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Conceptualising Social Media as Complaint Channel

This paper explores the relationship between UK "Millennials'" consumer goals and their choice of social media as a complaint channel. It also considers the relationship between interactive and remote channels and how power is distributed online between consumers and organisations. From interviews with members of the Millennial generation and a content analysis of complaints voiced through computer manufacturer 'Dell''s UK Twitter and Facebook sites, the research uncovered three significant themes. Firstly, as a complaint channel, social media is largely used by "Millennials" for venting their anger against organisations. Due to the distant and interactive nature of social media, the research opens up a new classification in consumer complaint literature, categorising social media as a semi-interactive channel of communication. Subsequently, it is the characteristics of the medium which afford this classification, enabling "Millennials" to assert power over organisations by utilising the pressured environment that social media creates and leveraging the influence of mass complaints.

Keywords: Consumer complaints, social media, Millennial Generation, brand relationships

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INTRODUCTION

> ""Britain has a somewhat pessimistic culture whereby complaining is done largely for the hell of it" (Baggini 2010).

The primary focus of this paper is to explore the relationship between UK consumers' goals and their choice of social media as a complaint channel. Consumer complaint behaviours (CCB) are common and at their core, are based on dissatisfying product or service experiences (Kowalski 1996),which can lead to negative word-of-mouth (WOM) behaviour or consumer exit, consequently proving detrimental to a company's reputation (Burton and Khammash 2010). Recently, an increasing number of consumers are using the Internet (Mattila and Mount 2003) and social media (Jansen et al, 2009, Pinto and Mansfield 2012) to communicate their complaints, either taking a public or

private approach (Day et al 1981; Singh 1988). Public complaints are directed to the company for redress and are visible for them to see (Tronvoll 2012); in the context of social media, complaints would be present on the organisation's Facebook wall or directed to their Twitter handle. Private complaints, on the other hand, involve spreading negative WOM and remain largely undetected by the organisation (Velázquez et al 2010); in this case the company would not be addressed directly in the social media post.

With social networking taking up more of Britons' time online than any other single activity (Experian 2012), it is evident that communication channels are changing (Walters et al 2010) and so are audiences. The attitudes and behaviour of "Millennials", also known as generation Y, have heavily influenced the evolution of social media (Mangold and Smith 2012), promoting interactivity at a new level through platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Kamerer and Morris, 2011). The millennial generation 'refers to those individuals born after 1980 who come of age after the turn of the century' (Pinto and Mansfield 2011, p.2) and it is estimated that this generation makes up 19.6% of the UK adult population (Aimia research, 2011). They are a powerful consumer group who expect to be heard, are often characterised as overconfident and opinionated (Alsop 2007), and see technology as part of their lives (Beckstrom, Manuel, and Nightingale 2008). Frequently they will retaliate through social media when dissatisfied with a product or service (eMarketer 2011) and with over 10 million active Twitter users in the UK (Arthur, 2012) and 31 million Facebook profiles (Kiss 2013), it's evident that these platforms have tremendous reach and provide the perfect medium for dissatisfied "Millennials" to vent their anger towards various organisations.

It is suggested that there has been a change in the balance of power between organisations and stakeholders (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2002) and increasingly 'public articulations may be used by consumers as an instrument of power' (HennigThurau et al 2004). Until a few years ago, the damage of negative word of mouth was limited to a fairly small audience; however, online comments can now go viral, reach millions of people within a short period of time and tarnish an organisation's reputation (Tripp and Gregoire 2011). It has been reported that 'many businesses in the consumer electronics industry are facing an increasing number of consumer complaints' (Ouden et al 2006, p.821). Yet, recently it was revealed that UK "Millennials" consider computer technology organisation, Dell, to have a highly authentic and reliable online presence (Van den Bergh 2013). Dell has, therefore, been chosen as the focus of the analysis of social media complaints in this paper in order to conceptualise social media complaint behaviour. More in-depth understanding of this subject is imperative as, when a consumer makes a complaint online against the organisation, consumer trust in the organisation's ability and willingness to solve a problem appropriately is being questioned (Zaugg and Jäggi 2006), which can impact upon an oranisation's reputation.

Whilst there have been many studies into online consumer complaint behaviour (OCCB); particularly in the areas of web-based consumer opinion communities (Hennig-Thurau et al 2004), protest framing websites (Ward and Ostrom 2006) and internet complaint forums (Lee and Hu 2004), most of the research specific to complaining has explored consumers from the USA (Ferguson and Phau 2012). Furthermore, there has been little research into the role of social media platforms in generating public concerns and complaints against organisations. It is widely accepted that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication impacts upon public attitudes and behaviours (Bickart and Schindler 2001); therefore, understanding consumer motives to complain through social media in a UK context presents opportunities for British organisations to enhance

public participation, better understand the market and create meaningful messages to achieve overall goals and objectives (Kamerer and Morris 2011).

The core contribution of this research is to conceptualise social media complaints in order to explore the relationships between "Millennials'" goals and channel choice, as well as the relationship between interactive and remote channels. How power is distributed between consumers and organisations will also be explored. In order to explore consumer complaints through social media, this paper will consider key themes within the literature utilising them as a foundation in which to build an understanding upon. Key themes to be examined in the literature review include the antecedents of consumer complaint behaviour in particular dissatisfaction, the perceived 'cost' of complaining, consumers motives for lodging complaints, the types of complaint channels in existence and the role of new media in consumer communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dissatisfaction

