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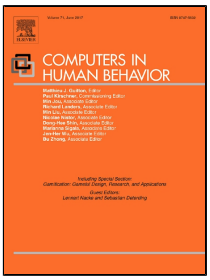

Complaint handling on social media: the impact of multiple response times on consumer satisfaction

Doga Istanbulluoglu

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Title Page

Title: Complaint handling on social media: the impact of multiple response times on consumer satisfaction

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Abstract

With the increasing popularity of social media, understanding online consumer behaviors is becoming increasingly important for researchers in this field and practitioners who manage social media accounts. The focus of this study is one of the critical aspects of online complaint handling: response time. Using data collected from consumers who complained on Facebook or Twitter, the study explores how the response times of multiple company responses on social media influence consumer satisfaction. Specifically, the first response after the complaint and the conclusive response that closed the complaint file were investigated in regard to consumers' objectives for complaining. Participants in the study stated that they expected companies to reply to their complaints within 1-3 hours on Twitter and within 3-6 hours on Facebook. The analysis reveals that both a quicker first response and a quicker conclusive response lead to higher satisfaction with complaint handling. Furthermore, in contrast to previous research on response time in offline redress-seeking situations, which has suggested that when consumers receive redress, response time does not have an effect on satisfaction, the findings of this study suggest that a speedy response increases satisfaction regardless of the consumers' objectives. These findings provide implications for researchers and practitioners.

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Complaint handling on social media: the impact of multiple response times on consumer satisfaction

Highlights:

- The paper explores how the complaint response time on social media influences consumer satisfaction with complaint handling.
- Consumers expect companies to reply to their complaints within 1-3 hours on Twitter and within 3-6 hours on Facebook.
- Both quicker first response and quicker conclusive response lead to higher satisfaction with complaint handling.
- Consumers now expect quicker responses even when the company provides redress.

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Complaint handling on social media: the impact of multiple response times on consumer satisfaction

Abstract

With the increasing popularity of social media, understanding online consumer behaviors is becoming increasingly important for researchers in this field and practitioners who manage social media accounts. The focus of this study is one of the critical aspects of online complaint handling: response time. Using data collected from consumers who complained on Facebook or Twitter, the study explores how the response times of multiple company responses on social media influence consumer satisfaction. Specifically, the first response after the complaint and the conclusive response that closed the complaint file were investigated in regard to consumers' objectives for complaining. Participants in the study stated that they expected companies to reply to their complaints within 1-3 hours on Twitter and within 3-6 hours on Facebook. The analysis reveals that both a quicker first response and a quicker conclusive response lead to higher satisfaction with complaint handling. Furthermore, in contrast to previous research on response time in offline redress-seeking situations, which has suggested that when consumers receive redress, response time does not have an effect on satisfaction, the findings of this study suggest that a speedy response increases satisfaction regardless of the consumers' objectives. These findings provide implications for researchers and practitioners.

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1. Introduction

Dissatisfaction with products and services creates consumer complaining behavior, which may become detrimental for companies and requires company attention. It is known that consumers disseminate negative content to more recipients and for a longer period of time than they do positive content (Hornik *et al.*, 2015). Poor complaint handling can lead to the loss of existing customers, create negative word-of-mouth and negatively influence the reputation of the company (Bitner *et al.*, 1990; Keaveney, 1995; Tax *et al.*, 1998). While existing studies of consumer complaint handling illustrate the importance of this area, the movement of complaining behavior from offline (and therefore shielded from other consumers) to online (and evident to other consumers) requires investigation of this phenomenon with a fresh perspective. This will enable theories of complaint handling to be updated to account for the prevalence of this more public nature of complaining and, as such, progress theory as well as offering strong managerial insights.

People spend more time on the Internet and social media than ever before. In the UK, Internet usage more than doubled between 2006 and 2014 (ONS, 2014), and in the US, total digital media spend on computers, smartphones and tablets increased by 157% between 2010 and 2014 (comScore, 2015). The most widespread and popular social media site, Facebook, is also the second most visited website globally, with more than 1.86 billion monthly active users (Alexa, 2016; Facebook, 2017). Social media is used for personal communication and entertainment, as well as utilitarian gratifications such as immediate access to services (Xu *et al.*, 2012). Interaction between companies and consumers on social media provides a broad range of benefits to both consumers and organizations (Canhoto and Clark, 2013). One third

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of social media users follow brands on social media, and Facebook, followed by Twitter, is the top social media channel on which brands are followed (Edison Research, 2014).

The major social media channels, Facebook and Twitter, are now used extensively for customer complaints (Dekay, 2012; Einwiller and Steilen, 2015). According to research by Ombudsman Services (2015), the number of complaints made in the UK almost doubled from 2013 to 2014, and among those who complained, 31% used social media to do so. As a relatively novel channel for consumer complaining, social media offers new opportunities for consumers to communicate their complaints to companies, while creating new challenges for the companies to respond to these. Previous research has addressed several aspects of online complaining behavior and complaint handling, including: (1) influence of volume and valence of online reviews on purchase intentions (e.g. Sun, 2012; Jiménez and Mendoza, 2013), (2) antecedents and consequences of online word-of-mouth (e.g. Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Verhagen *et al.*, 2013), (3) online boycott behavior (e.g. Makarem and Jae, 2016) and (4) designing strategies to handle online complaints (e.g. Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012; Einwiller and Steilen, 2015). This paper will contribute to this discussion by revisiting the issue of response time following an online complaint. As a communication channel, social media is known to be fast-paced and dynamic, which affects consumers' expectations of complaint handling (e.g. Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014). Research on consumer complaining in offline situations shows that consumers' satisfaction with complaint handling is affected by the time taken by companies to respond to the complaint (Conlon and Murray, 1996; Smith *et al.*, 1999). Furthermore, satisfaction with problem handling is found to be directly related to the response time after an online complaint (Mattila and Mount, 2003). This study builds upon previous research by exploring the response times of multiple replies on social media and the relationship between these and satisfaction with the complaint handling. It is anticipated that

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the findings of this study will aid companies in understanding complaining consumers' expectations and help to define company policies on online complaint-handling situations.

