of employees, employees' knowledge and training, time available per customer, working space and time. The negative incidents were confirmed by one participant, saying “the mobile shop availability is useless, totally useless from my own experience, because whenever you ask about anything, either a phone or contract details, you end up calling the supplier itself and speaking one of the customer service staff by phone”.

Interestingly, regulatory factors were counted at -3. ‘Regulatory factors’ includes how suppliers control consumer purchasing and usage behaviour via contract terms; both



contracted parties' rights and sanctions; and the mobile contract termination and upgrading flexibility conditions (Srivastava, 2006; Lioba, & Jens, 2007). The mobile phone contract represents the formal design of the contractual relationship between two parties. A valid contract is described as "a contract that is legal and that meets all of the legal requirements of law" (Motiwala, 2008, p.101). Many participants mentioned negative attitudes towards the contract or part of it in different ways. For example, "the mobile contract is always in favour of the company and you have no other choice, and there is no way that you can change it, you have to accept it", "if you want the offer; you should accept the terms and conditions" and "based on my experience, none of us read that contract because it has a lot of terms and conditions". Results show that all behaviour setting elements affect consumer behaviour positively apart from the regulatory element. Therefore, the findings guide us to accept all the minor behaviour setting propositions and reject the regulatory ones.

The third factor to positively affect consumer retention is learning history, which counted 24 incidents. Positive and negative learning history episodes gained 66 and 42 repetitions in importance respectively. Results showed that learning history has a positive statistical influence on consumer behaviour, which supports proposition 3. This notion is confirmed by many authors (Clemons & Gao, 2008; Manchanda, 2005; Constantinides, 2004). Hoch & Young-Won (1986) highlight the positive effect of learning history on consumer retention behaviour: as a consumer learns from product experience, he has evidence about product quality. Therefore, the majority of consumers repeat the same purchase behaviour from the same provider based on evaluation of previous experiences (Bigné et al., 2001; Javalgi & Moberg, 1997). Consumers who have no previous experience rely on other information such friend and family recommendations (Jiaqin et al., 2007; Leek & Chansawatkit, 2006), especially with regard to handsets, services, and tariffs (Tomeh, 1970). One participant said "I can't say that I have enough good experience to shop around for the best deals." This view is confirmed by Romaniuk (2004), who argues that past behaviour is the simplest and most accurate measure of future behaviour at both brand and individual level. The most important role of consumer experience is in evaluating options and establishing which of them will produce most benefit and least punishment in the future (Foxall, 2007).

The fourth factor affecting consumer contractual repetition behaviour is informational reinforcement (IR) which averaged 19 positive incidents. There were 48 positive and 29 negative statements concerning IR. These results indicate that proposition 4 is confirmed. Many participants highlighted the importance of informational reinforcement in using and consuming wireless telecommunication services such as social chatting, interaction with others and improving personal relationships. This notion is supported by other scholars (Castells et al., 2004; Belov, 2005; Steven et al., 1996). One participant mentioned that "mobile services give me more chance to communicate with others, socialise more and chat more. They let me have more friends" while another user said that "it keeps me in touch with others". Accordingly, some suppliers offer group mobile communication services (Mobile Community) for a specific cost per month, such as family packages or magic numbers. Demestichas et al. (2009) investigated mobile community services that express the importance of communicating with others and sharing information thorough mobile phones.

The last two factors that affect customer retention behaviour negatively are utilitarian and informational punishment, with the incident count averaging -4 and -29 respectively. Statistical analysis supports both proposition 5 and proposition 6. According to the participants' views, the main utilitarian punishments that influence consumer behaviour directly are monthly contract cost, amount of deposit required and the cost of terminating and upgrading mobile service contracts. One participant claimed that "contract termination is not easy because if you want to switch, you need to pay all the cost of getting that contract". Monthly cost was important: one participant said "I never asked for a new handset, I always asked to reduce the cost" and another that "I care about reducing the monthly cost".