Dissatisfaction plays a central part in complaining and a 'disconfirmation paradigm provides a good conceptual framework for understanding consumer complaint behaviour' (Blodgett and Granbois 1992, p.94). It is an evaluative process whereby expectations are compared to actual performance. Woodruff et al (1983) describe negative disconfirmation to be when 'perceived performances falls below expectations' and this 'in turn leads to the emotional reaction of dissatisfaction' (p.296). Moreover, Kowalski's (1996) theory of complaining provides a similar outlook on dissatisfaction; however, she states that complaining is 'an expression of dissatisfaction, whether subjectively experienced or not, for the purpose of venting emotions or achieving intrapsychic goals' (p.180). Therefore, as dissatisfaction is a frequent but not necessary antecedent of complaining, Kowalski outlines two distinctive processes that facilitate the action. The first is the individual's 'dissatisfaction threshold', which is the limit for experiencing dissatisfaction. The second is the 'complaining threshold', which is the limit of expressing dissatisfaction. Both of these processes are underpinned by self-focused reflection. By evaluating current events against the individual's personal standards, a judgement is made whether expectations are exceeded (satisfaction) or whether, in fact, they have eluded expectations (dissatisfaction). Consequently, both of the processes combined will either result in the individual lodging a complaint or ceasing further action. Day and Landon (1977) similarly posit dissatisfaction as a precursor of complaining. However, their three step classification of CCB incorporates specific actions. The first stage begins with distinguishing between behavioural (take action) and non-behavioural (take no action) responses. The second and third stages assemble the behavioural responses into either public or private responses and subsequently detail specific actions. Public action refers to direct complaints to the seller or a third party, whilst private actions include the decision not to repurchase the product and/or negative word of mouth. In some circumstances, therefore, dissatisfaction can be seen as the catalyst for consumer complaints and dissatisfaction responses can include exiting the relationship all together (Singh and Pandya 1991), privately engaging in negative word of mouth (Day et al 1981), or publicly voicing the complaint (seeking redress) to the organisation (Hirschman 1980). It is this last action that forms the focus of this research. It is recognised that consumers who choose to complain publicly are generally younger (Shuptrine and Wenglorz 1981), therefore, it is appropriate to explore direct complaints when considering the millennial generation, as they are more inclined to take action (Warland et al 1975).

Cost of Complaining

Once dissatisfaction is experienced, the decision to complain can be seen as an analysis of the subjective utility of complaining, whereby the consumer deliberates the effort involved in making the complaint against the benefit they will receive for doing so (Kim et al 2003). Singh and Wilkes (1996) demonstrate that complaints can be influenced by the prospect of redress and the involved effort in complaining, a notion they call expectancy value. Likewise, Kowalski (1996) relates complaining to the mini-max principle, whereby consumers want to maximize rewards from complaint behaviour and minimize the associated costs. Additionally, Blodgett and Anderson (2000) build upon this suggesting that the perceived success involved in the effort taken to complain impacts individuals' probability of lodging a complaint. Finally, Lala and Priluck (2011) suggest that when consumers perceive the effort and benefit of complaining to be equal, they will aim to reduce the amount of effort expended in complaining. Their study on student "Millennials" discovered that the more difficult the complaint process is perceived to be, the less likely this consumer group is to complain. The authors go on to propose that web-based models of communication differ from in-person models in a number of ways including 'convenience, ease and sophistication' (p.238). This notion will be explored in this paper to determine whether "Millennials" perceive a cost utility when communicating complaints through social media channels. It is noted that for 'young techno-literate' generations (Freestone and Mitchell 2004, p.121) such channels 'minimize barriers of time and place required for complaining, and become an ideal outlet for customers to vent out their frustration after receiving a dissatisfying experience' (Ekiz et al 2012, p.97). This concept will be investigated within this paper, together with an exploration of whether millennial consumers believe social media facilitates the venting of their frustrations, as well as identifying the main motives for using social media in order to complain.

Motives for Complaining

There are many motives for voicing a complaint; however, the single most common reason is to vent anger for the purpose of catharsis (Alicke et al 1992). Dollard et al (1939) have compiled significant research suggesting that when goal achievement is met by obstacles, individuals have a tendency to produce feelings of anger and aggression, which subsequently lead to retaliation at the perceived source of frustration. Since venting is a "fire-and-forget" situation, no reply from the firm is expected or desired (Mattila and Wirtz 2004, p.149) and it is suggested that cathartic complaining reduces the feelings of distress by freeing individuals from reflecting about the causes of their dissatisfaction (Kowalski 1996). Previous research indicates that complaining can be motivated by the desire to seek redress, an apology, compensation, a request for corrective action, or to express emotional anger (Heung and Lam 2003). Conversely, many complaints, especially negative word of mouth (WOM), tend to be non-instrumental in nature, meaning that complaining is not directed at specifically changing the distress-causing situation (Nyer 1999). Other non-instrumental motivations can include self-presentation, whereby complaining may be used strategically as a tool of impression management (Kowalski, 1996), to solicit sympathy (Alicke et al 1992) or to assert power (Slama and Celuch 1994). Furthermore, Reynolds and Harris (2005) indicate that these non-instrumental motives can be identified as rationales for inauthentic complaints, whereby consumers 'intentionally and knowingly voice complaints without having prior experienced genuine service failure or feelings of dissatisfaction' (p.325). Bennett (1997) also discusses the idea of fraudulent complaints signifying that venting may not 'lead to improved longer-term relations with the source

