

## Reconceptualizing Consumer Protection in Zambia: A Legal and Socioeconomic Review of Unfair Trade Practices and the Evolution of Statutory Consumer Rights

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African Journal of Commercial Studies, 2025, 6(1), 207–212

DOI Link: <https://doi.org/10.59413/ajocs/v6.i.1.19>

### Abstract

This article undertakes a critical doctrinal and socio-legal review of Zambia's evolving consumer protection landscape with a specific focus on the conceptualisation of unfair trade practices, consumer complaint behaviour, and the normative foundations of consumer rights. Drawing from the theoretical underpinnings of legal positivism, natural law theory, and rights-based jurisprudence, the study explores the historical, philosophical, and legal evolution of consumer protection norms from pre-colonial barter systems to the modern statutory frameworks such as the Competition and Consumer Protection Act (2010). The article also examines the conceptual tension between the state's regulatory obligations and consumers' agency within increasingly complex commercial transactions. Using a comparative legal approach and literature synthesis methodology, this review article juxtaposes the Zambian experience with global legislative trends, notably the European Union's Unfair Commercial Practices Directive and U.S. consumer protection doctrines. It is concluded that Zambia's consumer protection regime, while formally progressive, remains substantively deficient due to limited consumer rights awareness, enforcement weaknesses, and legislative fragmentation. The paper proposes a reconceptualisation of consumer protection grounded in both normative legal theory and empirical consumer behaviour analysis, advancing the thesis that an integrated rights-based and behavioural model is imperative for the realisation of consumer welfare and economic justice in Zambia.

**Keywords:** Consumer Protection, Unfair Trade Practices, Consumer Complaint Behaviour, Legal Positivism, Natural Law, Consumer Rights, Zambia, Socio-Legal Framework, Statutory Enforcement, Comparative Consumer Law

### Article Info

Volume 6, Issue 1

Publication history:

Accepted on 4 March 2025;

Published: 11 March 2025

### Article DOI:

10.59413/ajocs/v6.i.1.19

## 1. Introduction

The doctrine of consumer protection has undergone significant metamorphosis, from rudimentary customary trading norms in pre-colonial societies to codified statutory obligations in contemporary regulatory states. In Zambia, this evolution reflects a confluence of legal transplantation, colonial legacies, and post-independence aspirations to uphold economic justice and protect vulnerable consumers from exploitative commercial practices. Despite the enactment of laws such as the Competition and Consumer Protection Act No. 24 of 2010 and the Food Safety Act No. 7 of 2019, unfair trade practices (UTPs) remain pervasive in both formal and informal markets. These practices—ranging from misleading advertising, defective products, non-disclosure, and coercive pricing mechanisms—undermine consumer autonomy, distort market integrity, and erode public trust in economic institutions.

This article, rooted in a doctrinal and socio-legal research tradition, interrogates the conceptual foundations of consumer protection in Zambia, with emphasis on the normative and behavioural dimensions of consumer rights and complaint behaviour. Drawing on the works of Fishbein and Ajzen (1980), Dehdashti (2018), and legal theorists of rights-based jurisprudence, the article seeks to map the historical trajectory, philosophical justifications, and institutional limitations of Zambia's consumer protection regime. It problematises the disjuncture between formal legal entitlements and the behavioural realities of consumers who often lack the awareness, agency, or procedural knowledge to exercise their rights. Secondly, the article revisits the conceptual underpinnings of unfair trade practices (UTPs), elucidating their evolution in international and domestic jurisprudence. Thirdly, it advances the discourse on consumer complaint behaviour (CCB), situating it within both the theory of planned behaviour and the socio-psychological triggers of complaint or inaction. Fourthly, the article provides a historical exegesis on the emergence and codification of consumer protection rights, culminating in Zambia's accession to international norms such as the United Nations Guidelines on Consumer Protection (1985). Fifthly, it examines the intersection between consumer rights and fundamental human rights, highlighting the normative implications of treating consumer protection not merely as economic regulation but as a constitutional imperative. The article closes with a set of theoretically grounded and policy-oriented recommendations that call for integrated regulatory enforcement, public legal education, and harmonisation of consumer-related laws.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Conceptualization of unfair trade practices

