

Managing Online Business Complaints: Current Insights and Future Directions

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Abstract

With the development of internet technology and the expansion of the digital economy, online business complaints have increasingly drawn attention from both academia and industry. Despite a growing body of research on online business complaints, there still needs to be more disciplinary perspectives and systematic reviews on this topic. In light of this, this paper adopts a managerial perspective to categorize existing literature into three major areas: online business complaints motivation, factors in causing online business complaint, and online business complaint responses, which clarify the fundamental framework of online business complaint research. Specifically, this study elucidates the mechanistic effects of different types of business products, business services, and customer perceptions on the motivations for complaints. After discussing how specific customer-business relations and contextual factors amplify complaints, the paper summarizes the responses to online business complaints, exploring how businesses can address customer complaints through language style and service recovery. This review offers insights into the future directions of online business complaint research and provides references for businesses in handling customer complaints.

Keywords: online business complaints, managerial perspective, research trends, literature review

1. Introduction

In the digital age, the proliferation of online platforms not only facilitates brand development for businesses but also amplifies the risks posed by customer complaints, necessitating response strategies. Online platforms serve as crucial carriers that offer opportunities for businesses to develop their brands, along with some challenges. Customers express dissatisfaction verbally or in writing, giving rise to customer complaints, and the development of social media significantly enhances the spread and impact of online complaints (Ward & Ostrom, 2006), prolonging and broadening the dissemination of complainants' personal negative experiences and emotions. This phenomenon also makes it easier to resonate with other customers, forming group complaints (Van & Willemsen, 2012). The widespread use of social media prevents businesses from promptly cutting off and controlling the dissemination of unfavorable information, making managing customer complaints a crucial issue for businesses (Zhao et al., 2020). To mitigate the series of impacts resulting from online business complaints, businesses should understand customer complaint behavior and promptly implement appropriate response strategies for addressing and managing them.

A systematic review of complaint factors and responses is needed in online business complaint research. Relevant studies primarily focus on the mechanisms of complaint generation (e.g., Du & Fan, 2012; Liu et al., 2023; McCole, 2004; Chebat et al., 2005; Hill et al., 2009; Du et al., 2014; Morgeson et al., 2020) and businesses' responses to complaints (e.g., Zhu et al., 2017; Racherla et al., 2012; Giles & Gasiorek, 2014; McGraw et al., 2015; Balaji et al., 2015; Hogleve et al., 2019; Yoo, 2020). While valuable research has emerged recently, diverse perspectives and inconsistent conclusions prevail, calling for a disciplinary perspective for an overall review and evaluation of online business complaint research. As this topic is more situated with the business and management areas, this paper systematically reviews and evaluates existing studies on online business complaints from a managerial perspective.

The present study categorizes existing research on online business complaints into three main sections: online business complaints motivations, factors in causing online business complaints, and online business complaint responses. Firstly, it subdivides complaint motivations into business products, business services, and customer perception, providing basic background information for online business complaints. Secondly, it distinguishes factors in causing online business

complaints, namely customer-business relations and contextual factors, which enhances our understanding of where online business complaints originate. Finally, focusing on online business complaint responses, the paper concentrates on complaint responses related to language style and service recovery, examining the practical implementation of these responses within this context. This paper is expected to provide a theoretical foundation and research direction references for future studies and professional practices.

2. Online Business Complaints Motivation

This section includes business products and services and customer perception. The first subsection consists of three parts: product harm crisis, stock-out new products, and business service failures. The latter is made up of group perception and individual perception.

2.1 Business Products and Services

2.1.1 Product harm crisis

The product harm crisis stands as one of the organizational crises that businesses encounter. Organizational crisis demand that organizations engage in new, untested, and unfamiliar behavior within time constraints to maintain or attain their desired state (Krackhardt & Stern, 1988), which could also potentially result in value loss for the organization (Billing et al., 1980). Within organizational crisis management, the study of product harm crisis has garnered significant academic attention (Jaques, 2009).