of frustration' (p.159). Instead suggesting that disinhibition may occur, whereby an individual's inhibitions become relaxed and 'the act of aggressive complaining further stimulates complaints by providing the individual with emotional and other rewards for behaving in this way' (p.159). Therefore, through positive reinforcement consumers can affectively learn to complain and do so on a regular basis, both for their own consumption and personal benefit (Reynolds and Harris 2005). Disinhibited behaviour is a common product of computer mediated communication (Joinson 2007) due to the anonymity that is provided by the internet, which motivates individuals to speak more freely than they would do in real life (Ryan, 1995). However, disinhibition should not be confused with channel choice and Joinson (2007) explains that 'the choice of an online alternative may be due to the expectation that its attributes can be appropriated to satisfy the individual's own needs' (p.76). The increased tangibility and proximity of online communication increases the benign effects of disinhibition for the millennial generation (Baggio and Beldarrain 2011) encouraging them to 'express themselves more openly' (Suler 2004, p. 321), creating the potential to openly complain through mediums such as the internet (Pinto and Mansfield, 2011). The current research will consider whether "Millennials'" dependency on the internet has enabled them to articulate themselves in an open manner or if, in fact, social media facilitates uninhibited expressions of dissatisfaction. Mattila and Wirtz (2004) build upon this in a CCB context stating that when selecting a channel, dissatisfied stakeholders will pursue a 'complaint medium based on the degree of interaction associated with that particular channel' (Mattila and Wirtz 2004, p148). Therefore, it is important to conceptualise social media as a complaint channel in order to understand the properties and motives which make this platform appealing to disgruntled "Millennial" consumers.

Complaint Channels

Seemingly there are many different channels individuals can use to communicate their complaint and the choice will centre on meeting the individual's own needs and expectations. Mattila and Wirtz (2004) build upon Day and Landon's (1977) classification of CCB by conceptualising channel specific complaint behaviour. They present two types of channel that stem from redress seeking, either interactive consisting of face-to-face or phone communication, and remote channels such as letters or electronic messages. There has been scare research into channel specific complaint behaviour and Mattila and Wirtz (2004) stand alone in conceptualising this. Their research suggests that consumers will turn to channels such as email in order to vent their frustration, whereas consumers looking for tangible compensation might perceive face-to-face or phone channels to be more efficient due to the real time interaction with the provider. However, Greenberg (2010) acknowledges that in the midst of the digital age, through the use of networks such as Facebook and Twitter, communication has become real time especially to "Millennials" who utilise media 'without reservation or fear' (p.412). Consequently, as new complaint channels emerge, the research of Mattila and Wirtz (2004) will need to be revisited, taking new complaint mediums into consideration.

New Media

Ward and Ostrom (2006) consider the impact of the internet upon communication and note that whilst consumer dissatisfaction was once considered a 'lonely experience', it is now perceived as a useful way for consumers to find 'affirmation and social support for their oppositional role' by sharing dissatisfying experiences with others on internet forums (p.228). Thus aligning with social identity theory, which points to the idea that shared attributes allow individuals to distinguish themselves collectively from others and relate to particular in-groups (Stets and Burke, 2000). Building upon this notion, Bailey (2004) considers the internet to have facilitated negative consumer-to-consumer communications in a number of ways; particularly through complaint websites as 'aggrieved consumers now have a quick medium through which [to communicate] and a worldwide audience to [whom]they can voice their concerns' (p.170). This suggests a 'change in the balance of power' between organisations and consumers (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2002, p.18). Hennig-Tharua et al (2004) determine online and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communication as a great 'instrument of power' for stakeholders due to its immediacy, anonymity, accessibility, long term availability and its significant reach to potential audiences (p.42). Previous CCB research regarding the internet focuses on eWOM, as dissatisfaction can be articulated through dedicated complaint websites (Bailey, 2004), forums (Harrison-Walker, 2001) and opinion platforms (Hennig-Tharua et al 2004). Until the advent of social media, it was improbable that wider audiences could view direct public complaints in their most organic form. Now 'with just one click, consumers can post their complaints in the form of negative word-of-mouth to the internet' (Van Noort and Willemsen 2011, p.132), instantly communicating dissatisfying experiences with a network of other consumers. Social media has, therefore, enabled a shift in focus from organisations to stakeholders (Berthon et al 2012) due to the distribution and adoption of consumer-empowering technologies such as social platforms and mobile devices (Verhagan et al 2012). Despite social media's ability to influence aspects of consumer behaviour (Mangold and Faulds 2009), little research has been carried out into its properties as a complaint channel. Kaplan and Haelein (2010) suggest that social media platforms are often used in order to engage with like-minded individuals, with channels such as Twitter suited to creating 'ambient awareness' of issues (Kaplan and Haenlein 2011, p.105). Nevertheless, it is yet to be determined whether social media offers different properties than the internet when functioning as a complaint channel. Progressing in this line of research, Pinto and Mansfield (2011) have begun looking at contemporary complaint channels, focusing on Facebook as a complaint mechanism with a sample consisting of American Millennials from a Pennsylvanian university. The results concluded a low level of complaint intention via this channel. Building upon the research of Pinto and Mansfield (2011) and developing Mattila and Wirtz's (2004) existing model and conceptualising social media as a complaint channel, the research presented in this paper will consider additional social media platforms such as Twitter, to explore whether the same results are likely to occur within a UK context when location and channel variables are changed. Therefore, by developing Mattila and Wirtz's (2004) existing model and conceptualising social media as a complaint channel, this study proposes to consider new communication mediums such as social media and the behaviour of the millennial generation in relation to the following research objectives:

Aim: to conceptualise social media as a complaint channel

Objective 1: to understand the relationship between "Millennials'" consumer goals and social media channel choice when communicating online complaints;

Objective 2: to explore the balance of power between consumers and organisations within the context of online consumer complaints;
Objective 3: to examine the relationship between remote and interactive complaint channels.