Using data collected from consumers who have previously complained on social media, this paper contributes to the marketing literature by exploring how the complaint response time on social media influences consumer satisfaction through three distinctive contributions. Firstly, the study shows how social media as a dynamic platform for consumer complaining shapes consumer expectations regarding the way in which communication with companies takes place. This will help practitioners such as customer services departments and social media managers, as they need to understand consumers' expectations when they design strategies to deal with consumer complaints. Secondly, this study identifies the influence of first and conclusive response times on satisfaction with complaint handling on social media. Previous research has shown that consumers' satisfaction is directly related to the company's response time (Davidow, 2000; Mattila and Mount, 2003). However, on social media it is now easy and convenient to reply to consumers multiple times, and it is not known how the response time for these multiple responses influences satisfaction with complaint handling. By addressing this gap, this research expands on the understanding of the influence of multiple responses on social media and at the same time aims to help practitioners who implement policies on replying to consumer complaints. Finally, it identifies the influence of response time on satisfaction based on the objective for complaining (i.e. redress seeking and public complaining). Response time is known to influence consumers differently when redress is involved (Gilly and Gelb, 1982; Clark *et al.*, 1992), and this research sheds light on how complaining consumers with different objectives are influenced by first and conclusive response times on social media.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. It begins with a review of research which has investigated offline and online complaint handling and response time. This is followed by a

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description of the methodology, and the results of the study are presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Complaint handling and response time

Complaint handling as a term refers to the strategies companies use to resolve service failures in order to manage consumers' post-purchase dissatisfaction (Tax *et al.*, 1998). Bitner *et al.* (1990) suggest that while these failures are initially problems for companies, the way in which employees respond to these failures will determine how the consumer will remember the incident. Appropriate complaint handling might provide an opportunity for companies to not only correct the problem, but also transform it into a satisfactory encounter. Successful complaint handling increases the chances of repurchase behavior and positive word-of-mouth from previously unsatisfied customers (Blodgett and Anderson, 2000; Orsingher *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, when consumers believe that the company made a large effort to solve the problem after their complaint, post-purchase customer satisfaction increases, which then demonstrates a higher impact on customer engagement (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2015a). Eventually, complaint-handling strategies can lower marketing expenditure by reducing the cost of obtaining new customers (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987). On the other hand, when complaint handling is ineffective, there is a high risk of losing even customers who have been satisfied in the past (Homburg and Fürst, 2005). When a company's attempt to solve the initial problem is also not successful, consumers feel disappointed twice (Bitner *et al.*, 1990). This can cause 'double deviation', which refers to a situation where the company fails to provide satisfying service in the first place and then fails again to address the issue in a satisfying manner (Bitner *et al.*, 1990). Hence, effective and successful complaint management will enable companies to maintain customer satisfaction in a number of ways, including providing efficient customer feedback, reducing negative word-of-mouth, increasing loyalty and retaining customers. Nevertheless, companies cannot always satisfy

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complaining consumers, for reasons such as limited availability of people and financial resources, or can do so only with a delay because of complicated structures for processing, routing and monitoring consumer complaints (Ryngelblum *et al.*, 2013).

Consumers can have various objectives when they complain. These can be grouped into public or private complaining actions: public complaining activities involve consumers' actions that are visible by the company, such as redress seeking or venting to third-party channels, and private activities are those limited to friends and family, such as warnings (Day and Landon, 1977; Day *et al.*, 1981). When consumers engage in public complaining activities, they expect to see that the company is responsive toward their complaint and aims to solve the problem (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012). Therefore, the responsiveness of the company is a central element of complaint handling in the eyes of consumers (Matzler *et al.*, 2005). Davidow (2003) identifies six dimensions of responsiveness: timeliness, redress, apology, credibility, attentiveness and facilitation. These six dimensions should be considered when companies design complaint-handling services to satisfy complaining customers. Traditionally, timeliness is identified as response time, which is the time that passes from the date a complaint is received to the date the complaint file is closed (Gilly and Gelb, 1982). Since response time is one of the factors that is perceived by consumers as controllable, it is judged more harshly (Kelley *et al.*, 1993). As a result, it is known to be the key to post-complaint satisfaction (Blodgett *et al.*, 1997; Tax *et al.*, 1998).

A quick and positive response to consumer complaining improves a company's image and increases consumers' loyalty (Clark *et al.*, 1992), but it also has a stronger influence on overall complaint satisfaction than other factors that influence satisfaction (Stauss, 2002). Speedy responses provide both economic and social benefits (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2015b). They help economically by ensuring that consumers save time and additional economic resources, and they provide social benefits by highlighting that the company cares about their

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consumers and is attentive. Even when monetary compensation is offered as part of complaint handling, an immediate response usually has a stronger recovery effect than delayed monetary compensation (Roschk and Gelbrich, 2014). In the B2B context, it has been found that 'taking quick action' is one of the most important attributes of complaint resolution management, which highlights the importance of quickly addressing the issue, analyzing the problem and reaching a resolution (Henneberg *et al.*, 2009; Henneberg *et al.*, 2015). However, Gilly (1987) reports that response time has no effect on consumers' perceptions of company image, while Blodgett *et al.*(1997) find it does not affect repurchase intentions. One reason for such contradictory comments might be that the effect of response time is context-dependent, and consumers might have different expectations in different situations, which influence their perception of the response time (Davidow, 2003).

