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COMPLAINING IN CYBERSPACE: THE MOTIVES AND FORMS OF HOTEL
GUEST'S COMPLAINTS ONLINE

**Abstract**

Traditionally consumers who have been dissatisfied with service have typically
complained to the frontline personnel or to a manager in either a direct (face to face, over the
phone) manner, indirect by writing, or done nothing but told friends and family of the incident.
More recently the World Wide Web has provided various 'new' ways to air a grievance,
especially when little might have been done at the point of service failure.  With the opportunity
to now spread word of mouth globally, consumers have the potential to impact the standing of a
brand or a firm's reputation. The hotel industry is particularly vulnerable, as an increasing
number of bookings are undertaken via the Internet and the decision process is likely to be
influenced by what other previous guests might post on many booking linked sites. We conducted
a qualitative study of a key travel site to ascertain the forms and motives of complaints made
online about hotels and resorts. Two hundred web based consumer complaints were analysed
using NVivo 8 software. Findings revealed that consumers report a wide range of service failures
on the Internet. They tell a highly descriptive, persuasive and credible story, often motivated by
altruism or, at the other end of the continuum, by revenge.  These stories have the power to
influence potential guests to book or not book accommodation at the affected properties.
Implications for manager of hotels and resorts are discussed.


Key words: Online complaints; E-Complaints; Service Failure; Hospitality

**Introduction**

Service failure for hospitality firms has received a growing amount of research over recent years. However, most of this work tends to focus on service failure and/or recovery issues at the point of contact rather than after the event. It is possible that consumers will bring a service failure to the attention of the firm and get a satisfactory response; however, this may not always be the case. Consumers who have been dissatisfied with service have, in the past, had the options of doing nothing, complaining to the frontline personnel, complaining to a manager in either a direct (face to face) manner or indirectly by writing (see for example, Singh & Howell, 1985; Singh, 1988; Rogers, Ross & Williams, 1992). Similarly, the consumer may go on to engage in more private face to face actions, such as negative word of mouth to friends, relatives or associates (Singh, 1988). More recently the World Wide Web (Internet) has provided various 'new' ways to air a grievance, especially when little might have been done at the point of service failure. These grievances may be shared on websites where other consumers go to search and evaluate potential tourism purchases, such as accommodation. Such actions are akin to the consumer complaining behaviour of negative word of mouth but done quite publicly. Despite Lee and Hu's (2004) research, little is currently known of how and why hotel guests complain online and the implications this has for the hospitality industry. This paper seeks to report on the nature of online consumer commentary by analysing a selection of negative reviews of hotel experiences as published on the Internet. In particular, the research focuses on the motives for placing these reviews on the Internet and the narrative content and structure of the reviews.

**Consumer complaint behaviour**

An extensive literature exists on the definition or conceptualisation of consumer complaint behaviour (CCB). Perhaps the most influential and widely cited work is that of Singh

(1988) which addressed definitional issues. What is clear from past research is that CCB is usually triggered as a result of an unsatisfactory purchase experience (Singh, 1988). The responses to the negative consumption trigger can be manifested in multiple ways: the aggrieved party can (a) complain/voice concerns direct to the firm either at point of failure or afterwards, (b) complain to others through word of mouth, or (c) take the matter up with a third party (e.g. consumer advocacy office). Other research (Singh and Howell, 1985; Rogers, Ross & Williams, 1992) also highlights no action and future behavioural actions as forms of CCB.

But what does complaining actually mean? Kowalski (1996) offers a definition of complaining as: "an expression of dissatisfaction, whether subjectively experienced or not, for the purpose of venting emotions or achieving intrapsychic goals, interpersonal goals, or both" (p. 180). As highlighted by Singh's (1988) work, one common form of complaining has been word of mouth (WoM). Importantly, WoM has been recognised as an important influence in consumer buying decisions. As WoM activities tend to operate separate from the offending firm they provide independent communication to others. Traditional WoM activities have involved the aggrieved consumer potentially telling friends, relatives and/or work colleagues (those in close social proximity) about goods/services experiences both good and bad.

Traditional CCB conceptualisation has highlighted negative WoM as a way to air a complaint to others within a particular social circle. However, more recent research has highlighted a newer form of complaining behaviour: electronic word of mouth (eWoM) (see, Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004). Electronic WoM is information that is communicated via the Internet to multiple individuals/consumers, remains available over a long period of time and tends to be anonymous (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). The types of sites people

post their opinions on can vary from a firm sponsored site through to an individual initiated blog site. Consumer reviews are one form of eWoM and can reveal important information about a product whether it is good or bad. As Sen and Lerman (2007) point out, eWoM product reviews tend to be dichotomous – usually recommending a product to others (positive review) or discouraging product use (negative reviews). For the purpose of the current paper a negative review on a website is defined as complaining. Like traditional CCB taxonomies that include WoM as a complaint option, the broader Internet forums, including review sites, provide a distribution channel for airing grievances. In line with Kowalski's (1996) definition of complaining, a negative online review is an expression of dissatisfaction that is posted with the possible aims of venting emotions, engaging with others and sharing information.