The product harm crisis is becoming increasingly prevalent in today's e-commerce environment (Siomko et al., 2010) and may lead to customer complaint behaviors. Identified as one of the common threats faced by companies, the product harm crisis is recognized as a business issue that may cause harm to customers (Vassilikopoulou et al., 2011), particularly associated with defective or even dangerous products (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). However, due to its inherent ambiguity, especially in the initial stages of a product harm crisis (Laufer et al., 2009), attributing responsibility accurately for the crisis is often challenging (Laufer & Coombs, 2006). Based on the perception of fairness, customers tend to compare the harmed products they purchased with those of other companies, leading to an intention to complain (Ren & Jing, 2013). Even if the company later absolves itself of responsibility, its brand may still suffer losses (Laufer et al., 2009). Therefore, the product harm crisis will likely trigger customer complaints in the early stages, threatening the business's brand which is explored by some existing studies.

2.1.2 Stock-out new products

The frequent occurrence of stock-out new products is a common service failure experienced by businesses. This phenomenon arises due to various factors such as insufficient supply or excessive demand, passive or strategic stock-outs, and promotional or non-promotional stock-outs (Liu et al., 2023), leading to frequent instances of stock-outs for new products. These stock-outs evoke a comprehensive customer response, affecting their cognition, emotions, motivation, or behavior (Fitzsimons, 2000). The waiting time for stock-out new products (WTFSNP) refers explicitly to the duration from when customers become aware of the stock-out of a new product until they obtain the stock-out new product, which encompasses objective and subjective waiting times (Sunaga, 2018).

The duration of stock-outs for new products can impact customers' possibility of complaining. Generally, customers' adverse reactions are positively correlated with waiting time (Taylor, 1994). In other words, as customers experience longer waiting times, it becomes more likely to trigger their negative responses (Hui & Tse, 1996; Borges et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2018). Liu et al. (2023) found that although the length of the waiting time may shift customers' attention, regardless of its duration, customers tend to complain. Therefore, relevant studies focus on how to avoid stock-outs of new products, aiming to reduce customers' inclination to complain and thereby safeguard the brand and interests of the business.

2.1.3 Business service failures

Service failure is another crucial factor leading to customer complaints. Scholars have focused on customers' perceived satisfaction levels, exploring how to prevent service failures. For instance, Bitner et al. (1990) propose that service failure occurs when there is a lower quality of service during the service encounter. Building on this, Grönroos (1994) suggests that service failure results from a business's failure to meet the expected service levels of customers. Later, Bejou & Palmer (1998) broadened the scope of identifying service failure, asserting that regardless of responsibility when customers perceive that a service failure has occurred, a service failure has taken place. That is, service failure is the subjective assessment by customers that the business has not met the expected service levels.

The attribution of service failures and their impact on customer complaint behavior is also a focal point. Attribution refers to attributing the cause of a failure to either the customer or external environmental factors (Green et al., 1980). Aiming at this, Richins (1983) proposes that service failure attribution can be categorized into internal and external

attributions. In addition to these two factors, there are third-party reasons (cf. Song et al., 2005), all of which influence customers' complaint intentions to varying degrees. Compared with failures caused by customers, failures initiated by the business result in greater customer dissatisfaction and negative behavior (Richins, 1983). In other words, when customers attribute the cause of service failure to the business, their dissatisfaction increases (Bitner, 1990). Thus, different attributions of service failure impact customer complaint intentions. When the attribution is directed towards the business, customers are more dissatisfied, potentially posing a threat to the brand and interests of the business.

2.2 Customer Perception

2.2.1 Group perception

The network characteristics of business complaints mean that customer complaints often take on group form, allowing access to a large audience of other customers. The internet has given rise to numerous virtual communities, with online virtual communities becoming spaces for consumer virtual encounters (Cachia et al., 2007; Corrocher, 2011; Waters & Jamal, 2011). As a new channel for complaints (Harrison, 2001), this public space makes communication with strangers easy and convenient (Huang & Li, 2016). Therefore, group complaints in online business settings are prevalent, and studying the impact of group complaints on individual customer complaint behavior is a central topic.

