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Attributing rhetorical agency: Corporate social media interactions on Twitter

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Attributing rhetorical agency: Corporate social media interactions on Twitter

by

Katlynne Amy Davis

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication

Program of Study Committee:
Geoffrey Sauer: Major Professor
Jo Mackiewicz
James Ranalli

The student author and the program of study committee are solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2017

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NOMENCLATURE

CRM             Customer Relationship Management
SNS             Social Networking Site
PAOS            Publicly Available Online Service
WOM             Word of Mouth
eWOM            Electronic Word of Mouth
NWOM            Negative Word of Mouth
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I would like to thank my committee chair, Geoffrey Sauer, and my committee members, Jo Mackiewicz and Jim Ranalli, for their patience, guidance, and support throughout the course of this research. Their help has been invaluable to me as I worked through this process.

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This study uses concepts of rhetorical agency to analyze how corporations communicate effectively or ineffectively with their customers on social media. While literature from the fields of business, marketing, and public relations has addressed corporate social media more generally, there is a lack of information about how corporations should consider rhetorical concerns when structuring messages to their customers. Technical and professional communication studies have also explored the topic of social media, but have yet to closely analyze corporate social media responses to customer complaints. To conduct this study, I combined concerns from both business and technical and professional communication to reveal how companies and customers attribute agency to one another, and how insight from these interrelated fields creates a foundation for future research involving corporate social media communication.

In this study, I analyzed two customer service Twitter accounts to determine how rhetorical agency was at work within customer complaint interactions. The findings from this analysis demonstrate that companies do not always communicate in ways that allow for mutual attributions of agency. I argue that customers and companies must be able to view one another as capable of action in order for successful communication to occur.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION & THE PROBLEM

With its introduction in the mid-2000s, social media has become an exceedingly popular form of online communication for both organizations and individuals. In 2017, Facebook reported 1.86 billion monthly active users (Facebook.com, 2017), and Twitter reported that it had 313 million monthly active users (Twitter.com, 2017). Today, almost 70 percent of Americans use a social media site (“Social Media Fact Sheet,” 2017). Individuals with social media accounts use these sites in a number of different ways. Research on social media has indicated that while users mainly perceive these sites as spaces where they can communicate with family members or friends (Diffley, Kearns, Bennett, & Kawalek, 2011), they also talk about and engage with businesses and other organizations.

As social media use continues to expand, individuals look to these sites not only for the formation of personal relationships but also relationships with larger entities, such as corporations and organizations. While sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram allow users to interact with companies in a variety of ways, Twitter has emerged as one of the main platforms for users to communicate with corporations. Brandwatch, a social media monitoring company, reported that 65.8% of U.S. companies with 100 or more employees use Twitter for marketing purposes, and that the average Twitter user follows five businesses (Brandwatch, 2017). The Harvard Business Review found that the number of tweets directed at company accounts grew two and a half times over two years (Masri, Esber, Sarrazin, & Singer, 2015). Furthermore, the percentage of individuals using Twitter for customer service grew 70 percent between 2013 and 2014 (Masri et al., 2015). In an analysis of 149,472 tweets in which users commented about brands, Jansen et al. discovered that 20 percent of the microblog postings
contained brand sentiments (Jansen et al., 2009). On Twitter, individuals can lodge complaints, ask questions, comment, among other types of interactions, and can receive responses more quickly than through other communication mediums—some companies respond within an hour (Elrhoul, 2015). Social media sites like Twitter are beneficial for companies because they can “participate in highly viral conversations in which customers make suggestions, ask questions, and voice concerns,” (Coyle, Smith, & Platt, 2012, p. 28). These conversations can then be viewed publicly by other customers or users who search for information about the company, expanding the dialogue beyond the initial interaction. Customers use company responses and conversations as a basis for evaluating a particular brand’s overall reputation (Coyle, Smith, & Platt, 2012, p. 28).

Due to the significance of Twitter and other social media sites in communicating with customers, corporations have emphasized the social aspect of engaging with an audience. Customer service is now conceptualized as “social CRM” or social customer relationship management, a term used widely in academic and nonacademic marketing research (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). Unlike traditional approaches to CRM, social CRM recognizes how customers exercise more influence on corporate brands through social media (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). Because of this, social CRM advocates for approaching social media as a mutually beneficial dialogue that is valuable for both customers and companies. Other research from public relations and marketing argues that social media should be used to build relationships with customers rather than as platforms for one-way communications (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015).

Yet even as Twitter and other social media sites have cemented their influence as mediating platforms for corporate-customer relationships, not all relationships built on these sites are positive. Customer service gaffes and mistakes are not uncommon on Twitter. These
mistakes can be particularly harmful for a corporation’s ethos, and may subsequently affect the corporation financially as users decide not to use a service or purchase a brand (Drennan, 2011). Corporate customer service mistakes have manifested in different ways, with automated-replies providing some of the most controversial and disastrous incidents. For example, in 2012 a customer posted on the blogging site Tumblr that Progressive Insurance had legally defended a driver who had killed his sister in a car accident (Eha, 2012). Those who read this story then took to Twitter to attack Progressive Insurance. They received tone-deaf and impersonal automated replies from the company, only serving to exacerbate the situation (Eha, 2012). In 2014, Oreo tweeted an auto-reply to a user whose Twitter handle contained a racist slur so that this reply was visible to the account’s followers (Dua, 2015). Other corporate Twitter missteps involve a lack or misunderstanding of context, as when DiGiorno Pizza mistakenly used a hashtag concerning domestic violence as part of a tweet to promote their products (Shandrow, 2014). Another mishap took place when Coca-Cola encouraged users to respond to negative tweets using a “#MakeItHappy” hashtag (Woolf, 2015). Using tweets containing this hashtag, Coca Cola employed an algorithm that would turn the negative tweets into “happy” images. Noticing Coca Cola’s campaign, Gawker, an online media company and blog network, created a Twitter bot that tweeted lines from Mein Kampf using the hashtag “#MakeItHappy.” Coca Cola’s account responded by building images of a smiling banana or a cat playing a drum kit from Gawker’s Mein Kampf tweets.

Although plenty of corporate mishaps occur on Twitter itself, oftentimes customers will take to Twitter to complain about incidents that they have experienced or heard about. Information spreads quickly on social media sites and can cause what Pfeffer, Zorbach, and Carley (2014) term “online firestorms” where companies are bombarded with negative messages.
In April of 2017, two police officers forcibly removed a man from United Airlines Flight 3411 after the flight had been overbooked (Yan, Zdanowicz, & Grinberg). Passengers who had recorded the incident uploaded videos to Twitter, in which the man was seen bleeding from his face. On Twitter, users relentlessly attacked United Airlines for violently forcing the man off of the plane and injuring him. United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz later issued an apology that referred to the man’s removal as an effort to “re-accommodate” passengers, but this only served to further enrage the public (Petroff, 2017). Twitter users attacked United Airlines’ Twitter account directly, and began mocking the company with the hashtag #NewUnitedAirlinesMottos that contained slogans like “not enough seating, prepare for a beating” (Petroff, 2017). Competitors also jumped into the fray, with Royal Jordanian Airlines tweeting an image stating, “We would like to remind you that drags on our flights are strictly prohibited by passengers and crew” (Royal Jordanian, 2017). As a result of this backlash, United lost $255 million of its market value (Shell, 2017).

Reviewing these general interactions between corporations and customers on Twitter suggests that while this platform can be an effective customer service tool, corporations must tread carefully as to not risk publicly damaging their own professional ethos and, consequently, their financial interests. Additionally, these interactions reveal the need for a more nuanced approach to corporate-customer relationships on Twitter; maintaining these relationships is more complex than simply providing a customer with a solution. Customers are just as concerned with receiving a solution as they are with how that solution is communicated to them.

Although corporate-customer relationships on social media have been studied from the perspectives of business, marketing, and public relations research, the rhetorical roles and functions that corporations and customers fulfill have not been discussed in depth. Research
using content or sentiment analyses is essential to our understanding of social media communication, (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009; Ma, Sun, & Kekre, 2015; Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp, 2015) but these methodologies may not always account for how other contextual factors contribute to communication processes. Furthermore, these studies have explored Twitter for its customer-service potential, but many do not address how companies are communicating or should communicate in customer complaint interactions. Unlike some research conducted in business communication, work from the field of technical and professional communication has analyzed the rhetorical functions of social media use in the workplace (Weber, 2013; Ferro & Zachry, 2014; Kline & Alex-Brown, 2013; Stolley, 2009). Some of this research relies on rhetorical theory to address how social media can facilitate successful communication in the workplace and classroom. Still, it remains unclear how rhetorical theory can help to define the specific relationships that exist between corporations and customers on social media, as well as how to make communication within those relationships more effective. As they are closely aligned, the fields of business communication and technical and professional communication can provide perspectives that are integral to understanding corporate communications with customers on social media—business communication, public relations, and marketing research reveals how companies and customers approach and use social media, while technical and professional communication studies build upon this knowledge by examining the rhetorical implications of these uses and approaches.

In this study, I bring together the unique insights of each of these disciplines to analyze the rhetorical effectiveness or ineffectiveness of corporate replies to customer complaints on Twitter. Combining these insights sets the groundwork for a more thorough inquiry into corporate and customer communication on social media. First, I examine how business
communication studies, including marketing and public relations, characterize corporate and customer relationships on social media. I then review technical communication theories of rhetorical agency and apply them to communication strategies used by two customer service accounts on Twitter, revealing both the complexity of these rhetorical situations and the need to explore Twitter as a genre of workplace communication. More specifically, I argue that these customer service accounts—@MicrosoftHelps and @HPSupport—do not always communicate in ways that attribute agency to their customers or in ways that allow customers to attribute agency to them. Rhetorical agency is often described as the capacity to act or enact change (Campbell, 2003). When we are willing to attribute agency to others, we perceive them as having the capacity to act or interact with us in ways that reveal we have been recognized (Miller, 2007). If companies do not recognize customer potential for influence and action through their communications on social media, customers, in turn, may not be able to view companies as competent in handling customer issues. A lack of awareness about how agency is perceived may harm a company’s reputation. Throughout this paper, I will explore how companies and customers use social media to interact with one another, and how combining theories of rhetorical agency with concerns from business communication creates a useful foundation for identifying effective and ineffective communication strategies that companies use in customer complaint interactions on Twitter.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will discuss several key areas of research from business communication, marketing, and public relations fields. These key areas illustrate the unique approaches that inform corporate social media communication, and how corporations communicate with customers on social media in practice. Research on social customer relationship management (CRM), public relations, and customer complaints presents a more complete understanding of how corporations use social media. Despite this wealth of useful information, I argue that these disciplines should be more specific in their recommendations for successful communication with customers on social media. Encouraging corporations to respond quickly to customers on social media, to engage in conversation with customers, and to be authentic and attentive in these conversations oversimplifies the communication process. Additionally, I emphasize that although research from business communication fields supports the dialogic and collaborative potential of social media, corporations do not always use these types of strategies in practice.

Terminology: What Is Social Media?

Though we may use “social media” to talk about sites like Twitter or Facebook in more informal discussions, the specific sites or services we are referring to when we talk about social media in academia are not always clear. Literature and research from business, marketing, and technical communication fields echoes this lack of common terminology. There has yet to be an established language used to talk about social media, which can be identified through terms like Web 2.0, social networking sites (SNSs), or publicly available online services (PAOSs) (Ferro & Zachry, 2014). But what do we mean when we employ these terms, and how do we categorize certain sites from others for more specific and definitive analyses?
To try to conclusively establish a definition of social media, boyd and Ellison (2007) use the term social networking sites (SNS) to delineate sites that “allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). For boyd and Ellison, the ability to network with others does not differentiate social media from other types of sites, but rather the ability to make these networks visible to others. Users’ social networks are visible through the site and enable them to display their own connections to others (boyd & Ellison, 2007). This conceptualization does help discern some sites from others; Twitter and Facebook meet these SNS criteria, whereas sites like YouTube have some “SNS features,” but ultimately are not SNSs because they do not allow for one or more of the three features listed above.

Ferro and Zachry (2014) draw on boyd, Ellison to categorize the functions of specific sites. In looking at how workers used various publicly available online services (PAOSs) like social media, Ferro and Zachry differentiate between sites, a set of pages available through a larger domain name, and services, certain elements on the site that serve different functions for users (2014, p. 10-11). This distinction allowed Ferro and Zachry to winnow down social media terminology beyond larger, encompassing terms like SNSs, PAOSs, and Web 2.0. Using this schema, Ferro and Zachry identify nine genres of services offered on specific sites, such as network creators (LinkedIn), blogs (Wordpress), wikis (Wikipedia), media sharing tools (Flickr, YouTube), and web applications (Google Docs, Basecamp) (p. 11). Within these categories, Twitter was listed as offering microblog services where users can share content on the network (p. 11).
Building on this discussion, Zappavigna offers a helpful way to understand these terms in relationship to one another. In her book, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media*, Zappavigna (2012) refers to Web 2.0 as the social web, in which the internet functions more as a space for fostering interpersonal connections rather than simply a locus of information (p. 2). Web 2.0 also differs from Web 1.0 with the pervasiveness of content that is created by users themselves, such as blogs, vlogs, and microblogging. (Zappavigna, 2012, p.2). Zappavigna places SNSs underneath this larger category of Web 2.0 as a genre through which users can generate content. As one type of SNS, Twitter offers microblogging services, which allow users to create posts or tweets of 140 characters or fewer. Unlike Facebook, which does not place a restriction on posts, Twitter constrains the amount of text that users can share.