3. Online complaint handling and response time

Research shows that companies are more likely to respond to online complaints than traditional ones (Gulas and Larsen, 2012). The question arises as to how effective offline complaint-handling procedures become when they are transferred to online environments. Using defensive strategies as a response to such messages, for instance deleting or ignoring consumer complaints, has a more negative impact on consumers' evaluations of the company than employing accommodative strategies (i.e. putting the consumer's interests first) (Lee and Song, 2010). Einwiller and Steilen (2015) found that when large companies respond to consumer complaints on social media, they usually employ the following strategies: transferring the customer to another department or communication channel, or asking for further information. These strategies are not always appreciated, and are often interpreted by consumers as shunting (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015). Therefore, the current study investigates both the time passing until the *first response* from the company is received (i.e. how long it

takes to hear from the company) and also the time passing until a *conclusive response* that closes the complaint file is received (i.e. how long it takes to reach a solution).

Similarly to offline communication settings, receiving online responses more quickly has a positive impact on consumers' perceptions of the company and post-complaint satisfaction (Strauss and Hill, 2001; Sexton, 2015). Since social media is a dynamic platform which is open to the public, fast-paced and mostly synchronous, response time on social media is one of the crucial dimensions of complaint-handling strategies. In this context, it is more appropriate to define response time as the time passing from the point when the consumer posts the complaint to the point when a reply from the company is received. The reason for this is that even a short delay on social media can lead to significant problems for companies. A famous case illustrating this problem is Dave Carroll's 'United Breaks Guitar'[1] music video, where he complains about United Airlines with a song he wrote and produced. The company tried to contact Carroll less than 24 hours after he uploaded the video on YouTube, but the damage was already done, with just under 20,000 views of the video at the time. The video quickly became a huge success, with 5 million views in the first month (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2010). In such cases where it is possible for the complaint to reach the public through online waves of complaints or outrage, companies need to react in hours or minutes (Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014), as in these cases, the process often matters more than the outcome (Tripp and Gregoire, 2011).

Posting negative comments online was found to be predictive of consumers' intended conduct (Verhagen *et al.*, 2013). Receiving a response from the company after posting an online complaint has a positive effect on customers' satisfaction. In Maritz's (2011) study of online complaining on Twitter, 83% of consumers who received a response said they liked or loved hearing back from the company and 74.4% stated they were very satisfied or somewhat

[1] United Break Guitars: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YGc4zOqozo

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satisfied with the company's response. It is also known that when a company ignores online complaints, it leads to dissatisfaction and reduces consumers' intention to repurchase (Mattila and Mount, 2003; Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012). Moreover, Kim *et al.* (2016) found that a company's response has a positive impact on the behavioral intentions of other consumers who can view the post, and causes them to be less likely to conduct negative behaviors such as leaving the company. However, Einwiller and Steilen (2015), who studied consumers' follow-up messages after initial online expressions of dissatisfaction via content analysis assert that response time does not influence complaint satisfaction. Content analysis, although useful, might not be the best method here for understanding consumer satisfaction, since not everyone will post an update on their complaint resolution and might not be explicit in terms of explaining their feelings after the case is closed.

4. Hypothesis development

Consumers' expectations regarding the response time of face-to-face, phone and online complaints differ. When consumers are faced with a problem which they believe that the company can or should help to fix, they expect to see the company expending effort to solve this problem (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012). Part of this expectation is about the speed of the company's response (Davidow, 2003). Traditionally, it is expected that consumers who voice their complaints receive a more urgent response from companies (Martin and Smart, 1988). However, speed of communication is limited to the speed of the medium and sometimes delay to the response can be attributed to factors outside of the company's control, such as delays with the postal service in the case of letter complaints. Early studies indeed identified the average response time for consumer complaints through postal mail as 21.6 days (Martin and Smart, 1988). On the other hand, computer-mediated-communications provide faster communication (Strauss and Hill, 2001), and when complaining customers use these media, their expectations of the response time shortens significantly. One previous

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study shows that average the response time for companies to reply to email complaints is six days (Strauss and Hill, 2001) highlighting an important difference from postal mail. Given that online communication is now expected to be even faster and social media channels are known to be used for immediate contact compared to both email and offline communication channels (Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014), it is hypothesized that customers expect even faster responses from companies via these channels.

H1: Customers expect response times on social media to be quicker than response times through traditional channels (including email).

This study focuses on consumer complaining on two of the most popular social media sites, Facebook and Twitter. Facebook and Twitter allow representatives of companies, products and services to have official/verified accounts where they can create and manage company-related content. On Facebook, users can post on the companies' pages as long as the page allows users to contribute, and this is one way for consumers to complain about products and services on this platform. On Twitter, users can complain about products and services using their accounts, and can include the company account handler (i.e. mention) and/or relevant hashtags to make it easier for others, including the company, to identify this post. Companies and organizations, in return, can use their own Twitter accounts to reply to these posts.

Both Facebook and Twitter increase speed of communication between companies and users (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). However, the nature of the communication on Facebook and Twitter is different. As a social networking site, Facebook, does not limit the length of posts, however, posts on Twitter, which is a type of microblog, are limited to 140 characters. This allows users to exchange only small amounts of content on Twitter, such as short sentences, individual images and links to other content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011). Twitter is mostly used to talk about daily activities and to seek or share information (Java *et al.*, 2007). Due to

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its strengths of speed and the convenience of posting and reading posts, Twitter has been described as an online listening tool (Crawford, 2009). The public nature of Twitter presents an opportunity to consumers who want to start an open discussion with companies or try to engage with the company about their negative experiences (Kietzmann and Canhoto, 2013). Companies, in return, can use Twitter to react rapidly to consumer complaining (Burton and Soboleva, 2011). As it has also been pronounced "the fastest social media platform" (Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014, p 120), Twitter gives itself value with its speed. Facebook also provides speedy communication, but it is mainly famous for its features that can be used to share different kinds and sizes of content such as photo sharing and instant messaging (Papacharissi, 2009; Dekay, 2012). Such differences in the way in which communication channels work influence consumers' expectations regarding how companies use these channels (Jankowski and Hanssen, 1996). Since Twitter is known to highlighting its main value as speed of communication, it is hypothesized that customers' expectations of response time and the actual response time on Twitter will be quicker than those on Facebook.