Unfair trade practices (UTPs) encompass a range of deceptive or abusive behaviors in business transactions, affecting both consumers and other businesses. In the EU, UTPs are interpreted as distortions of equal trading opportunities, often involving dominant market positions according to Dehdashti<sup>1</sup>. The concept has evolved across various legal frameworks, including competition and consumer laws (Agrawal, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. UTPs broadly refer to any unfair method or unfair or deceptive trade practice that is prohibited by law or recognized by law or by a court judgment for the purpose of promoting the sale, use or supply of any goods or for the provision of any service.<sup>3</sup>

Law defines an unfair trade practice as any business action or behavior that deceives or is unjust to customers.<sup>4</sup> Unfair trade practices include, but are not limited to, fraudulent or deceptive advertising, selling products that are hazardous or inappropriate for their intended use, charging exorbitant prices, concealing or supplying inaccurate information, and breaking warranties or promises. According to Tadjibayeva<sup>5</sup>, unfair trade practices embody an extensive variety of deceptive, fraudulent, or unethical conduct hired by means of companies to benefit an unfair gain over competitors or purchasers. According to the CCPA<sup>6</sup>, trading practices are unfair if (a) they mislead consumers, (b) compromise the standards of honesty and good faith which enterprises can reasonably meet or (c) place pressure on consumers through harassment or coercion. From a regulatory perspective, the concept of "unfair trade practices" was established in the EU's Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (UCPD) in 2005 (Swinnen, Olper, & Vandeveld, 2021). While the Directive only regulates interactions between businesses and their consumers, not transactions between businesses, it does provide examples of how "unfairness" can be regulated in commercial relationships.<sup>7</sup> The European Commission also defined UTPs as practices that "grossly deviate from good commercial conduct, are contrary to good faith and fair dealing and are unilaterally imposed by one trading partner on another."<sup>8</sup> The European Commission thus mentioned examples of UTPs including late payments, unilateral changes to contracts, ambiguous or incomplete contract terms, unfair termination or disruption of contracts and the improper use of confidential information.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.2. Conceptualization of consumer complaint behaviour

Consumer complaint behaviour (CCB) have secured a quite important place in the academic field of marketing research.<sup>10</sup> Consumer complaint behaviour is about questions such as "What the consumers do when they are dissatisfied?" "What actions do they take?", "Why consumers complain?" "What factors contribute to consumer complaint" and "How customer

<sup>1</sup> Abdollah Dehdashti, Sara. "B2B unfair trade practices and EU competition law." *European Competition Journal* 14, no. 2-3 (2018): 305-341.

<sup>2</sup> Agrawal, Yash. "Unfair Trade Practices in India: A Comparative Analysis Between the Competition and Consumer Laws." Available at SSRN 3619075 (2020).

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Landini, Sara, and Sara Landini. "Unfair Commercial Practices." *Sustainable Tourism Contracts* (2021): 119-141.

<sup>5</sup> Tadjibayeva, M. R. "UNFAIR TRADE PRACTICES IN E-COMMERCE." *Herald pedagogiki. Nauka i Praktyka* 1, no. 5 (2021).

<sup>6</sup> Competition and Consumer Protection Act, 2010

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> Hilty, Reto M., Frauke Henning-Bodewig, and Rupperecht Podszun. "Comments of the Max Planck Institute for Intellectual Property and Competition Law, Munich of 29 April 2013 on the Green Paper of the European Commission on Unfair Trading Practices in the Business-to-Business Food and Non-Food Supply Chain in Europe Dated 31 January 2013, Com (2013) 37 Final." *IIC-International Review of Intellectual Property and Competition Law* 44 (2013): 701-709.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Crie, Dominique. "Consumers' complaint behaviour. Taxonomy, typology and determinants: Towards a unified ontology." *Journal of Database Marketing & Customer Strategy Management* 11 (2003): 60-79.

complaint helps?"<sup>11</sup> According to Kanjoo *et al.*<sup>12</sup> usually consumers show four types of complaining behaviours when they are dissatisfied which are silent exit, direct complaint, making complaint to third parties and negative word-of-mouth communication. In relation to this, Zhao and Orthman<sup>13</sup> classified CCB into three response groups: private action, third-party action and voice action. In this study, consumer complaint behavior is taken as complaining to third parties such as the CCPC.