METHODS

The review of the literature suggests a focus on the precursors and motives of complaints that arise from a dissatisfying experience; however, research conceptualising new complaint channels such as social media appears to be in its infancy. Given the lack of understanding surrounding the concept and the intention to build upon the work of Mattila and Wirtz (2004), an interpretivist mixed methods approach was adopted. It was important to create a more complete picture of online complaint behaviour by combining complementary data from semi-structured interviews and qualitative and quantitative content analysis; therefore, avoiding biases associated with single method approaches. Alicke et al (1992) suggest that the majority of empirical research on CCB has depended upon participants' retrospective accounts of dissatisfaction. These authors point out that such studies need to be questioned as retrospective accounts do not generally reflect what people actually do when they complain. Therefore, it is important for this research study to analyse examples of public complaints posted online, as the data is presented in a completely un-mediated form, therefore, casting light on the emotions felt by consumers at the time of making the complaint, and playing to the strengths and weaknesses of the textual communication (Wright and Larson 1997). As a method used on its own, however, content analysis t does not offer much opportunity to explore the reasons and motivations behind the texts (in this case, the online complaints) (Deacon et al 1999). Thus in order to gain an insight into why "Millennials" utilise social media as a complaint channel, content analysis was supported by semi-structured interviews, which provided a greater breadth and depth of information, enabling participants experiences and thoughts about complaining online and the meanings they associate with it, to be explored in their own words (Klandermans 2002).

Interviews

The interpretivist approach used in this study required the use of semi structured interviews in order to uncover how the participants made 'sense of their social worlds and how they express these understandings' (Deacon et al 1999, p. 6). The semi-structured format allowed 'the researcher to respond to the situation at hand and to new ideas on the topic' (Merriam 2009, p.90). The interviews were conducted individually in a face-to-face setting, typically lasted around 35 minutes, and the discussion guide was designed to address research objectives 1 and 2 i.e. to understand the relationship between "Millennials'" consumer goals and social media channel choice when communicating online complaints as well as the balance of power between consumers and organisations within the context of online consumer complaints. The interviews included "warm-up" questions to put the participants at ease (Grady 1998, p.21) which also enabled the researcher to gauge the participant's use of social media and the part it plays within their daily life. Having established rapport, the interviews were structured around a discussion guide which placed particular focus on themes such as motives for using social media as a complaint channel, expectations and goals, characteristics of the medium and consumer. The interviews were transcribed and to encourage an open and

honest discussion, the participants signed confidentiality agreements enabling the interviews to be recorded, increasing the accuracy of the data captured (Schensul et al 1999). Transcribing and recording the interviews and sending copies of the transcripts to participants for their feedback, contributed to the reliability and validity of the findings.

In recruiting participants to take part in the individual semi-structured interviews, a purposive sampling technique was used (Denscombe 2004). Each participant had to have previously voiced a complaint through social media, be active on platforms and be born after 1980 (the millennial generation). Four interviews were conducted, consisting of two male and two female participants, including those in employment as well as full-time higher education, in order to create a more representative picture of the millennial generation (See Table 1). The names of each of the participants have been changed to protect them from being easily identifiable. Consistent with the content analysis, all interview participants were a mixture of current and previous Dell customers who had experienced both good and poor relationships with the company. The interviews did not exclusively focus on Dell, however, as it was important to allow participants to draw upon a range of complaint experiences providing varied detailed insights into "Millennials'" online complaint behaviour.

Table 1- Respondents' Profile

Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Type of social media usage	Social media platforms used	Relationship with Dell
Mikey	Male	23	Property transfer team leader at estates and management	High regular - Everyday	Facebook and Twitter	Current customer for 5 years. Poor relationship
Jack	Male	24	Fresh foods supervisor at Harrods	High regular – Everyday	Facebook and Twitter	Previous customer for years. Good relationship
Lucy	Female	22	Student	High regular – Everyday	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr	Previous customer for 2 years. Good relationship
Hatti	Female	22	Student	High regular – Everyday	Facebook, Twitter and Instagram	Previous customer for 3 years. Poor relationship

Content Analysis

Complaints posted on the official UK Facebook and Twitter pages of computer technology provider Dell were the subject of qualitative content analysis, which sought to address research objectives 1 and 3 i.e. to understand the relationship between "Millennials'" consumer goals and social media channel choice when communicating online complaints and to examine the relationship between remote and interactive complaint channels. UK "Millennials" regard Dell to have a highly authentic and reliable

online presence (Van den Bergh, 2013) and consequently consumers will only lodge online complaints with those organisations they trust will solve issues or problems appropriately (Zaugg and Jäggi 2006). Importantly for the context of this research, the company has both a dedicated UK Twitter and Facebook page. The textual data obtained offered many methodological advantages; firstly, the complaints were presented in their most organic form and provided an account of dissatisfied consumers' complaints. Secondly, as content analysis allows the researcher control over the study (Berg 2009) and was, therefore, a time effective method. Qualitative content analysis is by its very nature subjective and relies heavily on the researcher's interpretation of the content (Macnamara 2003), and does not easily permit the measurement of the strength of emotion conveyed in the social media posts. The coding frame was, therefore, designed to enable key words and phrases to be entered for interpretation by the researcher.

A stratified random sampling technique was used, whereby Dell's Twitter and Facebook pages were separated into two distinct, non-overlapping groups as they each contained texts that shared similar characteristics (Deacon et al 1997). A coding frame (see Appendix 1) was designed to include categories such as the purpose of the complaint i.e. whether it was for redress, venting or to warn others, the nature of the complaint and whether other complaint channels had been mentioned in order to identify a relationship between remote and interactive channels. The coding frame offered methodological validity as 'the categories adequately represented the concepts in the research objectives developed' (Schreier 2012, p.7). The data consisted of complaints from a 3 month period, January to March 2013, as it was important to ensure equal detailed samples from each platform. In total, 114 complaints were coded, 57 from each. It should be acknowledged that it was not always possible to ensure that all social media posts coded were submitted from individuals from the millennial generation, as platforms such as Twitter do not display the ages of profile holders. All data was, however, extracted from verified UK sources, ensuring reliability and validity and contributing new research into conceptualising social media as a complaint channel within a UK context.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The primary aim of the research was to conceptualise social media as a complaint channel; by understanding the impact of consumer's goals in relation to channel choice, examining the relationship between complaint channels and exploring the notion of increased consumer power.