H2a: Customers expect response time on Twitter to be quicker than response time on Facebook.

H2b: Actual response time on Twitter is quicker than actual response time on Facebook.

Response speed is one of the key factors that influences post-complaint satisfaction (Blodgett *et al.*, 1997; Tax *et al.*, 1998). The benefits of speedy responses are twofold: they ensure that the consumer's problem is solved in a timely manner and emphasize that the company is attentive toward consumers' problems (Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2015b). As a result, consumers' overall satisfaction is directly related to the response time both offline (Hart *et al.*, 1990) and online (Mattila and Mount, 2003). When consumers receive online responses faster, their

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satisfaction and perceptions of the company's response will improve (Strauss and Hill, 2001). It has even been identified that a reply offered to online complaints 4 weeks after the initial complaint has no impact on customers' satisfaction levels (Tripp and Gregoire, 2011) suggesting that very late replies are effectively the same as no-replies in terms of their influence on customer satisfaction.

Previous studies exploring online complaint handling have identified various strategies in terms of companies' recovery procedures (e.g. Dekay, 2012; Einwiller and Steilen, 2015). These suggest that it is possible to interact with complaining consumers on social media more than once. The ability to have multiple interactions can be used for different purposes, such as asking for further information (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015) or sending an early but generic messages to save time while working on a solution (Strauss and Hill, 2001). Even though these quick boilerplate answers can sometimes be interpreted as shunting techniques by consumers (Mattila *et al.*, 2013), quick replies are usually appreciated and improve consumers' perceptions of the company (Strauss and Hill, 2001). Since satisfaction with complaint handling is found to be directly related to the time taken to respond to the complaints (Mattila and Mount, 2003), the following are hypothesized about the first and conclusive response.

H3a: A quicker (actual) first response on social media will result in higher satisfaction with complaint handling.

H3b: A quicker (actual) conclusive response on social media will result in higher satisfaction with complaint handling.

There are a variety of reasons for consumers to complain, with a variety of objectives including redress seeking, warning the public, educating others or venting (Day *et al.*, 1981). In general, these objectives can be grouped into two: wanting to obtain redress and aiming to

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publicize the complaint. Consumers' objectives when complaining influence their decisions regarding the complaint channel (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004). Moreover, as the effects of response time on satisfaction levels are context-specific and shaped by many factors including situational and personal factors (Davidow, 2003), the objectives of the complaint can also effect consumers' satisfaction with the complaint handling. For example, previous research reveals that when the company provides redress as a response to a complaint, customer satisfaction improves regardless of the response time (Gilly and Gelb, 1982). This suggests that for these consumers who receive redress, response time is not a main concern.

On the other hand, consumers complaining for purposes other than redress (i.e. public complaining) expect shorter response times (Gilly and Gelb, 1982). For these consumers, it is important to hear back from the company as early as possible. Since their main concern is to raise the company's attention about the matter of interest, they do not expect to wait longer for the company to show that they are attentive. As a result, quicker replies lead to higher satisfaction when consumers complain publicly compared to when they seek redress. Hence, the following are hypothesized.

H4a: A quicker (actual) first response on social media will result in higher satisfaction with complaint handling among customers who complain publicly than among customers who seek redress.

H4b: A quicker (actual) conclusive response on social media will result in higher satisfaction with complaint handling among customers who complain publicly than among customers who seek redress.

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5. Methodology

5.1. Sample

Data was collected through an online self-completion survey. Survey-based data collection is one of the most common methods in the consumer complaining and complaint handling literature (Dahl and Peltier, 2015) because of its several advantages, including the ability to access large datasets, cost-effectiveness and convenience. As this study is focused on social media users, Facebook and Twitter were used to identify and recruit survey participants who had complained on these channels and received a response from the company. Hence, the sample was purposive, consisting only of relevant elements rather than randomized ones (Mason, 2002). In this way, it was hoped to reach a sample that consisted of participants who had recently experienced an online complaint-handling situation and reduce the limitations associated with scenario-based data collection methods such as validity and generalizability (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979).

In order to identify consumers who complained on Facebook or Twitter, the official accounts of 100 companies were observed. The aim was to recruit consumers who had received a reply from the company or had experienced conversations with the company. Hence, the Social Brands 100 report (Headstream, 2013), which lists industries and companies that use social media actively, was used. A complete list of the companies used in the sample can be found in the Appendix A. In this report, social brands are defined as those that regularly monitor social media, engage with relevant conversations and maintain a consistent presence (Headstream, 2013). This means that the Facebook and Twitter accounts of these companies were active at the time of data collection in terms of posting their own content, replying to customer posts and engaging in conversations.

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5.2. Data collection

The Facebook and Twitter accounts of the selected companies were monitored for three months and an invitation to participate was sent to consumers who complained and received a company response. The invitations were sent a maximum of two days after the final reply from the company. This aimed to ensure that the participants received the invitation to participate when they had finished their conversation with the company and could still recall their experiences. The invitation consisted of an introduction to the study, information on ethical considerations and the link to the online survey. In order to send messages to potential participants on Facebook, $1 per message was paid, but there was no cost on Twitter. A total of 1100 invitations were sent on Facebook and 1250 invitations on Twitter. In total, 455 respondents completed the survey. After partially completed surveys were removed, the final number of surveys in the dataset was 422 (Facebook=222, Twitter=200).

Ethical procedures were established by following Walther (2002) and Eynon *et al.* (2008). Approval from the institutional ethical review board was obtained before data collection began. A summary of information regarding the ethical considerations of the study was shared with participants in the invitation message, but participants were also presented with full information on confidentiality and their rights on the first page of the survey.

5.3. Survey instrument

An online survey company (SurveyGizmo[2]) was used to create the survey instrument. The survey instrument investigated the speed of the company's response, satisfaction with the complaint-handling process and satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint, as well as the objectives for complaining and the type of problem. Participants were first asked to identify the social media site that they used to complain (i.e. Facebook or Twitter) and then to indicate their objectives for complaining. The next question investigated the severity of the problem.