According to Day and Landon's (1977) classification of consumer complaint behavior, consumers can take private actions, such as complaining to friends and family, boycotting retailers/manufacturers/products, or switching brands, and/or can take public actions, such as complaining directly to retailers or manufacturer, or contact third parties by filing a complaint with a public consumer protection agency, voluntary organization, the media or taking legal action against the retailer or manufacturer. Day and Landon (1977) describe CCB as the result of a specific consumer behavior, whereby the consumer is subsequently faced with an experience that generates high levels of dissatisfaction and is sufficiently influential that it is neither psychologically similar nor quickly forgotten. For Istanbuluoglu *et al.* (2017)<sup>14</sup>, CCB was "an action taken by an individual which involves communicating something negative regarding a product or service to either the firm manufacturing or marketing that product or service or to some third-party organizational entity".

Although these definitions provide some understanding of CCB, they somewhat fail to acknowledge other noteworthy responses to complaints, such as the spread of negative word-of-mouth (WOM) and inaction.<sup>15</sup> Howell *et al.*<sup>16</sup> provided a more comprehensive view of CCB. They suggested that it was "a set of all behavioural and non-behavioural responses which involve communicating something negative regarding a purchase episode and is triggered by perceived dissatisfaction with that episode".<sup>17</sup>

### 2.3. History and conceptualization of consumer protection rights

Consumer protection in general has its roots in the era dating from the pre-industrial revolution in the UK.<sup>18</sup> Generally speaking, historically, the notion of consumer protection entered the legal lexicon from the 1970s in an era of interventionism when consumer laws and policies were produced and it became a community objective. One of the first countries to respond to consumer exploitation was the UK where the 'Molony Committee' was established in 1959, tasked with specifically looking into consumer problems in order to make law reform proposals.<sup>19</sup> Consumer protection, as we know it today, first emerged during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries with the spread of the industrial revolution which introduced mass production.<sup>20</sup> During this period a 'consumer movement' began to take shape across the globe and consumer relational dynamics, existing legal norms, and economic policies were increasingly questioned.<sup>21</sup>

The concepts of 'consumer protection' and 'consumer rights' to the ordinary person throughout the eighteenth century would thus, at least mean (a) protection from excessive prices levied on primary commodities, and (b) protection from short measure.<sup>22</sup> The nineteenth century, however, saw a rise in the maxim of *caveat emptor* (buyer beware) which was strongly called for by advocates of *laissez faire*.<sup>23</sup> It was felt that it was only fair that each man should look out for himself and should not blame anyone when he purchased defective goods because he had the freedom of choice.<sup>24</sup> However, due to the increase in the number of goods that could not be readily examined by the buyer, the courts began to limit *caveat emptor*. The courts began to imply terms into contracts, especially those for the sale of goods, which made sure the buyer got a fair deal by, for example, requiring that the goods were fit for their purpose.<sup>25</sup>

Consumer protection is a form of government regulation designed to protect the interests of consumers, and all activities

<sup>11</sup> Kanjoo, Manzoor, Muhammad Ahsan Nawaz, and Muhammad Aftab Ali. "Determinants affecting customer's complaint intention A study in the context of Pakistans retail market." *International Journal of Learning & Development* 3, no. 6 (2013): 139-152.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> Zhao, Wenjie, and Md Nor Othman. "Predicting and explaining complaint intention and behaviour of Malaysian consumers: an application of the planned behaviour theory." In *International Marketing*, pp. 229-252. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Istanbuluoglu, Doga, Sheena Leek, and Isabelle T. Szmigin. "Beyond exit and voice: developing an integrated taxonomy of consumer complaining behaviour." *European Journal of Marketing* 51, no. 5/6 (2017): 1109-1128.

