

Facebook as a complaint mechanism: An investigation of millennials

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ABSTRACT

The Millennial generation presents both opportunities and challenges to marketers. Due to their familiarity and heavy usage of technology and social media, Millennials seem to be one group of consumers who, when dissatisfied with a product or service experience and/or the improper handling of a complaint, may retaliate on the Internet. The purpose of this study is to examine how Millennials use Facebook as a complaint channel by posting complaints online. A sample of 441 undergraduates was used from a public university in the eastern half of the United States during the 2010-2011 academic year.

Keywords: Millennials, social media, Facebook, consumer complaining, electronic word-of-mouth

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INTRODUCTION

The “Millennial generation” refers to those individuals born after 1980 who come of age after the turn of the century. Believed to represent approximately twenty-five percent of the U.S. population, they have attracted a great deal of attention from business and industry (Morrissey 2012), higher education (Chau 2012; Sweeney 2012), as well as academic researchers (Mangold and Smith 2012; Hartman and McCambridge 2011). Volumes have been written about their values, attitudes, behaviors, and demographics characteristics. In fact, the Pew Research Center published an extensive report in 2010 reviewing how today’s teens and twenty-somethings are reshaping our nation on all levels (Pew Research Center 2010).

“Each generation has unique expectations, experiences, generational history, lifestyles, values, and demographics that influence their buying behaviors” (Williams and Page 2011, p. 1). Several of the characteristics and preferences used to describe Millennials imitate the values of previous generations, while others have recently surfaced (Sweeney 2012; Rivera and Huertas 2006; Oblinger 2003; Howe and Strauss 2000). Some of the most pertinent characteristics used to describe this cohort include: confident, connected, self-expressive, high expectations, impatient, digital natives, experiential learners, pressured to perform, ambitious, technologically savvy, team oriented, demand instantaneous feedback, and fast paced (Sweeney 2012; Pew Research Center 2010; Howe and Strauss 2000).

Many of these characteristics present both challenges and opportunities for marketing organizations. For example, driven by their use of technology, Millennials do not consider computers and mobile devices to be luxuries, but rather necessities of daily life. According to Pew Research Center, “They are history’s first ‘always connected’ generation. Steeped in digital technology and social media, they treat their multi-tasking hand-held gadgets almost like body parts” (2010, p. 1). Their familiarity with and usage of computers and digital media encourages them to be drawn to online communication (Mangold and Smith, 2012). Millennials are known to be natural bargain-hunters who are willing to spend a great deal of time researching products online, setting them apart from older generations (Dexheimer 2012). In addition, Millennials are talking more online about products and services than previous generations and when dissatisfied with a product or service, are more likely to “lash out about or at companies or their brands” (eMarketer 2011; 2009).

FACEBOOK

Ninety percent of Millennials report using the Internet and for those in college or who have attended college the statistic rises to 96% (Pew Research Center 2010, p. 28). In terms of social media usage on sites such as Facebook, Millennials far outpace other generations (Marketing Profs Research, 2010; Pew Research Center 2010). Numerous studies document the high percentage of college students who have a Facebook account (thought to be over 85%), which they access via their computers, tablets, or mobile devices (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Ross, Orr, Sisic, Arseneault, Simmering, & Orr, 2009; Sheldon, 2008a; 2008b).

Statistics from Facebook.com state that during March 2012, approximately 44% of their active users (totaling 901 million individuals) logged on to the site (Facebook, 2012). Based on this statistic, it is not surprising that in 2011 Americans spent more time on Facebook than any other U.S. web site (Nielsen, 2011).

As a member-based Internet community, Facebook allows its users to post profile information, communicate with others by sending public or private online messages or wall posts, and to share photos online. As a result, its features are constantly changing and being updated. Facebook and other social networking sites such as Twitter are perfect mediums for self-expression -- something particularly attractive to Millennials (Sheldon, 2008a, p. 69). The expressive communication style fits Millennials. Individuals who employ this particular communication style are described as “social specialists” who can be both assertive and opinionated and when stressed, go on the “attack” (p. Hartman and McCambridge (2011, pp.32).