[2] www.surveygizmo.com

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These were followed with questions regarding the expected and actual response times. The questions investigating the response speed from the company asked participants to select one of the following: "within one hour after complaining, between 1-3 hours after complaining, between 3-6 hours after complaining, between 6-12 hours after complaining, between 12-24 hours after complaining, between 24-48 hours after complaining, more than 48 hours after complaining". The next question asked participants to indicate whether they had received only one response from the company or had engaged in a conversation involving several messages. If they had engaged in a conversation, they were also asked to indicate the response speed of the final message that resolved the issue. Satisfaction with the process and outcome were asked in two separate questions using a five-point bipolar scale anchored at very satisfied and very dissatisfied. The final questions collected classifying information (i.e. age and gender). A pre-test was conducted with 12 participants to ensure that the online survey instrument worked in the intended way. After the pre-test participants had completed the survey, they were asked if they had noticed any problems, and if they could think of more than one way to interpret the questions. As a result, the wording of some of the questions was slightly adjusted.

5.4. Data analysis

Data analyses for the study were conducted through the SPSS 21 for Windows program package. Descriptive statistics were used to illustrate the demographic profile of the participants, to describe actual and expected response times on Facebook and Twitter, and to describe satisfaction with the way in which the company had rectified the problem and the outcome of their complaint. A paired samples t-test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference between expected response time on social media and expected response time through offline complaining channels (H1). Consumers' average expected response times on Twitter and Facebook were compared using an independent samples t-test

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(H2a). In a similar manner, an independent samples t-test was used to determine actual response times on Twitter and Facebook (H2b). Since data was collected through self-completion surveys independently, the data points were uncorrelated and mutually independent, demonstrating that the independent samples t-test was appropriate for these analyses.

Two one-way between-groups Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVA) were employed to identify the effects of different response times on satisfaction with complaint handling (H3a and H3b). This test can be used to explore differences between groups while statistically controlling for another variable, which is known as covariate (Pallant, 2016). In this study, it was used to compare the dependent variable, satisfaction with the complaint handling, across different groups of response speeds. Response speed for the first response (H3a) and response speed for the conclusive response (H3b) were used as independent variables with severity of the problem, satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint, and initial expectations of response time considered as covariates. Moreover, two two-way between-groups ANCOVAs were adopted to compare the impact of response time on satisfaction for consumers seeking redress and for consumers not seeking redress (H4a and H4b). This test examines the individual and joint effect of two independent variables on one dependent variable while taking into account the influences of the covariates (Pallant, 2016). Response speed for the first response (H4a) and response speed for the conclusive response (H4b) were again considered as the independent variables, but this time the impact of consumers' objective in complaining (i.e. redress seeking or not) on the dependent variable (i.e. satisfaction with the complaint handling) was also taken into account. This aimed to identify any 'interaction effect'. An interaction effect occurs when the effect of one independent variable (i.e. response speed) on the dependent variable (i.e. satisfaction with the complaint handling) is not the same under the effect of another independent variable (i.e. objectives of complaining)

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(Pallant, 2016). Severity of the problem, satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint, and initial expectations of response time were again considered as the covariates.

Paired samples and independent samples t-tests, one-way between-groups ANCOVA tests and two-way between-groups ANCOVA tests were all performed with a significance level of .05.

Before testing the hypotheses, the assumptions in performing the t-tests and ANCOVA tests including assumptions of normality, homogeneity of variances, the strength of the correlation among covariates, linearity, and homogeneity of regression slopes were checked (Pallant, 2016). Data normality was checked by conducting a Kolmogorov–Smirnov test on the dependent variables, and the distributions were found to be not normally distributed (p =.00 <.05) (Glass and Hopkins, 1970). However, inspection of the Q–Q plots indicated relatively minor deviations, with most points collecting around the zero line and moreover, because violations of this assumption in the social sciences when the sample sizes are large enough (>30) are known to not cause any major problems (Pallant, 2016), it was decided to continue with the test. To test the assumption of homogeneity of variance, first Levene's test of homogeneity of variance in terms of (actual and expected) response time was run independently for both of the independent samples t-tests with a significance level of 0.05 (Glass and Hopkins, 1970). Given a violation of Levene's test of homogeneity of variances, $F(1, 418.746) = 4.03$, p =.045, a t-test not assuming homogeneous variables was calculated for H2a. The nonsignificant result of Levene's test, $F(1, 420) = .24$, p =.621, suggested that homogeneity of variances was warranted for H2b. Next, Levene's test of homogeneity of variance for ANCOVA was conducted to test whether the variances were the same for each of the groups. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was confirmed in three cases: Levene's test (for H3a): $F(6, 415) = 2.17$, p =.455; Levene's test (for H3b): $F(6, 415) = .925$, p =.477 and Levene's test (for H4a): $F(13, 408) = 1.49$, p =.115. However, Levene's test was

not significant for H4b (F (13, 408) =2.30, p =.006), which indicated that the assumption of equality of variance was violated and the variances of the dependent variable were not equal. However, ANCOVA is robust to small and moderate violations of the homogeneity of variances if the ratio of the largest to smallest group variance is not more than three (ratio= 2.7) (Dean and Voss, 1999). Scatterplots were also used to test for linearity separately in order to ensure there were linear relationships (1) between the dependent variable (i.e. satisfaction with the complaint handling) and each of the covariates, and (2) between each of the pairs of covariates (Pallant, 2016). Next, correlation analyses were performed to explore the strength of the relationship among the covariates, as ANCOVA assumes substantial correlations between the dependent variable and the covariates, but not among the covariates themselves (Pallant, 2016). No strong correlations were found between the covariates (r_1 =.16, r_2 =.17 and r_3 =.036, p < .001), indicating that they did not overlap. Finally, in order to check for the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes, which requires interaction between the covariates and the dependent variable (i.e. satisfaction with the complaint handling) to be not significant, the slopes on the regression line for each group were checked statistically at an alpha level of .05 (Pallant, 2016). The scores for severity of the problem, satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint, and initial expectations of response time and first response time were .12, .48, .40, respectively with p <.05, and the scores for the same covariates and conclusive response time were .38, .89, .79, respectively with again p <.05. Therefore, it was concluded that all interactions were not significant at this level and the assumption was not violated (Pallant, 2016).

