Motivation and Attitude: An Exploration of Customers’ Online Complaining Behavior

Guest complaints are inevitable due to the high level of human involvement in the hospitality business (Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2009). Traditionally, a complaint takes place in a dyadic manner in which the complainer communicates his/her grievance to the company, a third party, friends or relatives (e.g., Day & Landon, 1977). However, this dyadic communication environment for customer complaints is fading out due to the advent of social media websites. It has been reported that about two-thirds of the world’s Internet population visit social network or blogging sites (Anonymous, 2009). Online community has been even linked to the individual identification as a social proxy (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007).

The prevalence of social media websites provides new platforms for customers in the hospitality industry to voice their negative experiences. The traditional dyadic dialog between the company and the customer is shifting to a triadic communication network that involves the complainer (actor), the company and other website users (observers) (Figure 1). This new communication platform brings more complexity to the complaint process. First, a complaint is exposed to both the company and other website users (Lee & Lee, 2006). Second, the company’s responses toward the complaint are also accessible to both the complainer and other website users.

![Figure 1. The communication triad](image_url)
While a large number of studies have tackled the issue of traditional complaining behavior from various perspectives, investigations into the new phenomenon of online communication between the complaining customer and the company in a triadic communication environment are inadequate. This study aims to investigate customers’ online complaining behavior in a hotel setting using the communication triad as the backdrop. Specifically, the objectives of the present study are to (1) explore customers’ motivation for posting online negative comments, and (2) examine customers’ attitude toward hotel’s online responses to negative postings.

In the reminder of the article, we will first elaborate on the communication triad in an online setting. After that, we reviewed literature in customers’ potential motivation for posting online negative comments and their attitude toward hotel’s online responses. Proposed methodology, expected theoretical and practical contributions are discussed at the end of this article.

**Literature Review**

*The communication triad*

Actor, or complainer, denotes dissatisfied customer who posts negative comments about his/her unpleasant experience. Hotel in the triad represents the responsible party for actor’s complaint. It has been reported that hotel customers are more likely to browse online remarks to gather the information of a specific hotel thus he/she can access both complaints and the hotel’s responses (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Swanson, 1987). Thus, negative postings may bring hotel companies unexpected damages (Tao, 2009, 2010; Zhang & Tao, 2009). To minimize these
unpredictable damages and to better communicate with their customers, some hotels join online 
social communities and engage in social media facilitated activities, such as blogging, creating 
online social groups, or providing feedbacks to customers’ online negative comments. For 
example, the front office manager of Westin Washington City Center replied to a customer’s 
comment on TripAdvisor.com (Britten, 2010). Observer, in this communication triad, refers to 
the potential customer who reads the online interaction between the complainer and the company. 

The involvement of the three parties results in an “actor-hotel-observer” triad for online 
complaint process. Compared with the conventional dyadic communication, the triadic 
interaction describes a new communication environment where observers can "listen in" on the 
comments that are being posted. The co-presence of the company and the observers makes 
customers’ motivation for online complaining more complicated.

Customers’ motivation for posting online negative comments

As motivational process represents one prerequisite step to engage in a specific behavior 
(Hsu, Cai, & Li, 2010), customers’ underlying motivation for posting online negative comments 
is expected to interpret such behavior when they are aware of the co-presence of the company 
and observers. Prior studies on motivation suggest that an individual stimulated by a given 
situation engages in a behavior with the expected consequences (e.g., Crompton, 1979; Gnoth, 
1997). Feather (1982) also stated that motivation is a function of expectation. Therefore, 
customers’ online complaining behaviors are likely to be motivated by certain expected results. 

Since both hotel and observers now become customer’s “audience” in an online setting, 
customer’s online negative comments may be intended for the observers, the hotel, or no 
particular parties. Specifically, when the intended recipients of a negative comment are other
website users, the comment is in a form of negative word-of-mouth because the focal customer may want to share unpleasant experience, warn others of their future choice, and even take revenge against the company by letting other people know about his/her experiences and calling for boycott (e.g., Lee & Song, 2010; Lei, 2009; Wetzer, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2007). When the complaint is directed at the hotel, the online negative comment is no longer negative word-of-mouth, but a complaint because a solution such as an apology or compensation is expected from the company (e.g., Lee & Song, 2010). Companies strive to make up for their failures by providing online explanation, apology, or other recovery treatments. There is another possibility that customers may just want to express their opinions, vent dissatisfaction or seek the self-validation from others’ approval (e.g., Lee & Song, 2010; Lei, 2009). In this case, they are not asking for recovery efforts from the company or communicating their complaints to others.