### Complaining on the Internet

The Internet provides consumers with an anonymous and easily accessible channel for negative WoM through airing viewpoints and/or making complaints known to others. Negative eWoM in the form of consumer reviews has the potential to tarnish a brand and persuade a potential consumer to search elsewhere for the product. As Ward and Ostram (2006) assert, consumer complaining is no longer a private matter; it is now potentially very public with an opportunity to express personal grievances and dissatisfaction via the Internet. Indeed, as Tyrrell and Wood (2004) note, the Internet provides a world-wide forum for disgruntled consumers. Whilst in the past an unhappy consumer might tell another 12 to 20 people about the experience, it seems the reach of complaints aired on the Internet is almost endless and unquantifiable. Consumers now have the opportunity to make what essentially was a private action between family and friends (Bearden & Teel, 1983) into a public action for the consumption of whoever accesses a site where a complaint may be located. As Hart and Blackshaw (2006) report "Where

traditional word of mouth is limited by size of a social network, "*word of web*" can include a

social network that spans the globe." (p.21). Thus, the web provides various 'new' ways to air a

grievance, especially when little might have been done at the point of service failure (Lee &Hu,

2004).  The opportunity to write a review is one form of CCB that is easily done with modern

technology. The question is what are the implications of "word of web" for the hospitality

industry and hotels in particular? Hart and Blackshaw (2005) emphasise that firms ignore these

online complaints at their peril and that "even a mighty firm can be brought to its knees." (p. 28)


There has been an explosion of Internet sites that assist consumers with making bookings

online.  In the hotel industry a multitude of sites such as *Wotif.Com, Hotel.Com,* Expedia.Com

exist to provide consumers with online booking access.  In addition, there has been growth in the

opportunity to use the knowledge of other travellers by reading reviews provided at many of these

booking sites.  For example, reviews on TripAdvisor.Com are provided as a tool to people

searching for, and booking, hotel properties. TripAdvisor.Com has a number of online hotel

booking affiliates, which means that the reviews by consumers about individual properties may

be used in the selection/booking decision making process.  Indeed, such sites are built on a

premise of trust that is developed from providing consumers with an opportunity to post both

positive and negative commentary. Similarly, there has been a growth in general *blog* sites that

can be set up by individuals.  A *blog* site is a web page established, usually by an individual, to

record information of some topic.  Blogs may also be used to discuss product or service

experiences.  The growing e-landscape presents a multitude of information that can be viewed by

potential consumers as part of the consumer search process.  In the case of hotels, potential guests

can access an array of information prior to making a booking choice.  The websites provide

information in both text and photographic forms.  Some of this information is generated by the

hotel but other information is generated by third parties, such as guests who have used the hotel previously. As Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) note, stories and narratives presented by consumers on Internet sites provide an information source for potential purchasers. Thus, while marketers might present their hotels on the web by way of photos, virtual tours and narratives, so too can a consumer. Importantly, as Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) note, consumers now have the opportunity to take control and frame descriptions within their personal experiences versus that of a promoter.

Consumer feedback is essential for service recovery as well as service improvement. However, by using online technology as a channel for lodging negative word of mouth consumers are effectively cutting out the frontline personnel who could not only potentially resolve the complaint but learn from the complaint to prevent similar service failures from occurring in the future (Lee &Hu, 2004; Snellman & Vihtkari, 2003). The posts that are available online seem to have good persuasive power somewhat similar to word of mouth. Shea, Enghagen and Kholler (2004) make an important point that those consumers using the Internet as a channel of communication provide an information source that is both interpersonal and mass communication all at the same time. Online posts are provided for the use of a community of potential buyers, and offered with no commercial vested interest. Thus, many online posts have the potential to be received with a similar credibility to that of word of mouth received from friends or family. Technology also offers a new channel that reduces the time and effort to make a complaint (Snellman & Vihtkari, 2003) and is open to anyone with online access. Even those consumers who are normally reluctant to complain directly to the firm have an opportunity to express a view. Importantly, as mentioned previously, with many consumers turning to online booking approaches, the commentary that appears in the reviews can be highly influential in shaping decisions about where to book. This has major implications for the hotel industry particularly

because these reviews can remain on these sites for several years. It is therefore important to understand why consumers place these reviews online, what they focus on and how they structure these reviews so the hospitality industry can be better informed on how to manage this form of consumer complaining.

**Motives for online consumer complaints**

It is possible that there is a range of motives for complaining online ranging from a general venting or revenge reasoning through to a more altruistic reason of preventing others from suffering the same fate. Kowalski and Erickson (1997) identify four functions of complaining behaviour: catharsis (venting); self-presentation (impression management); social comparison (testing one's own perception against other); and call for accounts (redress tactic). Related research undertaken by Wetzer, Zeelenberg and Peiters (2007) argues that different emotions that are associated with negative consumption experiences will be associated with various behavioural actions. For example their findings suggest that people who experience emotions of anger and frustration associated with a consumption experience will be more likely to engage in negative WoM activities such as venting or taking revenge. Wetzer et al. (2007) also found some support for the emotions of disappointment and regret being associated with wanting to warn others through WoM. Similarly, Price, Feik and Gustskey (1995) found a significant relationship between altruism and what they termed market helping behaviour. This involves acts that benefit others in their purchases and consumption. They also found that altruism is likely to motivate those consumers who like to initiate discussion around products and services, what they called market mavens, to engage in market helping behaviour.

Whatever the motive, it is still likely that the author of the online commentary will give some consideration to how the information is phrased and expressed, including how words are selected and combined as well as the narrative structure. Hookway (2008) in discussing the 'blogosphere' raises some issues about impression management and draws upon the classic work of Irving Goffman to coin the phrase "disembodied face work" (p96). Authors of online commentary are likely to manage the written text to portray themselves as good, believable and not to blame. Furthermore, given the non-commercial nature of online reviews there is an element of trust that might arise as a result of the production of a balanced account of a service failure event (Hart & Blackshaw, 2005).

### Service failure – the focus of consumer complaints

As others have suggested (for example, Sparks & Fredline, 2007) service failures tend to occur in the hospitality industry on a fairly regular basis. The nature of the hospitality industry means that it is difficult to observe many aspects of the services in advance and even harder to 'try before you buy'. Many aspects of accommodation services can only be assessed once checked in. For example, the quality of the bedding, the room/space configuration, the temperature of the room, the cleanliness of the surrounds, the friendliness of the staff and the views usually can't be ascertained until the consumer is present. The unique sum of impressions and experiences that occur during the consumption period may lead to positive, negative or a mixture of experiences. Ultimately the service experience will be in the 'eye of the beholder'.