This work that characterizes what social media are revolves around themes of collectivity and community. Social media are just that—*social* media. Individuals can engage with networks of other users and can access the ties that exist within these networks. Though information is spread through social media networks, individuals use these sites to create close connections with others. Some social media do offer different services through which connections can be formed so that communication strategies may not always be analogous across sites. Even so, socializing with a larger community remains one of the most prominent identifying factors of social media, and it is echoed throughout the literature in business communication fields. Throughout this study, I do not use a specific term (Web 2.0, SNSs, PAOSs) to refer to social media. Instead, my goal is to emphasize the community-oriented and collaborative features of social media that corporations use when approaching communication on these sites.
Social CRM

In marketing and business communication, company and customer interactions on Twitter are often discussed as issues of customer relationship management (CRM). Traditional forms of CRM focus on managing customer relationships “as a means for extracting the greatest value from customers over the lifetime of a relationship” (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). But with the advent of social media, businesses are no longer able to exercise the same level of control over how customers might perceive their brands. Instead, customers drive conversations and influence perceptions about companies and brands (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). Social media allows customers to complain publicly to companies, to share customer service experiences, and to use hashtags to document experiences and connect with others, a tactic that can be either disastrous or beneficial. As social media has allowed for customer service to grow as a communal and dialogic activity, social CRM has emerged as a significant strategy in approaching engagement on these platforms (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). Traditional CRM strategies aim to analyze the customer only to the advantage of the business, misunderstanding the types of relationships that social media foster. However, social CRM recognizes that businesses must “facilitate collaborative experiences and dialogue that customers value” (Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p. 30). Unlike traditional CRM, social CRM focuses less on gleaning customers’ desires from data and emphasizes customer service as a conversational exchange that fosters mutually beneficial relationships.

To reinforce that social CRM strategies are more useful when communicating with customers on social media, IBM asked both customers and business executives about their perceptions of social media engagement (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). The goal of the study was to more fully understand customer motivations for social media engagement with companies, which
aren’t always clear from analyses of user data. While the results indicated that participation on social networking sites is popular for both customers and companies, they also revealed a disconnect between what consumers expect from their engagement with companies and why companies believe consumers engage with them on these sites. Ultimately, the most significant disparity involved a fundamental misperception of how consumers are approaching relationships with companies on social media; businesses believed that most consumers engaging with them on social media wanted to learn about new products or to obtain general information about the company, whereas consumers listed discounts and purchases as their top goals for interacting (Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p. 34). Businesses also thought that consumers were motivated to follow them on social media by their desires to be a part of a community and to grow closer with brands they were interested in (Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p. 33), but these proved not to be significant enough reasons for engagement. Instead, consumers cited that they would follow companies if they believed it was beneficial to them, and if they felt companies “communicated honestly” with them (Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p. 33). Additionally, consumers noted that they engaged with brands on social media that they already were familiar with, contrary to the perceptions of business executives who believed social media engagement could precede this affinity (Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p. 35). Yet, recommendations from family or friends who shared or retweeted information could sway consumer engagement (Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p. 35).

To align consumer expectations and company perceptions, IBM advocated for a social CRM approach that recognized how social media has changed the ways in which customers and companies interact, namely how social media have allowed customers to exercise more influence in their relationships with companies. IBM recommended that companies that take to social
media must “adapt to the reality that the customer is now in control,” and that engagement
should come at the “mutual benefit of the customer and the business” (Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p.
36). Similarly, IBM suggests that companies also look to the highly conversational and
collaborative environment as a tool for increasing customer engagement. While customers
responded that they were more likely to engage with companies they were already familiar with,
reviews and advice from other users exercised a significant influence on brand opinions (Baird
& Parasnis, 2011, p. 34). IBM acknowledged that companies could benefit from this communal
sharing by “touching customers emotionally,” tapping into a “shared sense of values,” and by
encouraging users to share their social media experiences with others (Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p.
34). Although customers did expect companies to provide them with more tangible benefits, such
as discounts and purchasing options, the ability to communicate honestly and emotionally was
also recommended as a way to increase interaction and engagement (Baird & Parasnis, 2011, p.
35).

Focused more specifically on customer complaints on Twitter, Coyle, Smith, and Platt
(2012) expand on the collaborative and contextual nature of social CRM, characterizing it as a
collective dialogue between users and companies. The study explored how replies using varying
levels of interactivity and responsiveness affect how consumers perceived brands in terms of
helpfulness and trust. In the field of business communication, interactivity is interpreted as the
“combination of rich content, active intelligence, collaborative communications to create a
compelling consumer experience” (as cited in Coyle, Smith, & Platt, 2012, p. 29). Much like
IBM’s conceptualization of social CRM, the significance of interactivity centers around
constructing positive experiences through the use of a collective conversation between
companies and consumers. Coyle, Smith, and Platt draw on Johnson et al.’s description
of responsiveness to customer problems as one element of interactivity, with all responses “perceived” as being “appropriate and relevant, and resolving the information needed” (2012, p. 29). To ensure that issues are sufficiently addressed, companies are directed to ask customers to explain the issues they are having, and then respond in a way that is both suitable to the context and solves any problems to the satisfaction of the customer. In this understanding of responsiveness, addressing customer complaints via social media becomes a discursive activity in which the customer and company work together through conversation to resolve problems. Customers should not be studied through the data they supply, but rather should be understood as equals who expect a more collaborative experience.

Further exploring the expectations of customers on social media, Coyle, Smith, and Platt examined how two types of responsive posts affected customer perceptions of companies. Posts from the account responded to customer complaints, and were categorized as either emphatic, in that they responded to a customer with an obvious recommendation for future action, or problem-solving, in that they offered a solution to the customer. While the emphatic posts recognized the customer’s issues and provided a suggestion for what the customer could do to fix the situation, they did not indicate that the conversation would be continued: “Currently, the only way to apply for a job with us is through our web site Thanks!” (p. 32). Instead, the problem-solving posts took action on behalf of the customer, often offering to continue the interaction until the problem was resolved: “Currently, the only way to apply for a job with us is through our web site, but send me your e-mail and I will let you know if something opens up. Thanks!” (p. 32). Customers who participated in the study who were exposed to problem-solving posts considered the brand to be more trustworthy and benevolent, and had stronger attitudes about the brand (Coyle, Smith, & Platt, 2012). Overall, these results illustrate that for companies
to effectively address customer complaints on social media sites, they must do more than simply acknowledge a problem in their responses. Customers expect companies to resolve their problems through a conversation in which both parties are actively participating. Without this socially-minded approach, companies risk damaging customer perceptions of their brands.

Not all research explicitly discusses social CRM, but the fields of business and marketing do advocate for using conversation to build relationships with consumers on social media. Canhoto and Clark (2013) analyzed customer-service interactions on Twitter from the perspective of social capital theory. Similar to social CRM, social capital theory is concerned with how individuals invest in social relationships in order to obtain benefits. As Canhoto and Clark argue, social media platforms are ripe for the study of social capital in that they allow for collaborative and collective communication between consumers who may often seek out benefits from the relationships they create (p. 523). These relationships are constructed within social networks through which various types of support are exchanged, such as informational, emotional, tangible, and social support (Canhoto & Clark, 2013). Much like research on social CRM, social capital theory recognizes the significance of the consumer’s desires and perceptions involving social media relationships with companies, and identifies the need for a conversational, discursive approach in fostering these relationships.

Relying on social capital theory’s emphasis of support and social networks, Canhoto and Clark analyzed data from consumer interviews to identify what types of relationships users valued, and what types of support they felt they received when interacting with companies on social media. Users appreciated when companies took a formal approach to social media communications, valued reliability in responsiveness, and appreciated personalized responses to problems in which companies promptly retweeted to solve a problem or clearly understood the
circumstances of the issue (Canhoto & Clark, 2013). Additionally, half of the interviewees wanted to know that an individual with the authority to represent the company was handling the interaction, while the other half stressed the importance of communicating with “another human being, as opposed to a corporate body” (Canhoto & Clark, 2013, p. 533). While it was clear that users preferred relationships that were mindful of contextual factors surrounding their own needs, they were most interested in obtaining tangible support, where problems were solved or refunds or promotions were given. (Canhoto & Clark, 2013, p. 534). But interestingly, users also placed high value on emotionally supportive interactions where they felt as if they were being listened to, cared for, and treated as valuable (Canhoto & Clark, 2013, p. 534). Lastly, users approved of company responses that were visible to the public, noting that this transparency to other users indicated that the company cared (Canhoto & Clark, 2013, p. 535). Echoing research on social CRM, Canhoto and Clark’s research suggests that even though customers expect a certain level of tangibility from these interactions with companies—a problem to be solved, or a refund given—they also expect to be treated with respect and care, and for companies to empathize with the issues they encounter.

Public Relations and Social Media

As social CRM advocates for the dialogic and collaborative nature of social media, public relations literature delineates in more detail how to cultivate relationships between customers and corporations. Managing corporate public images and reputations on social media has become a key component of public relations work (Lee, Sha, Dozier, & Sargent, 2015). For those working as public relations practitioners, planning social media campaigns, monitoring social media accounts for trends, and disseminating information via social media accounts are some of the main tasks that professionals in the field are asked to undertake (Lee, Sha, Dozier, & Sargent,
In a survey of public relations professionals, all participants indicated that they used Twitter, and over 50% indicated that they had used Twitter within an hour of taking the survey (Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011). Public relations practitioners also reported that they felt empowered by the use of social media in their careers, and felt as if they were increasing their own expertise in social media-related skills (Diga & Kelleher, 2009).

Because social media allows professionals to connect more directly to customers and their opinions, the field of public relations values these sites for their ability to facilitate relationships. Initially, the work of public relations was viewed as occurring within the domain of communications (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), but a conceptual shift during the mid-1980s recast how professionals and academics understood the field. Currently, public relations work is articulated as relationship management; building and maintaining relationships has been the primary analytical focus of public relations research and scholarship (Ledingham & Bruning 1998). Cutlip, Center, and Broom described public relations as “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (1994, p. 2). This shift to a relationship-centered field of study is similar to the shift from CRM to social CRM in business and marketing. In both social CRM and public relations, companies are encouraged to create more reciprocal bonds with customers rather than operating from an aloof position in which companies are distanced from customers.

With such an increased emphasis on relationships, much of public relations research consists of organization-public relationship (OPR) studies that seek to understand how relationships between company and customer can be fostered (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015). For companies to build good OPR, they must employ two-way, dialogic communication skills to
interact with their customers (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015). De Bussy (2010) argued that companies must “a) listen to stakeholders, b) have a positive regard for stakeholders, and c) be willing to change” in order to put dialogic communication into practice (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015, p. 187). These principles suggest that companies need to participate in more active back-and-forth talk with customers so that they feel as if they are being heard and that their contributions are being taken into serious consideration. Much like the conceptual impetus behind social CRM that calls for collaborative communication between customer and company, public relations professionals are encouraged to engage in conversations with customers rather than simply disseminating information to them. Research has revealed the positive associations between dialogic communication and public perception. Yang, Kang, and Johnson (2010) found that company blog posts using dialogic communication standards had positive influences on public attitudes about the organization, and Saffer, Sommerfeldt, and Taylor (2013) discovered that more interactive, two-way communications with customers lead to more positive perceptions of corporations.

Social media are particularly effective for building relationships in that they allow for conversational interactions between companies and stakeholders. Through replying, commenting, retweeting or sharing, both users and companies can talk with one another. In turn, these conversational interactions have positive impacts for companies and customers, including trust in e-vendors, increased knowledge of products, positive attitudes concerning online shopping and advertising, and increased company profits (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015). In an extensive study on how brand websites and Facebook and Twitter accounts helped in building relationships, Shin, Pang, & Kim (2015) observed that while websites were used for more one-way communications,
Facebook and Twitter exhibited many features of dialogic communication that could be used to facilitate relationship-building between companies and stakeholders.

However, while Facebook and Twitter possessed strong capabilities for two-way, dialogic communication between customers and companies, Shin, Pang, & Kim (2015) uncovered that these sites were not being used to their full potential to generate conversation with customers. Overall, organizations used Facebook and Twitter more for one-way communication, such as information dissemination, than for two-way communication—more than 60% of Facebook wall posts and tweets on Twitter contained no engagement features. Instead, about 80% of wall posts and tweets included information items (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015). In addition, none of the Facebook and Twitter accounts in this study gave information about management or people working for these organizations (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015). Despite these results, Shin, Pang, and Kim (2015) encouraged companies to make use of the dialogic communication tools that social media platforms offer because of the potential they offer for building OPR. Research on companies like JetBlue reveals how conversation with customers through social media can increase followers and cement relationships (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015). Other companies’ use of crowdsourcing and user engagement with customers has also been known to create brand awareness and brand loyalty (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015). If relationship-building through user engagement on social media has benefits for companies, it only makes sense to continue to foster reciprocal communication with customers on these sites.

Corporate Reputation

Although building relationships through dialogic communication has significant benefits for companies, the type of content that companies choose to use in customer communications can influence customer perceptions of brands. Simply adopting dialogic communication practices
does not ensure that customers will feel as if they want to engage with a company, or that a relationship is being created. In establishing connections, companies need to consider how the content of their social media messages is being perceived, what customers expect to see in these messages, and how this will affect a larger corporate reputation. The concept of reputation is critical for many different types of organizations, such as government departments, non-profits, and schools, but is especially important to the field of public relations (Griffin, 2014). However, because definitions of reputation vary across disciplines, there has been difficulty in creating a clear overarching explanation of the concept (Helm, 2011). In reviewing cross-disciplinary definitions of corporate reputation, Helm (2011) concluded that “Reputation is a perceptual collective construct […] or a socially shared impression – that relies on an individual’s perception of a public consensus about how the firm will behave in any given situation” (p. 7).

