

Bad Outcomes from Good Practice within Emergent Negative Online Engagement

Abstract

Social media is a complex, interactive and co-creative environment where marketers seek to promote brand values. The construct of online consumer engagement (OCE) has emerged as a key metric of social media marketing outcomes. Research has focused on positive OCE resulting and there is limited insight into the critical drivers of negative OCE. This paper draws on both Practice Theory and Justice Theory to identify a range of customer and organisational interaction practices during episodes of negative OCE within the customer services Facebook pages of retail banks. Results indicated instances of where “good” customer services practices have turned “bad” when applied to the social media context. The empirical work advances the theoretical concept of OCE to suggest that it may be targeted at a broader network of actors than has been conceptualised.

Keywords: Social media, Facebook, customer service, practice theory, financial services

1. Introduction

The construct of online consumer engagement (OCE) has emerged as a key metric of social media marketing outcomes (Mollen and Wilson, 2010, Cvijikj and Michahelles 2013, Brodie et al 2013). In order to achieve social media marketers are advised to orchestrate ongoing constructive brand-customer and consumer-consumer interaction (Barker et al 2013, Ashley and Tuten 2015). Understanding OCE is highlighted as a business priority (eConsultancy 2017). However, the relatively recent conceptualisation of OCE means that it is an emergent and malleable online practice (Erikson 2010; Gummerus et al 2012). Emergent practices are unclear and lack clear boundaries (Bjorkeng et al 2009) which means that the processes and techniques that marketing practitioners should adopt are ill-defined and untested.

The contribution of this study to consumer research is threefold. First, we focus upon negative OC as knowledge of negative OCE remains tenuous and there is limited insight into its operation (Hollebeek et al 2016). Second, we answer calls for research to recognise the nuanced nature of OCE and to examine the practices of managing or influencing OCE (Kunz & Jahn 2012; Brodie et al 2013). Finally, we provide a foundation for ongoing study of the OCE phenomenon through the application of Practice Theory and Justice Theory.

2. Literature Review

The use of the term “engagement” dates from 2005 (Brodie et al 2013). OCE is considered an antecedent to the development of a mutually beneficial relationship between consumer and organisation (Smith et al 2015). To promote engagement brands can establish a social media presence through the creation of a Fan Page within a social media platform i.e. YouTube, Twitter or Facebook (Kang et al 2014). Fan Pages offer a place for customers to meet other customers and also to interact with the brand (De Valck 2009). However, survey evidence shows that only 11% of social media messages get a direct response from businesses and that customer expectations of a 30 minutes time lapse before responses are unmet indicating that routinized best practice is not established (Sproutsocial 2016). This is a concern since social media are high in transparency and accountability (Ward and Ostrom 2006) and very poor social media encounters can result in a substantial loss of brand equity (Fournier and Avery 2011).

Academic research has maintained a sustained focus on developing the OCE construct. In a systematic literature review, Ul Islam and Rahman (2016) highlight several research gaps: (1) most studies have emphasised positive OCE and thus negative OCE has remained unexplored; (2) there has been no study that examines employee-customer engagement interactions; (3) there is a trend towards quantitative methods (4) current research has focussed upon only a limited set of service contexts. In addition, typically, research identifies OCE as a positive behaviour and links it to beneficial brand outcomes (Kang et al 2014). However, such approaches overlook negative OCE behaviour of counter-arguing and resisting brand actions (Van Doorn et al 2010). Extant negative OCE research is exploratory (Hollebeek & Chen 2014) or providing findings that conflict with theorised effects, such as linking negative engagement to positive brand outcomes (Berger et al 2010; Liu 2006). We study negative OCE since it is public, persistent and expressed within an online channel where customers place more trust than broadcast communications and thus has considerable impact (Ward & Ostrom 2006).

OCE conceptualisations do not adequately account for negative engagement (Brodie et al 2013) and there is a tendency to consider negative OCE as being equivalent to negative word of mouth (Kumar et al 2010). However Juric et al (2015:281) argue that negative OCE is a distinct concept which occurs as a result of “dynamic, iterative processes of relational exchange”. Justice Theory is an appropriate lens through to evaluate the nature of relational exchange that underpins negative OCE. It is established that both what is done (tangible compensation) and how it is done (employee interaction with the customer) influence customer perceptions of justice based on three main aspects (Levesque and McDougall, 2000).