Online group complaints have an impact on the individual psychological mechanisms of consumers. For one thing, the internet influences consumers' psychological mechanisms. Specifically, the internet can lead to the "group polarization phenomenon," which is approximately twice as pronounced as in the offline social setting (Wallace, 2001). For another, the characteristics of social groups play a crucial role in individual decision-making and judgment. Customers often experience service issues with other customers involving social aspects (Tetlock, 1985). The frequency of interactions among members influences the sense of belonging, satisfaction, trust, and the emergence of group identity within the community (Opreana, 2013). Building on this, the internet's anonymity feature accentuates individuals' depersonalization (Huang & Li, 2016), further promoting group convergence in highly ambiguous situations.

Customers who experience service issues generate a particular psychological phenomenon of group perception, potentially leading individuals to develop complaint intentions and behaviors distinct from the group. Research has found that following service failures, customers' negative emotions are mutually reinforced through interactions within the group, thereby intensifying their inclination to complain (Du et al., 2014). However, other studies have revealed that, compared with individual situations, when customers find themselves in a group facing similar service problems, the perceived utility of complaining is lower, and the inclination to complain is weakened (Chen et al., 2020). Group-based complaints influence the individual psychology of customers, but the impact on the individual's complaint intentions and behaviors has not been conclusively determined.

2.2.2 individual perception

Following service failures, customers perceive various types of harm, including material, emotional, and psychological, leading to the recognition of negative emotions and a motivation to complain. Numerous studies have made distinctions in this regard. Firstly, distinctions are made based on the types of harm consumers experience. For instance, service failures can result in economic and psychological harm to consumers (Zhang & Lv, 2010). Additionally, classifications are made according to the types of losses consumers undergo. Losses resulting from service failures are categorized as economic and social (or psychological) losses (Li & Yu, 2006), utilitarian resource losses (such as money, goods, and time), and symbolic resource losses (such as status, respect, and sympathy) (Du & Fang, 2007). Furthermore, distinctions are made regarding negative emotions inflicted on consumers. Smith et al. (1998) found that service failures can lead to a range of negative emotions in consumers, including anger, dissatisfaction, disappointment, self-pity, and anxiety. For example, empirical research by Zhang et al. (2010) found that service failures in banking significantly impact consumers' internal and external negative emotions. In summary, customers, after experiencing service failures, perceive harms of different types and levels.

In the perception of individual customers regarding service failures, face is a unique factor. Face influences individuals' perception of social presentation and psychological status (Du & Fan, 2012). Face resources can be gained, lost, and exchanged (Brown & Levinson, 1978). When consumers encounter service issues leading to a loss of face, negative emotions such as shame and embarrassment may arise (Goffman, 1955). Consequently, consumers may seek to regain or preserve face, and such actions often accompany customer complaint behavior (Du & Fan, 2012). Therefore, after experiencing service failures, customers may engage in complaint behavior to restore face, posing a threat to the brand and interests of the business.

3. Factors in Causing Online Business Complaints

This section focuses on customer-business relations and contextual factors. Customer psychological contract and customer loyalty are included in the first subsection while complaining costs, complaint knowledge and possibility

complaint of success form the other subsection.

3.1 *Customer-business Relations*

3.1.1 Customer psychological contract

Scholars have extensively researched customer-business relations, focusing on the perception and demands of customers within the psychological contract. Roehling (1996) was the first to extend the concept of the psychological contract to the relations between businesses and external customers. Building upon this, Hill et al. (2009) posited that the psychological contract is the subjective perception of obligations by the participants toward each other. Other studies (e.g., Zhao & Ma, 2015) further complemented this perspective, indicating that the psychological contract involves customers' perception of responsibilities and obligations between themselves and businesses that are not explicitly stated in written contracts. Overall, existing research has predominantly centered on the relationship between businesses and end customers, defining the customer psychological contract as the perception and beliefs of customers regarding reciprocal responsibilities and obligations between themselves and the business (e.g., Pavlou & Gefe, 2005; Kingshott, 2006; Hill et al., 2009; Goles et al., 2009; Tang et al., 2011). Therefore, the customer psychological contract is more relevant to the subjective perception of customers regarding their own and the business's responsibilities and obligations.

