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When The Whole World is Listening – An Exploratory Investigation of Individual Complaints on Social Media Platforms

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1. Social Media Complaints – Navigate Through Unknown Terrain

Social media offer consumers a public stage to voice their dissatisfaction to a global audience. Negative service experiences can therefore go viral in the twinkling of an eye. Hence, they can seriously damage a company's reputation (States 2009). Consumers use social media platforms with little or no physical and mental costs to interact with firms and talk about companies with other users on a daily basis (Fischer/Langner 2008; van Noort/Willemsen 2012). Due to the increasing prevalence of fast Internet access, smartphones, and the public nature of communication in the social web, conversations can occur beyond geographic constraints (Kane et al. 2009; Boyd et al. 2010).

This increased publicity ultimately results in a power shift from the firm to its customers, which has substantial implications on complaint management. Service providers need to rise to this significant challenge. However, many firms that engage in social media activities do not know how to best navigate in this highly dynamic environment (Mittelstanddirekt 2011; Reischauer 2011) and ignore or underestimate inherent risks – often due to a lack of understanding (Kaplan/Hänlein 2010; McCann 2010).

One company that has already experienced the extreme pressure of social media is United Airlines. Dave Carroll, a musician whose guitar was broken on a flight with United Airlines, recorded a song to vent his anger and uploaded it on YouTube. His song quickly attracted thousands of views and inflicted considerable damage on United's image and stock prices (Ayres 2009). Another company that had to face a homemade PR crisis due to a single social media complaint is T-Mobile Netherlands. After his son had experienced months of trouble with T-Mobile's customer service, the famous Dutch comedian Youp Van't Hek complained about T-Mobile on Twitter and started a public debate on bad customer service. His crusade even spread to neighboring Belgium, where the public debate eventually caused leading Belgian companies to sign a charter to limit waiting time in contact centers (Indigne 2011).

Even though consumers nowadays increasingly use social media to complain (Fishburn Hedges/Echo Research 2012), no academic study could be identified that investigates complaints on influential social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. To date, academic research has mainly concentrated on complaint behavior and complaint management in an offline context. Researchers have, however, investigated some aspects of online complaint management such as customers' perceptions of company responses to emailed complaints (Strauss/Hill 2001), or the different types of electronic service failures leading to online complaint behavior (Cho et al. 2003). In addition, several researchers have analyzed complaints and negative word-of-mouth on various social media platforms, such as specific complaint websites, corporate and private blogs, third-party

product review websites, and in feedback forums of online retailers (Harrison-Walker 2001; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Lee/Lee 2006; Burton/Khammash 2010; van Noort/Willemsen 2011). The customers' motivation to articulate complaints on social media platforms, the different types of complaints, and the effectiveness of corporate responses, however, remain mostly unknown both to practitioners and scholars (Culnan et al. 2010; McCann 2010; Hoffman 2011). This study addresses this apparent gap in literature by providing a deeper understanding of the specific characteristics of social media complaints and deducing best practice solutions on how to successfully react to these complaints. Therefore, the aim of this study is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social media complaints by answering the following *research questions*:

- (1) Can social media complaints be classified along the established consumer complaint behavior schemes?
- (2) To what extent are social media complaints distinct from other complaint types?
- (3) What are the drivers of successful social media complaint handling for service firms?

To answer these questions, we first review current literature concerning offline and online consumer complaint behavior along the three phases of the life cycle of complaints (i.e. service failure, customer complaints, and corporate responses; Best/Andreasen 1977). In doing so, we propose a new taxonomy of complaints to better account for the specifics of social media. These results are supplemented by a qualitative netnography of complaints on corporate Facebook brand pages. Ultimately, distinct drivers of successful complaint handling are presented and limitations as well as implications for further research are discussed.

2. Customer Voice and Complaint Management

2.1 Service Failures and Online Complaints

Based on an examination of complaint processes, Best and Andreasen (1977) postulate that complaints usually run through a specific *life cycle*: First, a customer experiences a service failure. Second, the customer lodges a complaint. Third, the customer is recompensed by the company. If the compensation meets the customer's expectations, the complaint process is terminated. The life cycle restarts if the customer is dissatisfied with the solution offered.

There are several *classification schemes of service failures* in the literature. For example, service failures can be differentiated according to their process and outcome orientation. The process dimension refers to how the service is delivered such as the attentiveness of front-line staff during hotel check-in. In contrast, the outcome dimension refers to failures in the core service itself and hence to what the customer receives as a result of the

service delivery process (Parasuraman et al. 1991; Keaveney 1995; Smith et al. 1999). In addition, service failures can also be categorized at a more granular level. Bitner et al. (1990), for instance, identify three types of service failures related to the behavior of frontline employees: (1) the refusal or inability of employees to respond to customer needs, (2) the unprompted and unsolicited behavior of employees, and (3) the inability of employees to manage core service failures. Technological problems and other customers can also cause service failures (Grove/Fisk 1997; Meuter et al. 2000).

