Public complaints: The influence of the context of simple and double deviation on customers' motivations

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Abstract:

Public complaint, the expression of customer dissatisfaction via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004), is often considered as a revenge behaviour following a double deviation (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011). Using a qualitative analysis on Twitter and two experiments, we quantify the situations of simple and double deviations and clarify the context influencing the motivations for the public complaint on a brand social network. First, we show that most public complaints analysed result from simple deviation situations. Then, we conceptually distinguish and show the role of five motivations (reconciliation, support, revenge, avoidance and reparation) in public voices after a service failure. Reconciliation and revenge are two competitive mediators explaining public complaining. Support and avoidance play the same role concerning word-of-mouth. Third, we observe a "love become hates"

Keywords: complaint management; public complaints; online reviews; double deviation; tie strength

effect (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009), showing the amplification of revenge desire and

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behaviours after a double deviation.

1. Introduction of Paper

The web offers a wide range of opportunities to complain online (Ward & Ostrom, 2006) and public complaining is often seen as a revenge behaviour (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). The literature establishes that double deviation seems to elicit from the disgruntled client negative emotions which themselves can create a desire for revenge. Public complaining is then a way to undermine the brand image. However, digitization and the exhortation of brands to seize the Internet as a complaint channel promotes the expression of dissatisfaction from the first deviation. Our first contribution will be to evaluate the proportion of online complaints resulting from a simple (vs double) deviation.

The literature underlines three main motivations to complain: desires for reparation, for reconciliation and for revenge, and mentions desire for avoidance as closely linked to complaining behaviour (Grégoire et al., 2009). These motivations are positive (reconciliation) or negative (avoidance and revenge) desires towards the brand when desire for reparation is more neutral and problem-solving oriented. To our knowledge, no research mobilizes these motivations simultaneously to explain voice behaviour. Moreover, there is confusion between desires for reconciliation and reparation, sometimes assimilated and never studied together. The second contribution of our research is therefore to conceptually distinguish these desires and analyse their impact on voice behaviours (public complaint and positive word-of-mouth). We also identify two different wishes in reconciliation: a wish to help the company improve (desire to support) and a wish to make peace (desire for reconciliation).

Finally, the literature highlights the influence of relational variables on consumer response to service recovery. Yet, the conclusions diverge. Our third contribution is therefore the study of the extent to which the prior relationship with the brand moderates the impact of the deviation context (simple or double) on consumer motivations and behaviours.

Through the qualitative study of 9,080 tweets posted on 8 brand accounts, we quantify the phenomenon of double deviation. Study 1 suggests that a majority of negative expressions on a brand social network is in simple deviation situations. Study 2 is an experiment conducted with 406 respondents by which we conceptually distinguish the desire for reconciliation from the desire for reparation. We show that in case of double deviation (vs simple) desire for revenge is higher and positively influences public complaining. Study 3 is a second experiment conducted with 219 individuals. We observe a "loves become hates" effect (Grégoire et al., 2009). Furthermore, we show that revenge and reconciliation are competitive

processes which explain public complaining. In the same vein, avoidance and reconciliation influence positive word-of-mouth toward the brand.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Public complaint and negative word-of-mouth.

Public complaint is a form of online negative word-of-mouth, defined as any negative expression of a customer about a product or company made available to a multitude of individuals and organizations via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). It is a common form of retaliation following a double deviation (e.g Johnson, Matear, & Thomson, 2011). Digital strategies of companies help to multiply public complaints. According to a recent study by Easiware (Natral, 2017), brands offer an average of five different channels for managing their customer relationship, and social networks are among the new channels used by brands. Thus, community managers should be confronted with an increasing number of public complaints in situations of simple deviation.