CONSUMER COMPLAINING

One form of self-expression that has been heavily studied in the marketing literature is the consumer complaint process, or the processes consumers go through when dissatisfied with a product or service (Hansen, Wilke, Zaichkowsky 2009; Phau and Baird 2008; Bunker and Ball 2008; Ashley and Varki 2009). The type of response behavior that a dissatisfied customer chooses can offer the marketer a number of potential benefits, or disadvantages. Customers who “voice” their complaints directly to the marketer can assist the firm in identifying problematic areas. However, when customers do not voice complaints directly, choosing instead to engage in third party, negative word-of-mouth, or exit behaviors, the organization has no chance to rectify the situation and may be open to further negative consequences. These may manifest as a decline in customer retention, diminished brand equity, or a loss in future customers. Therefore, organizations should be concerned with not only the root problem that caused the customer’s dissatisfaction, but also the manner in which the customer responds, and endeavor to encourage them toward direct voice.

This study is particularly interested in the complaint response category of negative word-of-mouth and the means by which this behavior is communicated. When initially conceptualized as a response category, most negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) was communicated person-to-person. However, new technological advances have provided opportunities to communicate the NWOM, more broadly, via the Internet or via social networks. Complaints through electronic media such as the Internet have increased dramatically and will most likely continue to do so in the future (Tripp and Gregoire 2011; Strauss and Seidel 2004). No longer are complaints merely person-to-person, but person-to-network providing a forum for exponential growth in the negative consequences of customer comments. One dissatisfied customer’s circle of influence can now reach unprecedented proportions. Web sites such as TripAdvisor and customer “reviews” on various e-retailing sites have now made public what was considered to be private complaining in the past (Keates, 2007). One recent study has shown that the act of either private or public complaining is significantly associated with customer defection from the organization (Malholtra, Agarwal, and Ndubisi 2010). This potential for a rapid explosion of NWOM communication should give organizations even more reason to develop and manage formal consumer complaint recovery programs, as customer retention becomes more volatile.

USE OF TECHNOLOGY

The use of technological advances is particularly important to the college-aged customer segment. Electronic media and social networks, instant messaging, Twitter, and others have become a fact of life and are prevalent on college campuses today (Marketing Profs Research

2010; Lenjart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr 2010). These types of communication allow college students to be continuously connected to friends, family, faculty, and business sites in ways that older generations could not have imagined (Hoffman, Novak, and Venatesh 2004).

It is documented in the literature that Millennials are drawn to Facebook to achieve the 3 C's: "Connection, Conversation, and Community" (Euro RSCG Worldwide Knowledge Exchange, 2010, p. 7). Due to their familiarity and usage of digital media, Millennials seem to be one group of consumers who, when dissatisfied with a product or service experience and/or the improper handling of a complaint, may retaliate on the Internet (eMarketer 2009). This research intends to explore is there a fourth "C" drawing Millennials to Facebook -- Complaining? Therefore, the purpose of this article is to examine how Facebook is used as a complaint channel for posting complaints online. Specifically, three research questions are examined:

- 1) What is the Facebook usage of Millennials?
- 2) How likely are Millennials to use Facebook as a complaint channel for varying products or services?
- 3) Does the likelihood of using Facebook as a complaint channel differ by degree of Facebook usage?

METHODOLOGY

Sample

In order to answer the research questions, we surveyed a total of 441 undergraduates from a public university in the eastern half of the United States during the 2010-2011 academic year. The sample was representative of the Millennial group, i.e. it represented the age cohort from which Millennials are drawn (see Table One). Data was collected using a paper and pencil survey. The sample of respondents ($N=413$) consisted of 248 males (60%) and 165 females (40%). Approximately ninety-four percent of the overall sample had a Facebook account. Of those that had an account, 60% ($n=247$) were men and 40% ($n=163$) were women. The average age of respondents was 21 ($M=21.32$, $SD = 3.301$). Sixty-two percent (270 students) indicated they owned a smartphone. When asked how often they post to Facebook via their smartphone, the respondents reported a mean of 4.88 and standard deviation of 1.90 (on a scale of 1=Not at all to 7=A great deal). The sample was comprised of 3.2% Freshmen, 26.3% Sophomores, 33.6% Juniors, and 27.4% Seniors. All students were business majors at the time of the study.

MEASURES

Facebook Usage

To measure the frequency and duration of Facebook usage, we relied on the measures by Sheldon (2008a). Respondents were asked at what age they first joined Facebook and the number of minutes/hours they spend on Facebook in an average day. We followed the Richins and Dawson methodology (1992) to break the sample into Facebook usage groups based on intensity of usage, creating tercile ranks for *High*, *Medium*, and *Low Facebook Usage*. The terciles were based on the number of minutes reported by the respondents (ranging from 2 to 490 per day). The *Medium* group (usage minutes 35 to 60; $n = 118$) was eliminated to create a

distinction between those respondents reporting *low* and *high* Facebook usage. Groups of students with *High* usage (usage minutes 80 to 490; $n = 135$) and *Low* usage (usage minutes 2 to 30; $n = 158$) were compared to assess significance. The research questions that refer to comparisons by *High* and *Low* usage categories, therefore, employed a final sample of 294 respondents.