Other descriptions of corporate reputation emphasize perception as well. Andrew (2014) writes that reputation is another person’s judgment and recognition of a company: “Whether you are an individual or a multinational company, your reputation is not something that you own; it is something that is assigned to you by others” (p. 2). Yet Andrew also notes that consumer judgments are partially the result of actual experiences with company service and how well companies follow up on their promises for service (p. 4). Even so, customers share their experiences with other individuals and with the media—this is important as reputation is formed through the collective act of discussion (Andrew, 2014). In their review of work on reputation, McCorkindale and DiStaso (2013) claim that corporate reputation is governed by stakeholder estimations and by how corporations choose to present themselves. Therefore, corporate
Companies recognize the need to uphold an online corporate reputation, but note that it is an increasingly slippery construct to maintain in these environments. To offer advice to companies seeking out a social media presence, Fertik and Thompson (2010) appropriately write, “Your online reputation is your reputation” (p. 16). Companies communicate specific “personalities” through their websites, and these personalities are exhibited even more so with the conversational features of social media (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2013). Still, certain social media characteristics make preserving a positive reputation more pressing than ever. McCorkindale and DiStaso (2013) argue that together, the collective, instantaneous, and permanent nature of social media makes upholding a corporate reputation much more complicated. Customers can share their good or bad experiences with a company instantly. Others can read about these experiences in real time and can comment or share them with even more users. And, those experiences are easily preserved online for those who may come across them in searches on these sites. Whether good or bad, the ease of sharing and accessing customer experiences through social media has tangible consequences for companies.

Concerns about upholding a positive corporate on social media are often translated as concerns of managing reputation risk. Just as social media have introduced certain benefits for corporate communications and reputations, such as increased connectivity to and opportunities for active engagement with customers, they also present challenges for maintaining reputation. In public relations, reputation risk is described as an organization “acting, behaving, or performing in a way that falls short of stakeholder expectations” (Honey, 2009, p. 14). Risk occupies the area between what stakeholders expect and what companies deliver; if an
organization is to manage reputation risk, it must attempt to close the gap between these two things (Honey, 2009). However, social media makes reducing this gap more difficult. Users are given freedom to publish their own thoughts on social media, but these thoughts may not be true and may impact how others see organizations (Aula, 2010).

Regardless of the veracity of such claims, social media users construct a “collective truth” about organizations, which they then share with others across these networks (Aula, 2010, p. 46). The existence of so many truths places more control of corporate reputation in the hands of users and less control in the hands of companies themselves. Moreover, as companies are able to use social media for their own communication purposes, poor use of these accounts can result in reputation risks or crises (Aula, 2010). Overall, social media’s allowance for user-generated content and freedom of interpretation introduce new and unique concerns to those managing reputation risk. At times, these concerns are completely out of the company’s control. For example, Facebook user Mike Melgaard decided to create a fake account acting as a customer service representative for Target (Nudd, 2015). Melgaard wrote rude and sarcastic responses to customers who were upset by Target’s decision to use gender-neutral labeling for children’s products (Nudd, 2015). However, other customers were not aware that the account was fake and were outraged by Melgaard’s replies (Nudd, 2015). In this situation, Target could not control how others perceptions were affected by Melgaard’s fake account.

Considering these difficulties, Aula (2010) writes that companies need to adopt new strategies for managing corporate reputation that reflect the highly interactive nature of social media. Traditional methods of approaching reputation management apply economic perspectives to social media, but these perspectives are limited in that they do not account for the discursive nature of reputation building on social media: “An organization’s environment should also
be seen as a communicative environment of meaning in which images, symbols, stories, myths, and rumors both fabricate and challenge the organization’s reputation” (Aula, 2010, p. 47). In response to this, Aula (2010) recommends four different strategies to monitor and avoid reputation risks: absence, presence, attendance, and omnipresence. As the only strategy that incorporates dialogic interaction between stakeholders and organizations, omnipresence is valued above other strategies in that it instructs organizations to continuously immerse themselves in social media communications to better identify risks that could occur at any time (Aula, 2010). To properly address or prevent reputation crises, companies should be more active participants on social media by listening, monitoring, and engaging with customers.

Despite Aula’s recommendations for omnipresence strategies, the reality of reputation management reveals that most companies are not employing dialogue or deeper levels of interactions with their customers during reputation crises (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). Instead, companies rely more heavily on Aula’s other three strategies: absence, presence, and attendance. Companies use the absence strategy when they choose not to enter into conversations about the crisis (Aula, 2010, p. 48). With presence, a company uses only traditional communication channels (newspapers) to inform the public about the event, and companies using attendance listened to conversations via social media, but only to collect information for internal uses (Aula, 2010, p. 48).

In looking at how three separate companies chose to handle social media dilemmas, Ott and Theunissen (2015) found that even though the organizations claimed to use dialogue in these situations, they often decided to deny or justify the issues rather than participate in authentic dialogue with customers. Responding to a situation in which an employee had posted an image of a patron’s receipt on social media, Applebee’s chose to publish an official statement on its
Facebook page explaining why the employee had been fired (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). Soon after releasing this statement, Applebee’s began replying to angry user comments regarding the employee’s termination, but the replies were aimed more at persuading users that Applebee’s was right rather than entering into a conversation about how and why users felt the way they did (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). To make matters worse, some replies from Applebee’s contained material that was copied and pasted from the initial statement (Ott & Theunissen, 2015).

Reiterating an official statement can be perceived as patronizing or condescending, and can exacerbate the situation (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). Additionally, the Applebee’s crisis along with crises of other companies indicates that companies often do not approach online publics as equals, which is a component of creating successful and positive dialogue (Ott & Theunissen, 2015).

If organizations are to build relationships, engage in dialogue, and cultivate positive corporate reputations on social media, they must consider what factors impact customer perceptions of them. Hon and Grunig (1999) laid the foundation for research on organizational-public relationships by proposing several relationship-cultivation strategies that would foster positive public perceptions: access, openness, positivity, task sharing, networking, and assurances. Access indicates how well an organization offers the public ways to connect with them, such as including phone numbers or email addresses. Sometimes termed “disclosure,” openness involves the extent to which an organization shares information about itself with the public. Positivity is described as a strategy that an organization can use to make public relationships more pleasant. Task sharing refers to the ways in which an organization works with the public for mutually beneficial goals. Networking is defined as how an organization builds networks with various public groups, and lastly, assurances refer to how
well an organization makes the public feel as if their concerns are valid and that the organization is dedicated to upholding the relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015). Together, each of these relationship-cultivation strategies are directed towards supporting favorable customer or public perceptions.

Additionally, Hon and Grunig link their relationship-building strategies to positive effects on relationship outcomes identified as satisfaction, commitment, trust, and control mutuality, or the agreement between companies and customers as to who holds legitimate power or influence (1999). Subsequent research has found similar results, and has relied heavily on Hon and Grunig’s relationship-cultivation strategies and outcomes in analyzing the connections between organizational reputations and public perception. In their examination of relationship-building on social media and websites, Shin, Pang, and Kim (2015) used a related set of relationship-cultivation strategies—disclosure, access, information dissemination, and engagement—to determine what features were used most effectively. Sisson (2017) asked social media users about their perceptions of control mutuality and engagement surrounding animal welfare organizations that they followed. Users felt as if these organizations were attentive to their concerns, and that other users were attentive to the organization’s concerns (Sisson, 2017). Users also felt as if the organizations appreciated their input, that they were able to participate in discussions about decision-making processes, and that they had an adequate level of control over their interactions with the organizations (Sisson, 2017).

Though they do not use the same terminology, other studies advocate for factors similar to Hon and Grunig’s relationship-cultivation strategies as a means of strengthening positive public or customer perceptions. DiStaso and McCorkindale (2013) identified three variables that influence corporate reputation: trust, transparency, and engagement. No unified definition of
trust exists in the field of public relations, but DiStaso and McCorkindale (2013) argue that trust involves confidence, openness, and a shared set of expectations between both customers and companies. Companies must do more than only gain the trust of their customers; on social media both groups must trust each other (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013). Though related to trust, transparency can be a remedy for ameliorating situations in which trust is low (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013). Transparency in business involves disclosing information that customers can use to both make objective decisions about the company and to hold the company accountable (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013). Companies must be also truthful by releasing information to the public that accurately reflects their practices. Lastly, engagement is comprised of two-way communication through which companies have conversations with and listen to their customers (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013). DiStaso and McCorkindale (2013) argue that companies need to use social media so that customers “can talk to them not just about them” (p. 502).

The concept of talking to customers in an open, conversational way that promotes mutual trust ties to discussions of human voice. Though not described in much depth in public relations, voice in this context refers to the perception of a certain type of tone used in a communicative act (Kelleher, 2009). No in-depth definition of human voice is offered, but the concept is clearly linked to an individual’s perception that communication is occurring with another “real” person rather than a larger, mechanized entity (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Unlike human voice, Kelleher and Miller assert that “corporate voices sound more like profit-driven machinery than real people engaged in two-way conversations” (2006, p. 398). This interpretation suggests that customers must be made to feel as if they are speaking with individual people, not faceless corporations with robotic characteristics. Similarly, allowing multiple voices from within the organization to
speak on behalf of the company facilitates more effective communications with the public (Kelleher, 2009). To add to the definition, human voice is also described as an “engaging and natural style of organizational communication,” but Kelleher does not explain what “engaging,” “natural,” or even “human” may mean in this context (2009, p. 177).

Despite the existence of a unified definition, human voice has been found to positively impact user perceptions of company’s online presences and relationship outcomes. In his study of user perceptions of organizational blogs, Kelleher (2009) operationalizes human voice in several ways: the company invites the public to participate in conversation, is open to participating in a dialogue with the public, displays a sense of humor, tries to be interesting, makes interactions enjoyable, admits any mistakes, responds to criticism directly and promptly, and treats users as human (p. 181). By asking participants to rate organizational blogs in terms of how well they conveyed the features of human voice, Kelleher discovered that there was a positive correlation between the use of human voice and relationship outcomes such as trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment; when users felt that human voice was more prevalent, they were more confident that these relationship outcomes had been achieved. Although Kelleher’s focus was on the use of human voice in blogs, the similarities between blogs and social media, including commenting functions and frequent updating, implies that human voice may be a factor in communication via social media sites.

**Customer Complaints**

In comparison to the extensive research on relationship-building and corporate reputation, relatively few studies address customer complaints and even fewer explore customer complaints on social media. Because customers are using social media to voice their opinions and seek solutions for problems, specific sites like Twitter and Facebook should be examined for their
potential to facilitate customer service. Prior to the inception of social media and even the
Internet, the process of reaching out to a company with a complaint was much more tedious,
sluggish, and inconvenient (Einwiller & Steilen, 2014). Some dissatisfied customers chose not to
complain because they thought that it would not be worth the effort to complain or that
complaining would not lead to any satisfactory resolution (Einwiller & Steilen, 2014). In some
cases, customers weren’t aware of where or how they could complain (Einwiller & Steilen,
2014). However, because social media are built around user-generated content, sharing opinions
and complaining is far less complicated than it may have been before, even for those who are not
well-versed users of social media. Customers can also easily read others’ complaints as well,
which may encourage them to speak out to companies regarding their own issues
(Einwiller & Steilen, 2014). For these reasons, social media should be studied more closely for
its capacity to influence how and why customers complain.

Literature on customer complaints borrows from several different disciplines, including
marketing, business, public relations, and psychology. Though it may not be particularly difficult
to determine when a customer is complaining, research varies in the level of detail used to
delineate what constitutes a complaint. Most definitions of complaints center around the concept
of dissatisfaction; Cook (2012) claims that a complaint is “any expression of dissatisfaction” (p. 9).
Conversely, Kowalski (1996) is much more specific in his psychological interpretation of
complaints, arguing that past research was notoriously unclear in defining what constitutes a
complaint, leading to confusion in some studies. For Kowalski, complaints are motivated by
differences between what customers expect and what they receive in terms of a product, service,
or experience (p. 179). Complaining is a behavioral act that allows them to express their feelings:
“Conceptualized this way, dissatisfaction is the attitude resulting from disconfirmation of
expectancies, and complaining is a behavioral expression of the dissatisfaction” (p. 179).

Nevertheless, customers who complain are not always dissatisfied, but may be engaging in this behavior to elicit reactions from others (Kowalski, 1996). Kowalski discusses how individuals may take on certain roles in complaining in order to garner sympathy or approval from others, or they may complain to vent emotions and hold others accountable for their actions. While acknowledging that complaints are closely related to criticism, Kowalski notes that complaints differ in that they function more to serve interpersonal goals.

Complaints are also understood as a form of WOM (word of mouth) or eWOM (electronic word of mouth). WOM refers to the spread of information about a company and its products or services through interpersonal communication between customers. It has been shown to impact customer attitudes towards brands (Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014). Though similar to WOM, eWOM differs in that it takes place in online platforms where customer opinions are much more visible, easier to access, and spread much more rapidly in these environments (Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014). Social media are often studied for its facilitation of eWOM because it allows for users to communicate about brand opinions within, and even outside of, their social networks (Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014). Customer complaints shared through social media or other online environments are often understood as negative word of mouth, or NWOM (Balaji, Kong, & Chong, 2016). As users can instantaneously share their thoughts on or experiences with companies on social media, NWOM can spread quickly, at times creating public relations crises for companies that are involved (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014). These crises can erupt into what Pfeffer, Zorbach, and Carley (2014) call “online firestorms,” or situations in which customers share a large amount of negative messages about a company. Online firestorms can be
particularly difficult to control and can have serious implications for a company’s reputation (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014).

Although social media accelerate NWOM crises, not many studies discuss how companies view and handle NWOM and customer complaints, or what strategies work best for dealing with complaints. Research has addressed how and why customers choose to complain on social media (Balaji, Kong, & Chong, 2014), and how NWOM can affect organizational reputation (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014; Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014), but this work does not clearly analyze how companies choose to respond to complaints. In their case study of three different organizations, Williams and Buttle (2014) proposed to better understand organizational attitudes and responses towards NWOM. Through participant observation and interviews, Williams and Buttle found that organizations pay significantly more attention to NWOM communications than positive word of mouth communications (PWOM), with employees responding differently based on their organizational roles (2014). All employees were concerned about NWOM, but were especially worried about NWOM as it relates to the media, specifically social media, because of the lack of control over the situation (Williams & Buttle, 2014). Even with these concerns, employees working in call centers handled most complaints directly and focused on making customers happy as quickly as possible without having to forward complaints to senior employees (Williams & Buttle, 2014). Senior employees and those working in other departments expressed concern about NWOM, but used CRM systems to monitor the situations and weren’t necessarily confident in their abilities to respond to the NWOM situations (Williams & Buttle, 2014).