Furthermore, the breach of the psychological contract signifies the breakdown of customer-business relations, and understanding its mechanisms and defining boundaries remains a central issue. When unethical behaviors undermine the rights and interests of customers, breaches in the customer psychological contract occur (Hill et al., 2009). Regarding the definition and boundaries of a breach in the customer psychological contract, as summarized by Zhao & Ma (2015), it is the perception by customers of the extent to which the business unilaterally fails to fulfill obligations, excluding perceptions of customers regarding their fulfillment of obligations. Therefore, when a breach of the psychological contract occurs, customers might feel disappointed or dissatisfied with the business or even terminate their relations with it, seeking out new service providers (Zhao & Ma, 2015). Overall, breaches in the psychological contract tend to be subjective perceptions and can hurt a company's brand.

3.1.2 Customer loyalty

Customer loyalty programs have been widely employed in the marketing domains of aviation, hospitality, and retail industries in recent years (e.g., Tang et al., 2012; Kang et al., 2015), and their significance has garnered consensus within academia (Ivanic, 2015). Research in this area specifically focuses on the mechanisms underlying the formation of customer loyalty and its impact on businesses' interests.

Customer complaint behavior influences customer loyalty. As providing feedback is an effective way to maintain social relationships, customer loyalty to the brand increases when customer complaint behavior is encouraged (Umashankar et al., 2017). For example, Su's (2012) study demonstrates the necessity of encouraging customers to voice their complaints directly to the business. Morgeson et al. (2020) also found that economic growth, competition, industry type, and customer expectations impact the speed at which customer complaints transition to customer loyalty. While encouraging customer complaints can, to some extent, enhance customer loyalty, other contextual factors also influence the degree of its impact.

However, the impact of customer loyalty on the brand and profits of businesses remains to be seen. On one hand, loyal customers can assist companies in securing a competitive advantage in the market, thereby achieving higher profits (Geng & Jia, 2014). On the other hand, they may also leverage their status as "loyal customers" to seek privileges (Su, 2012), thereby increasing the service costs for the company and decreasing overall profitability (Wetzel et al., 2014). Additionally, Gregoire et al. (2009) found that in situations of service failure, strong customer relations can give rise to a "love-hate" effect, resulting in more intense retaliatory actions such as the spread of negative word-of-mouth, ultimately leading to financial losses for the business. Therefore, while customer loyalty may assist businesses in gaining profits through their loyalty, it may also lead to the seeking of privileges or the "love-hate" phenomenon, resulting in retaliation against the business.

3.2 *Contextual Factors*

3.2.1 Complaining costs

Complaint costs are contextual factors that influence customer complaint behavior. Research has identified complaint costs as one of the factors influencing customer complaints (McCole, 2004), as customers consider the costs involved before engaging in complaint behavior, such as time and effort (Richins, 1982). For instance, Koekemoer (2014) found that when customers complain through online forums, they assess factors like the time cost of complaining, the complexity of the complaint process, and the possibility of receiving a response, ultimately choosing the optimal complaint strategy. Therefore, complaint costs are crucial for customers when engaging in complaint behavior.