Past research has identified the sort of service failures that occur in hotels and these tend to include service quality concerns, reservation concerns, and room accommodation problems (see for example, Mattila & Mount, 2003). Harrison-Walker (2001) analysed online complaints

about an airline and found a high proportion were related to employee rudeness, employee incompetence or receiving misinformation from employees. Lee and Hu (2004) found most e-complaints to be primarily about service delivery including a decline in service quality, rude service representatives and service not being provided. Most fundamentally, a distinction can be made between service failures that occur due to an error of either omission or commission (Sparks, 2001). Failure as a result of omission is where part of the service offering is not provided. For instance, if a particular service is not available such as the hotel's signature restaurant is not open for patrons due to renovations. In situations where failure is a result of commission the service is delivered but does not meet the expected standards, such as the service provider speaking in a rude manner. Another distinction of service failures can involve core versus peripheral activities (Iacobucci, Grayson & Ostrom, 1994). Core activities are those central to the service provided such as the food at a restaurant. The core service breakdowns may include occurrences such as a hotel room not being ready, or a steak being cooked too well done when requested rare. Peripheral activities are those that complement or enhance the core service delivery such as the ambiance of a restaurant or the interpersonal style of providers. Failures that relate to peripheral activities frequently include a lack of interpersonal skills (e.g. friendliness) on the part of the service provider. Finally, failures may vary across a range of other dimensions including severity, duration, frequency, and whether it could have been avoided. A question raised in this research is whether online reviews focus on core or peripheral activities and whether they result from an error of either omission or commission and the implications this may have for the hotel industry.

**The structure or form of online complaints.**

As indicated earlier, the Internet provides past consumers with the opportunity to tell their negative consumption stories to the world. As McCabe and Foster (2006) assert, the tourist has a tendency toward a narrative attitude using stories to define and describe touristic events. However, to date, there appears to be no analysis of the *structure* or *form* of these types of online 'stories'. According to research into narratives (Elliot, 2005), it is argued that researchers have a lot to learn from investigating structural models of people's stories. An often cited approach to such structural analysis is based on the work of Labov and Waletzky (1967), who produced a model for analysing narratives. Essentially, the model asserts that narratives tend to hold recurring patterns that comprise six elements: abstract (summary); orientation (setting, time, place); complicating action (what happened); evaluation (meaning of the events); resolution (how it ends); and coda (return to present). Elliot (2005) suggests that it is the complicating action that forms the most minimal of narratives but it is the evaluative element that demonstrates the meaning of the events for the person telling the story. Gaining an understanding more about the structure of the stories told online may further enlighten the tourism industry in respect of the evaluative meaning accorded to individual consumer's experiences. Perhaps an important point about studying online communication is that it provides the researcher with information that is usually in close proximity to the time of events experienced. That is, information is usually posted not long after the service failure and is therefore more likely to be less susceptible to memory loss or recall difficulties (Verbrugge, 1980).

Given the limited research into online complaints and in particular those related to hotels, the study that is presented in this paper, set out to explore the focus and  structure of these

complaints, and what motivated the complainants to post the complaints on such a public forum such as the Internet.

**Research design**

This section of the paper presents the data collection and data analysis procedures used in the study.  As the aim of this exploratory study was to establish how people communicate in an Internet environment about negative experiences they have had while  staying in a hotel, the cases we were interested in were of those experiences that were reported as sub-optimal to the consumer's expectations. The specific objectives of the research study were to:

- Identify what triggered these complaints and what the complaint focused on
- Identify what motivated consumers to place their complaints online
- Identify whether the severity of the complaint influenced whether consumers would complain online
- Examine how these complaints were structured

Data collection

A qualitative approach was taken in this research using a document review method on two hundred complaints sourced from an online travel site (TripAdvisor.com). Lee and Hu(2004) and Hobson (2003) argue for the importance of conducting qualitative research in the hospitality and tourism industries particularly in the area of e complaints. Qualitative research also allows for the systematic exploration of what lies behind unknown social phenomenon particularly within a bounded social context such as the Internet and e-complaints (Lee & Hu, 2004; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1997).

The TripAdvisor.com site was chosen as it makes up the largest travel community in the world, with more than 25 million monthly visitors, seven million plus registered members and 15 million reviews and opinions (downloaded from site on 31 July 2008 http://www.tripadvisor.com/pages/about_us.html). Thus, TripAdvisor.com provides a case study of a point of contact for potential consumers to find out more information about a range of services, including accommodation, and to make a booking directly with a partner booking company.

Complaint cases were selected by reviewing the TripAdvisor site in November 2007, although reviews went as far back as July, 2002.  Each complaint represented a case and was selected if the rating provided by the consumer was a one or two on a 5 point scale.  The full text of each complaint case was copied into a spreadsheet for later analysis through NVivo 8, a software program for the management of data analysis of qualitative data.

**Data analysis**

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the data analysis took a grounded theory approach using inductive analysis to allow the natural variations in patterns and themes to emerge from the cases (Patton, 1990; Strauss, 1987). To enhance external validity, this study used a team approach to analyse data obtained from the documents (Ferlie, Fitzgerald, Wood & Hawkins, 2005; Teo, Lakhani, Brown & Malmi, 2008). Initially one researcher read the complaints and undertook basic open coding (Charmaz, 2006).  In particular, codes were established for the patterns of complaints such as what people were complaining about (Miles & Huberman, 1984). This first coding review was primarily content oriented.  Following this step the initial codes were reviewed by the research team and then examined to determine relationships and themes

that might exist.  The coding process proceeded to the next stage of investigating how the codes

related to each other in a hierarchical manner.  At this stage the research team involved in the

project and one independent person reviewed the coding to check for agreement on these coded

themes. Where there was disagreement with the coding the research team and the independent

person through discussion agreed on the codes and final coding was undertaken.  Memo and

journaling processes were adopted by the researchers to explore themes and concepts as these

emerged.  A further narrative analysis using the model proposed by Labov (1997) was conducted

by the research team to provide a more detailed understanding of the structure of the complaints.


