

DET NY MERINO # 83



HOW TO ENGAGE WITH NEGATIVE USER  
CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND TURN IT  
INTO OBJECTS OF OPPORTUNITY

HENRIETTE ROSENBERG HANSEN MAJ 2023

## PRÆSENTATION AF FORFATTEREN



### **Henriette Rosenberg Hansen**

Cand.mag. i International Virksomhedskommunikation,  
Syddansk Universitet

Akademisk medarbejder & Eventmanager på Nyborg  
Gymnasium

**ISSN: 2445 – 6764**

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### **Redaktion:**

Flemming Smedegaard  
& Svenja Rikke Reinhardt



## Resume

Denne artikel har til formål at undersøge hvilke negative kommentarer, udvalgte danske virksomheder modtager på deres sociale medier, og hvordan virksomhederne bedst kan håndtere disse kommentarer. En litteraturgennemgang bliver udarbejdet for at undersøge den eksisterende viden om sociale medier og social media management fra et organisatorisk perspektiv. Herunder også hvilke kategorier af kommentarer og henvendelser som virksomheder, ifølge den eksisterende teori, vil opleve at modtage på sociale medier. Samtidig vil den eksisterende teori vedrørende strategier til kommunikation mellem virksomhed og brugere på sociale medier blive gennemgået. Undersøgelsen bruger herefter metoden netnografi til at observere det digitale rum på det sociale medie, Facebook, og hvordan virksomheder og brugere interagerer med hinanden herpå, samt hvilken slags negative kommentarer, der eksisterer på det sociale medie. De observerede interaktioner og kommentarer bliver herefter kodet gennem tematisk analyse, som resulterer i et endeligt tematisk kort, som illustrerer analyseprocessen fra data til temaer.

Artiklen konkluderer, at virksomheder primært modtager negative kommentarer inden for tre kategorier: Kommentarer vedrørende produktklager, kommentarer vedrørende serviceklager/virksomhedens koncept, og unfair kommentarer, som ikke omhandler en reel oplevelse med virksomhedens service eller produkter, men derimod brugerens subjektive associationer med virksomheden. Denne sidste kategori, unfair kommentarer, afviger fra den eksisterende teori, hvor der ligeledes heller ikke er benævnt strategier til at håndtere denne form for kommentarer. Artiklen konkluderer dermed, at virksomhederne i vid udstrækning følger teorien, når de responderer på reelle klager. Når virksomhederne derimod responderer på kommentarer af "trolling"-karakter, hvor indholdet af kommentaren ikke bunder i en reel klage eller oplevelse, vælger størstedelen en "Don't feed the troll"-strategi, hvor virksomheden ikke ønsker at give brugeren yderligere opmærksomhed og derfor undlader at besvare disse kommentarer. Baseret på analysen af interaktionerne mellem virksomhed og brugere, diskuterer artiklen derfor hvorvidt virksomhederne netop burde svare på denne slags henvendelser, og hvordan de kan anskue negative kommentarer som en mulighed for at promovere virksomheden og dennes brand over for andre digitale følgere og potentielle kunder.

## Introduction

With social media becoming more and more widespread and prevalent in corporate communication and marketing, there is also a rising need for management and moderation of these social platforms and online forums. Many Danish organisations and companies exist on social media such as Facebook and Instagram and use these as part of their marketing strategy. Social media platforms are interactive and communicative forums where the users are co-creators of the content that constitute the social space. Facebook as a technology company offers their own set of community standards and guidelines that exist to prevent unacceptable content on the platform. But organisations are not shielded from hate and negative comments on their page by Facebook's guidelines and thus, it is the organisation's own responsibility to monitor and manage their own Facebook pages. This does not only revolve around creating content but increasingly also about managing enquiries and conducting online customer service on the platform in direct messages or in the comments section. Furthermore, the rise of social media and web 2.0<sup>1</sup> allows consumers to reach out and contact organisations in a public space, where the communication is no longer just between the organisation and the consumer, but between the organisation and a large community of consumers and potential new customers. Bad brand management and monitoring can then quickly result in negative digital word-of-mouth or even online firestorms against the organisation. With social media, communication managers have a pivotal chance to "nip the crisis in the bud" by dealing with customer complaints or misinformation before they turn into a full-on crisis that might not end well for the organisation and their brand and reputation. Social media allow quick and direct responses to the negative feedback that is observed not only by the organisation but also by several members of the consumer community. Based on this introduction to today's social media management, this article will discuss the necessity of strategic social media management that supports brand image and organisational reputation by analysing the different categories of negative comments and discussing strategies for handling these with strategic purpose. This article will investigate and discuss the following problem statement and related research question:

**What kind of negative comments do organisations receive on their social media profiles and how might organisations deal with online, negative detractors or content, and reduce the risk of an online firestorm?**

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<sup>1</sup> "The second stage of development of the internet, characterised especially by the change from static web page to dynamic or user-generated content and the growth of social media" (Oxford Languages, 2022).