1. Distributive justice is about the perceived fairness of the outcome (e.g., problem rectified, refund, compensation)
2. Procedural justice is about the perceived fairness of the process employed in resolving the service failure (e.g., speed or recovery, keeping customer informed)
3. Interactional justice is about the perceived fairness of the manner in which the customer is treated (e.g., respect, empathy, courtesy) (Patterson et al., 2006)

Within customer services research Justice Theory has been used to provide guidance to marketers when dealing with customer complaints. For example, Blodgett et al. (1997) found that interactional and distributive justice explained significantly more variance than procedural justice on subjects’ repatronage intentions or on their negative word-of-mouth intentions. On the other hand, Smith et al. (1999) showed that customers assign a higher fairness value to both distributive and procedural justice when they experience outcome failures.

The emergent nature OCE is evidenced by work, such as that by Mollen and Wilson (201) that strive to distinguish it from similar concepts such as involvement. Brodie et al (2011: 257) argue that OCE comprises “ specific types and/or patterns of focal engagement activities” or practices. The focus upon activity, or “what is being done” leads us to consider practice theory as an additional route with which to examine negative OCE (Schatzki 2003, Nicolini 2012). Practice theory scholars view practices as evidence of a linked and implicit way of understanding, saying and doing something (Schau et al 2009). When a practice is established it acts as a benchmark against which practitioners and researchers can judge “how they were doing, what they were doing and... when they were doing it wrong” (Bjorkeng et al 2009: 147). However in the case of an emergent practice there is a mixture of shared and contested understandings and identification of areas of practice that are this state of flux

provides deeper insight into OCE. For example, Skalen et al (2015) show how areas of misalignment within an online brand community destroy value, whilst Schau et al (2009) show where accepted practices boost community value. There is limited research within the marketing discipline that examines emergent practices although there is a rich stream that examines marketing practice (Hackley 1999, Hackley 2002). Hence, in this study we examine the emergent and contested practices used by organisations and customers to influence and manage negative OCE.

Our literature review leads us to frame the following questions: “Which practices do organisations and customers use in negative social media engagement? Is there identification of good and bad OCE practice? Does Justice Theory provide insight into emergent OCE practice?”

Methodology

We use practice theory to identify how consumers and organisations interact during episodes of negative OCE. A practice is defined as a linked and implicit way of understanding, saying and doing something and is a critical component of ordering and making sense of complexity (Garfinkel 1967; Schau et al 2009). Practice theory argues that focussing upon practices, either by observing or collecting participant accounts of enacting practices, enables researchers to make visible “tacit, sensory and aesthetic knowledge” (Gherardi 2012: 4). In order address our research questions we employed an inductive research design and collected qualitative textual and individual interview data regarding practices. Qualitative data collection is argued as being appropriate for the study of practices since it is “better able to answer questions as to the “how” of a process, its temporality and the meaning attributed to it” (Gherardi 2012: 5). Combining interview and textual data enabled us to generate information from two different perspectives (the online community and the organisation) (Cresswell 2013) and this approach is established within social media research situations (Olkkonen et al. 2000; Jahn and Kunz 2012). All data has been anonymised.

3.1 Data Collection

We select customer service social media pages in order to access episodes of negative engagement and we focus upon retail banking as an ongoing service that involves sustained interaction (Ennew and Waite 2007). This means that we could expect an organisational response to queries and also considerable effort to be made to resolve negative OCE. The textual data is Facebook posts, Facebook was chosen as it is the most commonly used channel by customers and brands (Statistica 2014). A dataset of 800 posts were gathered from the social media pages of eight banks in the course of 52 days, collecting stopped for each bank when a total of 50 posts were reached. The dataset contains customer-bank posts, bank-customer posts and customer-customer posts. Messages were tracked until there were no further comments from the bank or other customers. (For overview of dataset see Table 1 in the Appendices). Three individual unstructured interviews were conducted with social media managers (Table 2 in Appendices). Participants were asked about organisational social media practices with a focus upon actions, meanings and influences associated with negative OCE. A flexible interview approach ensured that participants were free to discuss topics at their own pace and were not biased through directive questioning. Capturing naturalistic discourse and analysing the conflicting knowledge claims it contains ensures the communicative validity of qualitative research (Kvale 1995).

3. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The first stage of our analysis was to identify instances of negative OCE. We then unpacked the practices observed and linked this to accounts within the interviews to

understand the organisational intentions. We used NVIVO to code iteratively, starting with broad codes such as a negative/positive engagement, followed by unique codes which were refined and aggregated in broader conceptual categories. Through the concurrent processes of coding and comparative analysis, recurrent themes and patterns were identified, as well as discrepancies in those patterns (Miles and Huberman 1994). We begin by reporting the practice that we observed in terms of Negative OCE before how discussing how the discourse seeks to position the emergent practices as good or bad practice.

4.1 Negative Engagement Practices

When initiating negative engagement customers used *Channel Justification practice*, which involved the positioning social media as a legitimate channel for complaining by highlighting the failure of the “usual route”. This practice was combined with *Venting Practice* which involved expressing negative emotions i.e. “lost patience” and insulting the organisation. In the following extract the customer highlights that he is using social media due to call centre service failure i.e. transfer procedure (i.e. knocked from pillar to post) and interactional skills (i.e. they cannot speak English)

When you call up [Bank B] to talk to someone, you get knocked from pillar to post to people who can't speak very good English and when you do finally get to speak to someone who can speak English, they couldn't help me. (John, Customer Bank B)

Customers engaged in *Attributing practice* which involved attributing negative motivations and attitudes as underpinning the poor customer service that they had experienced i.e. stating that they felt that the bank did not “give a toss about me as a customer!” or arguing that “loyalty is clearly a one way street” with the bank.

Amongst the banks was a strong desire to establish best practice in managing negative engagement in order to ensure that social media retains its value as a marketing communications channel.

Because if somebody comes on and says 'you're a bunch of robbing bastards' then what can you do...you're not getting this conversational stuff! (Bank SL)

One bank respondent noted if unchecked negativity would “overpower the messages that we're trying to get out there. (Bank R)”. It was argued that dealing with negative OCE was a business imperative due to the lack of control over the process and the persistency of the message

“No one's going to delete them. They're not going anywhere. We actually have to prepare a method of engagement or a method of handling negative advocacy. (Bank H)”

In response to negative engagement, banks responded with *Triaging Practice* which involved moving the negative customer-brand interaction out of the social media community to a one-to-one communication channel, i.e. Facebook private message function, the call centre or a brand visit. Bank-to-customer discourse also contained *Channel Justifying Practice* which involved positioning social media as being legitimate for “general queries”. Typically “security reasons” were used by all eight banks we analysed which meant that Bank R could give “general advice” only and “wouldn't be able to discuss anything confidential” through Facebook. Moreover this extract from Bank B highlights the link to procedural justice,

Even though we do have email addresses, at present we don't have a secure method of identifying our customers via this channel. This, unfortunately, necessitates the need for telephone contact (Bank B)

A second response was *Boiler-Plating practice* which involved posting an automated response, which might contain a thank you for the query, an apology and a contact number. In some posts banks made the effort to include the name of the customer in the response and also added in their own initials or identifiers to personalise the response. When the comment was expressing general negativity towards the industry the customer was thanked (a form of interactional justice) and the remit of the channel was reinforced

Hi there, thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with us. Please let us know if you have any UK banking queries; we're here to help and offer assistance should you need any. (Bank B)

Empathising Practice was used to manage negative engagement such as account closure. For example, Bank L expressed sorrow at the decision of a customer to close the account by stating *I'm sorry to hear that, but I'm glad you managed to speak with someone. I'll also make sure your feedback's recorded.*

3.2 Customer Identification of Good and Bad Practice

In this section we examine the extent to which the identified practices are considered good or bad practice in customer and organisational discourse. Customer discourse identified bank practices of Triaging and Boiler-Plating as bad practice. These practices resulted in negative OCE through continued Attribution and Venting Practices and a reaffirmation of Channel Justification Practice. For example, security reasons were denigrated as *“just words to avoid reprisals, damage control so to speak* (Bank S customer) and *“This is not a security issue; it's a general fault in your system”* (Bank H Students customer). Boiler-plating responses resulted in sarcasm and staff were accused of “hiding”

Funny how they always reply with just a phone number or website for help, yeah that really helps doesn't it. (Bank H customer).

Why is it [that] all Bank N staff hide behind ... [their] initials and refuse to give ... [their] names when asked on this site” (Bank N customer).

Channel Justification Practice involved updating other customers on social media with the successful outcomes from social media interactions. For example, when Bank S posted to Sarah that they responded to her query through private message, Sarah posted back:

..the only way to get things done with big companies that ignore you, is to get on Facebook and tell the public what is going on. It's amazing what happens!! Three complaints in a month on [Bank S] web site got me nowhere but one Facebook post got me what I wanted in a space of 2hours (Sarah customer Bank S).

Customers contended that Triaging Practice was counter to the channel “norm” of being a more direct form of communication and *“not another link to a complaints procedure”* (Bank N customer). This theme was found elsewhere in customer discourse, for example *“unless you can provide actual contact and account discussions this is really a pointless page.”* (Bank L customer).

4.3 Bank Identification of Good and Bad Practices

The social media marketing managers at the banks identified customer Venting practices as bad practice and stated that customers were *“just copying everyone else”* and that they thought that *“people [other customers] are getting fed up with it”* (Bank H). Social media managers reported that the use of initials was best practice in diffusing customer negativity and aggression but added the proviso that this did not work with senior staff.

That makes a big difference if you go on and say 'Hi, it's Craig from the social media team' or 'David'. We try to do that more and more often because that seems to diffuse the situation. Because it's more the company and the senior people at the company that they have a problem with. (Bank C)

In addition, social media managers considered that Triaging was good practice for three reasons (1) as a response to external regulation, (2) legitimacy through links to established customer service protocols and (3) a desire to control social media. For example,

You have to worry about compliance, about regulations, about behaviours.....For customer service there are a whole set of established KPIs. We also have a duty in financial services to document complaints so you have to say that our complaints process is sound and is speedy and efficient, so we need to see that in place (Bank H)

Social media managers discussed how they transferred “old” established processes to the new social media context as a way of gaining control

[We] have excellent customer service on the phone...So we have piggybacked a little bit on them and have also felt a lot more comfortable to be in social media through them.... Yes we've actually got a very nice on-boarding chart which shows that if you get any kind of tweet which is related to a risk or a complaint ..here is the agreed internal interactions to resolve something” (Bank H)

One participant highlighted how having a structure for engagement helped establish control and ensured that action could be taken.

They wouldn't expect any comments but if somebody came in and commented they would go 'Shit, what do we do now?!' But now we've got a structure ...and we've got a process (Bank SL)

4. Discussion

Our findings show that one driver for negative customer engagement is a “double deviation” in service provision, which is where a service failure is followed by a failed recovery (Bitner *et al* 1990) in other words a failure of procedural justice. In the customer service literature there is ample evidence that customers' satisfaction and intention to return to an organisation are influenced by not only whether the failure is recovered (distributive justice) but also how the service recovery is handled (relational justice). (McColl-Kennedy *et al* 2003). However emergent practices of Triaging and Boiler-Plating de-humanise the employee-customer interactions within social media and bank claims of having to adhere to compliance regulation and security constraints are contested. The organisational desire to establish a protocol for social media engagement has resulted in a failure to fully embrace the unique characteristics of the medium (which, according to customers, makes it pointless). This is an instance of where “good” marketing practice has turned “bad” when it is extended to a challenging new environment.

Our results show that, despite reported benefits of social media marketing for businesses (e.g. Bughin and Chui, 2011 and Stelzner, 2011), there are also clear gaps in organisational understanding of social media as requiring a distinct set of competencies. Shankar *et al* (2002) highlight that the emergence of multiple touchpoints can result in a desire for consistency or commonality in the management of online and offline environments and in our paper we show that it is internal organisational need for consistency that has resulted in a standardised “blueprinting” approach. This standardisation has undermined the benefits that should accrue from social media customer service. Our work connects to the

conceptualisations of brand community practices as being aligned or mis-aligned (Skalen et al 2015). In their work Skalen et al (2015) examine brand-customer interaction in contrast our findings suggest that a wider approach is needed since OCE may “be targeted to a much broader network of actors including other current and potential customers, suppliers, general public, regulators and firm employees” (Van Doorn et al (2010:254).

5. Conclusion.

In this paper we provide qualitative evidence of negative OCE in the context of financial services consumption and we examine employee-customer interactions on brand pages. Our findings provide a more nuanced understanding of how emergent practices become established and provide insight how organisational response either shifts or sustains negative OCE valence. We show that OCE practices transferred from established customer services processes can be linked to continuation of negative OCE and we suggest that organisations need to consider an approach which is better targeted to the social media context.

Appendices

Table 1: Overview of Dataset

	No. of posts
1. Queries that were already raised at traditional channels	108
2. Asking a direct question	87
3. Negative feedback on the bank / banking industry	49
4. Providing positive customer feedback	49
5. Threatening the bank to close their account	32
6. Posts with a potential for engagement	27
7. Complaining about not being able to contact the bank	17
8. Posts with no meaning	13
9. Complaining about interest rates, service fees & charges	12
10. Commenting on banking products, product features	13
11. Requesting a direct contact from their bank	8
12. Commenting on banking policies	9
13. Threatening the bank to contact financial ombudsman	4
14. Job application related posts	3
TOTAL	431

Note: Since some posts included multiple queries, the total number exceeds 400.

Table 2: Individual Interview participants

Label	Company Size	Position of Respondent
Bank H	270,000 employees Revenue £47 Billion	Digital Customer Engagement Manager
Bank R	92,000 employees Revenue £13 Billion	Content and Social Media Manager
Bank SL	6,500 employees Revenue £9 million	Social Media Manager

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