<sup>15</sup> Kwok, Sherine. "Exploring the non-complaining intention and behaviour of dissatisfied customers: an extended reasoned action approach." PhD diss., University of West London, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Howell, N., Wilson, T., Reynolds, N., Schmulow, A. and Mazzola, P., 2023. The case for a 'Treating Customers Fairly' regime in Australia: evidence from other jurisdictions and a consumer survey. *Competition and Consumer Law Journal*, 30(2), pp.183-208.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

<sup>18</sup> Oughton, David W. "Consumer law: text, cases, and materials." (*No Title*) (1991).

<sup>19</sup> Cartwright, Peter. *Consumer protection and the criminal law: Law, theory, and policy in the UK*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, Tshepiso. "The Realisation of Rights in Terms of the Consumer Protection Act 68 of 2008." Unpublished LLD dissertation. University of South Africa (2018).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>22</sup> Mubiana, Mubiana. "Consumer contracts under the Zambian Law: Does the legislation Provide Adequate Consumer Protection." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 6, no. 4 (2022): 179-196.

<sup>23</sup> Junior, Lynne, and Mc Levis. "Understanding the Doctrine of the 'Caveat' as a Guide to Electronic Commerce Transactions in Cameroon: A Critical Consumer View." *Understanding the Doctrine of the 'Caveat' as a Guide to Electronic Commerce Transactions in Cameroon: A Critical Consumer View (March 01, 2024)* (2024).

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

of consumer organisations aimed at ensuring the protection and enforcement of consumer rights in the marketplace through publicity and consumer education. Consumer protection is concerned with the idea that consumers have rights as consumers and the formation of consumer organizations to help consumers make better choices in the marketplace. In general, consumer rights are considered. Consumers International defines consumer rights as the right to be protected from harmful products, the right to be informed about products, the right to refuse unsatisfactory products or services, and the right to compensation if a complaint is justified. Consumers also have the right to choose from a variety of products in a market that is not controlled by one or a few sellers, to have a voice in government decisions that affect them, and to ensure that their interests are fully considered when policies are made. In addition, consumers have the right to a clean and healthy environment: consumers need to be sure that suppliers of goods and services do not pollute or damage the environment.

As early as the nineteenth century, it was recognised that consumers could be disadvantaged when entering into contracts with businesses. The earliest forms of consumer protection were designed to discourage deceptive trading practices, such as overpricing and shortages, and to protect consumers from the dangers associated with such practices.<sup>26</sup> Thus, throughout the eighteenth century the concept of consumer protection meant at least (a) to protect themselves from excessively high prices of primary products, and (b) to protect themselves from shortage measures.

However, in the nineteenth century, advocates of laissez-faire strongly called for the rise of the principle of "caveat emptor". They believed that everyone should take care of their own safety when buying defective goods and no one should be blamed because it was fair and he had the freedom to choose. However, due to the increase in the number of goods that the buyer could not easily inspect, the courts began to limit the principle of "caveat emptor". The courts began to imply terms into contracts, especially contracts for the sale of goods, to ensure that the buyer was getting a fair deal, for example, requiring that the goods be fit for their purpose. In 1893, the first Sale of Goods Act was passed, codifying the existing case law. Most of the laws protecting consumers are embodied in this act.

However, by the 20th century, it became clear that the 1893 Act was not effective enough and that more drastic action was needed. With the advent of industrialization and modernization came the emergence of technologically complex goods and services, such as packaged foods, which consumers could not easily inspect before purchasing. Businesses became wealthier and more powerful than their customers, which also meant that they had access to excellent lawyers, and as courts were quick to find terms implied in contracts, businesses also found ways to draft contracts that exempted themselves from liability. As a result, legislatures in most countries, such as the UK and the US, began to intervene in consumer contracts, passing a series of acts designed to protect the interests of consumers. This intervention departed from the traditional view that parties to a contract should negotiate for themselves to get the best deal, and also acknowledged that in many cases, ordinary consumers would enter into contracts with large, powerful organizations and had virtually no power to negotiate a favorable deal, and sometimes even no power to negotiate a fair deal.