Williams and Buttle’s work is valuable in that it reveals specific organizations’ perceptions concerning NWOM, but it does not offer a closer analysis of specific approaches
used when dealing directly with customer complaints. Moreover, it does not address how customer complaints are handled online via social media as opposed to complaints that are taken over the phone. In focusing on company responses to complaints, some recent studies draw from earlier research that examined specific response strategies prior to widespread use of and access to social media. Davidow (2003) argued that the lack of consensus in categorizing organizational responses needed to be addressed. To this end, Davidow has identified six overarching dimensions of organizational responses to complaints: timeliness, redress, apology, credibility, attentiveness, and facilitation. Each dimension is described as follows:

- **Timeliness**: how quickly the organization responds to a complaint;
- **Redress**: what benefits the customer receives when the complaint is handled (compensation, refunds, repairs);
- **Apology**: how a company chooses to acknowledge the customer’s distress;
- **Credibility**: how a company offers an explanation for the problem and reassures the customer that the issue will not happen again;
- **Attentiveness**: how the company uses interpersonal communication to interact with the customer in ways that demonstrate respect, empathy, and a readiness to listen and to learn about the issue;
- **Facilitation**: what policies and procedures the company has in place to help the customer so that they do not need to be transferred to a senior employee (Davidow, 2003).

As he outlines these six dimensions, Davidow reviews complaint management literature to discuss how effective these strategies have been on customer satisfaction. According to the findings of several studies, the dimension of redress was noted as having the most
positive impact on customer satisfaction after complaints had been handled, along with the dimension of credibility (Davidow, 2003). Timeliness and apology yielded mixed results, while customers reported being more satisfied if they did not have to be transferred to others to solve a problem (facilitation). Nevertheless, Davidow argues that attentiveness—interacting with customers to show respect, empathy, and a willingness to listen to the customer—is the most significant dimension as it has the most positive influence over customer satisfaction and repurchase. Attentiveness was also more likely to cause NWOM communications from customers if not used effectively (Davidow, 2003). Yet Davidow acknowledges that companies may struggle to ensure that all complaintants receive similar levels of attentiveness.

In addition to Davidow’s six dimensions, Benoit (1997) also provides categories of approaches that companies use to restore their images. Image restoration is similar, if not analogous to the concept of corporate reputation as it involves rehabilitating perceptions of a company when customers feel as if offense has been given or wrongdoing has occurred (Benoit, 1997). Thus, image restoration is the improvement of a damaged reputation. Benoit’s conceptualizes his approaches in the following typology:

- Denial: denying that a situation occurred or shifting the blame to another individual or organization;
- Evasion of responsibility: pointing to a lack of information about or control over the situation, explaining the situation as an accident, or highlighting the initial good intentions behind the situation;
- Reducing the offensiveness of the event: emphasizing positive attributes of the company and its past actions, explaining that the act was not that serious, framing
the situation in a different context, attacking the accusers, and compensation for the act;

- Corrective action: ensuring the customer that the act or situation will be fixed;
- Mortification: apologizing for the act or situation (Benoit, 1997).

Where Davidow provides six dimensions of organizational responses that should be present in each complaint response, Benoit’s typology is directed more pointedly at what options companies have in improving reputation or image and what options companies have historically taken advantage of. Benoit also notes that companies need to consider the context of the situation, including the specific accusations and the company’s audience, before deciding how to respond (1997).

To further investigate complaint responses on social media, Einwiller and Steilen (2014) applied Davidow and Benoit’s strategies to customer complaints and replies from companies on both Facebook and Twitter. Though they frequently used Davidow’s terminology regarding the six dimensions of organizational responses, Einwiller and Steilen noted that Davidow’s dimensions and Benoit’s typology overlap in some aspects; for example, the redress and credibility strategies are considered methods to reduce offensiveness, and apology and mortification are almost identical. In terms of responsiveness, nearly half of complaints communicated through Facebook and Twitter went unanswered, with Facebook claiming a slower response time than Twitter (Einwiller & Steilen, 2014). Most of the time, companies did not choose to resolve the complaint with redress or corrective actions publicly through social media—customers were directed to contact the company through direct or private messages or over the phone, indicating that there was less facilitation involved and that the individuals operating the social media account are not empowered to resolve the issue (Einwiller & Steilen,
Companies also expressed gratitude and regret to complaining customers (attentiveness), but spent less time showing that they were understanding of customers’ problems (Einwiller & Steilen, 2014). Thanking the customers for complaining or for feedback had a positive influence on customer satisfaction. Still, most customers expressed that they were either very unsatisfied or unsatisfied with the ways in which their complaints were handled or, in some cases, not handled by the companies. Therefore, Einwiller & Steilen conclude that more research should pinpoint how responsiveness rates (timeliness) and the content of response strategies can be improved.

Moving away from Davidow and Benoit’s work on organizational responses to complaints and image restoration, Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp (2015) developed a model for managing customer complaints based on types of complaints that appear most frequently on social media. As customers may use social media to disparage an organization that has failed to address their complaints, Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp argue that companies need to be able to quickly identify these threats and respond to them. To help accomplish this, six different types of social media complaints were identified and rated as either good, bad, or ugly. Directness, contacting the company directly through social media to resolve an issue, and boasting, spreading positive information via social media about how the complaint was handled, represent good forms of social media complaints. “Badmouthing” was present in situations where customers spread negative information about a company after a bad customer service encounter in which they had not directly contacted the company, and tattling involved complaining to a third-party. Both of these complaint styles were rated as bad. Lastly, “spite” and “feeding the vultures” were rated as the worst possible complaint outcomes. “Spite” is exemplified by situations in which customers spread negative messages after companies have failed to adequately address a complaint twice, while “feeding the vultures” referred to situations in which
a company’s competitors use social media to exacerbate the company’s failure to properly handle the complaint.

Based on these six complaint types, Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp offer recommendations for how to best approach interactions with customers. For simple direct complaints, companies were urged to resolve the issue promptly and publicly on the social media account so that other users would be able to view the interaction’s potential effectiveness. Companies were encouraged to contact customers with more complicated complaints through private channels, such as email, a private or direct message, or over the phone, as a back and forth over social media could prove to be frustrating for the customer. To deal with “badmouthing” complaints in which customers spread negative news about the company, companies were directed to publicly acknowledge the customer’s issue, handle it in private, and then share the outcome of the interaction publicly for other users to judge. “Tattling,” “spite,” and “feeding the vultures” can result from situations of double deviation in which the company has failed twice—first with the source of the complaint, and second with failing to address or mishandling the complaint. Cases involving tattling and spite-related complaints should be publicly acknowledged and handled quickly to keep the incident from going “viral” or spreading widely across social media. But incidents where competitors have chosen to capitalize on a company’s failure to address a complaint (feeding the vultures) are much more difficult to control. Companies can use humor, originality, and style to have the “last word” on the incident, but this strategy may not always be advisable.

Categorizing customer complaints in this way may be helpful in that it provides a framework for companies to identify and manage specific complaint situations, yet Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp do not offer any suggestions for how to construct effective replies to complaints. What message content is most or least effective in responding to
customer complaints? This remains unanswered. Additionally, they do not explore how customers perceive these complaint strategies. If satisfying customers is one of the main goals of responding to complaints, there should be more work done to understand what customers are expecting from customer service-related interactions on social media. Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp do recommend that companies use complaint management and social media monitoring applications such as TweetDeck, Social Mention, and Mention to track and organize customer tweets. Some of these tools classify customer tweets and hashtags about companies into positive, negative, or neutral categories, which can be useful in providing general overviews of company perceptions. Still, these applications do not account for the context surrounding interactions—the deeper meanings behind things that are said, why they are said, and what can or should be said to make social media interactions with customers more effective. With too much of a focus on complaint management software or social media monitoring applications, other situational factors that contribute to corporate social media communication may be lost.

The gap between what is suggested and how to execute those suggestions is indicative of most of the literature on customer complaints, as well as the literature on corporate social media presences in general. Oftentimes, the literature offers recommendations for actions—companies should respond quickly, acknowledge a problem, try to engage with customers in a conversational way, or offer compensation when appropriate. While these actions are undoubtedly useful for companies as they navigate social media environments, they may not be detailed enough to support effective communication with customers. If companies are to display authenticity, attentiveness, credibility, and trustworthiness in their social media interactions with customers, how are they to achieve this? What types of messages express attentiveness or credibility to customers? Without a clear understanding of how these
attributes can be accomplished, companies will continue to flounder in their social media communications with customers.
CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although reviewing the literature of business, marketing, and public relations fields provides crucial insight into how corporate social media presences are conceptualized, assessed, and valued in these disciplines, this body of work lacks a rhetorical approach that may unearth subtle yet significant details concerning how companies should interact with customers on social media. In this study, I will focus on the concept of rhetorical agency, which centers around perceptions of who has the capability and authority to act or enact change. More specifically, I will use the theories of rhetorical agency as they are discussed in the field of technical communication to demonstrate that corporations should consider framing social media replies in ways that allow for mutual attributions of agency between customers and companies. I will first discuss theoretical work from rhetorical and technical communication studies that has contributed to recent conceptions rhetorical agency, including Slack, Miller, and Doak (1993), Herndl and Licona (2007), and Carolyn Miller (2007). I will then review research from the field of technical communication that has built on these theories.

Defining Rhetorical Agency

From classical to postmodern studies of rhetoric, the concept of rhetorical agency has been a significant topic of debate for those in the fields of rhetoric and technical communication. Much of this debate has centered around what exactly rhetorical agency means, how it should be understood or approached, and what its value is to rhetorical studies (Geisler, 2004). While scholars have not agreed upon a uniform definition, agency is often described as how an individual perceives another’s capacity to effect an action or change through discourse. Campbell writes that “rhetorical agency refers to the capacity to act, that is, to have the
competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others” (2003, p. 4). But because an individual’s “capacity to act” can be limited by their positions within society, discussions of agency are typically linked to issues of power and authority. Some traditional or classical approaches to agency may overemphasize the power that a rhetor holds in a situation (Leff, 2003) without considering how other factors place restrictions on what may be said.

Conversations about these restrictive factors are present in much of Kenneth Burke’s contributions to rhetorical studies. Though not focused solely on rhetorical agency, Burke’s dramatistic pentad in A Grammar of Motives (1945) has had a profound influence on the study of rhetoric. Here Burke argues that to more fully comprehend the motives behind specific actions, we need to consider five different principles: the act (what happened), the scene (the situation surrounding the act), the agent (the person or type of person who performed the act), agency (the means or “instruments” used to perform the act), and the purpose (what the agent intended to accomplish) (p. 1298). Burke’s conceptualization of rhetorical agency involves the means by which an act was effected by an agent, although what may constitute “agency” or “agent” is relative to an individual’s perspective (Burke, 1945).

Yet even as Burke stresses that rhetorical events are dependent on perspective and are the result of interrelations between principles of the dramatistic pentad, his “agent” and “agency” principles are problematic. These principles separate the individual who performs an action from the “instrument” that the individual *uses* to perform the action, when these concepts may be interwoven in more fluid or complex ways. Carolyn Miller’s (1984) “Genre as Social Action” is a better foundation for understanding rhetorical agency. Miller argues that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of
discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (p. 151). Action is determined by meaning and is a “process of interpretation” (p. 156). Before we act, we interpret and define situations to decide on what would be appropriate (p. 156). Rhetorical agency, or action, is created through our interpretive and meaning-making processes prior to the actions we undertake. In the sections that follow, I will examine three approaches that expand rhetorical agency beyond Carolyn Miller’s 1984 work. These approaches also prove valuable in understanding how perceptions of agency play a significant role in effective communications via social media.

Slack, Miller, and Doak: “The Technical Communicator As Author”

Well-known within the field of technical communication, Slack et al.’s 1993 work, “The Technical Communicator As Author: Meaning, Power, Authority,” investigates the intersections of communication, power, and authorship. Slack et al.’s arguments about communication theory demonstrate how technical communicators do exercise power as authors of documents, and that they can enact change, whether large or small, in the discourses they write for. To support their claims about authorship, Slack et al. discuss three distinct views of communication: transmission, translation, and articulation. They argue that for each theory, authors exercise varying levels of control over the meaning-making process, and therefore occupy either positions of power or powerlessness. According to Slack et al., articulation theory should be valued above other theories because it posits that technical communicators contribute to a concept of meaning that is constantly transforming and changing.

Of the three communication theories, Slack et al. regard transmission and translation as the most problematic. Popularized by the mathematical approach of Shannon and Weaver, transmission involves encoding a message and sending that message over a channel where it can then be decoded by a receiver. Noise from the channel may distort the message as
its sent, but ultimately, the communication event is successful if the intended meaning from encoding remains intact as it is decoded. From this view, meaning is a “fixed entity” in that ideally, it does not change from sender to receiver (p. 164). Unlike transmission theory, the theory of translation acknowledges that meaning is produced through a sender’s encoding and a receiver’s decoding processes. A sender is only able to communicate successfully if what is encoded anticipates the perceptual framework of the receiver who will decode the message. For example, if a sender encodes a message in a way that reflects the receiver’s prejudices, preferences, and concerns, both parties are able to reach an understanding.