Complaint Intentions: Use of Facebook

Twenty-four undergraduate students from a large state university in the northeast region of the United States participated in two focus groups. Using the critical incident approach, students were asked to recall “a really frustrating experience with a product or service.” Based on the students’ responses, a set of items was developed for the dissatisfying experiences, including “at a restaurant, doctor’s office, auto repair shop, and retail store.” These items were then used in the survey phase of the study, where respondents were asked to indicate how likely they would be to post comments on Facebook to vent their frustration and complain about their experience. Items were coded on a 7-point Likert scale (1= *Very Unlikely*; 7=*Very Likely*).

RESULTS

Facebook Usage Patterns

The first research question asked: “What is the Facebook usage of Millennials?” Facebook usage was analyzed in terms of whether or not the respondent actually used Facebook, the average number of minutes users spent daily on Facebook, and the age at which they first began using Facebook. In our usable sample (those who use Facebook, $N = 413$), Millennials spent an average of approximately 75 minutes ($SD = 68.81$) on Facebook each day, with a range from 2 minutes to 490 minutes. This wide range in reported activity supports a previous study by Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert (2009), who found that the amount of time respondents reported spending on Facebook varied greatly: from 2 minutes to 165 minutes.

To further examine the Facebook usage patterns of Millennials, a comparison of High Users and Low Users was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in usage behavior between these two groups. The High User group was comprised of 135 individuals, with males representing 46% of the group and females, 53%. This group reported spending an average of 153.9 minutes ($SD = 4191.4$) or two and one half hours daily on Facebook, while the Low User group reported spending an average of 20.4 minutes daily ($SD = 86.9$); results were significant at $p = .000$. The Low User group was comprised of 158 individuals, with males representing 72.6% and females, 26.6%.

With regard to the age at which respondents began using Facebook, the mean reported by the respondents was at 17.7 years ($SD = 3.49$). A further comparison showed a significant difference between the High User and Low User groups regarding the age at which the student began using Facebook. The average age was 17.03 for the High User group ($SD = 1.46$) and 18.5 for the Low User group ($SD = 4.61$), $p = .001$. These results would imply that those who are on Facebook more often began at a younger age. Table 1 also includes these results.

Given the findings for the High and Low User groups and their gender makeup, further gender differences were compared. Regarding the overall usage of Facebook, females reported a mean of 90.7 minutes of use per day, while males reported a mean of 64.2 minutes per day,

significant at $p < .001$. However, the age at which males and females began using Facebook was not significant. While not a part of our original research questions, given the findings in Facebook usage between males and females, gender was further used as a comparison variable in other areas of this study, which will be discussed later.

In the second research question, students were asked about their likelihood of using Facebook as a complaint channel if dissatisfied in a variety of product or service situations, including: at a restaurant, at an auto repair shop, hair stylist, and a cell phone store. The responses are provided for the entire group of students ($N=413$) in Table 2. In general, the means were surprisingly low, with complaining for “a cell phone store” the highest - at a mean of 3.36 (on a scale of 1=Not at all likely; 7=Very likely). The two situations with the lowest reported scores were dentist ($M=2.06$; $SD=1.46$) and doctor ($M=2.12$; $SD=1.48$). A possible explanation for this result may be due to Millennials’ limited use of health care services. As a generational group, Millennials tend to be in the prime years of their life and are lucky to benefit from good health. Compared to other older generations (e.g. Baby Boomers), Millennials are not heavy users of doctor or dentist services; therefore, they are not personally familiar with many of the frustrations with health care service today.

An interesting, related issue to the likelihood of using Facebook as a complaint method is the sample characteristic, smartphone ownership. Sixty-two percent of the sample indicated they owned a smartphone (see Table 1). Mangold and Smith (2012) indicate that “user-friendly technology” such as smartphones will increase the propensity of Millennials to go online and post to consumer review sites” (150). As such, smartphones will also facilitate the use of Facebook for complaining via their cellphone application. The current study asked respondents who owned a smartphone, how often they use it to post to Facebook. The findings were: $M=4.88$ and $SD=1.90$ (on a scale of 1=Not at all to 7=A great deal). This finding was supported by statistics on the Facebook web site. As of April 2012, Facebook reports that over 55% of their active subscribers (totaling approximately 398 million individuals) used Facebook mobile applications (Facebook 2012).