**Results**

Themes were identified around the focus of the complaint, the motive for the complaint

and the structure and the content of the complaint.  We first report on these themes and then

present a model that explores the broader relationships between the themes.


**The focus of the complaint – triggers and targets.**

The complaints were triggered by, or targeted at, features internal to the hotel such as

actual room features, service quality, food/beverage, and public space; or external to the hotel

such as location relative to main attractions. Service failure was a result of both acts of omission

and acts of commission.


Table 1 highlights those triggers and targets that were reported and provides examples of

consumer comments.  In terms of the focus on the features internal to the hotel, the room features

were reported on the most frequently followed by references to the consumer service and the

public areas of the hotel.  In regard to the room, complaints centred on the size of the room,

cleanliness and the condition of the furniture and the equipment in the room. References to consumer service were mainly about the behaviour of the employees towards the guests and also the conduct of the owners or managers of the hotel.  Behaviours highlighted through the analysis included employees, owners and managers being unhelpful, unfriendly, uncooperative, aggressive, rude, incompetent and not apologising for the problems experienced by the guest. Complaints relating to the public areas of the hotel centred on the general condition of the hotel such as being old, shabby, outdated décor, dirty and smelly. There were also references to the lack of or bad condition of the facilities such as swimming pools, restaurants, parking and entertainment.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

Guests also identified the fact that their expectations had not been met.  Their expectations related to the standard they anticipated receiving from the hotel based upon the publicised hotel star rating and price paid, usually expressed in value for money terms.  The authors of some of the commentaries also made reference to the unethical behaviour of tour companies in misrepresenting the hotel and charging too much to organize the bookings and travel arrangements.

While most of the complaints tended to focus more on the hotel itself there were also references made to the location of the hotel.  These centred around where the hotel was located in relation to the tourist sites, the condition of the tourist attractions and the impact of the location of the hotel on the guests' holiday experience

**The motive for the complaint**

A review of the complaints indicated that the majority of the guests' initial complaint to the hotel staff had not been adequately resolved. The Internet was, therefore, a means for the guests to air their complaints - an opportunity to vent. In addition, guests showed a concern for the welfare of others (altruism). There was a focus on warning potential guests about safety issues such as *"In a badly lit area of Altinkum - watch your handbags ladies. Won't go again"* (Complaint 151) *"Community slightly threatening … can still smell the burnt rubber from street racing…"* (Complaint 161), and on problems with the hotel so others would not have the same bad experience such as *"BEWARE and DO NOT STAY at this HOTEL; THE ROYAL HOTEL IS TERRIBLE AND WILL RIP YOU OFF."* (Complaint 178).

Guests could also have felt a sense of injustice based on their initial complaint not being dealt with appropriately and fairly. This may well revolve around their perception that the process used by the hotel to handle the complaint was unfair (procedural justice) or that the staff was discourteous, lacked empathy and did not provide an adequate explanation (interactional justice).

**The severity of the complaint**

The severity of the complaints in terms of the consequences for the complainant varied from a minor inconvenience such as *"there was only one bathrobe between two which we felt was disappointing as we had to share. No tea and coffee making facilities but lucky we brought a travel kettle"* (Complaint 11) through to major discomfort and concern for their own health and safety such as *"There were bedbugs everywhere!! This is the first time I find bed bugs in a hotel room and someone from my group was bitten so badly he had to see a doctor. We also got blood stained bed sheet for the extra bed that we asked for and a choked bath tub!"* (Complaint 16) and

*"The place just doesn't seem very safe."*(Complaint 199). Many of the complaints also reported on a financial loss such as *"when we told them we were leaving to go to another hotel we were still charged a full night rate."* (Complaint 184).  It seems that the severity of the situation for the complainant did not necessarily influence whether the complaint was posted or not.

**Structure of the complaint – telling a story**

The publishing of negative reviews on the website takes place in an electronic social world and the presentation of the material is broadcast for wide public consumption.  We were interested to investigate the approaches taken to present the communication to others. Drawing upon narrative analysis principles (Labov, 1997) we undertook an analysis of the way online complaints were structured.  This approach involves drawing upon the analysis of stories which can be constructed around six key elements: abstract; orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda.  Our analysis found that the complaints tended to be reasonably short and did not contain an abstract (summary of the story).

An orientation clause (Labov, 1997) was evident as many of the complaints contained information about time, context, and place of the event.  In essence most people told a story starting with some sort of <u>contextual statement</u> about the reason for their trip and why they were staying at a particular location or hotel such as *"I was in Stockholm on business and was recommended this hotel by a colleague"* (Complaint 134).  As detailed in Table 2, 72 of the 200 complaints provided an orientation to the complaint.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

Evidence of a complicating action as key component to the story was clearly illustrated in virtually all of the complaints.  The event or situation that was the basis of the complaint was described often in vivid detail, using descriptive language such as *"It was like living in Dracula den, unhygienic, black atmosphere"* (Complaint 173). This lends support to the observance that guests were using the Internet as an opportunity to vent.  Virtually all of the complaints (188 out of 200) reported on the event or complicating action.  It was also evident that many complainants had experienced an assault to their senses, especially hearing and smell.  They brought this into their story by describing what they smelt such as *"Toilet is smelling like zoo garden."* (Complaint 55) and heard such as *"Windows are never shut so bang constantly and the cleaning staff drag buckets and furniture around all day long"* (Complaint 8). In essence the readers could feel that they were re-living the experience.  The complainants were reflecting the meaning of the experience for them.