Both transmission and translation theories limit the authorial power of technical communicators. In the transmission view, technical communicators serve as encoders by packaging the intended meaning so that the received meaning is exactly the same—they are not to contribute to meaning in any way and must remain “invisible” throughout the process (p. 165). Though it may appear that translation theory grants power equally to those involved in the communication process, Slack et al. argue that the sender inherently holds more power by limiting the interpretations that a message can have before sending it to the receiver. Communication is “an ongoing struggle for power, unevenly balanced toward encoding” (p. 167). Technical communicators can be seen as possessing power as translators in this sense, but because they are working as mediators rather than senders or receivers, this power is in mediating and not authoring meaning.

To remedy the potential shortcomings of transmission and translation theories, Slack et al. call for a communication theory that moves past the polar concepts of sender and receivers, and bestows more power to mediators and other contextual factors that contribute to communication. Articulation theory asserts that all contextual factors play a role in constructing
meaning, including senders, receivers, and technologies that are used to transmit messages. Here, established meanings are understood as the “nonnecessary” connections between the components that form them (p. 169). To better illustrate the concept of articulation, Slack et al. compare assembling trains to forming meaning. Smaller train cars are connected (or articulated) to others in certain ways that form larger trains. Each train is composed of a particular set of articulations, but these articulations are nonnecessary, meaning that they do not have to be arranged in a specific way and that the arrangements may change. Because of this, the cars in each meaning train can be disconnected (disarticulated) and reconnected (rearticulated) to form different trains of meaning (p. 169). Articulation theory claims that meaning is constructed in larger contexts in which all groups, mediums, and technologies struggle to contribute to the process and to assert that some meanings hold more possibility than others.

With the construction of meaning in articulation theory, power is not owned by a sender or receiver, and it is not negotiated between the two. Instead, power rests with those factors that strive to “fix meanings” by allowing for some possibilities and shunning others. These meanings are never completely immovable as particular groups may restructure meaning in ways that prove to be convincingly plausible. Slack et al. argue that power is relegated to those who help generate and reconfigure meaning, a claim that places power in the hands of technical communicators. Because technical communicators contribute to meaning, they exercise power and can therefore claim authorship of the documents or messages they work with. Denying them the power of authorship not only undervalues the perspectives that they add to communicative processes, it also completely misunderstands how meaning is constructed and altered.
Slack et al.’s support of articulation indicates that transmission and translation misunderstand the communication process and as a result, do not adequately grant agency to technical communicators or other writers. Transmission theory is criticized because it assumes that communication is a linear, one-directional process that allows one individual to absorb the exact meaning of another. Translation theory acknowledges the frameworks of sender and receiver as contributing to meaning, but do not allow translators any agency. Still, articulation may not always be informing communication in practice. Research on corporate social media communication shows that despite the positive influences dialogic communication has on customer attitudes, many companies use social media for one-way communications, such as disseminating information or responding to occasional public relations crises (Ott & Theunissen, 2015; Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015). Most business, marketing, and public relations research advocates for dialogic and conversational approaches to corporate communication with customers on social media, yet the research does not provide much evidence that companies put these approaches into practice.

Companies choosing to use social media for distributing information rather than encouraging dialogue may fail to see how both customers, corporate social media writers, and Twitter itself can articulate and rearticulate meaning. If corporations view social media communication as the process of simply spreading information to their customers, they are placing a disproportionate amount of power in their own abilities to act, and not enough in the hands of their customers, employees, or in Twitter as an online application that dictates rules for communication in that space. This also diverges from the literature, which emphasizes the power, both positive and negative, that customer voices can have on a company’s reputation and actions. Customers can share their experiences with their own private networks, and these
networks can in turn spread these experiences even further. Social media itself exercises power in these situations by permitting the rapid spread of information across these networks. As Pfeffer et al. (2014) point out, the agency present with both customers and social media sites can bring about “online firestorms,” much like those United Airlines and Pepsi experienced in April of 2017. Furthermore, social media writers who work for these companies may consciously choose not to follow protocol, make accidental mistakes, or may be poorly trained to handle social media accounts, as was the case with an employee for Chrysler who tweeted an illicit message from the company account (Kessler, 2011). Meaning and communication situations are thus transformed by a variety of agencies.

As articulation recasts the communication process, it also transforms the concept of authorship. Slack et al.’s discussion of technical communicators and authorship is centered around Michel Foucault’s (1969) “What Is an Author?” in which he claims that only certain discourses produce authors, thereby granting legitimacy and agency to certain authors over others. In transmission and translation views of communication, authorship may be given to senders and receivers, but not to others involved in the communication process (Slack et al., 1993, p.171). Similarly, corporations that do not indicate who is writing for them may not be granting their employees the authority to act. Foucault writes that “a contract can have an underwriter, but it does not have an author” (p. 161). In corporate social media communication, typically only the company itself is named rather than the individual authoring the post or tweet. Corporations employ customer service teams to write for their social media accounts, but these individuals are not always given authorship. Some customer service writers responding to complaints do use initials or first names to identify themselves, as is the case with Starbucks’s customer service account @StarbucksHelps, Walmart’s account @Walmart, and others. Still,
this is not always the case. If corporations cannot or do not name authors in social media discourses, it may be unclear to customers who holds the agency to handle their problems. Customers who cannot identify who is authorized to help them may become frustrated or confused. Furthermore, customers want to know that they are speaking with “another human being” who is tasked with helping them (Canhoto & Clark, 2013, p. 533). Including the names of those authoring social media posts or tweets allows corporations to empower their employees with authorship and agency, both their employees and the corporation itself.

Herndl and Licona: Constrained Agency

Slack et al. reconstruct the interrelations between communication, authorship, and power, but they do not fully address the complex relationship between agency and authority. In “Shifting Agency: Agency, Kairos, and the Possibilities of Social Action,” (2007) Herndl and Licona explore these themes in more depth by arguing that agency is not a possession of individuals, but that it exists at the meeting of specific social relations which allow for the possibility of action. Dissatisfied with how poststructuralist theories and humanistic thinking conceptualize agency, Herndl and Licona formulate a new approach to agency that reconciles possibilities for action with social structures of power that limit these possible actions. Within these social structures, authority can both constrain and support agency depending on the context of certain situations. Herndl and Licona’s concept of constrained agency helps to identify the possibilities for individuals to participate in discourse and create change as they shift within sometimes contradictory or ambiguous social spaces.

Even as poststructuralist traditions have attempted to explain agency in ways that account for social action and the constraints of power, many times those individuals who are said to be enacting social change are thought of as possessing or having agency. Herndl and Licona (2007)
challenge this notion of agency as possession because it does not explain how social systems often dictate when or where agency can be put into action. Instead, they claim that agency exists outside of the individual and within a complex network of social relations: “agency is a social location and opportunity into and out of which, rhetors, even postmodern subjects, move” (p. 138). Agency comes into being when it is put into action within the opportunities presented at these specific social locations.

Similar to Foucault’s description of the “author function,” Herndl and Licona (2007) argue for the “agent function” where agency exists prior to the agent. Herndl and Licona write that agency “cannot be seized, claimed, had, [or] possessed” because it only occurs when there is a potential for action in situations that are constantly shifting and changing (p. 137). This is similar to Foucault’s discussion of power and authorship in which agency precedes the agent, just as authority precedes the author. The agent function is also a combination of a subject’s own disposition, or the influences of past personal experiences, and the contextual conditions for the possibility of rhetorical action. Agents are only brought into being when they can enact a rhetorical performance through the specific social location and relations that they occupy. Each set of social relations offers varying opportunities for action, but subjects are not guaranteed to exercise any agentive abilities when the potential exists for an action to take place. Herndl and Licona compare their conception of agency to Judith Butler’s gender performance theory in which the performance of gender forms the subject’s gender identity and creates the performer, rather than the performer creating the performance of gender. However, in terms of agency, Herndl and Licona argue that subjects do exist prior to their performances of agency or authority. These subjects become agents only when they are “articulated into” the agent function (p. 141).
Like agency, authority exists before subjects and is constituted through a collection of specific social practices that are present in a specific social location (Herndl & Licona, 2007, p. 142). Individual subjects enact the authority function and exercise the authority to speak when the contexts, structures, and spaces that they are situated in allow for these opportunities. As Lawrence Grossberg (1992) writes, “authority is not located in the leaders in the community, but in the place that has been constructed, through cultural and intellectual labor, as authoritative (p. 383). Though authority can motivate rhetorical action, it often maintains and controls the dominant structures, meaning, and actions that constitute it. Authority constrains agency by making it difficult for subjects from less powerful groups to engage in opportunities to speak and represent themselves. If the authority function controls and limits meanings and actions, nondominant subjects will also be limited in the agentive opportunities that they can employ.

To illustrate the concept of constrained agency, Herndl and Licona examine Ellen Messer-Davidow’s (2002) work on the evolution of women’s studies as a significant discipline within the academy. In order for feminism and women’s studies to be able to participate in the academy, those supporting this change engaged the agent function by challenging dominant discourses, and eventually gained the authority to designate women’s studies as a legitimate discipline. However, once this was achieved, women’s studies became imbued in the power dynamics of the academy itself, which ultimately constrained the agency that the discipline could exercise. Messer-Davidow writes that although women’s studies had aimed to change the structure of the academy, the academy had “domesticated” feminism by controlling its transformative capacities (2002, p. 144). In becoming a discipline, women’s studies had to submit to university expectations, practices, and politics that restricted feminism’s “radical
potential” (Herndl & Licona, 2007, p. 144). Inclusion into the academy came at the cost of conforming to institutional power and the constraint of certain possibilities for agency.

Agency and authority can be neatly opposed, as is the case in Messer-Davidow’s discussion of women’s studies. Yet other situations reveal a more complex and ambiguous relationship between the two. Herndl and Licona analyze Jim Henry’s work on technical writing and collaborative writing practices in the workplace to demonstrate how subjects can shift between constrained agency and authority. According to Henry, even though writing and editing practices are constrained by dominant organizational practices, these practices elicit opportunities for writers to move between both the agent and author functions—writers can be situated in multiple positions depending on contexts that align “proposed changes and the organization’s goals and underlying discourses” (2000, p. 86). For example, Henry discusses how a professional writer charged with cutting out daily news articles for her organization acted within the agent and author functions. She not only held the authority to decide which articles could be suitable for the organization, but also had the potential to influence organizational practices. In this situation, her participation in the author function enacted the agent function, revealing the intricate relationship between the two.

Herndl and Licona’s notion that agency and authority are not possessed by subjects is important to understand in social media communication. Twitter, for example, allows for customers to complain and companies to engage with these customers, but this does not guarantee that a problem will be solved or a relationship will be formed. It may seem as if these groups own a level of agency, yet context will determine whether change can be successfully enacted. Instead, corporations must recognize the potential that specific situations may hold for agentive action and change. United Airline’s poor response to the events on Flight 3411 reveals a
misunderstanding of agency and authority as possession. Tweeting an official statement made by CEO Oscar Munoz in response to the situation, United Airlines wanted to show that it possessed the authority and agency to handle the issues. However, the statement infuriated customers who saw its apology for “re-accommodating” passengers as insensitive (Petroff, 2017). Backlash on Twitter erupted, with United losing $255 million of its market value (Shell, 2017). In the end, United did not own agency or authority because they misread the opportunities for change afforded by the social situation.

Similarly, both customers and corporations are constrained by the discourse of social media sites and the authority that certain groups hold on these sites. Communication on Twitter is clearly constrained by the 140-character limit that it imposes on tweets, but also by dominant communication practices prevalent on the site. Literature shows that through eWOM, customers can be exposed to a large amount of personal experiences with brands (Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014). Only so much can be said in 140 characters, and customers may learn how to construct their own complaints to companies from others’ experiences. Customer experiences that are widely shared may have more influence, therefore creating and constraining what communication practices are used. Furthermore, corporate communication strategies on Twitter may constrain the agency of customers. When responding to complaints, some corporations considered it an industry practice to respond to those with more followers before, or in place of others with less followers (Ma, Sun, & Kekre, 2015, p. 642). Corporations that choose to engage with customers who wield more influence on Twitter enact an authority function that permits the voices of some to be heard, but only at the exclusion of others.
Much like Herndl and Licona, Carolyn R. Miller (2007) conceptualizes agency as a product of the rhetorical situation rather than a possession of either rhetor or audience. Miller uses an informal survey to gauge instructor’s perceptions of automated writing and speech assessment technologies as the basis for her discussion on agency. Most instructors who responded indicated that they did not trust these technologies to effectively evaluate student work, mainly because they did not believe a computerized system could act as a “live” or legitimate audience when assessing student work: “And further, respondents spoke of the need for ‘engagement’ with audience in both writing and speaking: ‘student writers,’ one said, should ‘engage in conversation with other academics’” (Miller, 2007, p. 141). From these responses, Miller proposes that we struggle to communicate in situations in which we cannot assign agency to our audiences: “…we find it difficult (and perhaps perverse) to conceive of rhetorical action under conditions that seem to remove agency not from the rhetor so much as from the audience” (2007, p. 141). We need to be able to view an audience as an entity that will act in some way, whether it be to disagree, agree, criticize, or to compliment. Agency, Miller argues, is more concerned with perceptions of audience expectations rather than perceptions of rhetors as authors or speakers.

While many conceptions of traditional or classical rhetoric have championed the power and authority of the individual rhetor, this notion of agency misunderstands the role of audience in shaping rhetorical action, and consequently, the participatory and interactive characteristics engendered by the perceived existence of an audience (Miller, 2007, p. 142-143). Both Miller and Michael Leff note that classical rhetoricians did not completely ignore the power of audience in shaping rhetorical action—Isocrates and Cicero recognized the restrictions
that audience placed on the communicative act (2007, p. 146). But even so, the anxiety
Miller’s respondents felt towards automated assessment systems reveals their unwillingness to
endow technologies with the characteristics of agency (2007, p. 149). This is not a result
of technology mediating or removing audience, as Miller argues, because the speaker or writer
must to some degree anticipate an audience that is not always visible. Further, even if an
audience is visible and present, it does not follow that speakers and writers will then be able to
accurately infer that audience’s concerns, beliefs, and needs (2007, p. 149). The issue lies not
with technology as mediating systems, but with our capacity to perceive these systems as
agents: “To produce kinetic energy, performance requires a relationship between two entities
who will attribute agency to each other” (Miller, 2007, p. 149). An inability to see another as an
agent will render rhetorical action ineffective. Speakers and writers must then learn how to
attribute agency to those that may not always be physically present in order to enact change
within a rhetorical performance.