A review of the complaint management literature indicates that *online complaints* are caused by both failures in the outcome dimension as well as failures in the process dimension, such as core service failures, customer-employee interactions, technological problems, problems due to other customers, or specific e-commerce related problems (Harrison-Walker 2001; Grégoire et al. 2009). In general, these causes are not mutually exclusive. Oftentimes, complainants are dissatisfied with more than one facet of the service (Broadbridge/Marshall 1995). Hence, a single complaint can advert to several service failures at once.

2.2 A New Taxonomy of Consumer Complaint Behavior

Traditionally, literature on consumer complaint behavior differentiates three *types of customer responses* that are being used to actively cope with dissatisfactory service encounters: private complaints, direct complaints, and third-party public complaints (Day et al. 1981; Singh 1988; Bolting 1989; Cornwell/Bligh 1991). First, private complaints include word-of-mouth as well as switching behavior. They remain obscure to the service provider. Second, direct complaints, by contrast, refer to complaints that consumers directly lodge with the provider. Per definition, these complaints depict a one-to-one communication exclusively between the complainant and the service provider. Researchers debate whether direct complaints should be considered private or public (Singh 1988; Harrison-Walker 2001). On the one hand, direct complaint actions are private because they are not publicly accessible. On the other hand, they can be considered public because of the professional relationship between customer and service provider. Last, third-party public complaint action encompass complaints that are publicly aired via third parties such as media or customer associations, but can also refer to legal actions initiated by attorneys.

Social media complaints, however, do not fit traditional taxonomies of consumer complaint behavior. First, even if a social media complaint is addressed directly to the service provider, e.g., by posting on the company's Facebook brand page or using the company's Twitter hashtag, it cannot be subsumed under direct complaints. This is because even social media complaints are always public to some extent. Other users cannot be excluded from the complaint dialogue, which contravenes the notion that direct complaints exclusively pertain to the dissatisfied customer and the respective service provider. Second, social media complaints can also be considered public complaint actions if

they are not directly addressed to the service provider and thus – at least to some extent – remain hidden.

The result of the publicity that characterizes social media complaints is an entanglement of direct complaints and public negative word-of-mouth, which is inherent to all types of social media complaints. Accordingly, there has been little differentiation in literature between *social media complaints* and *electronic word-of-mouth*, which neglects social media as an increasingly important vehicle for direct complaints. For example, Breitsohl et al. (2010) consider online complaints in the form of negative reviews as potential triggers for electronic word-of-mouth activities, arguing that other users can follow the dialog between a complainant and the service provider and possibly spread the word about it. For that reason, researchers consider protest websites, online complaint forums, tweets, and microblogs as vehicles for electronic word-of-mouth (Harrison-Walker 2001; Sen/Lerman 2007; Jansen et al. 2009).

The magnitude of this entanglement between social media complaints and negative electronic word-of-mouth on a company's reputation is self-evident. According to Ugander et al. (2011), a Facebook user with 100 friends has approximately 27.500 unique friends-of-friends all of who can potentially observe the user's posts. As a result, social media complaints can prove detrimental to a company's reputation.

In order to account for the specific characteristics of social media complaints, a *new taxonomy of complaints* is proposed, which incorporates the changes in consumer complaint behavior due to social media. This taxonomy distinguishes consumer complaint behavior into private as opposed to public and voiced as opposed to hidden complaints (see figure 1). Private complaints exclusively affect the customer, her close friends and family, and the service provider. Public complaints are accessible by a large number of people who do not necessarily belong to the complainant's primary group of friends and family. Voiced complaints are intended by the customer to be read by the company, whereas hidden complaints are primarily addressed to third parties, who are not directly involved in the service failure. Consequently, four distinct *types of consumer complaint behavior* can be identified:

- (1) *Privately voiced complaints* include all direct complaints to the service provider via private communication channels such as face-to-face, postal mail, e-mail or telephone.
- (2) *Privately hidden complaints* refer to all complaints that are not primarily intended to be noticed by the service provider and are not publicly accessible. This includes negative word-of-mouth to family and friends as well as switching and boycotting behaviors.
- (3) *Publicly hidden complaints* refer to all complaints uttered via third parties that are, however, not intended to be noticed by the service provider. This includes complaining to third parties such as consumer organizations, the media, or taking legal steps. Moreover, this also includes social media complaints that are posted on review websites, weblogs, private Facebook walls, etc.

(4) *Publicly voiced complaints* include all direct complaints to the service provider via public communication channels such as the provider’s Facebook brand page.

Social media complaints constitute the category publicly voiced complaints, amend the category publicly hidden complaints, and hence shift the importance to these forms of consumer complaint behavior, yet research on publicly voiced complaints is still in its infancy. Most research on consumer complaint behavior hitherto focuses on privately voiced and privately hidden complaints (e.g., Mattila/Wirtz 2004) and to a lesser extent also on publicly hidden complaints, i.e., negative electronic word-of-mouth (e.g., Harrison-Walker 2001). Thus, despite its increasing relevance, there are relatively few studies that examine consumer complaint behavior in social media, and those that do mostly investigate positive and negative reviews on consumer review websites but only peripherally discuss direct social media complaints to the service provider (Lee/Lee 2006; Sen/Lerman 2007; Chen et al. 2011). Gaining insight on publicly voiced complaints is more important than ever, considering the increasing number of Facebook brand pages.