## Purpose of the article

This article aims to analyse negative comments posted on social media in order to categorise these into themes using thematic analysis. Based on this categorisation and the following analysis, the article will use theory about social media strategies to discuss how social media managers might act or respond when encountering the different categories of negative commenting. This strategy of active social media management aims to protect and support the organisation's brand and reputation, and contributes to buffering the organisation against digital negative word-of-mouth among customers, potential customers and other stakeholders.

## Definition of terms

Social media is defined as social technology platforms that offer interactive digital communication between users, also called social networking. The definition includes the technological opportunity of sharing, sending and posting content for other users to read, share, comment etc. (Oxford Languages, 2022). For the purpose of this article and the analysis, social media will refer to Facebook as this platform offers these technological opportunities and is a common social platform in the context of the study (Denmark). I am aware that Facebook as of October 2021 has changed its name to Meta but as this refers to several different platforms, this article will use the name Facebook. The term online debate refers to comments sections on Facebook pages, groups or postings. In this study, the dark side of social media refers to the negative use of social media functionalities. This specific article will focus on negative comments and posting as the dark side of social media. Although I do also acknowledge other, often more explicit, dark sides for example trolling or catfishing<sup>2</sup>, these were excluded due to irrelevance to the problem statement. This article will use Hudders, Lou and Brabandere's (2021) definition of a negative comment that says: "a negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or a company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet".

## Choice of methods

This study was inspired by the theory of netnography as this method was developed to examine online communities and platforms in a neutral and unobtrusive way. In netnography, participants' online

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<sup>2</sup> The process of luring someone into a relationship by means of a fictional online persona (OxfordLanguages, 2022)

behaviour is observed by the researcher without influencing them with one's presence. The theory of netnography includes triangulation of methods by doing netnography and an interview or survey to generalise the results of the digital observed behaviour. For the purpose of this study, triangulation was estimated to be irrelevant as the study does not aim to generalise the results but rather analyse the specific observed online behaviour and data, and discuss how these negative comments could be managed according to theory on social media management. Furthermore, this method was used to observe and collect data that was not affected by desirability bias as senders might have given a different comment or not commented negatively at all, if they were aware of this study or the fact that they were being observed. For the analysis of the data, this study uses thematic analysis to code and categorise the collected data into themes that might assist social media managers in dealing with negative comments on social media.

### **Creating theory from a literature review**

This section will consist of a literature review of relevant studies and research in the field of social media and crisis communication. The use and management of social media will be the focus of this theoretical review.

### **The negative ways of social media – the honeycomb framework**

Social media has often been praised for offering new possibilities for multimodal communication and its capacity to defy the concepts of time and space of communication that with social media can occur anywhere and anytime. Although social media and technology have radically changed the way people interact and communicate with each other, researchers are calling for an increased focus on the negative sides of social media and how these can be used for various negative actions. Baccarella, Wagner, Kietzmann and McCarthy (2018) investigate the dark side of social media by looking at the more undesirable side of the technology and how we can become more conscious of the potential risks online. They aim to outline a healthier use of media by better understanding the negative impact of these. Previous research has already found that social media has become a platform for cyberbullying (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011), trolling (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014), fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) and addictive use (Blackwell, Leaman, Trampusch, Osborne, & Liss, 2017). These scholars wish for more research to focus on the dark sides of social media and put emphasis on new methods that suit the investigation of social media better than traditional research methods. Furthermore, they call for dark side management strategies for how individuals and organisations can aim

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to minimise, prevent, or respond to the dark side of social media, which is also the purpose of this study. Wagner, Kietzmann and McCarthy aimed to explain how social media works in negative ways by unpacking social media functionalities into seven building blocks to describe the different features of the social media user experience. For the purpose of this study, this section will focus on conversation, sharing, reputation and groups, omitting identity and relationships.