Though Miller’s survey cannot be generalized to reflect all attitudes regarding automated
systems, it does suggest that agency is not a possession of the writer or speaker, but rather the
result of two subjects’ interactive abilities to ascribe agency to one another. Miller’s survey
responses indicated that speakers or writers needed to be able to interact with their audiences
through direct feedback, responses, reactions, or the development of relationships (2007, p. 150).
They also needed to feel as if those audiences were “living” (p. 150). Because of these
necessities, agency arises from the interactions between rhetor and audience that constitute the
rhetorical situation—it is not owned by any one subject (Miller, 2007, p. 150). As
either rhetors or audience members, our interactions are comprised of the attributions that we
make about each other and whether or not we assign the capacity to act to each other. Miller uses
the example of Crassus in his *de Oratore* as an example: “Crassus is awed by his audience not so much because of anything they are doing but because he attributes to them the capacity to do something, including agency to him” (2007, p. 150). If we participate in mutual attributions—the perceptions that our audiences or speakers can accomplish something through responses or reactions—we can place ourselves and others into Herndl and Licona’s agent function to enact change. In applying this process of attribution, Miller writes that we should examine the attributions we agree to make and encourage others to attribute agency to socially subordinate groups.

Miller’s insight about agency demonstrates how mutual attributions can facilitate communication between corporations and customers on social media. For effective communication to take place, corporations need to be able to attribute agency to their customers just as customers need to be able to attribute agency to the corporations they communicate with. Customers who cannot credit corporations with the capacity to act on a problem will most likely not have a favorable view of that corporation’s reputation. In the same way, corporations who do not attribute agency to their customers discredit the very real effects customers can have on corporation’s reputation and financial stability. Again, United Airline’s official statement by CEO Oscar Munoz did not anticipate how customers would perceive the corporation’s agency. Customers did not see the statement as an apology, but as a callous strategy to save face. As a result, customers took to criticizing the company because they did not feel as if United Airlines could satisfactorily handle the problem.

Pepsi faced a similar situation with the release of its 2017 commercial in which model Kendall Jenner offered a police officer blocking off protests a can of Pepsi (Gonzalez, 2017). However, Pepsi acknowledged the backlash concerning the lack of cultural and social awareness
in the commercial, and quickly released a statement saying they had stopped the advertising campaign. In listening to the responses of their customers, Pepsi recognized their capacities for action. They put a swift end to an advertising campaign that could have been even more disastrous for the corporation had it been allowed to continue. Although Pepsi’s corporate reputation was damaged, they acted in a way that attempted to halt any further criticism.

Additionally, Miller’s discussion establishes agency as an energy produced from interactions and rhetorical performances between rhetors and audiences. As Miller’s survey indicates, we understand these interactions through the types of responses that we receive from one another. The literature from business, marketing, and public relations not only recommends that corporations engage in conversation with customers, but also that corporations listen to customers (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015); use human voice (Kelleher, 2009); cultivate trust and transparency (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2013); reassure customers that problems are being attended to (Davidow, 2003); and demonstrate respect, empathy, and acknowledgment of any problems (Davidow, 2003). Through the quality of these interactions, customers may be more willing to attribute agency to corporations, which may in turn improve corporate reputation. If a corporation interacts positively with customers, these customers may be more likely to perceive the corporation as being capable of addressing any issues. Because the literature does not specifically address how to construct appropriate replies to customer complaint interactions, I will address this in the analysis section of my study in hopes of providing further insight in improving customer-corporation relationships.

Technical Communication and Corporate Social Media

With technical communication’s focus on technologies that facilitate and mediate communication, researchers have explored social media from a variety of perspectives, including
technical communication pedagogy (Hurley & Hea, 2014; Bowdon 2014), global online communication versus face-to-face communication (Longo, 2014), the use of social media in emergency situations (Bowdon, 2014; Potts, 2014) and in the workplace (Weber, 2013; Ferro & Zachry, 2014; Kline & Alex-Brown, 2013; Stolley, 2009). This research uncovers the ways in which social media has opened up and perhaps complicated communication between individuals across time and space. Employees can conduct work with co-workers or employees from other organizations via social media platforms, or communicate with customers directly. Although this work has established the value that social media affords for the field of technical communication and organizational or workplace studies, research has yet to be conducted on corporate responses to customer complaints and the role that agency plays in these interactions.

Despite his focus on policy rather than on communicative interactions via social media, Weber’s (2013) analysis of corporate social media policies implies that agency is problematized even prior to direct interactions with customers. Weber draws from Herndl and Licona’s concept of constrained agency to argue that corporate social media policies tend to situate their employees in unclear and often contradictory agentive positions—companies encourage employees to use their own personal voices in communicating with customers while also restricting those communications in order to uphold brand reputation (2013, p. 291). Employees are allowed to present a more individualistic tone that is often lacking in the “impersonal, anonymous voice of the company” displayed in other documents (2013, p. 297). However, this more approachable tone is limited by companies’ concerns to control and protect their public images. According to Weber, employees are asked to occupy both these opposing agentive positions through corporate social media policy. As a result, the function of employee agency in this context is ambiguous.
Weber claims that corporate social media policies constrain agency by developing possibly contradictory expectations for voice and ambiguous relationships between employees and the corporations they work for (2013, p. 299). In terms of voice, Weber found that companies directed their employees to be natural, honest, respectful, and positive when communicating on social media, and to try to align their voices with the values of the company (p. 299). They also instructed employees to be human in their social media communications, but mandated that this “human-ness” be presented in a way that works with the larger corporate ethos rather than against it (2013, p. 213).

In the same way that a writer’s voice is convoluted by these polices, an employees’ agency as a representative of the company is also uncertain. Companies simultaneously assert that their employees do and do not represent the company through their social media activity; social media policies advise employees that although they are not speaking on behalf of the company, their social media posts may still be viewed as reflective of company values and ethos (2013, p. 305). Intel’s social media policy suggests that regardless of whether employees are authorized to speak for the company, readers might not be as concerned with these discrepancies: “Perception is reality and in online social networks, the lines between public and private, personal and professional are blurred” (2013, p. 305). Customers reading these posts may see employees as representatives of the company even if that is not the case, and these perceptions allow customers to exercise a certain level of agency in determining how to interpret social media interactions.

Weber’s analysis is useful because it reveals how agency is complicated before corporations engage with customers on social media. Although some of these policies are directed at employees’ personal social media presences, we can assume that the
practices mentioned here—respect, positivity, honesty, and a sense of “human-ness”—can apply to situations where employees are writing for corporations. Even with their own social media accounts, employees are instructed to portray themselves as personable individuals who simultaneously do and do not reflect corporate values. As Intel’s policy states above, the lines between the “personal and professional” are obscured. Employees who are tasked with constructing tweets or replies to customers may not have a clear idea of when to appropriately represent their own personal ethos or the ethos of the company because of the ambiguity in these policies. This confusion could prove to be disastrous if employees who regularly work as social media writers misunderstand what is meant in the policies. Even more, if corporations are contradictory in their desires for both institutional and individual voices, this could confuse the customers that these corporations interact with. Customers may not be able to understand who or what has the power to resolve problems.

In her rhetorical analysis of a Danish bank’s response to the 2008 and 2009 global financial crises, Elisabeth Hoff-Clausen (2013) asserts that in order for organizations to build trust with the public, they must attribute agency to those affected by these crises. According to Hoff-Clausen, active listening is one way that organizations can attribute agency to the public, although she notes that this strategy should be approached carefully. The rhetorical performances that we engage in can help us to build trust, but our attitudes involving trust condition whether or not we choose to participate in rhetorical dialogue in the first place (Hoff-Clausen, 2013 p. 428). Hoff-Clausen builds from Miller’s concept of mutual attributions of agency to argue that trust affects our decisions to attribute agency. To be able to attribute agency to others, we “entrust” them with the potential to have an influence over us and to exercise some social force or power; we choose to make ourselves vulnerable in trusting another individual or organization to
act toward us in some way (Hoff-Clausen, 2013, p. 429). When we doubt this trust, we struggle to attribute agency to others and are no longer inclined to allow each other the potential for action. This relationship between trust and agency may explain why apologetic messages may not always be successful (Hoff-Clausen, 2013, p. 430). Because trust is in question in the situation prior to an apology, both parties participating in an exchange will be “safe-guarding” themselves and closely assessing the honesty of everything that is said. Customers will be actively doubting the trustworthiness of the organization apologizing, and organizations may be skeptical of those who accused them of wrongdoing (Hoff-Clausen, 2013, p. 431).

As Hoff-Clausen claims, current and past scholarship has not adequately evaluated how trust and agency are affected in organizational crisis situations, or how organizations can use online communication to build trust. Hoff-Clausen argues that active listening may help repair trust and resolve conflict (2013, p. 432). Used in conflict resolution and mediation contexts, active listening acknowledges the “feelings, experiences, thoughts, opinions, and indeed basic human worth and equality of the person feeling wronged” (2013, p. 433). When an organization chooses to participate in active listening, it reveals a willingness to the run a risk of being changed or affected by what the public has to say. This act of listening attributes rhetorical agency to the public by offering the possibility for individuals to enact change. In turn, the public can attribute agency to the organization through the attempt to listen to their concerns. In 2009, Danske Bank, a Dutch bank, used this strategy of active listening by inviting the public to comment on their perceptions of the bank. Although this attempt may have shown an outward concern for the public, Hoff-Clausen asserts that the bank constrained the agency of the public. Danske Bank imposed a word limit so that individuals could not post detailed comments on their website, but the bank was permitted to leave in-depth replies to these
comments. Dankse Bank also claimed the rights to these posts and assumed an editorial role in releasing its own interpretations of the 3,500 comments the public had left (Hoff-Clausen, 2013, p. 440).

Hoff-Clausen’s work describes how trust may be built through the attributions of agency that active listening allows for. Several scholars call directly for corporations to listen to their customers in social media communications (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2013; Aula, 2010; Davidow, 2003), and to focus on building trust with customers (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2013; Kelleher, 2009). However, it is not always clear what is meant by “listening,” how listening can be achieved, or why it might be important. Still, corporations harm potential or existing relationships when they fail to attribute agency to customers through listening strategies.

Oscar Munoz’s initial apology concerning the man forcibly and violently removed from United Airlines Flight 3411 did not adequately take into account customer outrage about the incident. Perhaps more obviously, the apology did not offer to listen to customer concerns. As a result, the apology garnered even more anger towards the company on Twitter. By failing to listen, United Airlines also failed to attribute agency to its customers and to allow customers to attribute agency to the company. Even with United Airlines’ failure, other companies listen more carefully to their customers. JetBlue Airways is lauded for its responsive persona on Twitter and has been known to actually follow up in person with customers who tweet about issues they had with flights (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015; Kolowich, 2014). In one instance, Jetblue responded to a customer’s question about pricing for standby tickets. Even though the customer was glad to receive an explanation, JetBlue decided to send out representatives to the airport to follow up with him in person (Kolowich, 2014). The customer later tweeted a positive message about his
experiences with JetBlue (Kolowich, 2014). Interactions like these reveal how listening can help built trust and positive relationships.
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I will look closely at the ways that corporations interact with customers on Twitter through customer complaints, and how concepts of rhetorical agency can be applied to understand these interactions in more depth. My goal in this analysis is to provide theoretical and practical insight that both corporations and the scholars who investigate business communication can use as they continue to engage with and study customers on social media. This analysis will also contribute to scholarship on corporate social media communication and social media customer service by employing a rhetorical perspective to analyzing customer complaint interactions. A rhetorical analysis that focuses specifically on rhetorical agency is useful in examining the contextual factors that impact communication. Message content on Twitter allows customers and corporations to attribute agency to one another in ways that influence rhetorical effectiveness, either positively or negatively. This analysis will identify how conceptions of rhetorical agency work to improve or diminish successful communication on Twitter.

In this analysis, I focus on two specific corporate Twitter accounts: Microsoft’s customer service and support account, @MicrosoftHelps, and Hewlett-Packard’s customer service account, @HPSupport. Both of these accounts are verified, meaning that they are authentic and actually connected to the larger Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard corporations. Additionally, the purpose of both accounts is to address customer service issues rather than to represent the corporations more generally, as is the case with the @Microsoft or @HP accounts. In an analysis of customer complaints, these customer service accounts are more suitable because they are dedicated to helping customers. Thus, I can accurately locate and analyze interactions with
customers on these accounts. For each account, I limit my analysis to the “Tweets and Replies” feeds where customer complaints and company responses were visible. The “Tweets” feed mostly includes informational tweets about product and service updates as well as links to troubleshooting guides.

Many studies analyze companies that appear on *Fortune* magazine’s list of the five hundred most profitable U.S. corporations (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Agugliaro, 2015, p. 172). *Fortune*’s “World’s Most Admired Companies” lists are also frequently used because they provide reputation scores that encompass different factors (DiStaso et al., 2015, p. 164). Microsoft appears 9th on the “World’s Most Admired Companies,” and both Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard appear on the “Fortune 500” list (Fortune, 2017). Both companies are also included in *Harvard Business Review*’s list of most and least empathetic companies on Twitter (Parmar, 2015). Microsoft ranks as the 22nd most empathetic company on Twitter, while Hewlett-Packard is ranked 258th (Parmar, 2015). This *Harvard Business Review* list analyzed 350,000 tweets from 300 companies and ranked them by how they used reassurance, authenticity, and emotional connection in their tweets (Parmar, 2015). Researchers identified patterns of empathic behavior and scored companies according to the frequency that this behavior was used (Parmar, 2015). The study also categorized both Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard as technology companies (Parmar, 2015).