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6. Results

6.1. Participants' profile

The demographic profile of the participants was as follows: the sample mostly consisted of females (61.8%). The majority of the participants were between 30 and 39 years old (34.4%), followed by participants aged between 18 and 29 years old (28.4%).

6.2. Speed of response and outcome

Thirty-three percent of the participants indicated that they received a response from the company within one hour after complaining and only 5.7% received the first response more than 48 hours after complaining. However, 57.6% of the participants indicated that they engaged in a conversation on social media rather than receiving only one message. Among those who engaged in a conversation, only 7.1% indicated that they received the conclusive message within one hour, whereas 19.9% of them received the final message more than 48 hours after complaining. Overall, 54% of the participants aimed to obtain redress (i.e. selected "To obtain refund/compensation/redress" or "To solve a problem") and 46% of the participants aimed to publicly complain (i.e. selected "Venting/ Getting it off your chest", "Warning others/ Information sharing", "Advising the company/ Criticism", "Raising awareness/ Disseminating voice/ Boycott"). In terms of the satisfaction levels, 17.5% of the participants felt very satisfied and 23.9% felt very dissatisfied with the way in which the company had rectified their problem, whereas 14% were very satisfied and 25.6% were very dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint.

6.3. Hypothesis testing

A paired samples t-test was conducted to test H1. Participants' expected response time on social media was found to be lower than their expected response time through traditional channels ($M_{social\ media}$ =3.06, $SD_{social\ media}$ =1.91 and $M_{traditional\ channels}$ =4, $SD_{traditional\ channels}$ =2.30). This suggests that on average, participants expected companies to reply to their

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complaints within 3 to 6 hours online and 6 to 12 hours through traditional channels. The difference was statistically significant (t(421) =-7.01, p <.001), supporting H1.

Two separate independent samples t-tests were used to compare the expected and actual response times on Facebook and Twitter. The expected response time on Twitter ($M_{Twitter}$ =2.78, $SD_{Twitter}$ =1.84) was found to be significantly lower than the expected response time on Facebook ($M_{Facebook}$ =3.32, $SD_{Twitter}$ =1.94). This suggests that on average, participants expected companies to respond to their complaints within 1 to 3 hours on Twitter and 3 to 6 hours on Facebook (t(418.746) =2.907, p =.004). On the other hand, there was no significant difference in actual response times on Facebook ($M_{Facebook}$ =2.84, $SD_{Twitter}$ =1.89) and Twitter ($M_{Twitter}$ =2.76, $SD_{Twitter}$ =1.81), suggesting that actual (first) response times on both social media sites were between 1 and 3 hours on average (t(420) =.431, p =.667). Hence, H2a was supported but H2b was rejected.

Two one-way between-groups Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVA) were conducted to explore the effect of response time on satisfaction with complaint handling, where satisfaction with complaint handling was the dependent variable. In the first ANCOVA test, the independent variable was the time taken by the company to send the first response (H3a). In the second test, the independent variable was the time taken by the company to send the conclusive response, which is defined as the response that concludes the correspondence between the customer and the company (H3b). Severity of the problem, satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint, and initial expectations of response time were employed as covariates in both tests. The effect of the response time on satisfaction was found to be significantly different for first response and conclusive response (see Table 1), supporting both H3a and H3b (F (7, 412) =4.606, p <.001, η^2 =.07 and F(7, 412) =4.969, p <.001, η^2 =.08 respectively). This shows that both quicker first response and quicker conclusive response resulted in higher satisfaction with complaint handling on social media. Two of the

three covariates, problem severity and satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint, were also found to influence post-complaint satisfaction.

Table 1: One-way between-groups ANCOVA results (H3a and H3b)

	Source	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	F	*p*
First Response (H3a)	Severity of the problem	5.145	1	5.145	7.363	.007**
	Satisfaction with the outcome	494.476	1	494.476	707.594	.000***
	Initial expectations of response time	.641	1	.641	.917	.339
	Response Time	22.531	7	3.219	4.606	.000***
Conclusive Response (H3b)	Severity of the problem	4.649	1	4.649	6.691	.010*
	Satisfaction with the outcome	522.947	1	522.947	752.616	.000***
	Initial expectations of response time	.289	1	.289	.415	.520
	Response Time	24.168	7	3.453	4.969	.000***
Note: $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$						

Finally, two two-way between-groups ANCOVAs were conducted to assess the impact of response time on satisfaction for consumers seeking redress and consumers who complained publicly (H4a and H4b). Problem severity, satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint and initial expectations of response time were again used as covariates to control for individual differences. No interaction effects were revealed (both for the first response (H4a): $F(6, 405) = 1.42$, $p = .204$, $\eta^2 = .02$ and for the conclusive response (H4b): $F(6, 405) = 1.001$, $p = .424$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$). These results suggest there is no significant difference in the effect of response time on satisfaction with complaint handling between consumers seeking redress and consumers complaining publicly (see Table 2). Hence, both H4a and H4b were rejected.