Most stories also contain some sort of evaluative clause, such as 'this was really horrible'.  Around half of the complaints provided a clear written evaluation of the incident as part of the story told online, or references to strong emotions felt by the complainant such as *"I was terrified to say the least."* (Complaint 51).  In addition, most had provided their own star rating as part of posting the complaint, thus adding an evaluation that is universally adopted in the hotel industry, even though it did not form part of the story in all cases.  Much of the evaluation was contained within juxtaposing comments, highlighting both the good and bad aspects of the stay, even though the negative may have been more heavily weighted such as "*the deco for the lobby and reception was very nice but it would be beneficial if the rooms matched the standard of the reception area and lobby."*  (Complaint 11).  This theme of presenting a balanced approach to the expression of the message suggests a certain degree of impression management activity.

The author of the complaint often described the action they took to handle/resolve the situation.  This could be making a complaint to the hotel staff such as *"We went back down to reception to complain and asked for a full refund…"* (Complaint 178) and/or leaving the hotel and making alternative accommodation arrangements such as *"We checked into another hotel for the last 3 nights of our vacation."* (Complaint 195).

Finally, many of the complaints finished with some sort of return to the present (coda). Such a technique tended to appeal to the reader in present time with comments such as *"would you want to stay at this hotel? NO"* (Complaint 178). Thus, the coda could be seen as closely connected to one form of resolution, which returns the story to the present time but also warns others not to use the hotel. The story often ended by returning to the present with advice for potential guests often using strong, direct language such as *"[the] Only thing I can say is NEVER stay at this place, it's vile"* (Complaint 100).  Advice centred mainly on not booking at the hotel but could also include, as discussed earlier, warnings around guests keeping themselves safe.

Hart and Blackshaw (2005) state that web messages are to the point and often blunt.  They suggest that this underscores the credibility of the message. "You might not like what someone has to say, but you can be relatively certain he or she is not lying to be polite" (Hart & Blackshaw, 2005, p. 27). The application of narrative analysis to the structure of the complaint reveals a common process of reporting or venting in respect of the service failure associated with the hotel stay.  Even though the complaints were fairly short and direct they also exhibited some common story telling elements.  Virtually all of the complainants reported on the complicating action and around half provided a clear evaluation of the incident.  It also needs to be noted that

evaluation is largely implicit through the posting of the account of the hotel stay and subsequent low star rating given to the hotel.  Last, there seemed to be two ways of resolution reflected in the reviews. First, by posting a complaint the consumer had the opportunity to voice the action taken as a result of the failure and, second, the consumer resolved the service failure by posting a complaint.  Figure 1 graphically displays the structural elements of the online complaint stories.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

Finally, we constructed a model to depict the overall themes and relations that emerged from the study.  In summary, Figure 2 seeks to provide a synthesised overview of the findings by linking the major themes of the research.  Thus, based on the analysis of the reviews there is a trigger that starts the process of engaging in writing a negative complaint. The trigger can be internal to the hotel but also something external in the vicinity of the hotel (neighbourhood), but will most likely be an unresolved negative experience associated with the stay at a particular property. The posting of the negative review is most likely to be as a result of venting, altruism or revenge. Evidence exists that a posting is a narrative structure that tells a personal story starting with setting a context, followed by a description of the event, which often captures the emotions felt and describes graphically what the complainant heard and smelt. This is followed by an explanation of the action taken by the complainant and often advice is provided to the reader as to whether they should make a booking.

Insert Figure 2 about here

**Discussion**

The themes that emerge from the online complaints indicate that consumers not only use the Internet to air their complaints but as highlighted by Sen and Lerman (2007) also use it to influence and persuade potential consumers to avoid using a product or service. This emphasises the importance of hotels developing strategies to manage these online complaints more proactively (Hart & Blackshaw, 2006).

Unlike Harrison-Walker's (2001) research, which identified only e-complaints that focused on peripheral service activities, this research identified a wide range of service failures caused by both errors of commission and omission and the inadequate delivery of both core and peripheral service activities. In addition the consequences of the service failure for the consumer did not need to be very severe for consumers to post their complaints. Indeed, a large number of complaints were about the standard of the accommodation and the rudeness of service staff. This is similar to what other researchers (Ok, Back & Shankin, 2005) find, whereby the manner in which a service failure event is managed ultimately affects behavioural intentions such as repeat visitation. So it is noteworthy that even what firms would consider minor and inconsequential services failures can result in complaints being posted online. In addition, since our study found many people not only indicate they will not return to the hotel but they also take the opportunity to warn others, this reinforces the notion that the Internet is an easy and accessible forum for consumers to air their complaints and express themselves in a way that potentially sends a message to a world-wide audience (Ward & Ostram, 2006; Tyrrell & Wood (2004). Gone are the days when just a few friends heard the complaint.

Complaining online to a large extent seems to be in response to the failure of hotels to adequately deal with an initial complaint often made face to face.  There is an emergence of specific, company directed complaint websites. Such sites are usually set up when little or no response is given to a consumer's original complaint (Tyrrell & Wood, 2004).  That is, when ignored, some consumers find an increased level of motivation to spread their displeasure to the world.  Some complainants seek revenge for a perceived injustice both in terms of the process used by the hotel in response to their complaint (procedural justice) and how the hotel staff dealt with their complaint (interactional justice). This is consistent with extensive research that has emphasized the importance of fair processes (both in procedural and interactional terms) operating. For example, McColl-Kennedy and Sparks (2003) found that consumers have a normative expectation to receive an explanation following a breakdown in service.  In contrast to motivations of revenge some complainants appeared to be motivated by a need to look after the welfare of others or altruism.  This altruistic motivation is not an uncommon motivation behind consumers complaining.  Consumers with high levels of altruism are more likely to help other consumers by providing information that could influence their decision to purchase (Price et al., 1995).  The Internet therefore has the potential to become an important domain for consumer helping behaviour.