The direct punishment that gained most subscriber interest was the mobile phone contract price that a customer sacrifices every month until the end of the contracted period. Price plays an essential role that may affect consumer/supplier relationships and behaviour retention (Reibstein, 2002; Sanzo et al., 2003). For suppliers, price is a vital marketing mix dimension because it generates revenue for the business (Vyasulu, 1998; Shipley, 1983). Also, price strategy and decision determine product and service attributes and perception of quality (Zeithaml, 1988; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001). For consumers, price influences buyers' perception of the product or service offered and of its value (Chang & Wildt, 1994). Rust and Oliver (1994, p.142) argue that "relationship pricing is the appropriate form of pricing which respect the long-term contact between service provider and customer." Contract price is very important because it has so many effects.

According to the analysis of participant discussions, informational punishment factors that affect retention behaviour encompass many elements: mobile payment and credit assessment by the mobile supplier (Clark, 2008), the risk of mobile shopping (Wu & Wang, 2006; Mahmoud & Yu, 2006) and low financial and personal data protection (Clarke et al., 2002).

One mobile subscriber said that "we normally face a credit check problem." However, another mobile user claimed that the credit check is just a routine procedure because "if you pass the credit check, which does not mean that you will pay the bills". Participants also disagreed about data security; one felt that their behaviour was constrained: "When you call and pass personal and financial details that is not really secure; when you text a message that is also not totally secure", but others were less concerned.

## **7. Conclusion and future research**

This study investigates the factors motivating individuals to repeat purchase from mobile suppliers by explaining retention behaviour in the contractual behaviour setting. It applies the BPM, which provides a clear explanation about the retention behaviour situation, antecedents and consequences. Six propositions regarding retention behaviour were tested using qualitative research; specifically, three focus groups of UK mobile phone users. The main results showed that utilitarian and informational reinforcements, behaviour setting and learning history affect consumer repetition behaviour positively. Utilitarian and informational punishment affects repetition behaviour negatively.

The main study elements that have been built by using BPM in this study need to be checked

quantitatively by collecting data from both consumers and suppliers to give a clear picture about the interactive mutual relationship. This notion is confirmed by Lindgreen & Pels (2002) who emphasise that the relationship should be studied from a supplier, as well as a customer perspective.

Appendix 1: Physical factors: Contingency table of frequency counts where the participants reported positive and negative behaviour incidents.

Case		Incident		Total
		Positive	Negative	
Place+	Count	78	0	78
	Expected Count	47.3	30.8	78.0
Place-	Count	0	59	59
	Expected Count	35.7	23.3	59.0
Employee+	Count	128	0	128
	Expected Count	77.5	50.5	128.0
Employee-	Count	0	73	73
	Expected Count	44.2	28.8	73.0
Promotion+	Count	51	0	51
	Expected Count	30.9	20.1	51.0
Promotion-	Count	0	16	16
	Expected Count	9.7	6.3	16.0
Social Factors+	Count	31	0	31
	Expected Count	18.8	12.2	31.0
Social Factors-	Count	0	15	15
	Expected Count	9.1	5.9	15.0
Process+	Count	19	0	19
	Expected Count	11.5	7.5	19.0
Process-	Count	0	17	17
	Expected Count	10.3	6.7	17.0
Time+	Count	15	0	15
	Expected Count	9.1	5.9	15.0
Time-	Count	0	13	13
	Expected Count	7.9	5.1	13.0
Regulation+	Count	56	0	56
	Expected Count	33.9	22.1	56.0
Regulation-	Count	0	53	53
	Expected Count	32.1	20.9	53.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>624</b>
	<b>Expected Count</b>	<b>378.0</b>	<b>246.0</b>	<b>624.0</b>

Notes: Pearson chi-square value under "Asymp. Sig" is 0.00 and less than 0.00 -  $P < 0.001$ , d. f. = 13, N of Valid Cases = 624

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