The third research question asked: “Does the likelihood of using Facebook as a complaint channel differ by degree of Facebook usage?” In order to answer this question, the High Users ($N=136$), and the Low Users ($N=158$) of Facebook were compared. It is interesting to note that there was a significant difference between High and Low User groups across all product and service experiences, with High Users more likely to complain via Facebook in each product or service situation (see Table 3). High Users indicated they would be most likely to complain on Facebook following a dissatisfying experience at a “cell phone store” ($M=4.21$; $SD=2.07$), “at a restaurant” ($M=3.88$; $SD=1.99$), and “retail clothing store” ($M=3.83$; $SD=2.02$). The top three complaining situations for the Low User group were: “at a cell phone retail store” ($M=2.73$; $SD=1.98$), followed by “at a movie theater” ($M=2.51$; $SD=1.92$), and “at an auto repair shop” ($M=2.44$; $SD=1.82$). The means and standard deviations for additional situations can be viewed in Table 3.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

Customer satisfaction and consumer complaining behavior have both been recognized in the academic and the practitioner world as important phenomena impacting an organization’s success. Several studies have supported this view, going as far as identifying successful complaint resolution as a type of competitive advantage (Chahal 2010; Fox 2008; Tax, Brown,

and Chandrashekar 1998). Technology and the Internet have been shown to play an important role in extending word-of-mouth (NOP World Study 2006). According to Tripp and Gregoire (2011), “companies need to understand and manage the rising threat of online public complaining” (p. 37). This study investigated the online complaining behavior of Millennials, in particular, their use of Facebook for online complaining.

Cyberspace seems to foster the online disinhibition effect where consumers “loosen up, feel more uninhibited, express themselves more openly” (Suler 2004, p. 321). In an online world consumers often say or do things that they would not do face-to-face. Therefore, the Internet offers a potential domain for easily spreading negative word-of-mouth via online complaining. Research suggests that consumers spread negative word-of-mouth communication more frequently than satisfied consumers tell others about positive experiences (Edison and Geissler 2011). For the products and services used in this study, however, respondents reported limited use of Facebook for online complaining. Even when comparing complaint intentions by gender and Facebook usage levels, we did not find high mean levels of complaining intention via Facebook. The highest result in any of the product/service categories that were measured was complaining on Facebook about a negative experience at “a cell phone store” where the mean was 4.21 for the High User Group.

Consumer involvement theory (Zaichkowsky 1994; Park and Moon 2003) provides one possible explanation of these results. Involvement theory posits that the amount of time, energy, and resources a consumer devotes to a purchase situation depends on how personally important or relevant that product or service is to them. Through mere casual observation of today’s teens and twenty-somethings, it is obvious how highly involved they are with their cell phones. In fact, Pew Research Center Research reports that eight out of every ten Millennials even sleep with cell phones (2010). While the particular products and services utilized in this study were developed from focus group discussions with undergraduate students (all within the Millennial-age group), future studies should fine-tune the selection of products and services paying particular attention to consumer involvement theory, choosing products or services that are particularly important or relevant to Millennials.

Gender has been shown to be a significant predictor of college students’ motivation to use Facebook (Sheldon 2008a; 2008b). In the current study, the Facebook “High User” group included more females than males. This finding is consistent with other literature showing a significant difference in Facebook membership between males and females (Valensuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), with women showing heavier usage on the social networking site (Nielsen, 2010).

While not a part of our original research questions, given these findings on Facebook usage between males and females, gender was used as a comparison variable regarding complaint intentions for the various products and services. Significant differences were found between males and females for the following product and service encounters: cell phone store, clothing store, and hair stylist. In each of these encounters, women reported a stronger likelihood to use Facebook to complain about the product or service provider (see Table 4 for additional information on comparisons by gender). Two of these categories - clothing and hair stylist - may be more female-specific categories, leading to the higher reported means.

No study is without limitations. A limitation of the current study is our use of only Millennial-aged consumers. A richer exploration of Facebook as a complaining channel should use a broader selection of the population. For example, it was reported that 2010 “social networking use among internet users ages 50 and older has nearly doubled—from 22% to 42% over the past year” (Pew Research Center Internet 2010). Given this increased usage, older

individuals from other generational sub-groups should be considered. In addition, this study was implemented at a single university in only undergraduate business courses. Therefore, some concern could be raised regarding the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider other geographic locations as well as business and non-business related majors.