	Private	Public
Voiced Complaint	<p>Privately Voiced Complaint</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct complaint to service provider via private channels (face-to-face, telephone, e-mail, postal mail, etc.). 	<p>Publicly Voiced Complaint</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct complaint to service provider via public channels (Facebook brand pages, twitter hashtags, etc.).
	I	IV
Hidden Complaint	<p>Privately Hidden Complaint</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private complaints to friends, family, colleagues, etc., not addressed to the service provider. • Switching brands/providers (exit) 	<p>Publicly Hidden Complaint</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public complaints via review websites, weblogs, Facebook walls, etc., not addressed to the service provider. • Third-party action (Better Business Bureau, government agency, Media, etc.)
	II	III

Figure 1: Taxonomy of complaints

2.3 Why Customers Complain

Research has shown that venting anger and frustration is the primary *complaint motive* for offline complaints (Alicke et al. 1992; Kowalski 2002; Robertson/Shaw 2009). Venting has also been shown to have a positive effect on post complaint customer satisfaction (Nyer 2000). Holloway and Beatty (2003) confirm the need of customers to express their feelings, but find the primary motive of complainants is to resolve the problem. The authors furthermore identify the wish to inform the company about their service problem, to prevent future service failures, to expose fraud, and to get a better understanding of the problem as complaint motives.

Dissatisfied customers often consider hidden social media complaints their last opportunity to draw attention to their complaint issue (Harrison-Walker 2001; Grégoire et al. 2009). Accordingly, many dissatisfied customers lodge publicly hidden complaints following a double-deviation, that is, these customers have experienced at least one dissatisfactory recovery attempt (Ward/Ostrom 2006; Tripp/Grégoire 2011). Moreover, Tripp and Grégoire (2011) claim that customers who complain publicly often bear exceptionally strong feelings of anger and betrayal against the service provider. These customers intend to provoke a chorus of outrage from other consumers by presenting their individual misfortune as representative for the company's behavior (Howard/Gengler 2001; Ward/Ostrom 2006).

2.4 Corporate Responses to Customer Complaints

Similar to service failures and complaints, research has analyzed and come forward with a *categorization of corporate responses*. These categorizations help to understand the options companies have when responding to complaints. For instance, Conlon and Murray (1996) categorize corporate responses to customer complaints into six response types: (1) no response, (2) apology, (3) excuse, (4) justification, (5) combination of apology and justification, and (6) request to return a product for evaluation. Naylor (2003) identifies several additional response types such as generic answers, which do not specifically address the problem, and defamation of customers. Oftentimes, firms respond using multiple response types (Conlon/Murray 1996).

Companies seem to be more willing to respond to customers who claim monetary compensation as opposed to customers who ask for an explanation or apology (Naylor 2003). This is surprising given the fact that customers are frequently satisfied if they receive a social compensation such as an apology or a sincere explanation (Folkes 1984; Conlon/Murray 1996; Davidow 2003). The importance of non-monetary compensations is not restricted to offline contexts but has also been confirmed for online contexts (Harrison-Walker 2001; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Ward/Ostrom 2006; Chen et al. 2011).

Effective complaint handling depends on various factors. While responsiveness and promptness are of importance in offline complaint handling (Conlon/Murray 1996;

Davidow 2003), they are paramount in online complaining (Strauss/Hill 2001). Research also indicates the value of signaling the company's willingness to interact with its customers (van Noort/Willemsen 2012). Communicating in a way that customers perceive as sympathetic and natural rather than profit-driven and mechanical is central (Searls/Weinberger 2001; Kelleher/Miller 2006). This includes personalized responses that specifically address the complainant's problem (Strauss/Hill 2001). Breitsohl et al. (2010) propose that the credibility of corporate responses is imperative in social media complaint handling, due to its public nature.

Restoring third-party users' trust in the service provider is an additional crucial challenge that comes with voiced social media complaints. Lee and Lee (2006) show that successful complaint handling can influence the initial trust of third-party observers as they can see how the service provider reacts to complaints. Breitsohl et al. (2010) furthermore suggest that corporate complaint responses might even induce higher levels of credibility than the original complaint. This however contradicts the assumption that users trust in user-generated content more than in firm-generated content (Cheong/Morrison 2008) and remains to be verified.

In summary, the *life cycle of complaints* (Best/Andreasen 1977), as implemented in current complaint management research, does not fully capture the characteristics inherent to social media complaint processes. Social media complaints do not end with the compensation of the dissatisfied customer as suggested by Best and Andreasen (1977). Companies need to account for reactions of other users in a social media context. In a public complaint context, the reaction of the complainant towards the corporate complaint handling efforts and towards possible interferences of third-party users also needs to be considered. Both the service provider and other users influence a complainant's behavior and attitudes and only when all parties involved perceive the complaint case as closed the life cycle is stopped. Hence, it is of utmost importance to fully comprehend the dynamics of social media complaints to be able to react appropriately and to be certain when no additional action is needed.