The structure and form of the complaints are particularly interesting.  They reflect to a large extent the elements identified by Labov (1997) and are phrased and expressed in a way to build a credible case that may strongly influence the views and decisions of other consumers. In line with Pan and Fesenmaier's (2006) assertions, consumers can use a review site to take control and frame descriptions within their personal experiences versus that of the hotel. The complainants tell a rich evocative story beginning with setting the scene highlighting both the bad

and the good.  This provides the reader with a  balanced perspective from the complainant.  As

complaining per se may be perceived as a negative form of behaviour (Kowalski,2002), it makes

sense that consumers are likely to provide a more balanced  online review that also conforms to

the policy requirements of  the web-site. As many web-sites are specifically set up for sharing

information, both positive and negative, writing negative eWoM is sanctioned behaviour.


Potential consumers are probably more likely to give credence to a negative comment if it

is balanced with a positive comment.  The complainant is building the reader's trust and creating

an impression of being believable and not to blame.  The readers are then potentially drawn into

the story through the use of highly descriptive language that recreates the emotions felt by, and

the experiences of, the complainant.  We get a real understanding of the evaluative meaning of

the situation for the complainant.  This could potentially provide hospitality firms with a better

understanding of what really upsets guests and ways to respond more appropriately to these

situations.  The very blunt and direct recommendations made by the complainants put the final

stamp of credibility on the complaint.  The power of these complaints to persuade other

consumers should not be underestimated.  As Hart and Blackshaw (2005) reflect, they can

influence potential guests to develop strong views about a hotel. They also have the potential to

project a very negative image of the hotel and by remaining on the site for years can have a long

term influence on consumers' decisions.


**Practical implications for the hospitality industry**

The findings of this study further emphasise the importance for firms, such as hotels, to

consider ways to counter and respond to the complaints of consumers made via discussion sites

on the Internet.  They provide an indication of some of the issues that hospitality firms should

take into consideration in regard to their response.  The complaints themselves are a rich source

of detail as to what triggers consumer dissatisfaction.  Not only do consumers complain about a

wide range of service issues but even what seems just a slight inconvenience can result in

consumers posting a complaint that potentially has far reaching consequences for the hotel. Thus,

for hotels, it is important to attend to even the smallest things, perhaps by ensuring quality audits

are regularly undertaken and that feedback on guest satisfaction is sought and responded to.  In an

analysis of text complaints, Kowalaski (1996) found that participants were more likely to express

greater negativity toward the party they were complaining about (to others via WoM) than if they

were to complain directly to the party that was the cause of the problem. Thus, it is plausible that

the online reviews, which have usually not been rectified at the source, express greater

emotionality when aired in such a public forum, compared to a situation where the reviewer had

spoken directly to the hotel. Carefully listening and responding to guest feedback at the time of a

hotel stay is, therefore, an important tool in reducing negative eWoM.


The understanding that the Internet is a highly accessible forum used by many consumers

to air their complaints should encourage firms to view the Internet as a channel to not only

capture but to respond efficiently to consumer complaints (Snellman & Vihtkari, 2003).  Internet

sites such as TripAdvisor also allow hotel property owners the opportunity to post a response

"…to reviews written about their property.  Responses meeting our posting criteria will be

displayed on the TripAdvisor site directly underneath the relevant review" (downloaded 31 July

08).  It is claimed that tourism and hospitality firms tend to ignore e-complaints, and that they do

this at their peril (Tyrell & Wood, 2004; Hart & Blackshaw, 2006).  However dealing with

complaints before they get to the web-site is still important and managers need to be careful about

entering into dialogue online as it may be fraught with danger. As Brown, Broderick and Lee

(2007) note, attempts by managers to influence online discussions can be risky and any such dialogue needs to "be open, honest, and authentic …" (p. 16).

Hart and Blackshaw (2006) suggest that firms need to create and implement a strategy to not only respond to consumers' e-complaints but also to better manage the complaint process. They suggest that someone should be put in charge of consumer generated media (CGM), that the web should be monitored and the data collected, analysed and interpreted to guide further action. However, we also suggest that while the web generally, and particular firms such as eComplaints and PlanetFeedback specifically, provide consumers with the means to complain online, it may be more beneficial for service firms such as hotels to provide this service themselves to their consumers. It is well documented in service recovery literature that encouraging consumers to complain provides a rich source for improving service quality and that responding appropriately to these complaints enhances consumer retention. Consumers seem to feel more comfortable complaining via electronic means. As such, firms could facilitate consumer complaints by providing easy access to technology interfaces and educating consumers on how and where to lodge complaints. This has implications not only for the type of technology needed to provide such a service but also what criteria to consider in the design of such a website. Schoefer and Ennew (2004) suggest that consumers should be involved in the design of complaint-handling systems and that a decision be made as to who has the authority to deal with complaints of varying magnitude. They recommend that firms should consider providing frontline employees with the responsibility to respond to consumer complaints directly. Not only does this allow for a more timely response to complaints but we would contend it could provide credibility to the response of the firm if the employee directly involved deals with the complaint. Palmer, Beggs

and Keown-McMullan (2000) found that consumers are more satisfied with the service recovery if it is handled by frontline employees rather than managers.