Scholars have focused on distinguishing between online and offline complaint costs in the digital era. As summarized by Wang et al. (2018), the complaint costs associated with online complaint behavior differ from those related to offline complaint behavior. Likewise, Zaugg (2006) pointed out that the increase in online complaints is due to the reduced time and economic, psychological, and physical costs brought about by the unrestricted nature of the online environment. Robertson (2012) further added that the ease of online channels (including low time costs, lack of time constraints, accessibility, and user-friendliness) is a crucial factor contributing to the increase in online complaints. Furthermore, scholars have explained why the costs of online complaints are lower than those of offline complaints. Compared to offline complaints, online complaints can avoid face-to-face interactions between customers and company personnel, thereby reducing the psychological costs of customer complaints (Hong & Lee, 2005). Similarly, Robertson & Shaw (2006) found that online complaints result in lower psychological costs by avoiding direct painful reactions compared to face-to-face or telephone interactions. Thus, the comparatively lower costs associated with online complaints, in contrast to offline complaints, have facilitated increased online complaint behavior.

3.2.2 Complaint knowledge and possibility complaint of success

Complaint knowledge and experience refer to customers' information about complaining behaviors and methods from external sources or their own experiences (Singh & Wilkes, 1996). Building on this, Moliner et al. (2010) posit that the more comprehensive the relevant complaint knowledge and experience, the more likely customers are to engage in complaining behavior. For instance, customers familiar with regulatory authorities' complaint processes are more inclined to lodge complaints with third parties (Tronvoll, 2007). Therefore, complaint "veterans" are more likely to express their dissatisfaction through complaint behavior when experiencing unsatisfactory service. In light of this, businesses can adopt relevant complaint management practices to mitigate the negative impact of complaints.

The possibility of complaint success positively influences customers' propensity to complain. Research indicates that the probability of complaint success (Blodgett et al., 1997), the possibility of issue resolution (McCole, 2004), consumers' perception of the possibility of complaint success (Jin, 2007), and the probability of complaint success (Grace & Bodey, 2007; Singh & Jagdip, 1990; Tojib & Khajehzadeh, 2014; Yang & Mattila, 2012; Liu & Mattila, 2015) impact customers' inclination to complain. The varying possibility of complaint success leads customers to adopt different complaint behaviors (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). Supposing the perceived value of the complaint is higher (for more substantial products), and the probability of complaint success is more significant. In that case, customers are more likely to engage in complaining behavior (Chebat et al., 2005). Thus, the possibility of complaint success significantly influences customers' complaint behavior. However, more research must address the underlying factors behind complaint success probability.

4 Online Business Complaint Responses

Compared with customer complaints, how businesses design complaint responses to maintain brand and business interests is of practical significance. Appropriate complaint responses can salvage consumers' negative emotions, leading to enhanced word-of-mouth communication for the business. They can also help customers regain trust, satisfaction, and willingness to make repeat purchases (Blodgett et al., 1997; Li et al., 2011). Research in this domain focuses on the design of customer complaint responses, emphasizing language style and service recovery to address complaints.

4.1 Language Style

The language style businesses employ in responding to complaints and its effectiveness have drawn academic attention. For example, Ludwig et al. (2014) pointed out that language style significantly influences both communicators' subsequent behaviors in computer-mediated communication environments. With the prevalence of business complaints on social media, language style has become a decision factor for complaint handling due to its diagnostic and retrievable nature (Huffaker et al., 2011). That is, when responding to customer complaints through social media, the language style adopted by businesses impacts its effectiveness (Giles & Gasiorek, 2014). Specifically, the design of language style in business complaint responses includes humorous responses and similar responses.

4.1.1 Humorous response

Humor plays a unique role in responding to complaints. In the new media era, humor is present in various online communication scenarios, including the business context. On the one hand, consumers tend to enhance the virality and persuasiveness of complaint content through entertaining forms such as humor (McGraw et al., 2015). On the other hand, humor is also one of the ways businesses attempt to defuse consumer complaints, especially those occurring online (Zhu et al., 2017).

Humor serves to resolve conflicts arising from service failures between customers and businesses. According to the Benign Violation Theory (Zhu et al., 2017), humor arises when there is a simultaneous perception of conflict and

benignity, leading consumers to view the conflict as benign and amusing (McGraw & Warren, 2010). Therefore, humorous responses from businesses fundamentally aim to make consumers perceive the conflict between them and the business as acceptable (i.e., a benign perception of the conflict) (Warren & McGraw, 2015), thereby improving their attitudes towards the company and its products (McGraw et al., 2015).

