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# COMPLAINING ON FACEBOOK PAGES AND PROFILES: CONNECTED AND SOCIAL

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## 1. Introduction

Online consumption-related activities can now reach and potentially influence large numbers of people. This is of particular concern to companies when the content is negative in nature, such as online complaining. Research has shown that exchanging such content influences consumers' purchase decisions (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Davis & Khazanchi, 2008; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). The advance of social media means that it takes less effort for consumers to complain and there is a higher degree of permanency to these complaints. Research has shown that companies need to listen to complaining consumers as those that do can actually benefit from them and improve their marketing strategies (Bodey & Grace, 2006; Hart, Heskett, & Sasser Jr, 1990; Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998). By considering more closely the content of the complaining posts, this paper explores the richness and variety of online consumer complaining behaviour (CCB) on Facebook. More specifically, the main objectives of this study are (1) to identify the approaches consumers employ when they complain on Facebook and (2) to determine which Facebook pages (i.e. profiles, company created or user-created pages) they use when they complain. It is anticipated that by exploring *how* consumers complain online on Facebook, this paper will help companies to understand their customers better and respond to online CCB appropriately.

## 2. Online Complaining

Online complaining occur on feedback and product review websites or websites with focus on particular products and services. In addition to that, consumers can use generic user-created content sites (e.g. social networking sites or blogs) for their complaints. In other words, online complaining can happen wherever consumers are able to create their own content online, and have discussions about products/services. User-created content sites (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter) have become commonly used websites to create and share content about dissatisfactory experiences. For example, a study examining online WOM behaviours and expressions of brand attitudes on Twitter found that approximately 33% of content about brands includes negative expressions (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009). User-created content websites offer their users a variety of features to create their content: Twitter can be used to write short public messages, Facebook can be used to reach friends and family privately or to the companies publicly and YouTube can be used to create audio or video files. Since there are different options available for consumers to complain on these websites, it is important for companies to know how their customers use different sections of these websites for complaining purposes.

The complaining process was formerly constrained by the one-to-one method of communication between the consumers and the companies. With the use of Internet for complaining, this now transformed into a broader form of communication which includes other parties (Goetzinger, Park, & Widdows, 2006; Hong & Lee, 2005; Schlosser, 2005; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Most online complaining channels are publicly accessible, and they

also enable consumers to engage with others in their discussions. As a result, (1) anyone can identify and access to online complaints easily through the use of search engines (e.g. Google, Bing), and (2) complaining now happens in the public domain (Bailey, 2004; Schlosser, 2005). Consequently, the Internet has expanded users' personal networks beyond traditional social links so complaining activities now reach beyond the consumers' immediate social network of friends and family as in traditional negative WOM to many more people. Moreover, online complaining activities can be co-produced in large networks of consumers and diffused through various types of online communication channels (Hong & Lee, 2005; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Schlosser, 2005). To sum up, now consumers not only produce product-related negative content, but also share this with others and use this as a way to interact and socialise. This results with a change in the nature of complaining from a personal act to a social behaviour.

### **3. Classification of Complaining on Facebook**

On Facebook, there are various types of sections consumers can use to interact with friends, companies and the public. The major sections that can be used to complain are profile pages, companies' official pages and user-created unofficial pages.

Profile pages are users' personal pages where they share status messages, photos, videos and links. When users post content on their profile pages, it becomes visible on their profile page and also on the newsfeed (i.e. homepage) of their Facebook friends. This way, users do not need to visit each other's page individually, but can keep track of each other's Facebook activities via the newsfeed.

Pages are Facebook sections that can be created by official representatives of companies, organisations, and brands. These are visible to not only Facebook users but everyone. Companies create official pages to communicate with their customers, promote their products, and form relationships. Consumers can browse and contribute to official company pages which may include complaining. However, companies have control over the content of the pages whilst some may block or delete consumers' contributions, others do not. Although, Facebook only allows official representatives of the companies to create pages, users can create their unofficial company pages as well (e.g. fake official pages or fan groups). Activities on these pages are not controlled by the company, but managed by the owner of the page. However if the company is aware of such pages, they may, if they are able, choose to contribute. In this study, these are called unofficial pages.

### **4. Methodology**

Netnography was employed as the research design: participant-observations used to examine online CCB on three Facebook sections. The sample is purposive; consisting only of relevant elements rather than randomised or representative ones (Mason, 2002). Official company and unofficial pages on Facebook were selected according to Kozinets' (2010) guidelines of site choice for netnographic studies. In order to select the companies for the sample, sectors with a high social media presence according to the Social Brands Report by Headstream (Headstream, 2011) were identified. According to their social media presence a total of 13 companies were chosen. Having selected the companies in the sample, the next step was to decide which Facebook pages to use for data collection. In order to fulfil the requirements of the study's objectives, six types of Facebook pages for each company: official brand page, unofficial brand page, anti-brand page, official product page, unofficial product page, and page with specific issues were included in the sample. Kozinets' guidelines for site choice (2010) suggests selecting sample elements that are relevant, active, interactive,

substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich sites for netnographic studies. Following these guidelines, one page for each Facebook section with highest number of members and highest level of interaction with heterogeneous and rich content were identified for all the companies in the sample. This resulted in 51 Facebook pages which can be seen in Table 1. An empty cell means either the company did not have that type of page or the page did not satisfy Kozinets' guidelines.