While many corporations are active on Twitter, Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard were chosen for this analysis based on their overall visibility, the ways in which they use Twitter to engage with customers, and the similarities between the products and services they offer. First, considering Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard’s inclusion and placements on these lists is important for this analysis because both companies are easily recognizable names within the U.S.
and globally. As such, they will have more customers and potentially more established reputations than companies not included on these lists. These factors will provide for a more dynamic analysis. Second, both companies use Twitter differently to connect with customers, according to the *Harvard Business Review*. Microsoft was described positively as a “sensitive responder” with a “casual, friendly, and helpful tone” (Parmar, 2015). Conversely, Hewlett-Packard was not seen as connecting emotionally to customers and was ranked as one of the bottom fifty least empathetic companies (Parmar, 2015). An analysis of two companies that differ in their Twitter communication strategies can provide awareness of effective and ineffective uses of rhetorical agency. Lastly, it was essential that the two companies chosen for the analysis were involved in similar industries and sold similar products and services; company communication strategies will vary depending on the products that they offer (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015). Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard are primarily technology companies that sell similar products, such as computers, tablets, and software. This similarity ensures that the analysis will not be impacted too severely by the industries each company is involved in.

In the sections that follow, I rhetorically analyze the interactions between the Twitter accounts—@MicrosoftHelps and @HPSupport—and their customers for ways in which rhetorical agency appears. I argue that in complaint interactions on Twitter, companies are not always communicating in ways that attribute agency to their customers or in ways that allow customers to attribute agency to them. If companies communicate in ways that do not reflect their customers’ potential for influence and action, customers may not be willing to perceive companies as being capable of handling their complaints. To foster effective communication on social media, both must be willing to see one another as agents. Companies that are now aware of how rhetorical agency factors into complaint interactions may
risk damaging their reputations. In the analysis below, I first analyze how companies do not always grant individual employees authorship, which constrains the agency that they may have when communicating with customers. I then analyze how attributions of agency and active listening are used in complaint interactions to reveal both effective and ineffective communication strategies that companies use when communicating with customers.

Authorship

When handling customer complaints, individuals writing for the accounts were not always granted named author status. Replies to customer complaints from @MicrosoftHelps did not acknowledge the individual employees authoring the responses, whereas @HPSupport replies were “signed” with employee names. The @MicrosoftHelps account consistently identified itself as a collective by using the first person plural pronouns “we” or “us,” rather than using first person singular “I”: “We definitely want to help! Can you tell us more about your concern?” (Figure 1). The account also did not “sign” the responses with any personal identifying information, such as employee initials or first names. The use of first person plural pronouns instead of first person singular pronouns “I” or “me” obscures who is authoring the replies. Without a signature to connect the reply to an individual, “we” refers to the company as a whole. Conversely, @HPSupport replies to customer complaints granted authorship to the individuals writing the replies. Each reply used “I” and included an employee name after the message: “Hi, I’d like to help. Are you using the cartridges which came with the printer? Let me know. :) ^ Prathap” (Figure 2).
The language that the @MicrosoftHelps account uses in its replies is problematic because it suggests that the company as a whole is acting as author. As such, the account is not allowing individual employees to exercise enough power in the communication process, which may affect customers’ willingness to attribute agency to the company. Authorship empowers individuals, and certain approaches to communication grant authorship to individuals while excluding others (Slack et al., 1993, p. 162). A company acting as author does not fully account for employee contributions to meaning, which echoes the translation view of communication. In this sense, employees, much like technical communicators, mediate or translate rather than author meanings. Companies that do not permit individual authorship in these replies limit the power that employees can exercise in communicating with customers.
Although individuals are writing responses for @MicrosoftHelps, the refusal to grant authorship to these employees can make it more difficult for customers to attribute agency not only to employees, but also to Microsoft. Customers may not be able to clearly identify who is authorized to help them because these replies contain no personal information about who customers are speaking with. As a result, they may not think that the company is capable of resolving customer issues. Miller writes that can be challenging for individuals to allow for rhetorical action when agency is detached from the audiences that they are speaking to (2007, p. 141). The lack of authorship reduces employees’ power to an extent, which in turn affects the perception that employees have the potential to enact change.

As companies dictate whether or not their employees have opportunities to exercise power through authorship, they are also constraining employee agency. Diga and Kelleher (2009) write that public relations employees felt empowered when using social media in their careers. Nevertheless, companies ultimately control whether or not their employees have opportunities to engage in power through authorship and how those opportunities are to be used. Employees are tasked with the power to respond to customers, but this power is constrained by company policies, mandates, and goals, some of which restrict authorship. In Herndl and Licona’s discussion of constrained agency and feminism, the academy did recognize the authority of women’s studies as a discipline, yet this inclusion into academia was controlled by university and departmental expectations (2007, p. 144).

Additionally, employee agency in the accounts is also constrained by the conflicting and contradictory voices expressed in customer replies. While @MicrosoftHelps consistently uses first person plural pronouns “we” and “us” in replies, @HPSupport occasionally switches between the first person singular “I” and “me” and the first person plural. As can be seen in
Figure 3, the employee identifies themselves individually through “I,” “me,” and a first name. But they also identify with the company through the collective “we” and “us”: “Hey Deborah, we would like to hear back from you. Let me know if I can help. Have a great day! ^Asmita”.

Many of the responses also ask customers to “Reply to us in a private message” (@HPSupport).

![Figure 3. @HPSupport Use of "I," "Me," & Employee Name](image)

In these responses, employees are acting both as individuals and as the company; therefore the agentive positions that they operate from are ambiguous. This ambiguity is similar to Weber’s (2007) discussion of constrained agency in corporate social media policies which suggest that employees both do and do not represent the companies they work for. These policies also make conflicting statements about how employees should use their voices by instructing employees to be “human” in their communications on social media in ways that also align with the larger company ethos (Weber, 2013, p. 213). Even though the @HPSupport replies use personal language, the inconsistency between pronouns signals a conflicting switch between corporate and individual authorship that might confuse customers. They may question whether they are speaking with an individual who can address their problem, or with the larger faceless company. The ambiguity between corporate and personal voices serves as a reminder to customers that these interactions are regulated by company power and authorship. Moreover, this ambiguity is similar to the @MicrosoftHelps replies. If companies complicate the authorship and
agency of their employees, customers may not be sure of how or who to attribute agency to in these situations.

Research on social media and online communications also emphasizes the importance of individual authorship. Kelleher (2009) writes that allowing multiple individual voices to speak on behalf of the organizations that they represent can make communication with the public more effective. Similarly, Canhoto and Clark (2013) found that customers wanted to know that authorized individuals who represented companies were interacting with them, and that they were communicating with “another human being, as opposed to a corporate body” (p. 533). Based on customer service research, Twitter itself encourages customer service employees to sign their replies in order to “humanize” the brand (Elrhoul, 2015). Customers were more likely to recommend a brand when they had a personal interaction with an individual (Elrhoul, 2015). Furthermore, as social media is used for cultivating interpersonal relationships (Zappavigna, 2012), it is important to understand how employee authorship in complaint responses can foster these connections. Individuals view sites like Twitter as spaces where they can engage with family and friends, and may expect a level of personal interaction from companies as well (Diffley, Kearns, Bennett, & Kawalek, 2011).

However, even though customers may have difficulty in attributing agency to companies when authors are ambiguous or not identified at all, this does not mean that communication with customers is wholly ineffective. Authorship is only one contextual facet that can influence the success of social media communication. Employees responding from the @MicrosoftHelps and @HPSupport accounts are empowered in some way to resolve customer issues by providing solutions and directing customers to other helpful company resources. While it is not clear to what degree customers were satisfied with the ways in which their complaints
were resolved, some interactions showed customers thanking the accounts (Figure 4). This suggests that customers are still able to attribute agency to the accounts, despite the lack of personal identifying information about the employees helping them.

![Image of a customer thanking @MicrosoftHelps](image)

**Figure 4**: Customer thanking @MicrosoftHelps

Despite the overt constraints that companies place on employee agency, these situations may still provide employees with opportunities to act both individually and on behalf of the company. In Herndl and Licona’s (2007) analysis of Jim Henry’s work on collaborative writing practices in the workplace, technical communicators are constrained by the dominant authority of the organizations that they work for, but specific situations create the potential for these writers to simultaneously engage in both agent and authority functions. In an example discussed in Chapter 3 Henry describes how one professional writer charged with cutting out newspaper clippings participated in the authority function—she was authorized to decide which articles would be most relevant to her organization (2007, p. 149). This authority produced an opportunity for agentive action because the writer could make decisions that would impact organizational practices (2007, p. 149). On Twitter, the employees writing for
@MicrosoftHelps and @HPSupport are constrained by company authority. They must follow company procedures for social media, including identifying either themselves or the company as authors. Nevertheless, employees may still be able to act within these constraints to change how customers attribute agency to the company. Even if a company may not allow for employee authorship, employees may be able to align their communication strategies in ways that satisfy both company and customer expectations.

As Miller claims, writers and readers learn how to attribute agency to audiences, even when communicating with others that are not present or mediated (2007, p. 149). Miller’s discussion of agency indicates that individuals struggle to attribute agency to audiences that are not interactive and do not react or respond in some way to rhetorical performances (2007). Clearly, both accounts are interactive and responsive, so customers are able to attribute some degree of agency to them. The question is then how the replies enable these attributions and why they may be successful. In the section that follows, I apply Miller’s claims about attributions of agency to the interactions between the accounts and their customers. Additionally, I connect Miller’s ideas to Hoff-Clausen’s concept of active listening. Together, these ideas will help determine how the content of company replies either allows or inhibits customer willingness to attribute agency to these companies.

Active Listening and Tone

On both accounts, replies to complaints allowed for mutual attributions of agency—from company to customer and from customer to company.
customer to company—by greeting customers and referring to the names or Twitter handles of the customers that they interacted with. With @MicrosoftHelps, most initial responses to complaints acknowledged customers by including a greeting and the customer name (Figure 5). Oftentimes, the @HPSupport account followed a similar procedure, but did not consistently include customer names in initial responses. Instead of saying “Hi, (customer name)!”, some replies only contained a greeting (@HPSupport). Miller argues that in order for a rhetorical performance to produce “kinetic energy” or action, the “performance requires a relationship between two entities who will attribute agency to each other” (2007, p. 149). Both customers and companies must be able to attribute agency to each other in order to effectively achieve action, which in this case consists of complaining and resolving complaints. By using a greeting and referring to customers by name, these companies attribute agency to their customers. They recognize that customers already have the potential to act by addressing individual customers in a way that is personalized: “Hi, (customer name)!”. In turn, customers may be more likely to attribute agency to a company that recognizes them individually, and not as just another frustrated customer.

Greetings and personal acknowledgment also serve as interactions with the customer. Miller contends that interaction is integral to our understanding of audience (2007, p. 149). In order to attribute rhetorical agency, we require that our audiences to be available to us through interactions such as responding, reacting, and or offering feedback (p. 150). We want to know that our audiences have heard us through their decisions to “resist, disagree, disapprove, humiliate—or approve, appreciate, empathize, and applaud” (p. 149). Though corporate Twitter accounts are limited in by company policy in the interactions that they can have, accounts that greet and refer to customers by name are attributing to customers the agency to speak about
their problems. Saying “hi” or “hello” is not only a responsive reaction that shows the company has heard the customer, it is also a polite and formal recognition of the customer’s complaint. In turn, this may make it easier for the customers to attribute agency back to the company because the company has formally addressed them through an appropriate and personal interaction.

Companies that politely greet and acknowledge their individual customers may be setting the stage to establish trust with them. Hoff-Clausen (2013) argues that reciprocal attributions of agency facilitate trust just as a sense of trust allows us to attribute agency to others. When we trust another person, we attribute to them the capacity to exercise some influence over us (Hoff-Clausen, 2013, p. 430). Establishing trust with customers is one of the main concerns of corporate reputation research (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2013; Kelleher 2009; Hon & Grunig, 1999), although this work does not discuss how the content of customer complaint replies can promote trust-building. Hoff-Clausen’s explanation of rhetorical agency and active listening helps to further analyze replies for messages that can affect perceptions of trust. Active listening is described as a rhetorically persuasive strategy in which it is clear that an individual is listening attentively and is expressing “concern and respect” for others (Hoff-Clausen, 2013, p. 431). When a company engages in active listening, Hoff-Clausen writes that “it chooses to act, as far as possible, against the cognitive and emotional inclinations to safeguard itself in the crisis situation, and it entrusts the affected public with the opportunity to exert influence” (2013, p. 433). Active listening provides those who have been wronged with the opportunity to enact change. This is especially pertinent for situations where customers are complaining or need help because customers may feel that the company has wronged or acted against them in a negative way. As @MicrosoftHelps and @HPSupport begin by acknowledging their customers, it demonstrates that they are actively listening to the problems they may have.
To show that they were listening to their customers, the @MicrosoftHelps account did more than respond attentively and appropriately in its replies than @HPSupport. Depending on the type of problem a customer encountered, @MicrosoftHelps would use words that signaled they were paying close attention to what had gone wrong. For example, in situations where a customer experienced a particularly frustrating or serious issue, @MicrosoftHelps would begin their replies with words or phrases that were fitting these problems, such as “Ouch!,” “This is not what we want to hear,” or “We’re sorry to hear about your experience” (@MicrosoftHelps). When customers were confused by especially unique problems, the account responded with “That’s weird,” “That’s strange,” or “Hmm” to show that they were empathizing with the customer’s experiences to work out a solution (@MicrosoftHelps). Additionally, when issues were resolved, the account expressed happiness with positive messages: “Awesome! We’re glad to know that you’ve figured it out. If you need our assistance, we’re always here for you” (Figure 6) and “That’s good to know, Matt! Don’t hesitate to reach out should you have any other concern!” (@MicrosoftHelps). Conversely, @HPSupport was not as cognizant of their customers’ frustration, confusion, or satisfaction. The account often used the same or very similar replies, which were usually structured in the following way: “Hi there. Thanks for tweeting. I’d like to help” (Figure 7). At times, a smiley face was included even though the problem may not have been resolved yet (@HPSupport).
Responses to complaints that were appropriate and that acknowledged the customer’s experience, whether positive or negative, show that @MicrosoftHelps is actively listening and paying attention. These interactions show that the company has not just read the customer’s tweet, but that it is concerned about the individual problem that the customer is facing. Each response is relevant to how the customer is feeling, which demonstrates that the company is cognizant of the issue and also how the customer feels about the issue. @MicrosoftHelps attributes agency to their customers by recognizing the nature of these specific situations. Similar to Miller’s discussion of interaction and Hoff-Clausen’s claims about active listening, @MicrosoftHelps provides responses that express “concern and respect” for their customers. Customers may then feel that the company itself has agency because it addresses their problems in detailed and appropriate ways. Furthermore, research has found that customers expect this
type of listening from companies, and that they value emotionally supportive interactions in which they were listened to and cared for (Canhoto & Clark, 2013, p. 534). Davidow (2003) discovered that the dimension of attentiveness, which emphasizes listening, respect, and empathy in customer interactions, had the most positive impact on customer satisfaction. Most importantly, listening is one facet of dialogic and interactive communication, which positively influences customer attitudes towards organizations (Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015; Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013; Yang, Kang, & Johnson, 2010; Ott & Theunissen, 2015).