The mechanism behind the effect of humorous responses primarily operates on an emotional level to address complaints. Humor elicits positive emotional reactions in audiences, such as joy, amusement, and pleasure (Gulas & Weinberger, 2006). When this positive emotion is closely associated with a brand, it undergoes “emotional transfer” onto the target brand (De Houwer et al., 2001), significantly enhancing advertising attitudes, brand perceptions, attention, and purchase intentions (Eisend, 2011). Consequently, humor positively impacts consumer brand attitudes (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992; Eisend, 2009).

However, consumers under different relational paradigms may perceive the same humor to varying extents, influencing their level of benign perception towards the company (Aggarwal & Zhang, 2006; McGraw et al., 2015). For instance, in transactional relations, if a company employs self-enhancing humor, consumers may develop skepticism and resistance towards the company, being less susceptible to persuasion (Kirmani & Zhu, 2007). Therefore, humorous responses can address conflicts arising from complaints and safeguard the brand and interests of businesses, but it is crucial to adopt a balanced and discerning perspective on the impact of humor in various contexts.

4.1.2 Response with similarity

Communication can be enhanced through stylistic similarity. According to the Communication Accommodation Theory, the match between the language styles of conversational partners influences communication outcomes, leading to a convergence phenomenon in the use of functional vocabulary, known as language style similarity (Ireland & Pennebaker, 2010; Ireland et al., 2011). Language style similarity signifies that communicators share similar psychological states and cognitive structures (Ireland et al., 2011). This can reduce the perceived social distance between communicators, enhancing mutual understanding (Ludwig et al., 2014; Huffaker et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2020). Consequently, it promotes friendly relations between individuals and elevates the consistency of potential cooperation partners (Huffaker et al., 2011). Therefore, language stylistic similarity contributes to increased mutual understanding, decreased conflict, and improved communication effectiveness.

Utilizing similarity in responses to customer complaints can optimize the effectiveness of responses. When businesses respond to complaints with similarity, it not only reduces the perceived social distance between the company and the complaining consumer but also shortens the perceived social distance between the company and bystander consumers (Giles & Gasiorek, 2014; Giles, 2016). This engenders a high similarity between the consumer and the company (Muir et al., 2016). Building on this, perceived similarity can decrease the uncertainty of the target individual (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), enabling more effective and confident interactions between the parties involved (Baxter & West, 2003). Consequently, this enhances the persuasive impact of company responses (Forman et al., 2008; Racherla et al., 2012) and complaint resolution effectiveness (Peng et al., 2004; Ferrin et al., 2007). Furthermore, employing business responses with similarity increases trust among bystander consumers, ultimately improving their evaluation of the company's products (Baxter & West, 2003). Therefore, businesses employing responses with similarity contribute to fostering customer understanding and trust, optimizing complaint resolution effectiveness in online commerce.

4.2 Service Recovery

When responding to online business complaints, businesses typically employ two main approaches to enhance customer satisfaction: maintaining a high level of service performance to prevent errors and promptly implementing effective service recovery measures during service failures (Anderson & Mansi, 2009). Service recovery has garnered widespread academic attention as a practical strategy for addressing consumer complaints following service failures. Existing research predominantly explores the role of service recovery in maintaining customer-business relations and the impact of transparent service recovery on prospective consumers.

4.2.1 The effect of service recovery

The success or failure of service recovery significantly influences the effectiveness of complaint resolution. On the one hand, successful service recovery improves the outcome of complaint responses and helps retain customers. From the perspective of consumer word-of-mouth, fair and satisfactory service recovery enhances positive word-of-mouth from focal consumers (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002; Wang et al., 2016), leading consumers to modify their complaints and repurchase (Yoo, 2020). From the standpoint of consumer emotions, service recovery has a mitigating effect on negative consumer emotions (Zhang & Gao, 2011). From the perspective of consumer trust, service recovery enables customers to regain satisfaction and trust, making them more inclined to remain loyal to the company (Chang et al., 2012). Therefore, businesses should consider service recovery as a “moment of truth” in maintaining customer relations.