3. A Qualitative Investigation of Social Media Complaints

3.1 Methodology

We use netnography (Kozinets 2002) to address the lack of knowledge on voiced social media complaints. Netnography is an exploratory, qualitative research method. Qualitative research methods generally enable a thorough and deep understanding of new phenomena by providing rich insights that cannot be generated by confirmatory quantitative

research (Srška 2007). Drawing from the idea of traditional ethnography, netnography refers to the observation of actual online consumer postings and subsequent reactions in an unobtrusive, naturalistic setting (Kozinets 2002; Langer/Beckmann 2005). Although netnography was originally developed as a long-term approach to conduct research on closed virtual communities (Kozinets 1998), it can be easily adapted to a non-participatory approach (Gnambs/Batinic 2011). A non-participatory approach is appropriate in this research setting as the primary goal is to specifically analyze already existing social media complaint dialogues. The first three process steps of a netnography as suggested by Kozinets (2002) are valid for participatory and non-participatory approaches and comprise (1) deciding on a community to investigate, (2) transferring the data from the Internet to a practical data format, and (3) performing a qualitative content analysis to render reliable results. Due to the non-participatory approach and sole focus on publicly available data of this study, the last two steps (4 and 5) of Kozinets's (2002) procedure were partly omitted as it was deemed unnecessary to disclose the researcher to the online community and to ensure anonymity because of the public nature of social media. Hence, it is neither feasible to perform a member check in which the study's results are presented to the subjects whose comments have been examined.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

A pre-condition of netnography is that complaints and the evolving dialogues can be reliably monitored on a daily basis. Therefore, we chose to collect the data using Facebook brand pages, which are easily accessible and archive all user comments on a public wall. Moreover, Facebook brand pages enable companies to engage in a two-way communication with a multitude of users. Communication is not only initiated by the company, but also by users, who can set off discussions both with the company and other users (Sweetser/Lariscy 2008).

All data were collected between November 2011 and January 2012 on the official German Facebook brand pages of nine service providers from the financial, health insurance, and energy sector. The research was limited to German Facebook brand pages to ensure a reliable and valid interpretation of the data.

The netnography of social network complaints requires analyzing the textual discourse of the complainants with the accordant service provider and/or other users. A comprehensive understanding and command of the language used are preconditions to reliably detect undertones such as irony. This is even more important in social networks where members often use informal language. Unlike in face-to-face situations where complainants can openly express their emotions, they are restricted to using emoticons or descriptive vocabulary to convey their feelings (e.g., Cho et al. 2003). The data collection ultimately rendered 113 complaint dialogues and more than 110.000 words. The complaints were voiced by 46 female and 65 male users. No information could be attained on the age of the complainants. For an overview of the complaints per industry please refer to figure 2.

	Health Insurance			Financial Services			Energy Providers			Total
Company	Allianz	DAK	TK	Dt. Bank	Cortal Consors	HVB	RWE	EnBW	Lichtblick	
Complaints	21	10	28	31	6	2	5	6	4	113
Corporate Posts	34	17	32	70	96	26	58	30	35	398

Figure 2: Overview of complaints per industry and service provider

Facebook brand pages differ in the degree of interactivity depending on whether users are allowed to submit new posts on the wall (open brand page) or are only allowed to comment already existing posts (closed brand page). The complaints that are issued include 27 original complaint posts on open brand page walls and 86 complaint comments to other posts on both open and closed walls.

3.3 Coding Procedure

All complaints were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2008). A distinct challenge lay in identifying social network complaints. Many comments did not explicitly refer to a negative experience, but still conveyed criticism. These comments were coded as complaints as many users turned out to be angered if the service provider did not attend to the comment appropriately. A coding scheme was developed to ensure consistency. According to the scaling structuring technique (Mayring 2008) all deductive categories were revised and new categories that emerged from the data were added to the coding scheme. This led to an iterative mode of coding, which required going through already coded complaint cases as new insights emerged. A coding guideline was compiled which contains coding rules and definitions for each category. Coded categories include for example the complaint motive, the tone of voice, the corporate response type, etc.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Identifying Complaints

The dynamics of social media in combination with the potential harm of complaints that are not adequately identified and managed call for a careful evaluation of which comments contain complaint elements. Social network complaints are often short, written in an informal tone of voice, lack context, and thus convey ambiguous sentiments. The identification of social network complaints for this study has thus proven complex and required a very careful examination of the text. This confirms the results of Branthwaite and Patterson (2011), who posit that the human coding of textual user distributions in social media can at times be very difficult.