2.2 Motivations oriented towards the relationship with the brand.

We distinguish unfavourable motives, such as desire for revenge and desire for avoidance, from favourable motives to the brand, such as desire for reconciliation. Desires for revenge and avoidance are identified as two negative and detrimental desires for the companies against which they are directed (Grégoire et al., 2009) to the extent that they reflect resentment and lack of forgiveness (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001). Desire for revenge is defined as a desire for retaliation felt by an unsatisfied customer against a brand, including taking the form of a wish to punish, to cause harm or take revenge for the harm she has done (Bechwati & Morrin, 2003; Grégoire, Ghadami, Laporte, Sénécal, & Larocque, 2018). Desire for avoidance is defined as the desire for a consumer to withdraw from any form of interaction with a company and to end its relationship with it (Grégoire et al., 2009; McCullough et al., 1998). Desire for avoidance is a passive desire that drives more to flight than to attack, as opposed to desire for revenge (Grégoire et al., 2009). At the opposite, desire for reconciliation is the extent to which a customer is willing to make efforts to overcome the service failure and maintain a relationship with the business despite its dissatisfaction (Joireman, Grégoire, Devezer, & Tripp, 2013). Desire for reconciliation denotes a willingness of a client to show good will and indulgence (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006) and opposes desires for revenge and avoidance in being benevolent, constructive and non-aggressive

(Aquino et al., 2006). Based on Joireman et al's 2013 scale of reconciliation, we distinguish the desire for reconciliation from a desire to support the company.

2.3 Motivations oriented towards solving the problem.

Desire for reparation is a central notion in the literature associated with service failure (Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999) that relies on positive interactions between the dissatisfied customer and the brand (Grégoire, Legoux, et al., 2018). Contrary to the desire for reconciliation, the desire for reparation does not reflect the aim to preserve the relationship with the brand, but is a positive step toward redressing grievances and restoring fairness after a service failure (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973). Most articles only deal with one of these two desires at a time (e.g Joireman et al., 2013) and seem to equate reparation and reconciliation.

2.4 Impact of the double deviation.

Previous work has highlighted the fact that most online complainants have experienced repeated failures. The results of Tripp and Grégoire (2011) indicate that 96% of public complaints result from a double deviation. Double deviation, through anger, leads to retaliation (Bechwati & Morrin, 2003; Bonifield & Cole, 2007; Grégoire et al., 2009).

2.5 Role of ties strength

The strength of the pre-existing relationship between the brand and the consumer is a widely studied concept in complaint management (Grégoire et al., 2009; Umashankar et al., 2017; Zhang, Feick, & Mittal, 2013). Ties strength is the power of the link between members of a network (Mittal, Huppertz, & Khare, 2008). There are contrasting results about the customers' reactions to service recovery depending on ties strength. When some studies indicate that a good prior relationship protects brands from the negative effects of their failures (e.g Grégoire & Fisher, 2006; Umashankar, Ward, & Dahl, 2017), others show instead that relational quality exacerbates negative responses after a poor recovery (e.g Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Grégoire et al., 2009).

3. Study 1: Quantification of double deviations on Twitter

3.1 Method.

To quantify the number of double deviation situations in public complaints, we chose to study the comments posted on a brand social network, in this case tweets. Twitter is particularly studied in the field of public complaint (Abney, Pelletier, Ford, & Horky, 2017;

Fan & Niu, 2016). The ease of sharing and retweet contributes to the visibility of each complaint (Doerr, Blenn, & Van Mieghem, 2013). Many brands have a Twitter account dedicated to customer relations in addition to their classic account (Abney et al., 2017).

Using the method of Fan and Niu (2016), we collected and coded 9,080 tweets from accounts of 8 brands of products and services. These brands are part of the Brand Finance 2017 ranking and they all benefit from more than 9,000 subscribers. In addition, we took care of the diversity of business sectors (products / services) and offers (hedonic / functional). The tweets were collected over a period of one week, from 03/01/2018 to 09/01/2018. Among the selected brands, three offered a Twitter account dedicated to customer service in addition to its main Twitter account. The analysis of tweets has been double-coded to clarify their tone (positive, neutral or negative) and the mention or not of a double deviation situation.

3.2 Results

Only 22% of negative tweets mention a double deviation situation. This result is all the more surprising because Twitter, because of the restriction of the number of characters, seems more conducive to the expression of anger and denunciation rather than the detailed explanation of a problem. Thus, our results are in line with the work that positions social networks as a new way to receive customer complaints in first intention. However, they do not allow to decide on the will of the complainants to find a solution or to avenge the brand. This is why studies 2 and 3 aim to build on the motivation of online complainants to express themselves on a brand social network and to more robustly describe their context.