Thus, while the earliest forms of consumer protection were designed to discourage deceptive trading practices and protect consumers from danger, today the main rationale for intervention on behalf of consumers is that the nature of modern markets makes it impossible for consumers to make prudent shopping decisions. Thus, as Harvey points out, the paternalism that legislation provides for consumer protection is often justified in modern times by the idea of unequal bargaining power between consumers and suppliers.

According to Mubiana (2022), consumer protection is linked to the idea that consumers have rights by virtue of being consumers, and to the formation of consumer organizations which help consumers make better choices in the market place. The term 'consumer rights' has been part of business literature since it was employed by the United States' President J. F. Kennedy in his address to the United States Congress held on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 1962 (Mayer, 2012). In that speech the US' President named four basic rights of consumers namely the right to safety, right to be informed, right to choose and right to be heard (Cordray, 2020).

#### **The right to safety**

The purpose of asserting this right is to protect consumers from harm caused by products other than automobiles, and means that if used as prescribed, a product should not cause harm to its user. In 1972, the U.S. federal government further formalized this right through the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). The organization has jurisdiction over thousands of commercial products and has the power to set performance standards and require products to have testing and warning labels (Cordray, 2020).

#### **The right to be informed**

This right to know states that businesses should always provide consumers with sufficient appropriate information to make informed and informed product choices (Cordray, 2020). The product information provided by the company should always be complete, true and appropriate. The right to information is protected by a number of pieces of legislation passed between 1960 and 1980 in order to prevent misleading information in the areas of financing, advertising, labeling and packaging.

#### **The right to choose**

The right to free choice stipulates that consumers should have a variety of options from different companies to choose from.

#### **The right to be heard**

This right enables consumers to express complaints and concerns about products so that issues are dealt with effectively and quickly.

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<sup>26</sup> Mubiana, Mubiana. "Consumer contracts under the Zambian Law: Does the legislation Provide Adequate Consumer Protection." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 6, no. 4 (2022): 179-196.

From the original four rights, there are now many more. For example, President Gerald Ford provided new stimulus measures in the 1970s, and by the end of the decade, four more entitlements were added to the IOCU (Berger, 2013). In 1985, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted eight consumer rights as the basis for consumer protection guidelines. The eight principles developed by Consumers International (2009) have gradually gained international recognition and acceptance. These rights have been accepted around the world. Understanding these rights helps us protect ourselves from unfair practices by traders, manufacturers and service providers. However, it is important to note that while these rights are accepted worldwide, not all of them are legal in developing countries such as Zambia. The development of global consumer protection legislation is influenced by legal, historical, economic and social factors.<sup>27</sup>

After discussing the development and need for consumer protection, it is important to define the term. In an attempt to define consumer protection, Mickleburgh<sup>28</sup> asserts that 'the expression "consumer protection" has not yet achieved the full status of a term of art'. From another viewpoint "consumer protection" may be regarded as "those measures which contribute, directly or indirectly, to the consumer's assurance that he/she will buy goods of suitable quality appropriate to his/her purpose; that they will give him/her reasonable use, and that if he/she has a just complaint, there will be means of redress".<sup>29</sup>

As can be seen from the above definition, the purpose of consumer protection is to allow consumers to receive fair and satisfactory treatment despite the many problems they face. Consumer protection is critical to ensuring consumers are not exploited and have access to safe, quality goods and services. Consumer protection, also known as "consumerism" or "consumer activism", describes the activities of various role actors to protect the fundamental rights of consumers. According to Mubiana, consumer protection is a form of government regulation aimed at protecting the interests of consumers, as well as all activities of consumer organizations aimed at ensuring the protection and enforcement of consumer rights in the market through advocacy and consumer education.