Voicing complaints

The primary data collected through both the interviews and content analysis can be seen to follow Day and Landon's (1977) classification of consumer complaint behaviour, as they stem from a 'dissatisfaction incident' (Day and Landon 1977) whereby consumers took direct public action in order to voice their complaints. In line with the work of Mattila and Wirtz (2004), the purpose of utilising social media can be likened to a remote channel of communication as interview participants selected platforms such as Twitter and Facebook in order to vent their anger. For example:

> "When I complain (on Twitter) it gets something off your chest, even if they don't do anything about it. Just makes you feel better, if you vent your anger then it's gone and it's out of you. It's just out in the open and Twitter is about speaking your mind" (Mikey, 23, team leader).

> "It's like a spur of the moment thing because at the moment you'reangry and you want to vent out your anger. Whereas once you've gone home and out of the moment you're not really in the mood to make a complaint. Twitter is just an easier way to complain and 90% of the time it's just to vent my anger, I'm not really expecting anything to change – Because it wasn't a major complaint" (Jack, 24, supervisor).

The findings demonstrate that complaints voiced through social media represent a "fire-and-forget" situation (Mattila and Wirtz 2004, p.149) and are non-instrumental in nature (Nyer 1999). The content analysis carried out also supported this finding as 82% of the complaints were articulated for the purpose of venting anger. One Twitter user explains:

> "Been on the phone to dell for an hour and they STILL haven't fixed the problem and I'm being charged for this!" (4 March 2013).

According to Kowalski and Erickson (1997), the suppression of distressed feelings will cause consumers to reside over the grounds of their discomfort, which could then result in increased dissatisfaction. Therefore, concurrent with Nyer (2005) the 'act of complaining caused a significant reduction in dissatisfaction' (p.938) for the interview participants and the platform was deemed most suitable due to ease and its open nature. It also appeared that "Millennials" utilised social media as a complaint channel according to the 'mini-max principle' suggested by Kowalski (1996), complaints were partly based on an analysis of the subjective utility of complaining and aimed 'to maximize the rewards to be gained by complaining and minimize the costs associated with complaining' (p.181). Interview participants drew upon the characteristics of the medium but also on the availability of 'consumer-empowering technologies' such as mobile devices (Verhagan et al 2012, p.1431):

> "It's great for finding out news and most news will be on Twitter before it's on other websites. Twitter it's very quick and easy. It's on your phone, it's there straight away, and you haven't got to pick up a phone or wait in a queue. There is always someone who is going to write back and deal with your complaint fairly quickly… you always get a response, and because you're on Twitter all the time anyway, you can read the reply quickly and easily" (Male, aged 24).
>
> "I use it (Twitter) mainly for checking football scores and it's great for getting the most up to date news. When it comes to complaints I'd rather use it because if I'm going to phone a company then they are more than likely going to charge me, so I'd rather use Twitter which is free. So like I said If I'm on my phone anyway I might as well talk to them quickly on Twitter than phone them up and probably get no answer" (Male, aged 23).

In line with the work of France (2009), it is apparent that the millennial generation do not expect to pay for services. When this is combined with the potential global reach and minimal time or financial effort involved in lodging online complaints (Goetzinger 2007), it is evident that social media platforms provide substantial opportunities for "Millennials" to exercise their demanding nature and 'desire to publicly express their opinions' (Hershatter, and Epstein 2010, p.241). Kanter and Fine (2010) state that "Millennials" view 'the world through the lens of social media and social networks' and that these platforms are seen as 'their home bases' (p.15); this was also clearly established through the interviews, social media either served as the main channel of

complaint or reinforced dissatisfying experiences from interactive channels such a telephone communication.

Channel Relationship

In contrast to the work of Mattila and Wirtz (2004), the findings from this study identify a relationship between complaint channels whereby dissatisfaction is transferred from interactive to remote mediums. The content analysis highlighted that 59% of consumer complaints voiced through social media expressed dissatisfaction concerning an interactive channel. Kowalski (1996) suggests that when consumers subjectively experience dissatisfaction their dissatisfaction threshold is lowered. In this case, consumers already had a low complaint and dissatisfaction threshold, perceiving the expression of dissatisfaction to permit the achievement of a desired outcome. The work of Mattila and Wirtz (2004) indicates that voicing a complaint through an interactive channel suggests a redress-seeking purpose. Moreover, the redress-seeking process is underlined with another factor which Kowalski (1996) posits to be a state of self-focused attention, whereby events and behaviours are compared to the individual's standards. It might be argued, therefore, that as expectations eluded the individual's standards, the dissatisfaction threshold was once again lowered and, consequently, the intention to resolve the discrepancy was increased, resulting in the consumer transferring their dissatisfaction from an interactive channel to a remote channel of complaint. It also indicates a change in the nature of the complaint transitioning from redress-seeking to venting. This finding supports existing work from Blodgett and Granbois (1992) who conceptualise complaining as a "dynamic" and sequential process, which recognises that certain complaint behaviours, such as negative word-of-mouth and third party complaints, are 'largely dependent upon the outcome of the redress seeking episode' also known as the perceived justice (p.93). Therefore, social media complaints can be characterised as part of a sequential process whereby dissatisfaction is transferred from one complaint channel to another – although this will not be the case for all social media complaints, the current study indicates that a significant proportion of data followed this pattern. It appears that the dynamic process in question changes the nature of the complaint as well as consumers tailoring their communications to suit the channel. The findings indicate that the majority of complaints lodged through social media were for the purpose of venting anger, and 62% of those complaints mentioned an interactive channel in the textual communication.