Consequently, seemingly harmless comments and posts can lead to further customer dissatisfaction if not adequately responded to. A multitude of user interactions were identified that did not explicitly refer to one or more service failures, but still carried an undertone of criticism. These comments and posts often triggered extreme negative reactions if not or not appropriately attended to. For example, one insured of a health company asked when it would be possible to access the online system of the company and was visibly annoyed about the insurance provider's answer:

User: From which point in time can one expect the old "BKK Gesundheit" customers to be integrated into the (online) system of the DAK, so that they too may be able to register with "DAKexclusiv" using their DAK data?

Insurance Provider: We are working intensively on the "fusion" of the DAKexclusiv-branch. As the colleagues say, the features shall be available to the members of "BKK Gesundheit" in May at the latest. So, we ask for a little patience and will pass on more information on this channel.

User: This is a bad joke! This sounds as though the fusion happened from one day to the next and now we're all in the cold water! To me as a "customer" this is a refusal to provide service. Then, at least, all forms etc. should be made available for the time of transition!

Oftentimes, critical comments were "hidden" within discussions that were originally centered on a seemingly unrelated topic. In general, four different *subtypes of comments* were identified that contained (latent) criticism and complaints: (1) comments to a corporate post, (2) comments to other users' comments or complaints, (3) comments to corporate reactions to third-party users' comments or complaints, and (4) comments to corporate reactions to a complainant's prior social media complaint. Accordingly, service providers need to consider all of the above when searching their brand pages for complaints.

Following the identification of the complaints the following section will examine the customer side of social media complaints. This section will thereby answer the following questions: Who typically complains via social networks? What are the causes that typically underlie these complaints? What motives do social media complainants pursue? And finally, what emotions do complainants experience during the complaint process?

4.2 The Customer Side of Social Media Complaints

4.2.1 The Complainant

The study reveals that complainants are not necessarily customers of the company. For example, a midwife complained about the compensation for her work on the Facebook brand page of a health insurance company:

User: “You have the opportunity to make more than one woman happy! If the compensation of the independent midwifery would be raised analogically to the increase of your liability premium over the last two years – as a contribution to the health of mother and child and to a good start for families!”

Complainants consequently also comprise former customers, media, non-governmental organizations, employees, competitors and other individual stakeholders that are affected by corporate policies or corporate behavior.

The majority of complainants voice their dissatisfaction outside of traditional business hours. Almost half of the complaints in this dataset were filed between 6 p.m. and 7 a.m. Users seem to be relatively inactive in the morning but activity picks up during lunchtime, in the afternoon, and, of course, on weekends. This is a major problem for companies considering that timeliness is one of the main drivers of post complaint satisfaction (Conlon/Murray 1996; Davidow 2003; Naylor 2003). What is more, companies that are not prepared to respond to complaints at all times may miss the opportunity to react to the one complaint that unleashes the dynamics of social media. Recently, Vodafone’s Facebook team in Germany, for example, responded inadequately to a complaint about erroneous bills on its brand page before packing up work for the weekend. Over the weekend thousands of users responded to the complainant’s initial post without a single response of the company (Scheer 2012). This example shows that it is crucial to adapt business hours to be able to monitor the brand page and respond to critical incidents at all times.

4.2.2 Causes of Social Network Complaints

70 out of 113 complaints (62 percent) were triggered by a *single service failure* (see figure 3). A single failure related to the provider's core service was the most prominent cause to file a complaint. This study furthermore reveals that social network complaints are also triggered by single failures in the fields of perceived corporate policy, customer-employee interaction, social media, technological problems, and the existence of other customers during the service encounter. Nevertheless, multiple service failures also play an important role. 36 (32 percent) of the complainants criticize multiple failures. Most multiple service failures were triggered by the social media presence of the company itself accompanied by technological problems or failures in user-employee interactions.

The large proportion of social network complaints following a single service failure seemingly contradicts the notion that, first, customers usually file publicly hidden complaints following a double-deviation (Ward/Ostrom 2006; Tripp/Grégoire 2011), second, that these customers often bear exceptionally strong feelings of anger and betrayal against the service provide (Tripp/Grégoire 2011), and third, that customers believe social network complaints to be their last opportunity to draw attention to their issue (Harrison-Walker 2001; Grégoire et al. 2009). Unfortunately, our dataset only provides information on the number of preceding recovery attempts in 30 cases. Yet, 26 out of these 30 complaints were preceded by at least one failed recovery attempt. Although this figure does not allow drawing conclusions concerning the total share of dissatisfied customers that file social network complaints due to double deviations, this figure does