Schoefer and Ennew (2004) also propose that firms need to design complaint-handling systems that consider justice and fairness both in terms of outcomes (distributive justice) and the procedures (procedural justice). Their study indicated that consumers do consider justice and fairness when evaluating the responses of firms to their complaints.

**Limitations and Future Research**

While this exploratory study was based on only one online travel website, it did access consumer complaints across a spread of hotels. Further research could access a wider array of sites and complaints and include other firms operating in the hospitality and tourism industry such as restaurants and entertainment. Another possible limitation of accessing data on these online sites is the possibility of competitors placing incorrect information on the site. Websites are installing systems to manage the manipulation of sites by business owners. For example, Yelp now has a system that separates reviews based on be given free meals from those posted by consumers who did not pay (McLaughlin,2007)

In terms of future research other research methods such as experimental design, perhaps through a simulated website could investigate the best way hospitality firms could counter online complaints (via service recovery actions). The simulation could encompass the manipulation of variables highlighted by this exploratory study. For example, the influence of the types and forms of the complaints as well as the response of the firm on the consumers' decision to use their product and services could be explored. Finally, as source credibility is such an important issue in consumer influence research, it seems important to conduct further research that

untangles the influence of the source of the review (consumer) versus the Web- site (see also, Brown et al., 2007).

In conclusion, this exploratory study contributes further to our understanding of how and why consumers complain online.  It also is an important catalyst for more detailed and comprehensive research in an area that has as yet not been extensively studied in marketing or management and which has significant implications for the hospitality and tourism industry.

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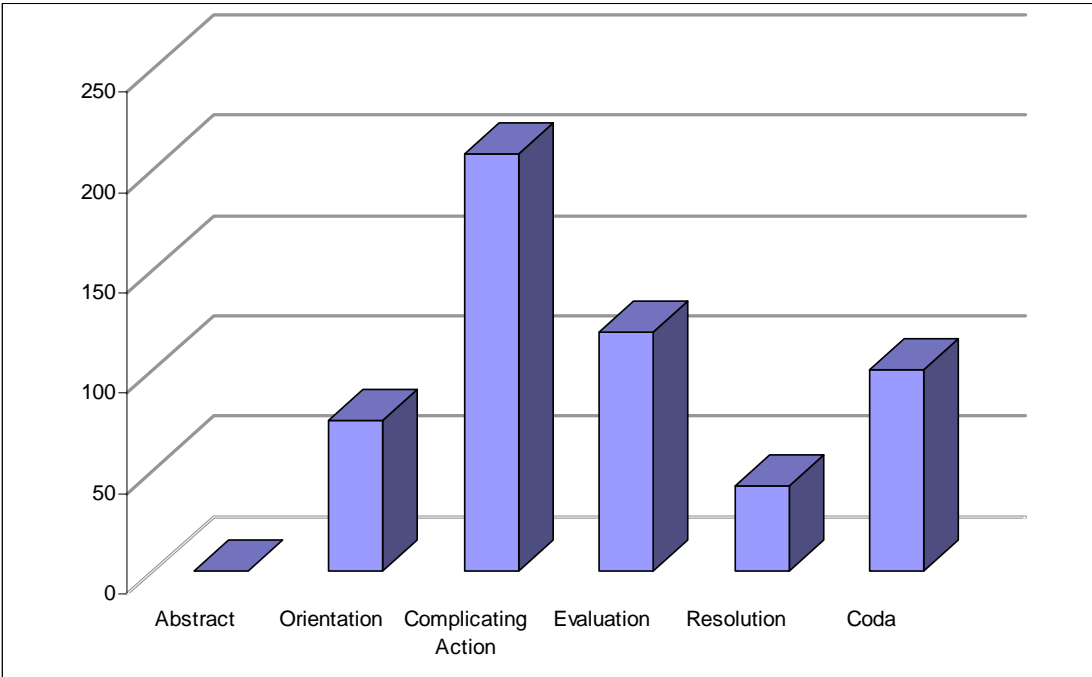**Figure 1: Illustration of narrative elements of the online complaints**