### Conversation

The dark side of the conversation functionality is that excessive, aggressive, and inappropriate activities can occur. For example, despite having clear rules and community standards intended to prohibit harassment, platform users can still be exposed to threats and bullying through e.g., direct message functions that are not regulated by the platform.

### Sharing

This aspect concerns the extent to which users can exchange, distribute, and receive content. Once users can easily share content, a fundamental risk is that the shared content can be inappropriate or harmful, or that it can be shared without permission and consent.

### Reputation

Reputation is the degree to which users can identify and influence the standing of others, including themselves, in a social media setting. A major reputation risk stems from sharing inappropriate content, which can destroy the user's reputation and/or the reputations of others such as politicians, who are forced to resign after for example posting offensive content on social media and damaging the reputation of their party.

### Groups

Groups describe the function that social media users can create or join circles of friends or communities centred around a shared interest. The negative side of the groups is often referred to as “ingroup-outgroup bias”. People define themselves in terms of social groupings (ingroup identity). They find themselves in an echo chamber in which their own beliefs are supported and reinforced, and those who do not fit into those groups (outgroups) are belittled (Baccarella, Wagner, Kietzmann and McCarthy, 2018).

## Hate commenting and online firestorms

Renee Barnes (2018) developed a participatory model for understanding commenting culture. She aimed to develop strategies to mitigate negative behaviour online more effectively. Her theory shows how the factors of personality, our offline world, and emotions will impact the comments we make, which in turn will influence the values and norms of the community in which the comments are made. Based on Barnes' theory, it is evident that hate commenting and negative online behaviour does not necessarily stem from the online environment but more so from the user's offline environment that affects their online behaviour. This behaviour does not spring from social media platforms, but they do facilitate it via their technology, which can have extensive consequences for organisations and individuals such as an online firestorm, a term which is described by Pfeffer, Zorback and Carley (2014). They discuss the impact of negative online word-of-mouth and complaint behaviour, and refer to this as online firestorms. On social media, negative opinions about products or companies can be created and propagated by millions of people within hours. Pfeffer, Zorback and Carley (2014) define an online firestorm as "the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM (word-of-mouth) and complaint behaviour against a person, company, or group in social media networks". The essential feature is that the messages in a firestorm are predominantly opinions, not facts. So, these waves of criticism that appear without warning can have a great impact on a company's or a brand's reputation. Combined with factors such as speed, volume and constant flow of communication, echo chambers and filter bubbles are what make online firestorms so harmful and critical for organisations.

## Types of negative comments

Soni Bhavik (2021) has categorised the different types of negative comments on social media. The categories are: complaints, queries and trolling/hate comments. This study will use these categories as inspiration for the data collection and sampling of organisations.

## Genuine complaints

Even with the best customer experience strategies, organisations may find customers using the online public platform to share their dissatisfaction. The comments are mostly made from a legitimate profile of an organisation or an individual. If not, these comments belong in the trolling category if the sender is fake or anonymous.



## Queries

Queries from confused customers may not be an ideal negative comment. However, it does reflect weak and unresponsive customer support if not answered promptly, according to Bhavik. Although some of the questions posted on social media are offensive and have a harsh tone, even in these situations, Bhavik suggests that managers have patience and answer their questions. It builds a strong customer relationship and is a symbol of the organisation's trustworthiness and authenticity (Bhavik, 2021).

## Internet trolls and hate comments

Trolling and hate comments are usually comments from fake accounts that find entertainment in commenting negatively or inappropriately about brands without any genuine issues or complaints. Users who post trolling or hate comments are often looking for a reaction from the organisation or affirmation from other users. Dall, Lorentzen, & Thielke (2019) define more specific categories in their book "Can troll be tamed?" (ed. "Kan trolld tæmmes?"). These categories include whataboutism, debatejacking, and grammar-trolling. Whataboutism refers to the derailment of the actual subject or topic of the debate by pointing at something else e.g., commenting: what about violence against men? in a debate about violence against women. Debatejacking is another category of derailment where the sender deliberately derails the conversation by commenting or posting about a completely different topic than originally posted. It could be a post about a new burger that might be "hijacked" by unions that criticise the restaurant for not signing a collective agreement. Lastly, grammar-trolling refers to people correcting spelling mistakes or word order in other people's posts or comments. This category of trolling is often seen when the troll does not have a legitimate or fair counterargument and then attacks the other part on irrelevant spelling mistakes instead (Dall, Lorentzen, & Thielke, 2019).

