



## Investigating Dynamics among Complainant, Bystander, and Advocate for Service Recovery via Corporate Social Media (CSM)

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**Introduction** An increasing number of consumers seek solutions to product/service failures by voicing their unsatisfactory shopping experiences on corporate social media (CSM) channels (e.g., Facebook or Twitter) (Weitzl et al., 2018). For example, 33% of consumers use CSM to complain about the brands or their customer services (Statista.com, 2019). Meanwhile, other consumers who observe the complaint messages (i.e., third-party observers) tend to be either bystanders passively receiving the complaint or advocates actively interacting with the complainants by sharing their own service experience (Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). Traditionally, webcare, the act of interacting with complaining consumers in a web-based interface to address consumer feedback (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012), has been the territory for firms with no involvement by other consumers. Research on the roles of third-party observers in webcare is emerging yet limited (e.g., Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017); particularly, little is known of the effects of their different positions as advocates or bystanders on webcare in the fashion retail industry.

We focus on brand advocates' tones in their defensive messages to complaints for supporting a retailer. In order to defend and protect the involved company in the complaint messages, brand advocates use various defensive responses ranging from positive reactions (e.g., counter-arguing the complaint message in a positive tone) to more aggressive and/or uncivil ones (Hutzinger & Weitzl, 2019). Given the wide presence of such consumer-to-consumer (C2C) service interactions on CSM channels, two research questions arise: 1) *How do different tones in advocates' defensive messages to consumer complaints influence silent bystanders' service evaluations?*; and 2) *What is the boundary of the effects of advocates' defensive responses on silent bystanders' reactions?*

**Theoretical Background and Hypotheses** First, the level of defensiveness in an advocate's response is proposed to influence a bystander's service evaluations. Low defensive responses mean advocates' responses being presented in a civil way (Schaefer & Schamari, 2016), whereas high defensive responses refer to the messages depicted in an uncivil approach (Bacile et al., 2018). Dysfunctional consumer behavior such as posting uncivil messages toward fellow consumers can harm others' service experiences (Bacile et al., 2018). In this view, compared to high defensive responses, low defensive responses are more likely to increase a bystander's positive reactions (i.e., C2C interactional justice, satisfaction with complaint handling). C2C interactional justice is defined as the extent to which a bystander perceives the advocate treats the complainant fairly, courteously, and ethically (Bacile et al., 2018). Satisfaction with complaint handling refers to the bystander's evaluation of the advocate's service recovery practice (Orsingher, Valentini, & de Angelis, 2010). According to the justice theory, interactional justice can be retrieved through interpersonal communication – whether advocates

express care about the service failure and willingness to help (Tax et al., 1998). Thus, when bystanders view advocates' responses to complaining messages on CSM channels, perceived C2C interactional justice (**H1a**) and satisfaction with complaint handling (**H1b**) are higher with low defensive responses than with high ones.

Next, the bystander's social distance to the complainant can serve as a boundary condition in the effect of advocate response. Based on the construal level theory, social distance reflecting psychological distance to the other party determines how individuals evaluate information (Liberman et al., 2007). As social distance decreases, information is viewed to be represented in more concrete and detailed terms (Nan, 2007) and thus triggers perceived connectedness with and similarity to the counterpart. Accordingly, the negative effect of defensiveness of advocate response on their service evaluation is stronger for the bystander who perceives him/herself near to the complainant than others (**H2**). When the bystander is socially close to the complainant, his/her mental experience with the service failure depicted in the complaint message intensifies (Wong & Wyer, 2016) and further influences individual's service evaluations. Therefore, near (vs. far) social distance to the complainant enhances the bystander's perceived distance to service failure (**H3**). Finally, the bystander's perceived distance to service failure mediates the effect of advocate response on C2C interactional justice (**H4a**) and satisfaction with complaint handling (**H4b**).

**Methods and Results** Two experimental studies utilizing CSM-based webcare scenarios were conducted. Each scenario presented a series of posts describing a customer's complaint about a firm's service, the firm's response and then a third-party customer's response to the main complainant. Participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Study 1 used a single-factor between-subject design in which the tone of an advocate's defensive response was manipulated to be low or high. Participants ( $n = 154$ , 55.2% male,  $M_{age} = 37$ ) were randomly assigned to one condition. They were asked to review the communications in scenario as if they were bystanders and to evaluate C2C interactional justice and satisfaction with the service recovery situation (Bacile et al., 2018). ANOVA result suggested that participants considered low defensive response as delivering more C2C interactional justice and felt more satisfied with the response, compared to high defensive response, supporting H1.

Study 2 used a 2 (advocate's defensive response: low vs. high) x 2 (complainant-bystander's social distance: near vs. far) between-subject design ( $n = 169$ , 57.4% male,  $M_{age} = 35$ ). Identical with Study 1, the advocate's defensive responses were manipulated. Social distance was manipulated by describing that the complaining consumer was the participant's friend (vs. stranger). MANOVA indicated no interaction effect, rejecting H2. However, results found that social distance moderated the effect of advocate response on service evaluations through the bystander's psychological distance to the service failure, supporting H3-4. When bystanders found their friend (vs. a stranger) posted the complaint message, they tended to perceive closer (vs. further) psychological distance to the service failure described in the

message; and in a closer psychological distance to the service failure, high (vs. low) defensive response greatly decreased positive service evaluations, compared to in a further distance.

**Discussion and Implications** Theoretically, this research enriches the service literature by portraying the dynamics among consumers involving in service recovery on CSM channels (i.e., complainant, silent bystander, and advocate). Practically, results provide additional insight to service management on CSM platforms. For instance, brands should provide guidelines for consumers on how to reply their peers' comments online and encourage individuals posting responses in more positive and friendly tones.

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