As the dissatisfaction threshold has been lowered once again, consumers can look to utilise the dynamic process of complaining. Dissatisfaction in this instance coincides with the work of Day (1954) and transforms to represent 'a state which motivates the consumer to consider engaging in one or more complaining activities…in view of their feasibility, their benefits when successful and their probability of success' (p.497-498). The decision to take another complaint action can be for the purposes of venting anger, in addition to drawing attention to the frustrating interactive channel experience. For example:

> "A good example would be my friend James, he phoned the games company (FIFA) when an account he created was hacked, however when they didn't reply to him in the allotted time they said they would, so he then turned to Twitter to vent at them. After he did they responded to let him know they were looking into it. But it was only after he vented is anger that they looked into it – I'm not sure whether they would have done it otherwise" (Mikey, 23, team leader).

> "I've phoned Topshop to complain as I'd paid for next day delivery and the service was shocking it didn't arrive. I had to call up every day and nothing was dealt with. So I then turned to social media and Twitter to complain about what had happened and I also wrote a blog about it – I personally felt better and people who saw the post would realise how bad the service was" (Lucy, 22, Student).

In this regard, the use of social media not only allows the individual to achieve intra-psychic goals, such as making themselves feel better, but also allows anger to be vented (Kowalski 1996). Additionally, it appears that the growth in social media teams dedicated to providing customer service through Twitter and Facebook (Cook 2012) affords consumers with a semi-interactive channel, as responses to complaints can vary in time. Subsequently, the content analysis supports the suggestion of social media as a semi-interactive channel with only 3% of the complaints analysed receiving no response from the organisation at all. The conceptualisation of social media as a semi-interactive channel contains two elements. Firstly, the method of voicing the complaint is remote, however, the response from the organisation is often in real-time or thereabouts, and the average time taken to respond to consumer complaints was 23 minutes. Secondly 'interaction and feedback are critical elements of all social media' (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p.66) and parallel to other digital environments, these platforms facilitate interactivity, allowing users to create dialogues and interact with others, conveying their opinions through an exchange of information (Schau and Gilly, 2003). The research findings exhibit that 57% of all complaints analysed included the involvement of other users in the complaint conversation. By applying the work of Ward and Ostrom (2006), company accounts on social networking platforms can be likened to complaint websites, in that they enable interactivity and allow users to 'find affirmation and social support' (p.228) alongside other dissatisfied consumers. It is this secondary level of interactivity which characterises social media as a semi-interactive channel, providing not only the opportunity for dialogue with the organisation, but also with other users. The findings are consistent with Warland et al's (1984) suggestion that 'consumer complainers have a common characteristic which binds them together' (p.67) Applying this argument to a social media context, it can be proposed that the channel provides users with a sense of social solidarity as 'complaining highlights the common interests of participants and these interests often rest on common experiences' (Hanna 1981, p.305). For example:

> "You want other people to see that you're complaining as you don't want to feel like you're the only one... Also you feel that if you comment on another complaint then it becomes like a snowball effect and you think maybe something will get done about it quicker. Because if everyone is complaining about the same thing then it becomes obvious to the company that there is a problem and hopefully they will try and sort it out as soon as possible" (Jack, 24, Supervisor).
>
> "After realising that the event had over sold the tickets I turned to Facebook to complain about the service I had received. The companies Facebook wall had lots of complaints from other customers about the same problem I was having – this made me feel instantly better as I realised I wasn't the only one!" (Hatti, 22, Student).

The opportunity to network and bring together other like-minded individual consumers can be seen as a benefit that the medium affords (Mangold and Faulds 2009). Subsequently, the 'snowball effect' mentioned and the mass voicing of complaints through social media bear resemblance to Ward and Ostrom's (2006) suggestion; that

those in conflict with an organisation 'encourage individuals to realise their common identity and the potential power of collective action' (p.221). It is understood that social media platforms are successful in creating a similar awareness of other users' issues also known as 'ambient awareness of issues' (Kaplan 2012), therefore, once consumers are impacted by a similar dissatisfying experience, they are more likely to act upon it meeting both their individual complaint needs and also those of the collective.

Power Balance

Hennig-Thurau et al (2004) posit that through electronic word-of-mouth communication 'a consumer's individual articulation of a consumption problem can contribute to the exertion of (collective) power over companies' (p.42) ,as the medium attracts a great number of potential viewers and comments are available for a long-term period of time. The interview findings suggest that the same notion can be applied to a social media complaint context, as one interviewee proposed "it gives consumers a voice that they have never had before." Seemingly, the collective nature of complaints was addressed with some insightful perspectives:

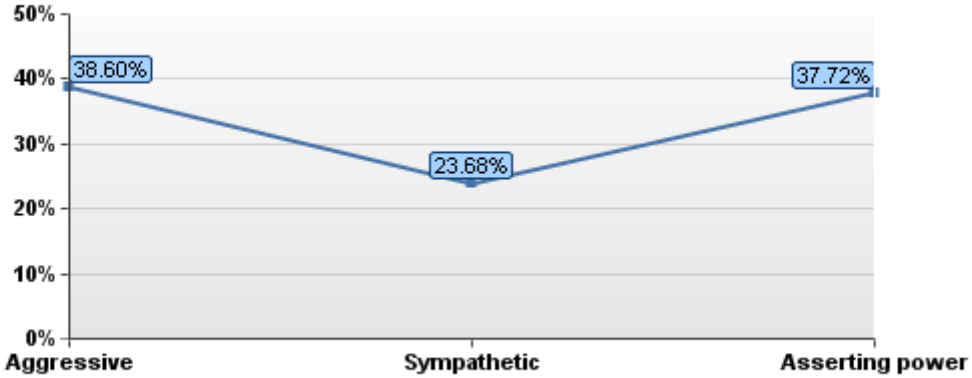
> "If you look at Twitter on the wider scale it would probably be a group act because there is most likely to be more than one person complaining about the same issue. At the time it's coming from your own personal account so it would seem individual but on a wider scale "it's a group act especially is people comment on your posts" (Mikey, 23, full time team leader).
>
> "There is a group element involved because it is open and you think that if someone else see's your tweet then they might speak up as well. It does make you feel better when you see other people having the same problem… it can start off as an individual thing, then manifest into a group thing. Although sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't" (Jack, 24, full time supervisor).