#### 2.4. The Concept of fundamental human rights

Human rights can be seen as primarily ethical demands. Therefore, they fall within the natural law paradigm. One may ask a question "Why are human rights important? Since declarations ethical affirmations of the need to pay appropriate significance of freedoms incorporated in the formulation (as was discussed in the last section), an appropriate be the importance of freedoms of human beings Note that while rights involve claims (specifically, are in a position to make a difference), freedoms, in mainly descriptive characteristics of the condition of the person<sup>30</sup>.

Human rights are not principally "legal," "proto-legal" or "ideal-legal" commands. Even though human rights can, and often do, inspire legislation, this is a further fact, rather than a constitutive characteristic of human rights. The importance of human rights relates to the significance of the freedoms that form the subject matter of these rights. Both the opportunity aspect and the process aspect of freedoms can figure in human rights. To qualify as the basis of human rights, the freedoms to be defended or advanced must satisfy some "threshold conditions" of (i) special importance and (ii) social influence ability. Human rights are a set of rights and freedom<sup>31</sup>, which is intrinsic to human being. Therefore, society, especially the state, should protect it and design protection mechanisms in implementation measures and rules. In fact, basic human rights include the concept that everyone has certain rights by virtue of being a human being.<sup>32</sup>

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### 3. Conclusion

This article has examined the conceptual, normative, and regulatory dimensions of consumer protection and unfair trade practices in Zambia. It is evident that while Zambia has adopted progressive statutory frameworks such as the Competition and Consumer Protection Act (2010), their practical efficacy remains undermined by insufficient enforcement, underreporting of consumer grievances, and a dearth of consumer rights awareness. Furthermore, the historical and philosophical legacy of consumer protection—tracing back to customary norms and transitioning through colonial ordinances to post-independence statutes—reflects both continuity and disruption in the normative architecture of consumer law.

Unfair trade practices are no longer isolated instances of misconduct but systemic features of commercial life that disproportionately affect the economically vulnerable. The conceptualisation of consumer rights as fundamental human rights, rather than mere statutory conveniences, repositions consumer protection within the broader framework of legal entitlements, dignity, and access to justice. Moreover, the study reveals that the behavioural disposition of consumers—

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<sup>27</sup> Scott, Tshepiso. "The Realisation of Rights in Terms of the Consumer Protection Act 68 of 2008." *Unpublished LLD dissertation. University of South Africa* (2018).

<sup>28</sup> Mickleburgh, John. *Consumer protection*. Vol. 215. Professional Books, 1979.

<sup>29</sup> Dlamini, Eugene Majahemphini. "Consumer protection in Swaziland: a comparative analysis of the law in South Africa and the United Kingdom." PhD diss., 2012.

<sup>30</sup> However, the ethical force of freedoms can help to generate different aspects of the "entanglements" between descriptive and Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact / Value Dichotomy and Mass.*: Harvard University Press, 2002). See also William Van Orman Of Empiricism," in his *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, Press, 1961), pp. 20-46, and Vivian Walsh, "Philosophy and Economics," *grave: A Dictionary of Economics*, ed. John Eatwell, Murray Milgate (London: Macmillan, 1987),

<sup>31</sup> Rosenbroum, A. S. (1980). *The Philosophy of Homan Rights*. USA: Greenwood Press.

<sup>32</sup> Sharifi, T. K. H. (2001). *The Human Rights, Theories & Procedures*. Political Law Faculty, Tehran University.

whether to complain, remain silent, or exit—must be understood in the context of subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and prior experience.

Ultimately, the consumer protection regime in Zambia requires not only legislative reform but also a paradigmatic shift in enforcement philosophy. This shift must integrate a behavioural model of regulation, robust institutional accountability, and a deliberate alignment with international best practices. The regulatory agenda must thus embrace a dual commitment: first, to the rule of law as

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflicting interests

### **Funding**

This study did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or nonprofit sectors.

### **Ethical considerations**

The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

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