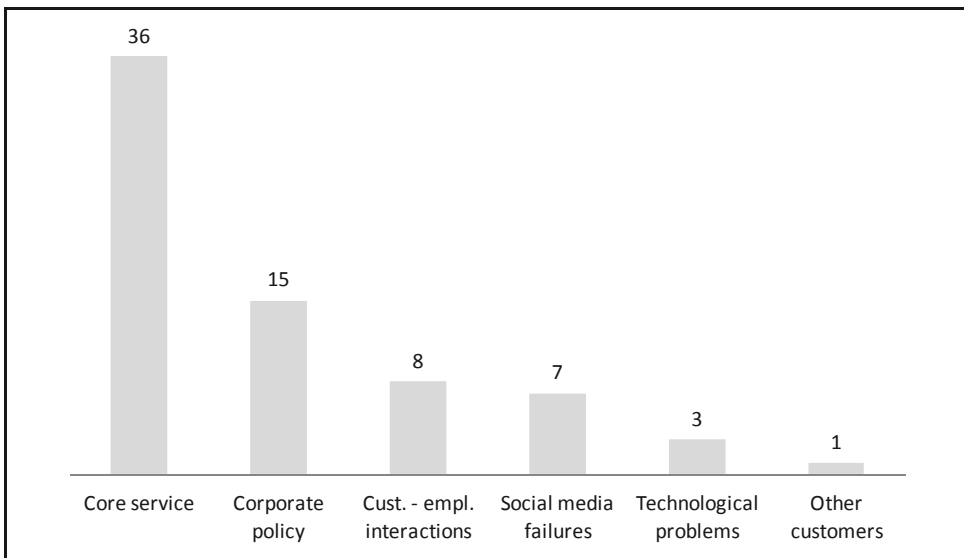


Figure 3: Types of single service failures that cause of social network complaints

show that double deviations cannot be neglected as a major reason to complain on Facebook brand pages. However, the large proportion of complaints triggered by a single service failure puts these numbers into perspective and indicates that a substantial number of complainants simply use social networks as their complaint channel of choice disregarding the exact circumstances of the service failure.

Accordingly, the study results furthermore indicate that complainants are well aware of the public nature of social network complaints, which they explicitly utilize to pressure service providers into responding to their complaint. For example, a customer simultaneously complained to a customer representative of her health insurance company and on Facebook to ensure that her problem is being attended to. This behavior seems to be especially common for complainants who have previously experienced a double-deviation when complaining via other channels. The study results confirm the assumption that complainants sometimes use social networking sites as a last means to enforce a reaction from the service provider by publicly pointing to the problems (Harrison-Walker 2001; Grégoire et al. 2009).

Additionally, the corporate social media presence itself often seems to be a source for vexation. A considerable amount of the recorded social network complaints were caused by failures associated with the corporate social media presence and not by process and outcome failures in conjunction with the actual products or services a company provides. The former comprise user-employee interactions on the brand page, the content of corporate posts, and – to a lesser extent - technical flaws in social media applications. For example, an insurance provider posted on its brand page the following:

Insurance provider: Imagine, your digs are on fire? What would you save? What would you leave behind? [...] Today is the first Sunday of Advent and the first candle is burning.

User: [...]... Seriously, how can someone ask such a stupid question? [...]

Insurance provider: Nobody wants a fire to happen in the first place. As mentioned above, there is a website that deals with this “stupid question”...

To make things worse, the data shows that failures due to the service provider’s social media presence often go hand in hand with failures in technology and user-employee interactions. By setting up a Facebook brand page, service providers establish a new, virtual servicescape (Bitner 1992) in which employees interact with users in order to create services and recover failures. Obviously, this new servicescape comes along with its own challenges, which the service provider needs to consider very carefully.

4.2.3 Underlying Motives and Emotions of Social Network Complaints

The evaluation of the *underlying motives of the complainants* reveals that the prevailing motive is to vent dissatisfaction, which is often combined with the wish to solve a prob-

lem or receive an answer to a probing question. Social compensation, such as an apology or a sincere explanation, plays a role in only about one fourth of the cases, monetary compensation in none. To motivate other users to join, to take revenge, to warn others, and to signal expertise do not evolve as sole reasons to complain, but become important in combination with other motives.

Social media obviously blurs the borders between remote and interactive communication channels, which is also reflected in the motives of social media complainants. Even though social media does not yet enable the full interactivity offered by telephone or face-to-face communication, it can be considered partly interactive due to the possibility of nearly real-time interaction and the fact that most complainants engage in a dialog with the provider. This ambiguity is mirrored in the motives of the complainants. On the one hand, the results seem to confirm Mattila and Wirtz (2004), who conclude that customers choose remote channels to vent their dissatisfaction, as the primary motive to complain via a social networking site is to vent anger. On the other hand, resolving a problem – a motive attributed to interactive channels by Mattila and Wirtz (2004) – is also important to many social media complainants. Service Providers thus need to be prepared to deal with dissatisfied users that simply want to vent their anger and users that seek a solution for their problem.

Although many complaints are information-oriented and contain a clear problem description they are often *emotionally charged*. Anger is the most prominent single emotion, followed by disappointment, and frustration. Complaints with multiple emotions almost always include anger. Consequently, the complaints' tone of voice is mostly informal, destructive, and scarcely includes emoticons. Complainants often stress their statements by lining up multiple punctuation marks or by using capital letters for parts of their complaint.