Subsequently, it appears that complaining via social media can be defined along a continuum that ranges from complaints as individual displays of dissatisfaction, to complaints that are the embodiment of a collective act. This also reinforces the conception of complaining as a dynamic process and Goetzinger (2007) proposes that the internet has highlighted the impact of 'openly complaining to the general public, termed collective complaining' (p.2). In addition it is suggested that the availability of comments may enable consumers to participate in more collective complaint behaviours. Therefore, direct public complaints made through social media may be used by consumers as a way of asserting power, providing 'a mechanism to shift power from companies to consumers, particularly in cases where criticism is articulated by many consumers simultaneously' (Hennig-Thurau et al 2004, p.42). Considering the 'potential global reach' (Mangold and Faulds 2009, p.359) of the medium and its open nature, the characteristics of the channel provide a pressured environment for the organisation, one which consumers appear to capitalise upon. For example:

> "It's a pressured environment and with lots of eyes on the complaint and response, it's important for the company to get it right… and you're aware that the company has that pressure on them. That's why you tweet them because and you know that they are more likely to respond as all eyes are on them. No one is going to be looking at my Twitter to see what I'm saying; the company will have more followers than me" (Mikey, 23 , team leader).

This environment allows consumers to demonstrate power over organisations as consumers are aware of the wider audience and the potential for the complaint to go viral. The content analysis suggests that there is a balance between aggressive comments and those asserting power. The findings demonstrated that 39% of the complaints were aggressive in nature and 38% appeared to exercise power (see Figure 1).

Figure 1- Nature of Complaints



Consumer power assertion was most often reflected in consumers' stating exit from the relationship. Hirschman's (1970) exit-voice theory posits that dissatisfied consumers have three options of which one is exiting the relationship with the seller, this is often seen as a last resort after voicing the complaint has failed. The findings indicate that social media facilitates consumers in voicing their complaints but also in voicing their exit. The organisation would not normally be pre-warned of a customer's impending termination of the relationship, however, social media allows users to exercise their power online and publicly threaten organisations with this action. Dell's Facebook and Twitter users explain:

> "Dell you're a con and you've just missed out on a lot of future business from a growing company....not that you care!" (21 February 2013, Facebook)
>
> "Under the Sales of Goods Act 1979 you are responsible for repair or replacement and I believe by failing to do this would be in breach of said act, I'll be letting trading standards know" (22 January 2013, Facebook).
>
> "My business has a social network of 151,306. I will tell them about my complaint unless I hear!" (22 February 2013, Twitter).
>
> "If a refund doesn't happen very soon – I shall write on my wall telling over 400 people just how badly Dell treat their customers" (21 January 2013, Facebook).

The findings concur with Hoffman et al (2004) who indicate that as a result of the rising consumer power on the internet, both exit and voice actions are strengthened. It is possible to conclude, therefore, that consumers may choose social media over interactive channels due to its highly public nature and ability to influence not only the organisations actions, but also actions of those closest to the unsatisfied consumer. Shea, Enghagen, and Kholler (2004) argue that the power of the internet as a channel of communication can be captured in the opportunity it affords consumers to both direct