4. Study 2: Influence of the deviation context (simple vs double) on complainant's motivations and voice behaviours

4.1 Method

In order to examine the influence of the deviation context on public complaint behaviour via the mediation of online complainants' motivations, we used an experimental inter-subject design with random assignments. The sample consisted of 406 participants recruited via a French panellist (Women = 59.6%, Age = 28.75 years, SD = 7.83). Respondents were exposed to a simple or double deviation scenario and were asked to answer a questionnaire containing items on the three motivations (desires for revenge, reconciliation and reparation, see Appendix A). They were also asked to signify their intention to speak on a brand social network. Participants in the double-deflection condition reported a significantly higher score for the perceived double-deflection (M = 5.04) than the participants in the simple

deviation condition (M = 3.37, t = -8.62; p <0.01). We found no difference in the averages of the realism index (respectively M = 5.92 and M = 6.22). Results of the AFC are satisfying: Khi²: 95.22 (p<.01), Khi²/df=1.94, CFI=.94, RMSEA=.07. The AVE of each of the constructs and the correlation matrix confirm the convergent and discriminant validity of the measure of each of the latent variables (AVE > .51; α > .73). We checked age, gender, attribution of responsibility, severity of problem, internet habits and customer attitude towards the complaint. We tested the research model via the Preacher and Hayes Macro Process (model 4) with 5,000 initialized samples and p<.05.

4.2 Results

Desire for revenge is a mediator of the deviation context (simple vs double) on the publication on a brand social network (CI = [.007, .346]). We note, however, that desires for reparation and reconciliation do not mediate the relationship between the deviation context (simple vs double) and the publication on a brand social network. The results indicate that desires for revenge and reparation are higher in case of double deviation (respectively M_{SD} = 3.52, M_{DD} = 3.08, p <0.01 and M_{SD} = 4.70, M_{DD} = 5.26 p <0.01). Desire for reconciliation is lower in case of double deviation (M_{SD} = 3.81, M_{DD} = 3.40, p <0.05). Desires for reparation and reconciliation are therefore well distinguished.

In study 3, we consider a wider spectrum of desires to reinforce the robustness of our study. Then, we consider the role of ties strength, identified in the literature as related to reconciliation after service failure (Umashankar et al., 2017). The introduction of this concept leads us to consider two dependent variables: intention to post on a brand social network (online complaining) and positive word-of-mouth (a positive behaviour toward the brand).

5. Study 3: Moderating role of ties strength on the relation between context and voice behaviours

5.1 Method.

We used a 2 x 2 inter-subject experimental design with random assignment to examine the influence of the context (simple vs double deviation) and ties strength (weak vs strong) on the motivations of the online complainants. The sample included 219 respondents (Females = 41.6%, $M_{age} = 34.68$ years, SD = 14.524). At the beginning of the questionnaire, respondents read a scenario describing a situation of simple or double deviation (same description as in study 2) associated with strong or weak ties to the brand in question. We measured the constructs using Likert multi-item scales in seven points (1 = "strongly disagree", 7 =

"strongly agree") adapted from previous research (see Appendix A). We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the psychometric adequacy of the constructs. The results indicate that all the loadings are significant (p <.01), which confirms the convergent validity and the adequacy between our data and our theoretical model. Relatively high Cronbach alphas (a \geq 0.76) confirm the reliability of the measurements (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Discriminant validity was verified using the method of Fornell and Larcker (1981) which revealed an AVE of each construct greater than its squared correlation with any other construct of the model. We can confirm that our model does not have a multicollinearity problem (Grewal, Cote, & Baumgartner, 2004). We tested the research model via the Preacher and Hayes Macro Process (model 8).

5.2 Results.

We highlight the mediation of desire for revenge between the deviation context (simple vs double) and the publication on a brand social network moderated by ties strength (weak vs strong). In other words, with strong ties, a double deviation (vs simple) conduct to higher (vs lower) desire for revenge. Yet, with weak ties, there is no difference in desire for revenge between simple and double deviation. We also show that desire for revenge and desire to support positively influence the public complaint on a brand social network. The indirect link between the context (simple vs double deviation) and public complaint via desire for revenge is moderated by ties strength (coeff. .204 [.014; .481].