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Table 2: Two-way between-groups ANCOVA results (H4a and H4b)

	Source	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	F	*p*
First Response (H4a)	Severity of the problem	5.880	1	5.880	8.479	.004**
	Satisfaction with the outcome	471.659	1	471.659	680.142	.000***
	Initial expectations of response time	.402	1	.402	.580	.447
	Response Time	3.540	6	.590	.851	.531
	Objective of Complaint	2.415	1	2.415	3.483	.063
	Response Time x Objective of Complaint	5.920	6	.987	1.423	.204
Conclusive Response (H4b)	Severity of the problem	4.397	1	4.397	6.338	.012*
	Satisfaction with the outcome	521.531	1	521.531	751.743	.000***
	Initial expectations of response time	.173	1	.173	.250	.617
	Response Time	5.480	6	.913	1.316	.248
	Objective of Complaint	2.065	1	2.065	2.977	.085
	Response Time x Objective of Complaint	4.169	6	.695	1.001	.424
Note: $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$						

7. Discussion and conclusion

As effective complaint handling and post-purchase satisfaction influence the reputation of the company, repurchase behavior and loyalty (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987; Shields, 2006; Nikbin *et al.*, 2012), understanding the effects of response time is important for both academics and practitioners. Through collecting data from consumers who had complained on social media, this study reveals that consumers' satisfaction with complaint handling on social media is related to the response time. The findings show that expectations of response time on Facebook and Twitter are shorter than for other media (e.g. offline complaining channels and email). Consumers expect companies to reply to their complaints on social

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media within 3 to 6 hours on average. Compared to the findings of Strauss and Hill (2001), which found that the actual response time to email complaints was six days, this is a significant difference. Since consumers expect quicker responses on social media, companies need to adjust their complaint-handling strategies and procedures when they are dealing with social media to enable higher post-purchase satisfaction. As a result, while companies respond to problems, they can also ensure that their consumers will not feel disappointed twice (Bitner *et al.*, 1990), and increase the chances of repurchase behavior and positive word-of-mouth (Blodgett and Anderson, 2000).

Twitter is perceived to be one of the fastest social media platforms for online communications (Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014). The findings of this study support this by showing that consumers who used Twitter to contact a company expected shorter response times compared to those who used Facebook. More specifically, research participants stated that they expected companies to reply to their complaints on average within 1 to 3 hours on Twitter and within 3 to 6 hours on Facebook. However, investigating the actual response times, this study shows that average response times on Facebook and Twitter to reply to complaints are similar (within 1 to 3 hours for both). Despite being structurally different and highlighting separate benefits, both Facebook and Twitter are social media channels that are designed to increase speed of communication (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Burton and Soboleva, 2011). Other than the services that they offer to users, they also offer products and services for companies and organizations that can be used for consumer support. For example, Twitter provides embedded messaging tools to companies that can be used directly on the Twitter page of the company as opposed to using the standard private messaging tool available to users (Lull, 2016), and Facebook has a separate app, the Pages Manager App, to help businesses to manage their Facebook pages by providing push notifications and the ability to view and reply to messages from users (Facebook, 2016). Such tools help companies to

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decrease their actual response time by supporting the way in which they manage their social media accounts.

A significant effect of both first and conclusive response times on consumer satisfaction was also revealed. In online complaining situations, it might not always be possible to solve the problem with an initial response. Initial messages are often used to gather more information or direct customers to appropriate departments (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015). Hence, receiving a response from the company does not always guarantee that this will conclude the complaint-handling process. The findings of this study show that both a quicker first response and a quicker conclusive response resulted in higher satisfaction with complaint handling. These findings are in line with previous research highlighting the influence of online response time on satisfaction in the case of email complaints (Strauss and Hill, 2001; Mattila and Mount, 2003). Moreover, while Einwiller and Steilen's (2015) findings based on extensive content analysis suggest that response time on Facebook and Twitter does not influence satisfaction, this study highlights the importance of accounting for public communications as well as potential private communications which may follow and the perspective of the complainant in terms of whether their complaint was resolved satisfactorily. Examining only the public communications overlooks the strategy of many organizations to move offline or into private channels in order to progress resolution. Furthermore, this study furthers knowledge by showing the existence of the same effect in the different stages of the complaint-handling process (i.e. first and conclusive response). To achieve high satisfaction levels, companies need to act quickly when they first respond to consumers' complaints online, but this alone is not enough. They then need to address the complaint and resolve the issue as soon as possible. Since it is not always possible for companies to satisfy complaining consumers due to limited labor and financial resources (Ryngelblum *et al.*, 2013), understanding how the different stages of responsiveness

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influence satisfaction is crucial for dealing with contemporary challenges that have surfaced with online environments (Sexton, 2015).

In contrast to previous research on response time in offline redress-seeking situations which has suggested that when consumers receive redress, response time does not have an effect on satisfaction (Gilly and Gelb, 1982), the findings of this study suggest that a speedy response increases satisfaction, regardless of the consumers' objectives. Clark *et al.*(1992) said, in the late 20th century, that as long as companies provided some kind of redress, they could improve their brand image, and whether the redress was received early or late did not have an effect. However, consumers now expect speed along with redress. For example, recent studies show that when monetary compensation is delivered in a speedy manner, it has a stronger effect than delayed monetary compensation (Roschk and Gelbrich, 2014). Rapid problem resolution makes consumers feel happy by saving them time, even when time was not their main concern when they first complained (Gruber *et al.*, 2008). It is also known that consumers whose main objectives are to seek redress prefer real-time interaction with companies, such as phone or face-to-face conversations, as opposed to indirect methods such as letters (Mattila and Wirtz, 2004). These suggest that consumers seeking redress now prefer methods that will help them to obtain quicker resolution and redress. This is a critical difference for complaint-handling theory and practice. There is a definite shift away from the accepted beliefs of late 20th century service marketing. Consumers' mind-sets have changed along with online marketing and social media. Before the Internet era, they seem to have focused solely on redress, whereas now they expect rapid redress.

7.1. Practical implications

As more and more consumers use social media to complain, companies need to be aware of consumers' expectations and should devise their social media strategies and complaint-handling procedures accordingly (Jansen *et al.*, 2009; Dekay, 2012; Einwiller and Steilen,

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2015). Understanding how consumers' expectations have changed with social media, especially in relation to their objectives and receiving multiple responses, offers new insights into devising complaint-handling strategies. This study's findings have important implications for marketers who want to respond to consumer complaining in the most effective way possible.