Customers’ attitude toward hotel’s online responses to negative comments

While hotels are recommended by marketers to respond to customers’ online negative comments, little is known about customers’ reactions to hotel’s responses. Previous literature has addressed positive effects of firms’ online responses to customers’ negative comments, including avoiding attacks from other customers, protecting or improving company’s reputation (Clark, 2001; Davidow, 2003; Homburg & Furst, 2007; Lee & Lee, 2006), and increasing customers’ satisfaction (Cho, Im, Fjermestad, & Hiltz, 2003).

Attitude is defined as “a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object” (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p. 10). Attitude toward a specific object can be determined by one’s expectation of the object (Hsu et al., 2010). As mentioned earlier, motivation for an action indicates the expected results. The present study,
therefore, predicts a potential relationship between customers’ online posting motivation and
their attitude toward hotel’s subsequent online responses to their posting. For example, when
dissatisfied customers aim to vent their anger or ask other customers for boycott, they may
perceive hotel’s response as a defensive behavior; when customers want to share their experience
with others via the social media websites, they may regard hotel’s response interference. In these
two cases, it will be important to know whether there is a line that hotels cannot cross regarding
their level of engagement in the free online communication environment. On the other hand,
when customers are expecting an apology or compensation from the hotel company through their
public negative comments, they may favor hotel’s effective and immediate responses. To sum up,
customers’ attitude toward hotel’s online responses to online negative comments can be
indicated by their online posting motivation to some extent.

Proposed Methodology

Research method

The current study adopts grounded theory approach to explore the issues related to online
complaints. Different from quantitative methods in which the data reliability centers on sample
size, the grounded theory method emphasizes depth and quality. The method does not aim to
generalize findings but to develop or discover concepts and theories on a phenomenon, and to
study how people act and react to this phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).
Sample and data collection

In-depth interviews are regarded as a powerful and revealing method to gain a deeper understanding of people’s experience with a phenomenon (Thomas & Esper, 2010). Thus, discovery oriented in-depth interviews (McCracken, 1988) will be conducted. Approximately 30 participants were expected to provide rich qualitative data. Potential participants for interviews will be recruited on a major mid-western university campus in West Lafayette, Indiana. Undergraduate students and graduate students are to be approached because they are more likely to use social media websites. In addition, a study among 22,000,000 Facebook users found that the majority of them are partially or fully college educated (Anonymous, 2010).

Each interview will last about 30 minutes. Written notes and audio-tape will be used to record the interviews. Participants will be asked to describe their previous experiences of posting negative comments online. They are to be given freedom to openly discuss topics and take the interviews in any reasonable direction. In case participants will not refer to the key points that the present study is interested in, some complementary questions will be used, such as “Why did you go online instead of voicing your dissatisfaction directly to the hotel company” and “How did you expect the hotel company to respond”. The interview transcripts will be synthesized and analyzed to identify why customers post negative comments online and their potential attitude toward the hotel company’s online responses.
Expected Contributions

Theoretical contributions

The present study contributes to customer complaining literature by introducing a new perspective to the research on customer complaining behavior. Different from the conventional “customer-company” two-way complaining approach, the present study explores customer online complaining behavior in the “actor-company-observer” triadic online communication platform. In addition, this study makes a meaningful contribution to the hospitality literature by investigating hotel customers’ particular motivation for posting online negative comments and their attitude toward hotel’s online responses to complaints, with a consideration of the co-presence of the hotel and observers.

Practical contributions

The present study brings up an issue that has been defaulted by hotel industry: how they can get involved in the social media environment and communicate with customers. Specifically, results of the present study would help hotel managers to gain a further understanding of why their customers turn to websites to voice their dissatisfaction and what these customers are expecting. With this understanding, hotel companies would be able to formulate more appropriate and effective online response strategies.
References


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