(De)legitimation strategies in company e-mail replies to customer complaints and their related social media comments by (potential) customers

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When a service recovery attempt fails, customers turn to social media to confront the company with their inaptitude to solve the complaint, hoping to elicit reactions from the company and other customers. This interaction between (potential) customers and companies is examined from a legitimacy perspective: Which strategies do they use to (de)legitimize themselves or the other party in private and public CMC communication? And how do these strategies contribute to their interactional dynamics? Based on a move analysis, we performed a discursive legitimation analysis of 150 e-mails (company replies to complaints) and 300 related Facebook comments (Reyes, 2011). Results showed that companies seek legitimacy in e-mail replies to customers by balancing interpersonal (e.g. apology) and transactional (e.g. compensation) legitimation strategies. Customers try to delegitimate companies by attacking their moral legitimacy, the pragmatic legitimacy of the decision, and the customer service agent's communication skills. When responding publicly to these attacks, we notice a shift in the companies' approach: they tend to restrict themselves to interpersonal legitimation strategies and are reluctant to be publicly transparent about the transactional side of complaint handling. This seems to silence the public discussion, but its disadvantage is the lack of public evidence of successful complaint handling.

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