When consumers complain, they want to see companies expending effort and interest on their complaint (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012). This is one thing companies need to do better, as we know that complainant satisfaction rates in 2013 were actually lower than in 1976 (Grainer *et al.*, 2013). Nevertheless, with advancing technologies in computer-mediated communications, consumers now increasingly demand rapid complaint handling, and this is a new problem facing businesses. An implication of this is that managers should not only consider complaint handling in terms of what the problem is, but recognize that part of the problem will always be speed when social media is used. Companies have to act on problems that create complaints and respond rapidly.

In online complaint-handling situations, Strauss and Hill (2001) suggest sending an acknowledgment email as the first response in order to buy some time to solve the issue and prepare a more thorough response later. However, we also know that consumers sometimes interpret these initial messages as shunting (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015). Sending an early acknowledgment message might be useful as long as the message is personalized, to prevent misunderstanding and show that the company has engaged with the specific issue under complaint. Nevertheless, even after sending such an initial message, the company still needs to address the issue quickly and follow up the conversation until resolution is reached in a speedy manner.

This study also found that two of the covariates, problem severity and satisfaction with the outcome of the complaint, influence post-complaint satisfaction. Hence, it might be useful for companies to focus on understanding consumers' perceptions of problem severity and on delivering solutions that match consumers' expectations. In online complaining situations, it could be possible through an investigation of the complaint content to learn more about the consumer's perceptions and expectations, although there is not always enough information from the consumer to do so. Initial company responses could be used to collect more information, and in return this could be used to personalize and improve the complaint-handling procedure for each consumer.

7.2. Limitations and future research

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that online complaints require speedy attention which rectifies the problem as soon as possible. However, the content of responses to online complaints was not investigated. Qualitative research that aims to investigate different types of content (e.g. apology, personalization, explanation) and their relationship with satisfaction could help companies in designing responses to online complaints. In addition, the current study defines conclusive responses as the final response received from the company that closes the complaint case. However, this last piece of correspondence might not always be satisfactory from the consumer's viewpoint. Hence, future studies can also investigate the difference between satisfactory and unsatisfactory final responses in relation to response time. This could also be developed further by investigating by industry, aiming to understand consumer expectations and satisfaction for different industries.

Appendix A – Complete List of the Companies in the Sample

Ranking	Brand	Industry
1	Battlefield	Entertainment
2	American Airlines	Travel

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3	Lufthansa	Travel
4	Thomson Holidays	Travel
5	Thomas Cook UK	Travel
6	Innocent	FMCG
7	Argos	Retail
8	SEAT Mexico	Automotive
9	Tesco	Retail
10	Dr. Martens	Retail
11	EE	Telecommunications
12	Guess 2 Give	Entertainment
13	Aldi UK	Retail
14	Walkers	FMCG
15	Dogs Trust	Charity
16	Waitrose	Retail
17	Met Office	Public Sector
18	WestJet	Travel
19	Rekorderlig	FMCG
20	Selfridges	Retail
21	Next	Retail
22	ARKive	Charity
23	UPS	Transport & Logistics
24	EA Sports FIFA	Entertainment
25	Appliances Online	Retail
26	Marks & Spencer	Retail
27	GoPro	Electronics
28	Sainsbury's	Retail
29	EasyJet	Travel
30	First Choice Holidays	Travel
31	Just Eat	Retail
32	Blue Cross UK	Charity
33	Heart	Publishing & Media
34	Marie Curie Cancer Care	Charity
35	Audi UK	Automotive
36	Lurpak	FMCG
37	The British Museum	Leisure
38	Schuh	Retail
39	Virgin Trains	Travel
40	ASOS	Retail
41	House of Fraser	Retail
42	London Midlands	Travel
43	National Trust	Charity
44	Debenhams	Retail
45	Teenage Cancer Trust	Charity
46	Nike	Sports Apparel

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47	WWF	Charity
48	British Heart Foundation	Charity
49	Liverpool Echo	Publishing & Media
50	Princess Cruises	Travel
51	The Perfume Shop	Retail
52	Amtrak	Travel
53	Heathrow	Travel
54	Delta	Travel
55	British Red Cross	Charity
56	Petplan UK	Financial Services
57	Southampton Football Club	Leisure
58	Leicester Tigers Rugby Club	Leisure
59	Bulmers	FMCG
60	Vodacom	Telecommunications
61	Yorkshire Tea	FMCG
62	Very.co.uk	Retail
63	Kiddicare	Retail
64	The Ellen DeGeneres Show	Entertainment
65	B&Q	Retail
66	Virgin Media	Telecommunications
67	Rimmel London	Cosmetics & Beauty
68	Virgin Money Giving	Charity
69	ABSOLUT	FMCG
70	Neal's Yard Remedies	Retail
71	WildPhotos	Charity
72	Cadbury Dairy Milk	FMCG
73	Diabetes UK	Charity
74	EDF Energy	Utilities
75	Classic FM	Publishing & Media
76	505 Games	Publishing & Media
77	ODEON Cinemas	Leisure
78	Toyota	Automotive
79	Halo	Entertainment
80	DoSomething.org	Charity
81	Ocado	Retail
82	Barclays UK	Financial Services
83	Vue Cinemas	Leisure
84	Estée Lauder	Cosmetics & Beauty
85	Relentless energy Drinks	FMCG
86	Cadbury	FMCG
87	Butlins	Hospitality
88	Barclaycard	Financial Services
89	Dorothy Perkins	Retail
90	Watch	Publishing & Media
91	Macmillan Cancer Support	Charity

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92	Bushmills Irish Whiskey	FMCG
93	The Body Shop	Retail
94	Matalan	Retail
95	Kuoni Travel	Travel
96	L'Oréal Paris	Cosmetics & Beauty
97	Amnesty international	Charity
98	Trent Barton	Travel
99	John Lewis	Retail
100	Tate	Leisure

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