Generally, *feelings of injustice* were mostly expressed in failures concerning service encounters with direct employee-customer interaction. 31 out of the 82 complaints in which justice dimensions could be coded were solely triggered by perceived low distributive justice, which was usually related to the cost-performance ratio of the service, especially price increases. Perceived low interactional justice (18 complaints) and perceived low procedural justice (11 complaints) were less prominent as a single cause for a social media complaint. However, perceived low interactional justice became significant as a cause of social media complaints once multiple justice perceptions were affected, which was the case for 12 complaints. The fact that many social network complainants do not criticize actual face-to-face service encounters, shows that low interactional justice comprises more than just employee-customer interactions. Interactional justice additionally refers to the interactions between the company and its many other stakeholders, e.g., midwives in the case of the health insurance companies.

4.3 Strike Up a Discussion – Reactions to Social Media Complaints

Complaints on Facebook brand pages often evolve into dialogues with multiple comments. Generally, the discussants can be classified into (1) the service provider, who administers the brand page, (2) third-party users, such as other customers, competitors, media, and other stakeholders that have not been previously involved in the complaint, and (3) the complainant, who issued the complaint in the first place. Of course, not every complaint entails comments from all three types of discussants.

Service Providers responded to about half of the complaints identified and often did so within 24 hours. However, relatively few complaints were actually resolved satisfactorily by the company. Some complaints were referred to other channels to exchange confidential information, in which cases it could not be determined whether or not the complaint was solved.

Corporate answers usually specifically address the issue brought up by the complainant but otherwise most often consist of one of the following single response elements (see also: Conlon/Murray 1996; Naylor 2003): An excuse (not acknowledging any responsibility for the service failure), a justification (taking on responsibility, but denying a negative quality), or a postponement of the complaint solution. Responses that consist of multiple response elements mostly include postponement combined with other response types such as an apology or saying thank you. An apology is only issued in three complaint cases. This is remarkable given the fact that research has long shown that apologies or sincere explanations often suffice to recover customer satisfaction (Folkes 1984; Conlon/Murray 1996; Davidow 2003).

All service providers strive to display integrity by phrasing responses mostly fact-oriented, polite, and in a formal language style with correct grammar and orthography; emoticons are rarely used. However, a substantial number of responses either have a snappy or offended tone of voice. Most corporate responses are personalized by directly addressing the complainant by name or by generally addressing all users that complain about the same issue. A signature is only provided in about one third of the corporate responses. Moreover, there seems to be uncertainty on both sides whether or not to use the polite form.

Frequently, *third-party users* join a complaint dialogue to express their support for the complainant using both the comment and like functions in equal measure. Although third-party users usually agree with the complainant they hardly ever share the complainant's strong emotions like rage. Few third-party users side with the service provider. However, complaints that are voiced in a very informal and impolite tone of voice sometimes prompt third-party users to defend the service provider. An attitudinal or behavioral consequence of the complaint on third-party users is hardly ever observable.

Due to potential reactions of third-party users, a social media complaint cannot be shelved just because the service provider might consider a complaint settled. Third-party users often react to complaints with a time lag. Complaints frequently attract more than one third-party user reaction and sometimes trigger additional complaints by other customers at later times. These additional complaints usually concern similar topics as the original complaint. Consequently, seemingly dead complaint dialogues may always revive.

When receiving a corporate response the majority of the *complainants* respond by “liking” the corporate response or by posting another comment. A complaint dialog with more than three posts evolves fairly frequently. Most complainants respond on the same day. The complainants’ responses were both positive and negative, meaning that the complainants compliment and criticize the corporate response. Four complainant responses were characterized by a conflicting sentiment: On the one hand these complainants positively acknowledge their provider’s recovery efforts, but on the other hand they are dissatisfied with the outcome. Generally, the clear majority of complainants framed their reactions in a constructive way. The degree of consent of the complainants’ responses to the corporate recovery efforts is rather positive.

The analysis of the *complainants’ justice perceptions* concerning the corporate recovery efforts shows that only half of the corporate answers were perceived as fair, which is also reflected in the complainants’ post-recovery satisfaction. Perceptions of low interactional justice are most prevalent in complaints that involve only a single justice dimension. Perceptions of low procedural and distributive justice are more often considered in conjunction with other justice dimensions. A change in fairness perceptions from unfair to fair over the course of the complaint dialog could only be observed in one case.

5. Management Implications

This study has demonstrated that it is quintessential for companies with an official social media presence to develop extensive management guidelines to better control the communication surrounding their services. The results of this study indicate that it is not for the company to decide whether users accept a Facebook brand page as a pure marketing channel or whether they use it as a complaint channel as well. Service providers must therefore account and prepare for the fact that Facebook brand pages are an out- and in-bound communication and complaint channel.

Four *drivers of effective complaint handling* can be deduced from the data that help to manage this new service environment successfully (see figure 4): (1) Willingness to interact, (2) transparency, (3) authenticity and credibility, and (4) human voice and human touch. These drivers are interdependent as they can both positively and negatively influence each other.