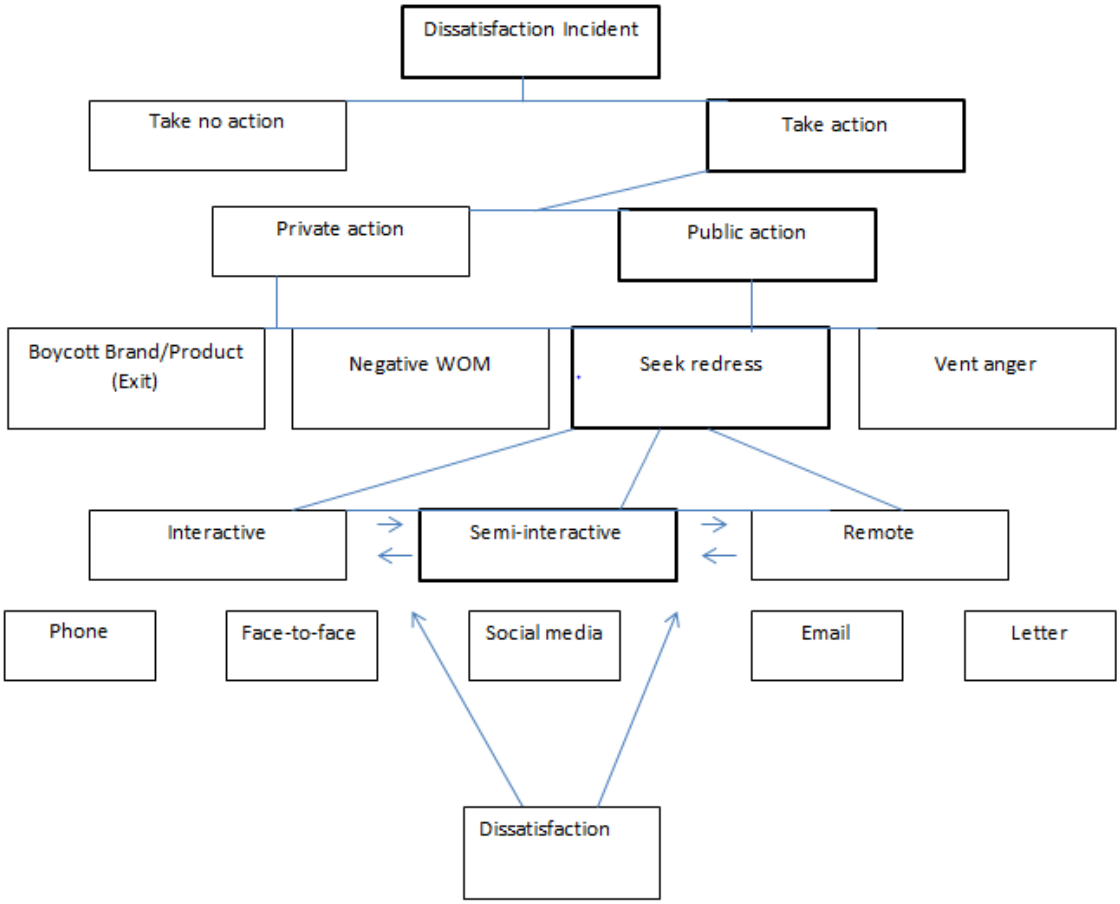
complaints on an interpersonal and mass communication level at the same time. This reinforces its status as a semi-interactive channel and consequently allows consumers to exercise a sense of power over organisations. Drawing upon computer-mediated communication literature, social media can facilitate consumers in asserting power over organisations due to a reduction in social cues (Sproull and Kiesler et al 1986). It is stated that static cues (environment) help individuals understand the social context of face-to-face communication. However, when these cues are removed during computer-mediated communication (in this case social media), users are able to display 'unregulated and self-centred behaviour' (Sproull and Kiesler et al 1986, p.1495), which leads to the suggestion that social media enables uninhibited behaviour in the form of power assertion. Therefore, 'under the protective cloak of anonymity, users can express the way they truly feel and think' (McKenna and Bargh 2000, p.62) suggesting that the characteristics of social media allow the empowerment of consumers more so than interactive channels.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the paper was to conceptualise social media as a complaint channel, building upon the work of Mattila and Wirtz (2004). The research took into account the relationship between consumers' ultimate goals in voicing a complaint in relation to choosing social media as a complaint channel, as well as the relationship between channels, whilst also exploring the balance of power between consumers and organisations. The findings were largely conclusive with those of Mattila and Wirtz (2004) demonstrating the majority of complaints were for the purpose of venting anger, however, a small proportion did exercise a redress-seeking resolution. Although the percentage was fractional, it demonstrated the flexibility in the medium and capabilities of consumers to utilise new channels of communication for varying complaint actions.
Although previous studies have considered the motivations of consumers articulating their views through electronic word-of-mouth on opinion platforms (Hennig-Thurau et al 2004), direct e-complaints to organisations have not been sufficiently considered. This research, therefore, contributes to the consumer complaint behaviour literature as it acknowledges that social media platforms are being used as complaint channels and identifies this medium to be semi-interactive in nature. The channel is established as semi-interactive, uncovering a pattern in which dissatisfaction is transferred between interactive channels and semi-interactive channels, mainly for the purpose of venting anger concerning either a failed redress seeking experience or dissatisfying interactive channel experience. Given the public nature of the complaint action, social media affords individuals the opportunity to not only interact with the organisation but other dissatisfied consumers, which provides them with a sense of social solidarity as it highlights a shared common experience (Hanna 1981). It has also been acknowledged by organisations that social media is gaining impetus as a channel of complaint and 'touches nearly every facet of our personal and business lives' (Qualman 2012, p.1). Dedicated social media teams providing customer support are becoming an integral part of business strategy, emphasising that the firm is no longer in control of the conversation (Kietzmann et al 2011). Subsequently, this has resulted in nearly all complaints voiced through social media being addressed by the organisation, affording the channel its semi-interactive nature as it provides interactivity on a dual level. Therefore by adapting Mattila and Wirtz' (2004) previous model of channel choice, this paper proposes a new model, which encapsulates social media and demonstrates the

dissemination of dissatisfaction between channels (see Figure 2). Although it is important to point out that not all complaints will contain the involvement of other consumers, the research indicates that a large proportion of complaints followed this form. The new model contributes to existing literature surrounding CCB as it not only identifies social media as a complaint channel; it also defines the medium as semi-interactive, allowing the reader to gauge the nature of the channel and the communication of complaints. Furthermore, by demonstrating the fluidity by which dissatisfaction can travel between remote, semi-interactive and interactive channels, the model addresses an otherwise unidentified area of the CCB literature, therefore, signifying the key contribution to be made by this study.

Figure 2- Social Media as a Complaint Channel



The research explored a suggested change in the balance of power between organisations and consumers (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2002) in relation to social media, taking into account the characteristics of the medium. The findings indicate an assertion of power as a frequent theme; with consumers not only appearing to exploit the characteristics of the channel, but also their power as a collective. Furthermore, complaints can be defined along a continuum that ranges from complaints as individual displays of dissatisfaction, to complaints that are the embodiment of a collective act. Aided by the semi-interactive nature of the channel, consumers were able to mobilise against organisations by contributing to other users' complaints, creating pressure on the organisation to respond or, alternatively, demonstrating their social support and affirmation (Ward and Ostrom 2006) for others' dissatisfying experiences. It was also apparent that consumers exercised threatening behaviour in order to convey a sense of

power - either publically suggesting exiting the relationship with the organisation, or threatening to spread negative word-of-mouth through their personal networks. This demonstrates the pressured environment that social media creates for organisations, considering how consumers capitalise upon it, transferring complaints from one channel type to another in order to achieve their personal goals.

While the research has explored social media as a complaint channel in terms of the millennial generation, it cannot be guaranteed that all complaints were voiced from those from this demographic. However the research does make progress in conceptualising social media in a UK context as all accounts and complaints had been verified to stem from a British source. Further research could determine the extent to which the channel is subjected to illegitimate complaints, as it is questionable whether or not complaints are exaggerated in order to influence the organisation. It may also be beneficial to look at the relationship between private actions, such as negative word-of-mouth, and how the concept adapts when exercised over public channels such as social media.

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