## Methodology

### Objectivity in social research and humanities

Both netnographic observation and thematic analysis are dependent on and affected by researcher reflectivity and subjectivity. This is due to the fact that the data is collected, analysed and interpreted based on the researcher's perception and interpretation of the used language. To describe this reflectivity and subjectivity, the hermeneutic spiral is relevant to include in this section. In the hermeneutic spiral, researchers understand the textual elements with a pre-understanding before even beginning the

thematic analysis. This understanding of the textual elements and words will continuously develop as the analysis progresses e.g., in the thematic analysis starting with the initial coding and hereafter the further development and revision of the occurring themes. Because these themes are developed by the researcher, they are not objective as the researcher collects the data subjectively based on what they consider to be categorised as negative words and comments. Although this was also based on the theoretical definition by Hudders, Lou & Brabandere (2021). This paradox is described by Brier as “naïve empirical data” as the perspective on data lies in the eyes of the beholder (Brier, 2017). Social research and humanities often revolve around an aspect of interpretation and critics will then argue that talking about a concise reality or “true” interpretation is impossible as interpretation is subjective. But Brier (2017) argues that social research’s interpretation is one of many ways to find meaning. He draws on Gadamer’s theory of fusion of horizons that functions as an addition to the hermeneutic spiral. In simple terms, Gadamer argues that the meaning of a text or any other cultural phenomenon is mixed with the context in which the reader understands the text. The unknown meaning and interpretation of the text are influenced by the interpreter’s own expectations and associations, meaning that the text is given new meaning again when interpreted. Gadamer’s theory on the fusion of horizons is described as being selective, meaning that it focuses on certain aspects of the text or phenomenon, and omits others. The choice of perspective is therefore determined by the interpreter’s own focus, experience or expectations, in other words, their horizon. In this case, the negative text is a representation of the sender’s horizon which is fused with the reader’s own horizon when they read and interpret the text. The perception of the truth is fused between the two individuals. The saying “truth is in the eye of the beholder”<sup>3</sup>, meaning that perception of truth is subjective, relates to Gadamer’s fusion of horizons, where the reader understands the text or cultural phenomenon within their own subjective perception of the truth. A “true” objective interpretation of a text might not be possible, but by fusing horizons we might reach a collective truth and reality (Brier, 2017). This philosophical perspective influences the study in the sense that this research does not aim to disclose one, true, objective theory about how to manage negative comments, but rather disclose how organisations and users can fuse horizons and reach a collective reality on how organisations could and might react and respond to negative content in order to meet the expectations of other users and customers.

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<sup>3</sup> Originated by Ruth Hubbard in her 1988 essay, Science, Facts and Feminism. Reality is interpreted through belief systems, norms and personality types. Not to be mistaken with “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” by Margaret Wolfe.

## Research design

This section will discuss the ethical guidelines in online research, in this case, netnography, and how these affect and influence the data collection.

### Ethical considerations in online social research.

This section focuses on the ethical issues in relation to using the internet as a platform for doing social research. When using the internet for data collection, there are several ethical questions to consider, which are widely discussed and still up for discussion among researchers. These issues or questions go beyond the platform's conventions of acceptable behaviour and data protection legislation. When using the internet as a method for data collection, it is important to be aware of these issues. One of the main ethical issues in internet research is that the distinction between the public and private spheres is blurred and vague. Especially the group function on Facebook is a grey area for ethical research as there are concerns about whether or not the data and communication are considered to be public or private in a hidden group or a group that requires requesting membership. Some researchers argue that data that have been voluntarily made available on a public platform can be used without the need for informed consent as long as anonymity is provided. The suggested guidelines for using internet communication are that the information or data should be: publicly available, no password is required to access the information, the material is not sensitive in nature and the site policy does not prohibit the use of the information. If these conditions are not met, the researcher will need to obtain informed consent from the participants (Bryman, 2016). For the purpose of this article, I will argue that Facebook, and social media in general, are within the realm of the public sphere, meaning that Facebook's terms of use and community standards themselves provide users with informed information about the privacy of their accounts. Users can use Facebook's privacy settings to hide information about themselves on their accounts. However, this does not include hiding comments posted by the user. This study will therefore argue that the textual data is voluntarily made available by the user when posted in a comments section on social media but personally, identifiable information can be hidden if the user wishes to do so. In addition to this, in Facebook's privacy rationale it is stated what kind of personal information users are not allowed to share such as social security number, passport number and residential information. In this policy or rationale, it is not stated that a user's full name is unacceptable to share as the users themselves can change or hide this if they wish to. This study provides full anonymity to respondents as variables, such as age, gender and residency, were not relevant for the purpose of the study and therefore also unethical to include. As this study does not revolve around any of the personally

identifiable information mentioned above and furthermore provides anonymity by omitting the names of the commentators, I would argue that this specific study does not violate the ethical guidelines for internet research or Facebook's community standards.