**Table 1- Facebook pages in the Sample**

	Tesco	Gap	Amazon	Kraft	Nestle	P&G	Nike	Apple	Sky	Google	McDonald's	Ryanair	Vodafone
<b>Official brand page</b>	Tesco	Gap	Amazon.com	Kraft - Corporation	Nestle	Procter & Gamble			Sky	Google			Vodafone UK
<b>Unofficial brand page</b>			AMAZON		Nestle		Nike	apple :)			Mc donalds	Ryanair	
<b>Anti-brand page</b>				People Against Kraft	Boycott Nestle		Boycott Nike	I hate Apple			I hate McDonalds!	i hate ryanair	Can we find 1 million people who will never use Vodafone (again)?
<b>Official product page</b>	Clothing at Tesco	Banana Republic	Amazon Kindle	Cadbury Dairy Milk	Kit Kat	Pampers	Nike Football	iTunes	Sky Sports	Google Chrome			
<b>Unofficial product page</b>	Tesco Value Vodka	Baby Gap	Kindle...	Cadbury	Aero	OLAY		iPhone		Google Earth	Mcdonalds Fries		vodafone 3G
<b>Page with a specific issue</b>	Why does the Tesco in Selly Oak always smell bad???			WE HATE KRAFT FOR TAKING OVER CADBURYS	Can this orangut an get more fans than Nestle?	Boycott Procter & Gamble AND Pampers for chemical burns on little babies!	Boycott Nike for Signing Michael Vick	Dear iPhone/iPod: I know I have 20% left! Thanks for messing my game up!!		Dear Google can you let me write my sentence before u start guessing it	I hate it when i get coke in my cup of ice at mcdonaldss		i have no reception is code for "Im with vodafone"

Netnographic observations were conducted on these 51 pages. One of the authors lurked in these communities for two weeks before starting data collection in order to become familiar with the community culture and ensure that they were suitable data sources. Actual data collection started with researcher identifying herself to the members of the page and lasted 5 months where each page being visited twice a week. Every time a page was visited, all new posts and comments were observed. Each post that contained complaints about the company, its products, services, practices, employees and marketing activities and the comments of the post were recorded as a separate incident in NVivo 8. In total, 596 separate incidents from the public sections of Facebook were identified and recorded by the end of the data collection.

In order to examine online CCB on Facebook profile pages, one of the authors used her personal Facebook friend list. Since communication through profiles is limited to the users' own network of friends as default setting, this was believed to be most convenient sample. In the beginning of the data collection, details of the study were announced to author's 545 Facebook friends with the option not to take part. Facebook newsfeed (i.e. the section that shows the updates from friends) was checked daily in order to identify complaining posts. Additional permission was requested from the owner of each potentially

useful post which was identified. A total of 88 complaining posts were identified and recorded from the profile pages of 545 Facebook users.

The dataset was read several times, and each post was assigned to emergent categories. Each of the three researchers independently coded the data, and the inter-rater reliability was calculated. After an initial inter-rater reliability of 54% the researchers revisited and revised the codes and subsequently achieved an inter-rater reliability of 90%.

## 5. Major Results

In total, 596 separate posts with complaints were identified on pages and 88 complaining posts were identified on the profile pages. Observations identified that 46.3% of the total amount of posts on the pages in the sample contained complaining. Not all complaining activities on Facebook had detailed explanations. Some consumers did not talk about the problem, situation or their reasons for complaining, but only stated their feelings and/or opinions about the companies. For example, it was not unusual to see posts that only say ‘I hate you Nike’ or ‘everybody should boycott McDonald’s’ without any explanation. In some cases, consumers’ other consumption-related activities such as asking questions, sharing experiences and seeking advice/suggestions also resulted as complaining. Although some of these consumers might have not particularly intended to complain, they contributed to negative online content about the company/product.

Observations identified eight approaches to complain on public pages which are advising the company, comparisons, criticism, entertainment, redress seeking, seeking advice/suggestions, venting and warning others. Table 2 and Table 3 show the frequencies of these approaches within the official and unofficial pages.

**Table 2 - Frequencies of Complaining Approaches on Official Pages**

Approach	Official brand pages	Official product pages	TOTAL
Advising the company	28	30	58
Comparisons	13	15	28
Criticism	62	16	78
Entertainment	6	0	6
Redress seeking	49	30	79
Seeking advice/suggestions	12	22	34
Venting	88	45	133
Warning others	32	5	37

**Table 3- Frequencies of Complaining Approaches on Unofficial Pages**

Approach	Anti-brand pages	Issue specific pages	Unofficial brand pages	Unofficial product pages	TOTAL
Advising the company	0	0	9	3	12
Comparisons	4	1	9	0	14
Criticism	13	4	16	5	38
Entertainment	6	12	9	4	31
Redress seeking	0	2	11	3	16
Seeking advice/suggestions	1	0	8	5	14
Venting	18	21	41	7	87
Warning others	12	1	11	2	26