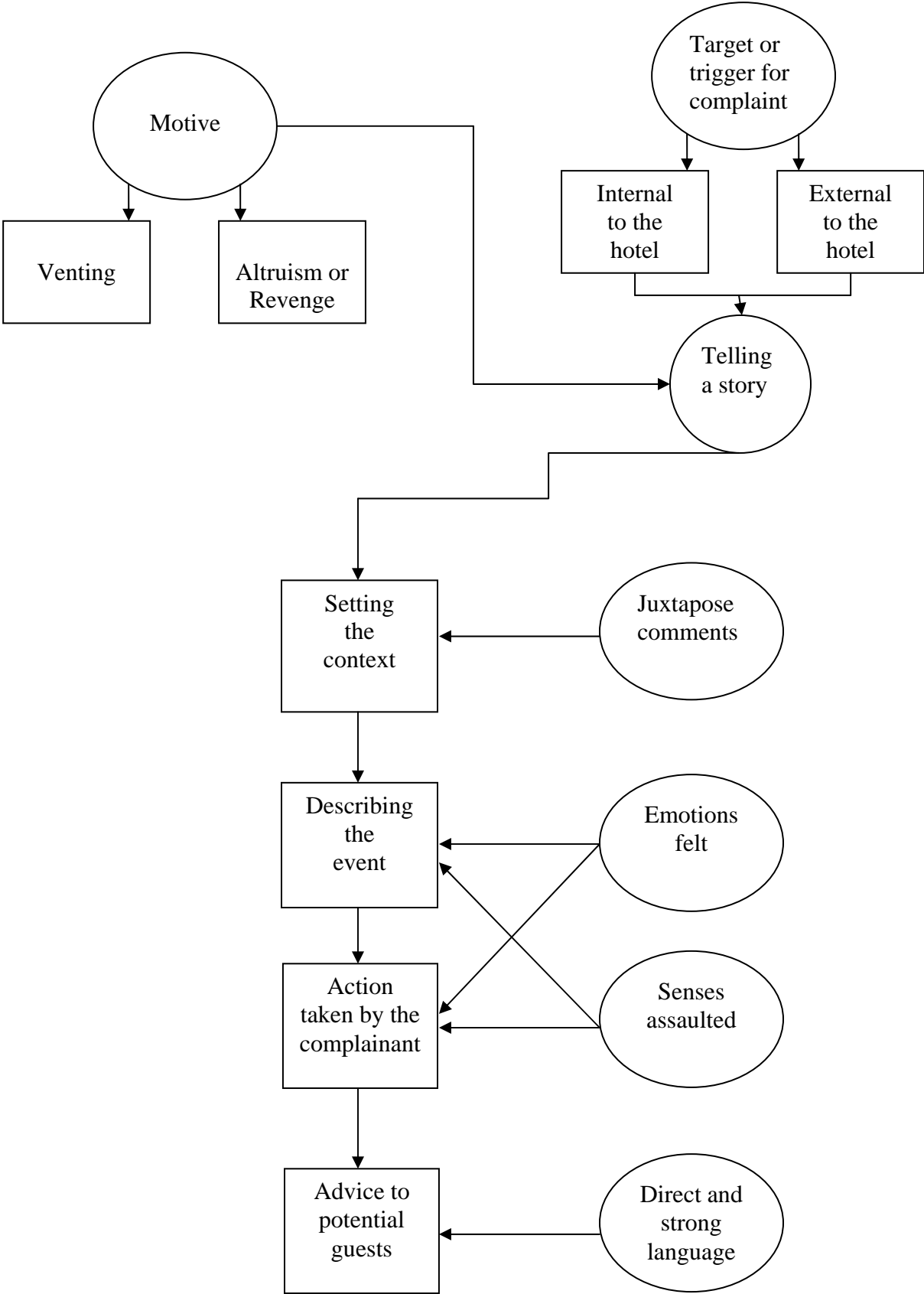**Figure 2: Links between key themes**

**Table 1: The focus of the complaints**

| Trigger or target of complaint | Number of sources | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| **Internal to the hotel** | | |
| Room features | 127 | Complaint 10 – "got into room and it was terrible, small grotty and generally crap. Were quite concerned that we would have visitors with more than two legs during the night" <br><br> Complaint 184 – "the rooms were filthy and the air conditioning did not work" |
| Consumer service | 82 | Complaint 61 – "rude surly staff and indifferent management added to the uncomfortable atmosphere of this hotel". <br><br> Complaint 138 – "It is spoiled by truly incompetent waiters .. We ultimately had to laugh at the circus each morning" |
| Public areas of hotel | 77 | Complaint 121 – "the hotel was dirty, the swimming pool had a dog swimming and soiling itself in it" <br><br> Complaint 83 – "found the hotel to be very tired and needing renovating". |
| Star reference | 52 | Complaint 71 – "Advertised as 4*hotel, is more like a 2* or poorly run 3*hotel" |
| Food or beverage | 47 | Complaint 132 – "Hotel restaurant is just awful. The buffet is inadequate with over cooked food …" |
| Value reference | 31 | Complaint 159 "It was not worth the price; I went to cheaper hotels in Kuala Lumpar which was more class than this smelly hole." |
| Tour company | 5 | Complaint 20 – "It is appalling to see how travel agencies can take advantage of tourists in this way. We |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | contacted itravel2000. who sold us the package, and Sunwing Vacations. But of course, none of these companies are willing to take responsibility for our disaster." |
| Ambience | 5 | Complaint 20 – "When we got here it was like being in a ghost hotel" |
| | | |
| **External to the hotel** | | |
| Location | 30 | Complaint 154 – "This hotel is situated far away from Vatican. You will need 1,5 hours to reach the center of Rome." Complaint 128 – "the beach was uninviting and rather dirty"- |

**Table 2: Narrative analysis of complaints**

| Labov elements | Number of sources | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Abstract – summary of the subject matter | 0 | No evidence of summaries |
| Orientation – information about the setting; time, place, situation and participants | 72 | "My husband and I decided to choose this hotel as they had themed rooms and we felt it would be fun and a little different" (Complaint 6)<br>"Arrived late at night on train and didn't really have any other options at that time." (Complaint 10) |
| Complicating action – what actually happened or was reported as a failure | 188 | "The hotel was dirty, the swimming pool had a dog swimming and soiling itself in it. The in room facilities were all broken and the hotel was ill managed with the staff being rude and unhelpful." (Complaint 121) |
| Evaluation – word or messages that say this was frustrating, annoying, upsetting, horrible; or amusing, hilarious and wonderful | 103 | "This was an awful hotel." (Complaint 114); "It was a horrible experience." (Complaint 125)<br>"Were we disappointed!" (Complaint 17) |
| Resolution – how it ended; people left, | 36 (2001) | "Left first thing in morning, just couldn't be bothered arguing." (Complaint 10)<br>"We brought this the attention of reception staff" (Complaint 14)<br>"We refused to pay as we did not touch a single one of those items. After arguing |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| got compensated, told others, posted the complaint | | for some time and checking with the housekeeping staff, they finally told us that they found the map and the beverage in the room! Not a word of apology from them" (Complaint 16) |
| Coda – returns perspective to present, back to the now – comments like, 'anyway I never go there again'. | 93 | "Stay away from this hotel." (Complaint 125) <br> "Don´t stay here if you are looking for a charming hotel" (Complaint 131) |

1 All posted complaints can be classified as a form of resolution; the 36 references refer to other forms of resolution