## **Methods for collecting and interpreting online data**

### **Netnography – research in online communities**

This section will introduce the method of netnography that the methodology of this study is inspired by. The method was developed by Robert Kozinets (2002) to study online communities by using an observational fieldwork approach.

Netnography is described by Kozinets as: “(...) ethnography adapted to the study of online communities. As a method, netnography is faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews” (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography is a qualitative research method that uses ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are evident and developing through computer-mediated communication platforms for example social media. Netnography builds upon the strengths of ethnography by demonstrating how ethnographic research can be conducted online using existing online communities but in an unobtrusive context where the influence of the researcher is reduced. This is due to the fact that netnography is conducted using observations of members, individuals and consumers in their “online habitat” and therefore the research is conducted in a context and environment that is less fabricated than focus group interviews, where desirability bias is a high risk and concern for researchers. Furthermore, this method can provide information in a way that is less costly and more time-efficient than focus group and personal interviews, which are often more time demanding to conduct and to extract data from compared to transcribing a large number of interviews (Kozinets, 2002). Netnographic research uses the information that is already publicly available in online communities to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online groups. The data collected through netnography occur through computer mediation, they are publicly available, they are in written text form and the identities of the senders are more difficult to distinguish. As with all research methods, netnography does also have certain limitations. Because this method collects data from online communities, the researcher must have good interpretive skills as it is not possible to ask for clarification without interrupting and disturbing the method's unobtrusive nature. Furthermore, the lack of informant identifiers in an online context makes it difficult to generalise results to groups outside of the online community from which the data was sampled.

## The steps of netnography

This section will outline the steps of netnography (Kozinets, 2002): Entrée, data collection and analysis, trustworthy interpretation, research ethics and member checks. For the purpose of this research, this section will omit member checks and entrée as this study does not wish to interview the users.

### Data collection and analysis

There are two important elements of data collection in netnography: the data directly copied from the computer-mediated communications of online community members and the data the researchers interpret regarding their observations of the community and its members, interactions, and meanings. In general, it is preferred to sample from online communities that have a more focused research question–relevant segment, topic, or group. Furthermore, groups or forums with high “traffic” of postings are preferred as they continuously produce new data for the research. This will support the analysis with more detailed or descriptively rich data and lastly, the groups should include between-member interactions of the type required by the research question. The data collection should continue as long as new insights or topics are still emerging. If no new topics or themes are discovered, the study has reached a point of data saturation and further data collection will be unnecessary.

### Providing trustworthy interpretation

During the process of collecting data using netnography and the following analysis, the researcher must ensure that they follow the conventional procedures that make research trustworthy. Netnography is based on the observation of textual communication and there is an important difference between discourse and observed behaviour that occurs during in-person ethnography. The communicators may be presenting a more contained and controlled self-image, a phenomenon called desirability bias. Throughout netnographic data collection and analysis, researchers therefore must be aware that they are analysing the content of an online community’s communicative actions rather than the complete set of observed acts of consumers.

### Research ethics in netnography

As with all research, studies using netnography must ensure that they are following the guidelines for ethical research. Ethical concerns about netnography revolve around two interrelated issues: (1) Are online forums to be considered private or public sites? and (2) What constitutes “informed consent” on the internet? Netnography uses information that is not given specifically to and in confidence to the

researcher. The individuals who created the data do not necessarily intend or accept the data being used in research (Bryman, (2016). According to Kozinets, netnographic researchers are professional "lurkers", arguing that "the uniquely unobtrusive nature of the method is the source of much of its attractiveness and its contentiousness" (Kozinets, 2002). The discussion concerning the private versus public issue is discussing whether informed consent is implicit in the act of posting a message to a public social media platform such as Facebook. Given that researchers provide anonymity to informants, most researchers agreed on an ethical policy in which the informed consent of users on online platforms was not required. As the data is publicly available on for example Facebook for everyone to see and obtain, it can be discussed whether or not the sender implicitly gives their consent when publishing their comment or post as mentioned above. For the purpose of this study, informed consent was not collected as the comments were posted to an organisation's public social media page and not a private conversation between two users or a closed group chat on the platforms. If the negative comments had been posted in private messages to the organisation, it would be relevant to seek informed consent to use the data. Therefore, for this study the negative comments were evaluated as publicly available and suitable for data collection, given that the comments were anonymised in the study.