According to this, consumers used both official and unofficial pages mainly to vent. This approach has the highest frequency in all types of pages. This suggests that consumers’

use of Facebook might have been mainly aimed at venting negative feelings (e.g. anger, frustration, annoyance) and to feel better about the situation. Since this does not require a particular audience, using both official and unofficial pages can help consumers to achieve it. Here, Facebook simply acts as a channel for consumers to vent negative feelings in a way that they can share their frustration with others whom they do not share traditional social connections. This approach is followed by redress seeking on the official pages and criticism on the unofficial pages. Posts with redress seeking specifically target the company. This research revealed that on Facebook, lines between redress seeking and other reasons of complaints were even more blurred; consumers post redress seeking content and spread negative information simultaneously knowing that not only the company but also other consumers will read their posts online. Moreover, some consumers mistook the unofficial pages for the official ones, and used these pages to seek redress. Those providing criticism might target different audiences depending on the objectives for complaining. Consumers who wanted to criticise the company in order to evaluate or give their opinions about it, might prefer to use official pages as they want to be heard directly by the company. On the other hand, consumers who want to communicate with others so as to spread information may use both official and unofficial pages. It should also be noted that in the view of the researchers, consumers who criticise might have additional objectives, such as expecting a redress without openly asking for it, or venting feelings without showing emotion. The rest of the approaches (i.e. ‘advising the company’, ‘comparisons with other companies’, ‘entertainment’, ‘seeking advice/suggestions’ and ‘warning others’) have similar frequencies in official and unofficial pages with some minor exceptions. It is been identified that complaints with these approaches also carry characteristics of social interactions. For example, customers sometimes use entertaining narratives to shape their complaining activities on Facebook. Use of humour or sarcasm to complain carries social objectives such as interacting with others, enhancing self-image and socialising.

Observations revealed that consumers employed similar approaches when they complain on public and profile pages. Among the eight approaches that were identified on public pages, six of them- ‘comparisons’, ‘criticism’, ‘entertainment’, ‘seeking advice/suggestions’, ‘venting’ and ‘warning others’- were observed on the profiles. Table 4 shows the frequencies of these.

**Table 4- Frequencies of Complaining Approaches on Profile Pages**

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Profile Pages</b>
Comparisons	12
Criticism	25
Entertainment	16
Seeking advice/suggestions	9
Venting	44
Warning others	8

Like public pages, venting has the highest frequency on profiles and it is followed by criticism. Therefore, overall venting as an approach to complain has the highest frequency on Facebook. Both public pages and profiles offer consumers an opportunity to vent negative emotions through sharing their feelings with others. Some consumers might consider this as a personal matter and prefer to use their profiles, while others might feel even better when they know other people will learn about their problems and therefore share them on the public pages. On profile pages, venting is followed by criticism. By offering their criticism in a platform that is shared through their personal networks of connections, consumers convert

complaining into a social activity that would be previously limited to one-to-one conversation with the company. In this way, these criticisms can also be used to disseminate information and engage in product related conversations with one's friends and family.

## **6. Conclusions**

Findings suggested that complaining on public and profile pages had similarities. Even though, different Facebook sections were chosen to communicate with different parties, complaining posts mainly carried similar characteristics in terms of the approached employed by consumers. Venting was found to be the most common approach to complain on Facebook posts, followed by criticism. Also, redress seeking had a higher frequency on the official pages which suggested that consumers consider Facebook as a direct communication method with the companies.

### *6.1. Managerial Implications*

Online complaints criticising, comparing and advising the company are potentially very useful to managers. These consumers provide useful feedback which can be considered in developing future products and services and improve the company's current processes. On the other hand, consumers who vent angrily on Facebook may not provide information that will be useful to managers. However, this may be an indicator of frustration with a lack of being able to complain or to get a successful response via other channels. Hence, effectiveness of traditional complaining channels might be investigated.

Managers also need to identify and respond to the consumers seeking redress on Facebook, especially on the official pages. It is not clear from this research whether Facebook is the consumers' first channel for seeking compensation or whether the consumer has been in touch via other channels. If the latter is the case the company may need to examine the effectiveness of the traditional channels. Consumers seeking redress on unofficial sections may well have tried the official channels of communication and in getting no response turn to Facebook. Complaints which are seeking help can highlight where companies can improve their customer services (i.e. what type of information does the consumer require and through which medium). When such information is used to improve the service it could potentially reduce the overall level of complaints.

Companies need to ensure that consumers' concerns are positively addressed however they may only have a limited amount of resources so they need to consider that most complaints occur on official pages and to a lesser degree on user-created unofficial pages and profiles. As user-created unofficial pages are often generally negative and may be produced by people who do not wish to be reconciled with the company it may be more pragmatic to allocate fewer resources to monitoring these pages. The company needs to consider the availability and longevity of the complaints.

By focusing on consumers' approaches to complain on Facebook, this paper has contributed to the understanding of CCB in general but also has noted some of the particular approaches that companies should be aware of.

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