Figure 4: Effective social media complaint handling

The first driver of successful complaint handling is *willingness to interact*. The study shows that dissatisfied users are not put off by closed walls, which allow only comments to corporate posts. In fact, closed walls seem to generate about the same amount of complaints as open walls. Nevertheless, the data also shows that closed walls generate user reactance. Service providers should therefore embrace two-way communication through social media by letting users publish their own posts. In doing so, complaint comments that have no reference to the original corporate post are avoided. Additionally, every unanswered complaint has the potential to publicly escalate. The data provides evidence that users whose complaints remain unanswered easily get frustrated and publicly remind the service provider to answer their complaint or continue to re-post the same complaint.

Transparency constitutes the second driver of successful complaint handling. Third-party users are interested in the outcome of corporate complaint handling efforts. In some cases, service providers refer complainants to other channels to avoid having to publicly discuss a complaint via Facebook. However, users perceive this behavior to be intransparent and suspicious. Instead, companies should publicly disclose their recovery

efforts and provide an adequate explanation if complaints have to be transferred to other channels due to privacy concerns to avoid mistrust among the other users.

Authenticity and credibility of a provider's social media actions constitute the third driver of successful complaint handling. The study indicates that, as soon as users perceive a misfit between the image that the company tries to convey and its actual behavior, complaints are triggered. This happened, for example, to the Deutsche Bank: Users considered a corporate post about a corporate social responsibility activity (AIDS fundraiser) of the Deutsche Bank as hypocritical and implausible in light of a prior food commodity speculation scandal in which the bank was involved and which many users assume to have aggravated the famine in developmental countries. To avoid triggering complaints, service providers need to be perceived as fair players with integrity and need to behave in a way that corresponds to the image they communicate.

Framing corporate responses with a *human voice and human touch* is the fourth success driver that is deduced from the data. When social media complainants perceive that they are taken seriously, they are more likely to be satisfied and to subsequently voice their satisfaction publicly by thanking the service provider. Hence, companies can convert the negative word-of-mouth that accompanies a social media complaint into a success story and thereby improve the company's image among third-party users. The results provide support that service providers need to pursue a proactive response strategy and carefully word their answers to entice complainants to publicly provide positive feedback. Formal pre-defined text modules are not advisable as they convey emotional distance. Instead, corporate answers should be framed to contain human voice by addressing the customer by name and by providing a signature with the full name of the employee. Acting in an empathic way by apologizing for the perceived failure and admitting mistakes demonstrates that the service provider is able to constructively accept criticism.

6. Conclusion

The study results confirm the notion that social media must be considered a relevant complaint channel. Although the volume of the complaints observed in this study varied across industries and service providers, social media complaints do not seem to be exceptions. More and more customers appear to take advantage of the two-way dynamics and high accessibility of social media by voicing their dissatisfaction on Facebook brand pages. The importance of social media as a complaint channel is also substantiated by the fact that – where observable – more than half of the complainants chose to voice their dissatisfaction first via social networks. Hence, social networks can be a tool to encourage customer voice as it reduces perceived costs of complaining for the customer and offers the service provider the chance to demonstrate customer orientation. If effectively managed, social networks can thus be a piece in the jigsaw puzzle of consumer complaint handling.

This study has shown that complaints on social networking sites cannot be classified along the established consumer complaint behavior schemes. Hence, a new taxonomy of consumer complaint behavior was proposed that incorporates these distinct characteristics of social network complaints. Based on this taxonomy, the netnography has revealed that social network complaints differ from “traditional” offline and online complaint channels in various ways. First, social network complaints are always public to some extent, which frequently results in a complaint dialogue under the observation and participation of third-party users. This complaint dialogue often extends beyond the recovery or compensation of the original complainant and thus needs to be carefully monitored by the service provider. Second, social networking sites combine the advantages of remote channels, which allow for a greater control of what is said (O’Sullivan 2000), and interactive channels, which enable real-time discussions and convey more information (Hong/Lee 2005). Third, complainants do not necessarily have to be dissatisfied customers but may be any other kind of stakeholder, who wishes to express his opinion. This complicates social network complaint handling as it potentially commingles the scope of duties of public relations and complaint management within one company. Fourth, even though customers are obviously aware of the power they have due to the publicity a social network provides, customers do not exclusively utilize this advantage to penalize the service provider. Besides venting anger and dissatisfaction, many customers use social networks to achieve a problem solution.

This study fills a void in the service management literature and contributes to a preliminary understanding of complaints on social media platforms, specifically on Facebook brand pages. The results can be considered groundwork for future qualitative triangulations and quantitative examinations and can serve as starting point for future research. The results point to a variety of other potential research topics: The role and motivation of third-party users, for example, evolves as an interesting research field. The tone of voice and human touch of corporate responses seem to be very important for the post-complaint satisfaction. More research is needed to generate specific insights as to which types of corporate responses lead to an increased post-complaint satisfaction levels. In addition, it is still unknown whether social media complaint handling needs different strategies on a cross-cultural as well as a cross-sectional level.

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