### **Identifying negative user content - thematic analysis**

Having described and outlined the method for collecting the data for the study, this section will now consist of a thorough review and description of the thematic analysis theory that will be used later in this study to analyse the collected data.

This next section will explain Maguire and Delahunt's (2017) six steps of doing a thematic analysis. They put emphasis on the fact that researchers may move forward and back between them, especially if dealing with a lot of complex data. Thematic analysis by Maguire & Delahunt (2017) is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data, in this case, digital textual data collected online by using netnography. Thematic analysis is not tied to a particular epistemological or theoretical perspective, although this study will argue that thematic analysis is highly affected by researcher subjectivity. As this study takes a social constructivist stand, epistemology and ontology will impact the method and analysis. This method is more than summarising the data, as a good thematic analysis interprets and makes sense of the collected data instead.

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### Step 1: Become familiar with the data

The first step in this analysis is reading and re-reading the transcripts or the collected data. At this stage, it is useful to make notes and write down early impressions that can be used later on, when the themes are coded and developed.

### Step 2: Generate initial codes

In this phase, the researcher starts to organise their collected data in a meaningful and systematic way. Often researchers will use coding to reduce lots of data into small chunks of meaning. This study will use open coding, which means that there are no pre-set codes that the comments must fit into, but the researcher develops and modifies the codes as they work through the coding process.

### Step 3: Search for themes

A theme is characterised by its significance to the study. This step organises the codes into broader themes that seemed to say something specific about this research question based on the notes and initial codes from the two first steps.

### Step 4: Review themes

During this phase, the researcher reviews, modifies and develops the preliminary themes that were identified in step 3. These themes should be coherent, and they should be distinct from each other. Some themes may overlap, and the researcher must therefore consider whether these themes are distinct enough from each other to be two separates. In this step, it is also possible to develop sub-themes that embrace “themes within themes”.

### Step 5: Define themes

This is the final refinement of the themes, and the aim is to identify what each theme is about. To illustrate and visualise the process of thematic analysis, it is relevant to develop a final thematic map that illustrates the relationships between themes and data.

### Step 6: Writing-up

The thematic map can be used to conclude the research with some kind of report or conclusion that sums up and illustrates the entire thematic analysis process from data to themes. This map will be used

to describe the results of the conducted analysis and how this can be used in order to answer the problem statement (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

### **Analysis of three Danish organisation's social media comments**

This section will outline how the study used netnography for collecting data and analysing the collected data using thematic analysis. For readability and clarity, the data will be included in-text which is also done to ensure transparency in the analysis process. These themes were manually grouped into theme complexes. The analysis aims to disclose semantic themes in the textual data that lead to latent themes. The analysis works top-down, aiming to answer the problem statement, although still allowing inductive themes for example allowing new types of negative comments to develop.

### **Netnographic sampling**

This study used netnography to look at three different Danish organisations' social media platforms: Yousee/Telenor (mobile and broadband operators), Jensens Bøfhus (Danish restaurant chain) and X-factor Denmark (TV2 - entertainment program). These three organisations were sampled based on their digital activity with all organisations posting frequently on social media and with a high level of user engagement e.g., commenting activity, likes and reactions. Furthermore, all three organisations operate in the same context as this study being Danish national organisations in Denmark. Based on the ethical considerations, the negative comments were sampled from comments sections only that were publicly available for the researcher to find. This also means that no data were collected from closed Facebook groups or other private content that required obtaining informed consent. Using netnography, 12-14 negative comments were sampled from the Facebook page of each Danish organisation and the study used Hudders, Lou & Brabandere's (2021) definition of negative comment as outlined in the introduction, meaning that the collected comments were negative statements made available to multiple people via the internet. The senders of the negative comments were provided with anonymity by blocking out their names in the text. Their identity is therefore not known by the researcher post data collection.



## Thematic analysis - step by step

### STEP 1+2: Become familiar with data and initial coding

The three organisations were each given a table that consisted of the collected data and screenshots from Facebook (left column). