Chapter 2
Moving Towards Successful Complaint Management

Abstract This chapter analyses the impact of customer complaint behaviour and classifies potential types of behaviour after a dissatisfying incident. Besides the opportunity of contacting a company directly, three alternative options are discussed which can be utilised by customers to vent their frustration. Thereafter, four different traditional complaint channels are introduced. This part is followed by a definition of social networks as a potentially emerging complaint channel. The remaining part of this chapter emphasizes the importance of complaint channels and describes three scientific theories which are important for customer satisfaction analysis: justice theory, behaviour theory and attribution theory. Each theory is described in detail and linked to the context of the study.

Keywords Attribution theory · Behaviour theory · Communication channels · Customer complaint behaviour · Customer dissatisfaction · Customer satisfaction · Justice theory · Online social networks

This chapter begins with a system of customer complaint behaviour and highlights potential customer choices once a product or service failure has occurred (Sect. 2.1). A typology of existing communication channels for contacting companies is provided (Sect. 2.2) and extended by incorporating social networks into existing models (Sect. 2.3). After this, fundamental aspects of the underlying scientific theories are discussed (Sect. 2.4).

2.1 Impact of Customer Complaint Behaviour

Customer **C**omplaint **B**ehaviour (CCB) has several antecedents, characteristics, and implications. To provide a consistent basis for this study, the term customer complaint behaviour can be defined as "a customer's protest to a firm with the goal of obtaining an exchange, a refund or an apology" (Larivet and Brouard 2010). However, researchers have shown that a certain dissatisfaction threshold needs to be crossed in order for customers to take action (Rust and Chung 2006). Thus, not

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S. Garding and A. Bruns, *Complaint Management and Channel Choice*,
SpringerBriefs in Business, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-18179-0_2

all types of a customer's protest are voiced directly to the company (Sect. 2.2). The analysis at hand deals with business-to-customer complaints (B2C) and does not consider corporate complaints in the business-to-business (B2B) segment. According to Henneberg et al. (2009), this distinction is constitutive since such relationships are different. In the B2C context, from the company perspective, the goal of complaint handling is the cognition and remedy of individual and systemic problems affecting the company's customers (Huppertz et al. 2003).

The reasons for customer protests, i.e. causes of initial customer dissatisfaction, are multifaceted. Shortcomings in products, slow service, unreasonable employee behaviour, product damage, and delivery problems are amongst the most common issues (Estelami 2000). Several antecedents for CCB have been identified. For instance, customer response depends on the type of service failure (Hirschman 1970), customers' attitude to complaints (Richins 1982) and their emotions (Smith and Bolton 2002). Among others, these factors mediate the process, namely the decision whether to complain or not. Researchers have established a general classification of complaint reasons and intentions by distinguishing whether customers have suffered monetary loss due to the failure (e.g. Gilly and Gelb 1982; Mayer et al. 1995). It must also be mentioned that not all claims for compensation or redress are justified, since some customers behave opportunistically and unreasonable (Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy 2010).[1] However, such variations are excluded from further investigation given that their intention is completely different from justified complainers. The management questions do not cover opportunistic customer behaviour.

When customers are dissatisfied with a product or a service, several possible ways to react are open to them. One option is that they can leave the company or engage in private complaining, another is choosing a form of public action (von der Heyde Fernandes and Pizzuti dos Santos 2008) such as voicing the complaint to the company. Dacin and Davidow (1997) structured the different opportunities and modelled potential CCB outcomes as seen from the company perspective (Table 2.1). Within this framework two dimensions are defined: (i) a *company's involvement with consumer dissatisfaction* and (ii) a *consumer's involvement in his social network*.

Each dimension is divided into two attributes. Dimension 1, i.e. *consumer's involvement in social network*: this represents the customer's decision whether to take private (*internal*) or public actions (*external*). Dimension 2, i.e. *company's involvement with consumer dissatisfaction*: this represents whether the company is informed about consumer actions (*involved*) or not (*not involved*). As shown in Table 2.1 consumers may choose to behave in the following way:

[1]Further readings on unjustified and opportunistic customer complaint behaviour: Harris (2010), Jacoby and Jaccard (1981), Reynolds and Harris (2005).

Table 2.1 Complaint behaviour outcomes

		Dimension 2 Company's involvement with consumer dissatisfaction	
		Involved	*Not involved*
Dimension 1 Consumer's involvement in social network	*Internal*	(i) Exit or boycott	(ii) Consumer's social net (word-of-mouth)
	External	(iii) Organisation (redress/complaint)	(iv) Third party

Source Adapted from Dacin and Davidow (1997, Table 1, p. 452)

(i) *Internal/involved*: Consumers do not contact others. They have made a silent decision, e.g. switching to another company for future purchases.
(ii) *Internal/not involved*: Consumers choose private complaining. Consumers decide to talk to friends and family (by word-of-mouth) to complain about the company.
(iii) *External/involved*: Consumers choose to voice their complaints directly to the company. Conventional complaint management procedures and techniques can be used to handle these complaints.
(iv) *External/not involved*: Consumers involve external parties. However, consumers do not approach the focal company but third parties such as governmental and customers' protection institutions instead.

This study focuses on the (iii) external/involved and (ii) internal/not involved combination of attributions: First, this research addresses the (iii) external/involved combination to investigate how companies can further encourage customer complaints. Second, strategies to minimise the disadvantages of the (ii) *internal/not involved* combination, e.g. customer complaints to friends and family, are identified. As social networks are positioned in this field, the integration of such an online platform as a further communication channel can directly involve companies in customers' word-of-mouth activities, where they have not yet been included. Moreover, customer satisfaction might increase if social networks meet the criteria for an appropriate communication channel in the context of complaint management.

To conclude, considering social networks as a new complaint channel might not only be a convenient way to increase customer satisfaction but may also obviate bad word-of-mouth by motivating customers to contact companies directly who had previously addressed their complaints to friends and family. Thus, one goal of this study is to analyse whether social networks work as an appropriate new complaint channel. To clarify the effects of using social networks as a "new" complaint channel is of high managerial importance. One the one hand, encouraging non-voicers and preventing bad word-of-mouth are necessary for successful complaint management (e.g. Blodgett and Anderson 2000; Choi and Mattila 2008; Rust and Chung 2006). On the other hand, companies are advised to develop corporate strategies for online social networks.

2.2 Typology of Communication Channels

Typically there are several communication channels available for customers to address their complaints to companies: writing a *letter* (*mail*), sending an *e-mail*, calling a *hotline* (*phone*), or visiting a *shop* (*face-to-face*) (Halstead 1991). All channels entail specific characteristics and are basically expected to be suitable for providing customer satisfaction with the complaint management process in most cases (Mattila and Wirtz 2004). According to past and recent research, complaints are most frequently addressed through a face-to-face dialogue at a shop, followed by phone, e-mail, and regular mail complaints (e.g. Matos et al. 2009; Tax et al. 1998).

The availability of communication channels is a compulsory component of corporate complaint management (Halstead 1991). The term *complaint channel* can be defined as the medium by which a customer submits a complaint to a company (Mattila and Wirtz 2004). These channels are also used by companies to respond to customer complaints (Gilly and Gelb 1982). Building upon this research and in line with the suggestions of Mattila and Wirtz (2004) this study examines four conventional channels: *face-to-face*, *phone*, *e-mail*, and *mail* (5th level in Fig. 2.1).

As shown in Fig. 2.1, the process of CCB consists of five steps: (1) Starting with an initial *dissatisfaction incident*, customers decide whether to *take action* or not (1st level). In case they remain silent (i.e. take no action) these customers stay

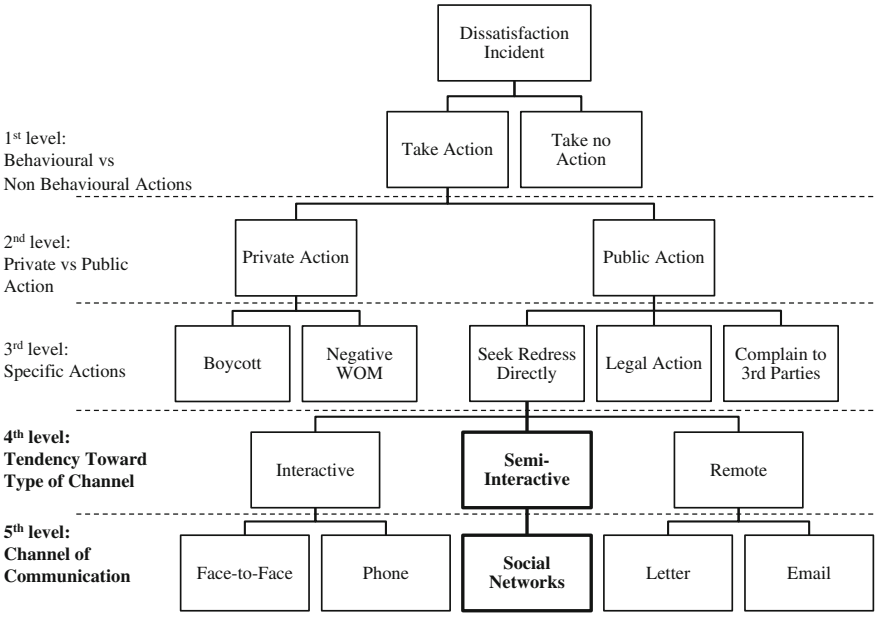


Fig. 2.1 Classification of customer complaining behaviour. *Source* Adapted from Mattila and Wirtz (2004, Fig. 1, p. 148)

unhappy due to an unresolved complaint and companies may experience future loss in revenues due to customer churn caused by customer dissatisfaction. However, once customers decide to act, (2) they have to choose between *private* and *public actions* (2nd level). Whereas private actions comprise all types of word-of-mouth activities, public actions describe customers to either approach the company directly, or, alternatively, venting their frustration by engaging lawyers or 3rd parties to solve the problem. When the customer has decided to (3) *seek redress directly* (3rd level) at the company, the customer (4) has to decide for an interaction level with the company. Mattila and Wirtz (2004) assess and specify this decision by noting customers' tendency to prefer either *interactive* or *remote channels* (4th level). Finally, the customer can (5) choose a communication channel to complain (5th level) as illustrated in Fig. 2.1.

As it can be seen in Fig. 2.1, Wirtz and Mattila (2004) distinguish the tendency towards a type of communication channel only between *interactive* and *remote* communication channels.

The first typology, interactive communication channels, represents all channels in which customers have direct contact with a company's employees and can discuss and interact immediately, as for example by means of face-to-face and complaints on the phone. On the one hand, not all customers favour direct interaction. According to research, most customers are afraid of confronting companies with an interactive complaint (Lerman 2006). Especially face-to-face confrontations are likely to escalate because of impoliteness between a customer and the employee (van Jaarsveld et al. 2010). On the other hand, some customers prefer phone calls, one reason being to experience individualised, personal treatment (Johnston and Mehra 2002).

The second typology, *remote communication channels*, comprises written communication such as mail and e-mail complaints. Upon notifying the company customers have to wait for a company response (Mattila and Wirtz 2004). For instance, some male complainers are found to be comfortable complaining in writing a mail or e-mail, which allows them to structure their complaints more accurately (Grougiou and Pettigrew 2009). Female customers sometimes wish to obviate the potential embarrassment inherent in interactive channels and are thus also likely to choose remote channels (Grougiou and Pettigrew 2009). Although the majority of companies support most of the mentioned communication channels and customers have general channel preferences, the implementation, execution, and supervision of each channel affects customers' satisfaction levels (Blodgett et al. 1995). These attributes can be consolidated as a major part of a company's complaint management policy (Huppertz 2007). Section 2.4 highlights the major determinants of customer satisfaction in complaint management policies, which are essential for the conceptualisation in Chap. 3.

Apart from these conventional typologies comprising communication channels are already offered by the majority of complaint management systems, a third typology represents a new opportunity of communication that has emerged in recent years—social networks. In the context of complaint management the *social networks* channel is embedded in existing research by an extension of Mattila and

Wirtz's (2004) approach. As Fig. 2.1 shows, customer complaining through social networks can be considered a public action (2nd level), given that the target company is involved. By contacting the company customers seek direct redress (3rd level). So far, only two comprehensive channel classifications, interactive and remote, are represented in the 4th level of the model. By applying social networks to this typology, a third classification, *semi-interactive communication channels*, is included. This element illustrates the specific characteristics of social networks and represents a consolidation of the interactive and remote dimensions. On the one hand, social networks facilitate written complaints, a key characteristic of the remote category. On the other hand, social networks are far more interactive than conventional remote approaches (mail and e-mail) though not as much as a bidirectional face-to-face discussion or phone call. Thus, the combination of the two approaches is a unique feature of social networks. Consequently, as a conjecture, this communication channel is seen as having an impact on overall customer satisfaction in the context of complaint handling processes. However, this manner of communication and interaction is so far applied only seldom in these situations (Lee and Lee 2006) and therefore tested in the course of this research.

2.3 Emergence of Online Social Networks

From a traditional perspective social networks can be delineated as a combination of relations among individuals where the characteristics of the linkages influence the social behaviour of the persons involved (Tichy et al. 1979). In principle, social network theory has been widely researched for decades (Parkhe et al. 2006). Several studies have investigated and enhanced this theory interdisciplinary, for instance from an interpersonal (Brass et al. 2004) and interorganisational perspective (Provan et al. 2007). More precisely, the determinants and antecedents of social networks have been investigated along with the role of strong and weak ties and knowledge transfer (e.g. Inkpen and Tsang 2005; Nelson 1989).

Apart from this traditional academic background a further aspect of social network theory has become apparent in the course of the 21st century: individuals have started participating in and interacting through online communities, such as Facebook, Google+, and LinkedIn. According to the literature various terms to describe this new social networking mechanism are widely used, namely descriptions such as 'online communities' (Dellarocas 2006), 'virtual communities' (Porter and Donthu 2008), 'social media' (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010), and 'online social networks' (Ellison et al. 2007). This study always uses the term *social networks* and adopts Miller et al.'s (2009) definition of social networks:

> "Online communities, consisting of people who engage in computer-supported social interaction,…[allowing] members to continuously express and access others' opinions,… [providing] a highly accessible and efficient source for evaluating and adjusting one's own thoughts and actions in light of input from socially relevant peers within a community." (Miller et al. 2009)

In the context of this study, the scope of social networks is further narrowed down. Within complaint management online social networks are used as an instrument to contact companies directly. Thus, social interactions take place between the customer and the company by means of social networks.

The most famous instances of such online communities are Facebook, Google+, and LinkedIn (Busemann and Gscheidle 2011) whereas qzone is strong in the Asian market. Figure 2.2 provides an overview of users of online social networks worldwide in 2014. The huge importance of this channel becomes even more apparent when considering that the most widely used online social network (Facebook) has more than one billion users.

The relevance of this communication channel is incontestable; almost 36 % of the entire German population is already participating in at least one social network (van Eimeren and Frees 2011). This ratio is steadily increasing, particularly given that older people are becoming more receptive to social networks (Spahr and Arns 2012). The importance of this medium is growing, as 55 % of all members use their accounts daily (Busemann and Gscheidle 2011). Among the six major social networks activities, 'searching for information' and 'getting updates from online friends' is stated by users as being the two major sources of interests (Busemann and Gscheidle 2011).

However, customers might utilise online social networks not only for contacting companies directly but also for venting their frustration about this towards their friends and families. The latter behaviour constitutes private action and is therefore not part of this study. This research focuses on an opportunity for companies to utilise social networks as a new complaint channel. In this regard, customers directly contact companies by sending a message through online social networks.

To sum up, social networks might represent a new communication channel for handling customer complaints, because they are already widely used by customers. By incorporating this communication channel as a complaint channel, companies might be able to increase customer post-complaint satisfaction with complaint management systems and to improve the customer-company relationship.

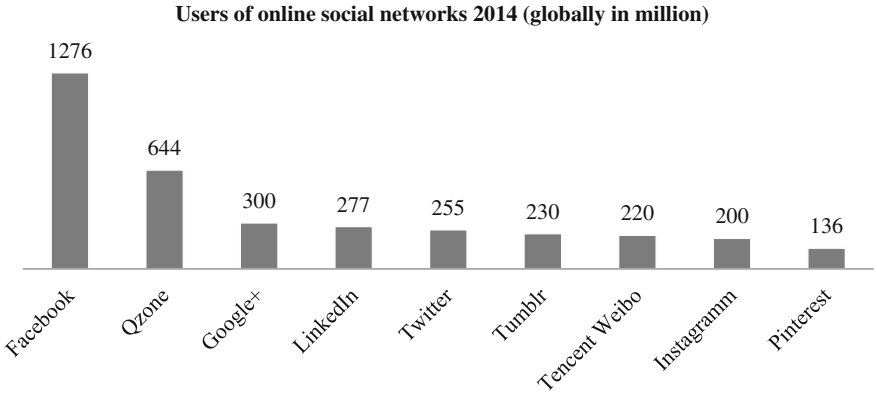


Fig. 2.2 Users of online social networks globally in 2014. *Source* Adapted from Statista (2014)

2.4 Fundamentals of Customer Satisfaction with Complaint Handling

The majority of studies reveal that customers' selection of companies, and therefore their purchase decisions regarding certain products or services are typically influenced by several factors (Blodgett et al. 1995). Among these the quality of customer service is a key determinant (Anand et al. 2011; Venkatesh and Agarwal 2006). Customer services can be subdivided into pre- and post-purchase services (Mitchell and Boustani 1994). The first part, *pre-purchase services*, comprises all company activities which focus on raising customer awareness (e.g. advertising) and supporting customer purchase decisions (e.g. sales agents). When a customer buys a product or service, responsibility shifts to the company's *post-purchase services*. These services are, for instance, up-selling or cross-selling activities as well as customer care policies. One major activity centres on the company's capability to handle dissatisfied customers. This study focuses on customers' post-purchase behaviour revealing insights into customer complaint management.

Dissatisfaction motivates customers to complain the reasons for their disappointment. This was a main research topic in the 1960s. In particular, research concentrated on the multidimensional topics of customer behaviour and complaint management. Cardozo (1965), for instance, was interested in the interdependence of customer effort, expectation, and satisfaction. Moreover, according to Gilly and Gelb (1982), customer behaviour in this context is predominantly affected by customers' perceptions of a product or service. Customers perceptions might lead to satisfaction or dissatisfaction because customers tend to measure their perceived post-purchase satisfaction as a ratio of ex-ante expectation and ex-post experience (Lapré and Tsikriktsis 2006). In other words, taking Oliver (1980) into account, customer dissatisfaction is characterised by their expectation level and corresponding expectancy disconfirmation. More precisely, any disappointments of expectation decrease customers' satisfaction level more than any excess increases it (Anderson and Sullivan 1993). In the wake of dissatisfaction, post-purchase behaviour might result in customer complaints (Dacin and Davidow 1997). Therefore, complaints can be observed as unique "recovery opportunities" (Kim et al. 2010) for companies (Gilly 1987).

The traditional scope examined satisfaction by investigating the impact of dissatisfaction on complaint behaviour (e.g. Churchill and Suprenant 1982; Day 1977; Landon 1980) and by establishing a model to frame customers' tendencies to complain directly to companies or to friends and family (e.g. Day 1984; Oliver 1980). From a more general perspective, three areas of research are identified and inferred as appropriate descriptive models in the context of this study: (1) *justice theory*, (2) *behaviour theory*, and (3) *attribution theory*. These theories are expected to be an eligible foundation for testing the adequacy of complaint channels. The theories referred to may not influence customer satisfaction directly; however, they have different effects on CCB. Diverse CCB, in turn, eventually leads to different levels of customer satisfaction.

First, customers tend to be satisfied with a company's complaint management when they perceive to be treated fairly. These results are derived from **justice theory**. Customers' satisfaction with a complaint handling process becomes relevant after customers have decided to address their complaints to the respective company. Much research indicates that the level of satisfaction with complaint management systems is primarily influenced by the extent of a company's fairness. This can be described as the manner in which a company communicates with the complaining customer (Homburg and Fürst 2005). Moreover, under consideration of Morrisson and Huppertz (2010), customers expect companies to treat complaining customers in the same way, regardless of the individual customer's value. This idea is supported by further studies, which demonstrate that monetary compensation is often not as important as fair treatment and an apology (Wirtz and Mattila 2004).

This topic is investigated in justice theory, a first major category in this field of research. Three elements are embedded in the construct of justice theory: (i) procedural justice, (ii) interactional justice, and (iii) distributive justice (Larivet and Brouard 2010). *Procedural justice* refers to customers' perceived fairness of the policies and procedures that companies have in place to handle complaints (McCole 2004). *Interactional justice* describes the interpersonal treatment of the complaining customer, i.e. politeness and helpfulness of companies (McCole 2004). *Distributive justice* is defined as the fairness of the outcome and the provided remedy (McCole 2004).

Second, Singh (1990) groups different behavioural clusters into four main response styles in CCB on the basis of **behaviour theory**. The underlying behaviour theory represents the next important area of relevance to this field of research. By applying the taxonomy-approach, four clusters have been identified as a proper guideline to classify complainers (Singh 1990). The first group is named *passives*. These customers usually do not voice complaints, i.e. they behave passively. The second cluster is characterized by *voicers* which are customers, who usually complain actively to the company when dissatisfied. In contrast, *irates* are mainly engaged in private complaining by addressing their complaints to friends and family instead of approaching the company. The fourth cluster is called *activists*. These customers voice their complaints in a formal way through the use of third parties. Addressees are e.g. customer protection agencies or lawyers. In support of this categorisation, Siddiqui and Tripathi's (2010) contemporary research in the banking sector reveals similar findings.

A fundamental precondition of this theory is that companies probably have no means of influencing customers' basic attitudes, though they are able to motivate them to overcome inertia, to name but one issue, (Kim et al. 2010) through the use of complaint systems (Bodey and Grace 2006). The contributions of Matos et al. (2009) support previous studies by demonstrating the substantial moderating effect of customers' attitudes towards complaining on complaint intentions. In particular, the authors investigate the relationship between service recovery after a complaint has been made and subsequent customer satisfaction. The most researched personality traits are self-confidence and conservatism (Bodey and Grace 2006),

word-of-mouth behaviour (Halstead 1991), and being afraid of a confrontation (Dacin and Davidow 1997).

However, considering Mattila and Wirtz (2004), the validity of those classifications can be questioned, because such typologies fail to integrate the antecedents of customers' channel choice. Further research shows that a customer's perception of the company's response to customer complaints also influences the probability of a customer complaining at all (Halstead 1991). Thus, not only does customer behaviour and attitude impact CCB, but also the anticipated company reaction.

Third, **attribution theory** establishes the link between product failure and customer response (Folkes 1984). In other words, this theory predicts that the perceived cause of a product failure influences customers' responses and therefore influences the mode of the complaint (Peterson and Kerin 1979).

According to attribution theory, both stability and controllability influence customers' satisfaction levels (Blodgett et al. 1995). *Stability* refers to the perceived likelihood of a similar failure occurring again, whereas controllability describes customers' perception as to whether a failure could easily have been prevented by the company (Choi and Mattila 2008). Scholars and practitioners recognise a set of obvious preconditions for customer satisfaction. For example, if a product's or service's shortcoming is completely unreasonable from the customer's point of view and could easily been prevented by the company, the company will likely be unable to remedy customer dissatisfaction (Choi and Mattila 2008). On the basis of these perceptions customers form their opinion about a company and subsequently decide whether it makes any sense to complain. The construct of attribution theory is obviously linked to and dependent on such variations of customer behaviour: A customer's choice of action is directly related to specific reasons for a product failure (Folkes 1984).

In addition to the three branches of research mentioned above, other researchers have investigated individual elements of complaint management. First, Mattila and Wirtz (2004) analysed the likelihood of channel choice by customers in order to voice complaints. They showed that the choice depends on customers' expected outcome. For example, customers who want to "vent their frustration" choose mail or e-mail to complain (Wirtz and Mattila 2004). Second, Gilly (1987) focuses on post-complaint processes and analyses repurchase behaviour after a complaint has been solved by a company. The results of the study show that the relationship between customers' complaints and their repurchase behaviour is mediated by their "cognitive processes regarding the complaint response" (Gilly 1987). Third, Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy (2010) investigate the impact of opportunistic customer behaviour on service recovery. When customers experience procedural, distributive or interactional justice to be low, they tend to act opportunistically. Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy (2010) show that customers are more likely to act like this when dealing with larger companies and do not want to build a long-term relationship. Fourth, scholars have analysed the relationship between demographic characteristics and complaining behaviour. It is widely accepted as true that demographic variables exert only a weak influence (von der Heyde Fernandes and Pizzuti dos Santos 2008). Variations in customer behaviour are primarily caused by

different attitudes rather than by demographic characteristics. Fifth, researchers have also observed that emotions mediate customer perceptions and have therefore to be considered in a company's handling of complaints (e.g. Chebat and Slusarczyk 2005; Schoefer 2008). In particular, it is shown that positive as well as negative emotions have an influence (positive/negative) on service recovery satisfaction (Schoefer 2008). However, only a few literature reviews summarise the status quo of research on complaint management (e.g. Gelbrich and Roschk 2010; Orsingher et al. 2010).

It can be concluded that the field of complaint management has been widely researched and several perspectives on the antecedents and determinants of customer satisfaction with complaint management systems have been revealed. However, not all findings are complementary; in fact, some are, as has been described, contradictory. Thus, the current analysis extends existing research with regard to customer satisfaction by analysing the adequacy of complaint channels.

Take away
Only a minority of customers decide to complain directly to the responsible company by utilising one of the available complaint channels. Apart from the traditional complaint channels, i.e. mail, e-mail, phone, and face-to-face, social networks are introduced as a potential new complaint channel. Customer satisfaction with complaint handling is disassembled into several dimensions, detailed in the research literature on the topic: procedural, interactional, distributive justice, as well as behavioural and attribution theory.

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http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-18178-3

Complaint Management and Channel Choice
An Analysis of Customer Perceptions
Garding, S.; Bruns, A.
2015, XV, 104 p. 20 illus., Softcover
ISBN: 978-3-319-18178-3