On the other hand, the failure of service recovery may jeopardize existing customer relations and even trigger retaliatory complaint behaviors. If service recovery fails to restore the sense of fairness for existing consumers, it may significantly impact the long-term relations between the business and consumers (Conlon & Murray, 1996). This can lead consumers to consider retaliation a potent means of restoring fairness (Walster et al., 1973), resulting in online retaliatory actions, a common genesis of complaints on social media platforms (Balaji et al., 2015). Therefore, businesses should avoid service recovery failures, retaining more consumers through successful service recovery and safeguarding the company's brand.

4.2.2 The transparency of service recovery

In addition to the service recovery itself, the transparency of service recovery is also a critical factor. Service recovery transparency refers to businesses in the digital environment sharing objective and easily understandable information about the service recovery process and outcomes with potential consumers (Hogreve et al., 2019; Yang & Kang, 2021), conveying signals of integrity and fairness (Lazarus & Mcmanus, 2006). Upon perceiving the efforts made by businesses in the interest of consumers, potential consumers typically reciprocate by appreciating the shared information (Eisingerich & Bell, 2008). They also tend to transform perceived potential negative information into positive signals of service quality, thereby enhancing trust in the enterprise and increasing willingness to make purchases (Hogreve et al., 2019). Therefore, service recovery transparency, achieved through elucidating the recovery process and outcomes, garners trust and purchase intent from potential consumers, contributing to the long-term development of businesses.

5. Research Trends and Practical Implications

5.1 Future Trends

This section further discusses the research prospects of online business complaints in terms of disciplinary perspectives, research gaps, and research directions.

Drawing from prior research on business complaints, a managerial perspective has been innovatively incorporated to advance the understanding of online business complaints within academic and industry circles. This integration of a managerial perspective assists researchers in delineating the boundaries of existing and future studies across diverse topics and issues. Simultaneously, through the critical synthesis of existing literature and the transformation of research findings (Du & Fan, 2012; Liu et al., 2023; McCole, 2004), it furnishes a theoretical foundation for businesses in the industry to manage customer complaints in practice.

However, some limitations in previous studies on online business complaints are identified. For instance, following service failures, customers' negative emotions are mutually reinforced through group interactions, intensifying their inclination to complain (Du et al., 2014). However, other studies suggest that when customers are part of a group experiencing similar service issues, their inclination to complain is weakened compared to individual situations (Chen et al., 2020). Consequently, the mechanisms through which group complaints affect individual customer complaint tendencies still need to be clarified. Future research can further explore the psychological phenomena of customer groups by analyzing factors in online social communities, thereby delineating how individual customers perceive group complaints and develop corresponding complaint tendencies. Additionally, the impact of customer loyalty on businesses is not conclusively determined in academia. While loyal customers can contribute to higher profits for businesses in market competition (Geng & Jia, 2014), they may also leverage their "loyal customer" status to seek privileges, potentially reducing business profits (Su, 2012; Wetzel et al., 2014). In this regard, future research can build upon this foundation to further investigate the mechanisms through which customer loyalty operates in the context of business complaints.

Besides, research directions are also witnessed based on this paper. With the development of digital technology and the internet economy, traditional face-to-face complaints have shifted to complaints and grievances lodged on social media platforms, significantly enhancing the spread and impact of complaints (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). At the same time, an increasing number of complaint factors associated with the characteristics of social media have emerged, continually enriching and expanding the research scope of online business complaints. As Ludwig et al. (2014) pointed out, in communication environments mediated by computers, language style significantly influences the subsequent behaviors of both communicators. Future research in online business complaints can integrate the unique language style of social media, further exploring the impact of language style on communication participants in online business complaint scenarios and drawing practical insights.