In actively listening to their customers, @MicrosoftHelps also used human voice in these interactions to make customers feel as if they were speaking with people rather than with a faceless company. Kelleher (2009) writes that organizations use human voice in several ways, such as inviting the public to participate in conversation, participating in a dialogue with the public, displaying a sense of humor, trying to be interesting, making interactions enjoyable, admitting any mistakes, responding to criticism directly and promptly, and treating users as human (p. 181). Although both accounts invited customers to speak and engage in conversation by asking questions and greeting those who reached out, @MicrosoftHelps used humor as well as unexpected yet interesting replies that humanized the character of the company. In one interaction, a customer who was having issues with the Xbox videogame *Call of Duty* tweeted at the account for assistance (Figure 8). @MicrosoftHelps responded to the customer by acknowledging the issue in a playful and humorous way: “We don’t want to interrupt you shooting terrorist[s] and zombies so let’s ask our friends from @XboxSupport to address your concern” (Figure 8).
Instead of simply directing the customer to @XboxSupport, @MicrosoftHelps made the interaction interesting and perhaps even more enjoyable for the customer through their use of humor. A response like this from a large company’s customer service account is unexpected and unique; most replies on both accounts were somewhat formulaic and dry—they quickly greeted the customer, at times expressed concern or a willingness to help, and asked questions or offered solutions. However, @MicrosoftHelps worked within this formula to express concern humorously, stating that they did not want to “interrupt” the customer’s time playing the game in which they would be “shooting terrorist[s] and zombies.” The account then offered a solution. As it’s not clear if the customer enjoyed the response, but it did not seem as if they were irritated or frustrated with this reply. They even thanked the account for the assistance. Communicating in a humorous way that is personalized to the customer’s situation is a move away from mechanical corporate voice that customers do not always approve of (Kelleher, 2009; Canhoto & Clark, 2013). It demonstrates that the company is treating customers as individual human beings who, in this situation, just want to get back to playing videogames. This reply also indicated that the company is listening closely to customers. Even though the customer here only used an
abbreviated name for Call of Duty, the company showed that it knew this was a first-person shooter videogame. Humor may not always be appropriate for all customer interactions, yet this example reveals that using human voice to break with formulaic replies can help companies treat customers in more humane ways and potentially encourage customers to feel more positively about a company’s character.

Although @MicrosoftHelps listened effectively to customer concerns, @HPSupport replies did not pay as close attention to context. Oftentimes the same replies were used repeatedly to respond to different customers. It was also clear that the account may have copied and pasted replies to customers, especially when following up to see if problems had been addressed: “Hey! I just wanted to check if you were able to get this issue sorted out. Let me know if you need further assistance!” (@HPSupport). The message, “Thanks for using our Twitter support – we’d love to hear your feedback #TakeHPSurvey link below” was also sent out to customers after their initial complaint (Figure 9). Both messages appeared several times on the account, and it seemed that they were automated replies, even though some messages did contain individual employee names.

Automated or mass replies that appear to be copied and pasted do not address the nature of the customer’s problem or how the customer was feeling. As a result, customers may see the
company as a mechanized entity that does not have the ability to solve their problems, mirroring Miller’s survey on automated assessment. Miller’s (2007) survey participants struggled to attribute agency to automated grading systems because they were not willing to attribute agency to technologies that could not respond or interact with them. According to the participants, cameras and computers could not respond as “live” audience members would, thus they would not be able to accurately account for “communicative complexities such as creativity, appropriateness to context, the expression of emotion, and individual and cultural differences” (2007, p. 140). While replies to customer complaints serve a different purpose than automated assessment software, this example suggests that customers may also struggle to attribute agency to a company that uses blanket replies. Messages that appear automated or that are sent out en masse do not reflect an attentiveness to individual contexts or customers. Therefore, customers may feel that the company does not value their complaints, and they may in turn be less willing to value the actions that the company could take to address these complaints.

In addition to using these blanket replies, @HPSupport frequently obscured whether or not customer complaints had been addressed by directing customers to contact them through direct messages. Most replies were comprised of two tweets—an initial message that greeted the customer and asked for or offered information, and a second message instructing the customer to reply to the account through a private direct message (Figure 10). Although it is easier for companies to resolve certain problems if they can communicate with customers where text is not restricted to 140 characters, this strategy is problematic because other customers cannot see if the complaint has been resolved. Additionally, some customers may not look closely at the interactions publicly available on the account. Therefore, it might appear that complaints are not being addressed at all, which reduces the likelihood that customers will attribute agency to the
company. Einwiller and Steilen (2014) found that when customers read other complaint interactions, they were more likely to speak out about their own issues. Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp (2015) recommended that companies handle certain complaints on the social media site itself so that others can view how the problem was addressed. Some customers may be frustrated by communicating back and forth on social media, but using private messages was only encouraged when the complaints were complicated (Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp, 2015).

Moreover, always offering the option to communicate in a direct message makes the interactions confusing to other customers who may be browsing through the replies. In one example, @HPSupport responded to a customer by suggesting that they contact the account through a direct message (Figure 11). Two days later, the account responded again asking if the customer’s issue was resolved (Figure 11). However, because direct messages are not publicly available and because the company replied a second time asking if the issue was addressed, it is unclear what happened. It is safe to assume that the customer did not reach out for help, or the company may not have been paying attention to the situation and replied again as a mistake. Regardless of the outcome, continuously offering to communicate through direct messaging increases the likelihood that complaints will not be handled publicly where other customers can see them. Customers may be confused by these interactions because it is not clear
how or if the issue was resolved. If the company’s actions and messages are not open to others, it can be more difficult for customers to view the company as being capable and trustworthy. If there is no evidence of interactions, whether positive or negative, it is more difficult for customers to form an opinion.

Figure 11. @HPSupport Confusing Interaction
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Together, the applied and theoretical work from the fields of business, marketing, public relations, and technical communication provides a more complete view of how companies can and, at times, do communicate effectively with their customers on social media. In corporate communications on social media, companies are largely concerned with maintaining positive corporate reputations in order to avoid public relations crises, but they may not always be cognizant of contextual factors that influence social media communication. Analyzing social media interactions using rhetorical agency is useful because it emphasizes that effective communication is possible when those speaking or writing perceive one another as being capable of performing an action. If companies and customers can attribute agency to one another on social media, they are more likely to engage in positive and productive interactions.

As my analysis demonstrates, companies are not always aware of the ways in which they may be allowing for or inhibiting attributions of agency through customer complaint interactions on Twitter. Some replies to customer complaints show that companies are attributing agency to their customers by greeting and naming individual customers, acknowledging the feelings customers are experiencing, and by using humor to humanize these interactions. In these situations, customers may be more willing to view companies as capable of resolving their issues because company interactions are personalized and thoughtfully reflect the customer’s individual concerns. Even so, companies constrained agency by not always granting their employees authorship when replying to customer complaints, which in turn limited the potentially positive influence that individual employee voices can have on communication. Additionally, replies that were not individualized or appeared to be automated did not account for the specific contextual
factors of each complaint situation. As a result, these replies did not allow for mutual attributions of agency; customers may struggle to attribute agency to a company that appears to automate replies and does not pay careful attention to their unique and distinct concerns.

As companies continue to use Twitter to communicate and interact with customers, they should be considering how the content of these interactions facilitates or hinders positive customer perceptions. Analyzing customer complaints reveals how rhetorical agency is connected to customer perceptions, and in turn, how these perceptions are essential for successful social media communication. Just as companies want customers to place trust in their abilities to provide quality services and products, customers also want to be recognized as individuals with their own valuable concerns and thoughts. Better understanding these relationships from the framework of rhetorical agency will assist in improving corporate communications on social media.

In summary, this study demonstrates that perspectives from business and technical and professional communication fields can be joined together to address how corporations can communicate more effectively with customers on social media. Though the fields discussed here have broached this problem, work from each of these disciplines has yet to fully explain what successful social media communication may look like in the context of customer complaints. Business communication, public relations, and marketing emphasize how corporations approach social media communication as dialogic and collaborative in order to maintain positive corporate reputations. However, this research shows that corporations do not always employ the recommended conversational tactics when interacting with customers. Similarly, technical and professional communication studies analyze communication using theories of rhetorical agency, arguing that communication is more effective if each party can attribute to one another the
capacity to act. Yet this work has not been applied to social media. This study melds together corporate concerns for upholding reputation with theoretical concerns for perceptions of agency to create a more complete foundation from which to examine social media interactions between corporations and complaining customers. This foundation not only explores an issue that has not been adequately researched, it also acts as the groundwork for future studies to investigate this problem in more depth. Overall, the approaches from each of these fields will help to provide appropriate strategies for corporations to successfully communicate with customers on social media.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to my argument and analysis. First, although there was an ample amount of literature on corporate presences on social media, scholars did not discuss the nature of customer complaint interactions on social media very often. As such, a limited number of suggestions were offered for dealing with customer complaints on these sites. However, I did draw from the literature on customer complaints and corporate reputation to explain how companies approach customer communication on social media.

In my analysis, the relationship between the number of followers an account had and the use of effective communication strategies was unclear. This analysis did not take into account how these factors might be linked. There was a significant difference between the number of followers on the @MicrosoftHelps and @HPSupport accounts. @MicrosoftHelps had 334,000 followers, while @HPSupport had only 75,000 followers (@MicrosoftHelps, 2017; @HPSupport, 2017). The @MicrosoftHelps account had been found to be more effective in communicating with customers (Parmar, 2015), but it is unclear how the number of followers might be related to this.
It was also uncertain to what degree corporations chose to reply to specific individuals over others. Some research reveals that corporations may give preference to those complaints or messages sent by customers who have a larger number of followers. In a study by Ma, Sun, and Kekre, one firm gave “slightly” more priority to complaints lodged by users with more followers (2015, p. 631). This practice ensures that a wider group of people will see that the company is attentive to customer problems, but it may also alienate others who are less influential. Though corporate social media accounts ultimately hold the power to decide which complaints to respond to, this study was unable to explore if the companies analyzed here gave preferential treatment to certain users. Future research should explore if corporate social media policies allow for these practices as they have a direct impact on customer perceptions of agency.

As customers were often encouraged to contact these companies in direct messages, complete interactions between the accounts and customers were not always available. Due to this lack of access, it was difficult to determine how customers interpreted company communication strategies and how the companies did or did not resolve the complaints. For these reasons, this analysis focused mainly on the effectiveness of company replies rather than on how they appeared to be perceived by customers.

Future Research

Future research would benefit from using rhetorical agency as a foundation for applied work. This work could look more closely at the content of customer complaint interactions in order to build upon what current literature has already established. Einwiller and Steiler (2014) studied the broader actions that companies take in resolving customer complaints on social media rather than examining the content of those interactions. Similarly, Grégoire, Salle, and Tripp (2015) developed a model to handle customer complaints, but these recommendations are
not specific enough and do not indicate how replies should be constructed. As a rhetorical analysis, this study did not take into account the statistical significance of certain features, such as how frequently certain replies or linguistic features were used. Discourse analysis would be particularly helpful in identifying what content, linguistic or rhetorical, companies are using when they communicate with customers. This would create a more in depth picture of what we know about the content of corporate interactions with customers on social media.

Another facet of corporate social media communications that should be studied is customer perceptions of rhetorical effectiveness in complaint interactions. This study could not adequately analyze how customers reacted to the interactions with companies because some companies directed customers to speak with them through direct messages. Still, customer perceptions are essential to understanding what factors impact their willingness to attribute agency to larger entities like corporations. Several academic studies and social media market research reports ask customers about their perceptions of corporate presences on social media (Canhoto & Clark, 2013; Baird & Parasnis, 2011; Coyle, Smith, & Platt, 2012), but relatively few ask about complaint interactions in particular. Survey or interview questions could be focus specifically on how customers perceive corporations’ competence and abilities to achieve action, such as resolving complaints.

Lastly, future research could examine the policies, training, and protocols that corporations have in place for handling social media communication. Employees who are working as social media communicators must follow corporate rules that dictate what can and cannot be said, and how they are to present themselves to customers. Weber (2013) has analyzed corporate social media policies for the constraints that companies place on employee voices, but corporations may have more exhaustive policies that govern social media interactions with
customers. An analysis of these policies would prove useful in further investing rhetorical agency because they may reveal how employees are limited in communicating with customers, and how employees themselves feel about the rules they must follow.
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