We also show that desires for reconciliation and for avoidance respectively exert a positive and negative influence on positive word-of-mouth about the brand (Desire for reconciliation: β = .524; δ = .092; p = .000; CI = [.343, .705] / Desire for avoidance: β = - .175; δ = .063; p = .006; CI = [-.300, -.051]). This result confirms the predictive validity of our conceptual model, distinguishing several desires explaining voice behaviours. Nevertheless, our study does not make it possible to highlight the influence of the desire for reparation on one of these two output variables.

General Discussion

First, our research evaluates the proportion of simple and double deviations giving rise to a public complaint on a brand social network. In particular, we emphasize the fact that the majority of the publications analysed are in simple deviation, which seems to indicate an evolution of practices and the use of the Internet as a complaint channel in the first instance. That is why, researchers and practitioners should not consider public complaining only as the

result of poor recovery practices and as a way for lost customers to hurt the firm. The second contribution of our research concerns motivations. We conceptually distinguish desires for reparation and reconciliation, one being a neutral and problem-solving oriented motivation and the other one being a positive and relation-preserving oriented motivation. This is to our knowledge the first study conceptually distinguishing these two desires in the field of complaints. In addition, we recognize that unlike previous research findings, the expression on a brand social network can be the result of both a desire for revenge and a desire to support. In other words, the public complaint on a brand social network can stem from a negative (revenge) or positive (support) approach from the consumer. Finally, we confirm ties strength as a moderator of the influence of the deviation context (simple vs double) on the motivations to complain. Our research confirms the love become hates effect.

First, this research allows managers to better grasp customers' intentions behind online complaints and to estimate their chances of recovering them. Secondly, managers must keep in mind that the digital tool must be considered as a full complaint channel.

One limit of our research is that we do not identify the circumstances favouring the public complaint on a social network in order to avenge oneself or in order to help the brand. We already know that it is neither the deviation context (simple vs double), nor the ties strength, but we still do not know what causes this negative or positive approach on the same given space. This would be an interesting avenue for future research.

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Appendix A

Constructs and items	Loadings std (study 3)	AVE / α (study 3)
Desire for revenge based on (Grégoire, Legoux, et al., 2018)		0.697 / 0.915
I want to:		
• take actions to get the firm in trouble.	0.89	
• punish the firm in some way.	0.83	
• cause inconvenience to the firm.	0.86	
• get even with the service firm.	0.86	
 make the service firm get what it deserved. 	0.70	
Desire for reparation based on (Grégoire, Legoux, et al., 2018)		0.693 / 0.897
I want:		
• to have the firm assume responsibility for its actions.	0.80	
• to receive a form of reparation for the failure.	0.82	
• to have the firm to fix its mistake.	0.89	
• the brand to solve the problem.	0.81	
Desire for reconciliation based on (Joireman et al., 2013)		0.568 / 0.794
I want to:		
 get back on track with this brand. 	0.83	
 forgive the brand despite what happened. 	0.75	
• make an effort to be more conciliatory with the brand.	0.67	
Desire to support adapted from (Joireman et al., 2013)		0.546 / 0.818
I want:		
• to help the brand not to repeat the same mistakes afterwards.	0.69	
• the brand to take advantage of this event to improve.	0.89	
 to allow the brand to progress through my experience. 	0.73	
• the brand to be aware of its mistakes so that it can avoid them.	0.62	
Desire for avoidance based on (Grégoire et al., 2009)		0.798 / 0.948
I want to:		
 keep as much distance as possible between the firm and me. 	0.92	
 avoid frequenting the firm. 	0.94	
• cut off the relationship with the firm.	0.87	
 withdraw my business from the firm. 	0.84	
Positive Word-of-mouth based on (Maxham III & Netemeyer, 2002)a		0.752 / 0.897
 I am likely to spread positive word-of-mouth about this brand 	0.84	
 I will recommend this brand to those around me 	0.96	
 If my friends are looking for a brand of sweaters, I will 	0.79	
recommend them		

Standardized loadings, all significant at p < .001. / Khi²: 331.685 (p<.01), Khi²/df=1.565, CFI=.967, RMSEA=.051