5.2 Practical Implications

To effectively minimize customer complaint motivations, businesses can implement proactive strategies such as optimizing their services and product offerings. For example, if a company consistently receives complaints about

product defects, they could invest in improving product quality control measures or conducting thorough pre-launch testing to prevent product harm crisis. This approach not only reduces the possibility of customer complaints but also protects the brand reputation from potential damage (Ren & Jing, 2013). Furthermore, businesses can focus on exceeding customer service expectations to enhance satisfaction levels. For instance, offering personalized assistance or implementing a user-friendly returns policy can significantly impact customer perceptions. By consistently delivering exceptional service experiences, companies can foster customer loyalty and mitigate the risk of negative feedback spreading on social media platforms (Laufer et al., 2009). On the whole, by proactively addressing potential areas of concern and exceeding customer expectations, businesses can effectively minimize the generation of customer complaints and safeguard their brand reputation in the digital era.

To foster and maintain healthy customer-business relations, businesses can strategically establish and uphold psychological contracts with their customers. For instance, companies could go beyond transactional exchanges and create emotional connections by offering personalized loyalty programs or exclusive perks. Such initiatives contribute to a positive psychological contract (Zhao & Ma, 2015), reducing the possibility of customer dissatisfaction and subsequent complaint behaviors. To proactively manage and prevent psychological contract breaches, businesses should focus on transparent communication and setting realistic expectations. For example, if a company promises prompt delivery, ensuring accurate and timely updates on shipping status can reinforce the psychological contract. Additionally, providing clear terms and conditions, along with responsive customer support, helps mitigate misunderstandings and perceptions of unmet obligations. On the whole, by consciously establishing and nurturing psychological contracts through personalized initiatives and transparent communication, businesses can build trust, reduce the risk of contract breaches, and effectively prevent customer complaint behaviors, thereby safeguarding their brand and interests.

In effectively addressing customer complaints, businesses can employ specific language styles in their responses to enhance customer satisfaction and brand perception. For instance, incorporating humor into responses is a proactive approach aimed at fostering a positive perception of conflicts between consumers and the business (Warren & McGraw, 2015). An example of this could be a lighthearted acknowledgment of a mistake or issue, demonstrating the company's willingness to engage with customers in a friendly and approachable manner. Moreover, businesses can strategically tailor their language styles to mirror that of the customers. This adaptive response not only promotes more effective and confident communication between the two parties (Baxter & West, 2003) but also contributes to the persuasive impact of corporate response messages (Forman et al., 2008; Racherla et al., 2012). For instance, if a customer uses informal language in their complaint, responding in a similarly casual and relatable tone can create a sense of connection and understanding. These language-adjustment strategies play a crucial role, especially in the context of online complaints (Zhu et al., 2017). Considering the digital nature of interactions, businesses must navigate the virtual space with sensitivity. Applying these linguistic styles contributes not only to complaint resolution but also to brand maintenance and enhancement of consumer attitudes toward the company and its products (McGraw et al., 2015). On the whole, this paper advocates for businesses to consciously adopt language styles in their responses that align with customer preferences. By doing so, companies can defuse complaints, strengthen their relationship with consumers, and ultimately achieve the dual objectives of effective complaint resolution and brand maintenance.

6. Conclusion

This paper systematically reviews existing literature on online business complaints from a managerial perspective. First of all, it summarizes the specific manifestations of online business complaints motivation. On the one hand, Product harm crisis, stock-out new products and businesses service failures may trigger customer complaint motivations; while on the other hand, both the group customers perception and individual customer perceptions can contribute to generating complaints. In addition, the paper identifies the manifestations of factors that cause online business complaints, encompassing customer-business relations and contextual factors. These factors may contribute to the further amplification of complaints. Last but not least, the paper delineates different online business complaint responses, involving how businesses can better handle responses to online complaints from the perspectives of language style and service recovery. This review is expected to provide reflection and support for researchers who explore online business complaints and practitioners in real-world business operations and enterprise management.

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