Many marketers have embraced the fact that complaints should not be viewed as nuisances, but rather opportunities to identify and resolve problems, improve products and services. They can also lead to the development of long-term, value-added relationships by turning dissatisfied customers into satisfied, loyal ones (Bearden and Oliver 1985; Chahal 2010). Facebook and other social media sites add another layer of complexity to the complaint management and resolution process; the potential impact of electronic word-of-mouth is enormous, with an average of “3.2 billion Likes and Comments generated by Facebook users per day during the first quarter of 2012” (Facebook 2012).

This study brings to light a new complaint channel that must be considered by marketers because “Millennials and other consumers are able to influence literally thousands of purchase decisions with a few sentences posted online” (Mangold and Smith 2012, p. 150). With “more than 125 billion friend connections on Facebook for all active users” (Facebook 2012), social media can be either a marketer’s friend or foe. The decision is theirs.

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TABLE 1**Sample Characteristics**

	All Students N=413		High Users N=135		Low Users N=158	
Gender	Males=60%; Females=40%		Males=46% Females=53%		Males=72.6% Females=26.6%	
Number of minutes on Facebook	M=74.7	SD=68.8	M=153.9	SD=4191.4	M=20.4	SD=86.9
Age at which began using Facebook	M=17.7	SD=3.49	M=17.03	SD=1.46	M=18.5	SD=4.61
Own smart phone	Yes=270; 62% No =164; 38%					
Use smartphone for Facebook	M=4.88; SD=1.896*					
Class standing	Freshman = 3.2% Sophomore = 26.3% Junior = 33.6% Senior = 27.4%					

*Scale of 1=Not at all; 7=A great deal

TABLE 2**Complaint Intentions: Use of Facebook as a Complaint Channel**

N=413				
Complaining Behavior	Mean	Frequency**	Percent	Std. Deviation
At a restaurant	3.07	62	14.1	2.010
At a doctor's office	2.23	24	5.4	1.598
At an auto repair shop	2.71	44	9.9	1.865
At a hair stylist	2.48	48	10.9	1.896
At a dentist appointment	2.12	23	5.2	1.539
At a grocery store	2.47	36	8.1	1.791
At a college administrative office (e.g., Registrar)	2.77	53	12.0	1.961
At a cellphone retail store	3.36	88	20.0	2.108
At a retail clothing store	2.98	68	15.4	2.016
At a movie theatre	3.00	63	14.3	2.005

*Scale: 7 point Likert scale, anchored by 1= Not at all Likely and 7=Very likely

**Frequency: # of responses of 6 or 7 on the 7-point Likert scale

TABLE 3**Complaint Intentions: Hi Facebook Users vs. Low Facebook Users**

N=293	High Users=135		Low Users=158		P=
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Complaining Behavior					
At a restaurant	3.88	1.99	2.43	1.81	.000**
At a doctor's office	2.67	1.76	1.88	1.29	.000**
At an auto repair shop	3.10	1.93	2.44	1.82	.003**
At a hair stylist	3.21	2.03	2.06	1.72	.000**
At a dentist appointment	2.51	1.66	1.81	1.37	.000**
At a grocery store	2.95	1.89	2.07	1.62	.000**
At a college administrative office (e.g., Registrar)	3.36	2.09	2.30	1.75	.000**
At a cellphone retail store	4.21	2.07	2.73	1.98	.000**
At a retail clothing store	3.83	2.02	2.39	1.81	.000**
At a movie theatre	3.55	1.93	2.51	1.92	.000**

*Scale: 7 point Likert scale, anchored by 1= Not at all likely and 7=Very likely

**Significant at $p < .05$

TABLE 4**Complaint Intentions: Comparison by Gender**

N=408	Male=245		Female=163		P=
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Complaining Behavior					
At a restaurant	2.93	1.99	3.28	2.04	.081
At a doctor's office	2.12	1.48	2.40	1.74	.085
At an auto repair shop	2.74	1.86	2.62	1.87	.510
At a hair stylist	2.17	1.73	2.95	2.05	.000**
At a dentist appointment	2.06	1.46	2.18	1.63	.427
At a grocery store	2.37	1.75	2.60	1.84	.221
At a college administrative office (e.g., Registrar)	2.75	1.92	2.79	2.02	.839
At a cellphone retail store	3.18	2.08	3.61	2.14	.042**
At a retail clothing store	2.74	1.92	3.35	2.11	.003**
At a movie theatre	2.91	1.97	3.12	2.07	.296

*Scale: 7 point Likert scale, anchored by 1= Not at all likely and 7=Very likely

**Significant at $p < .05$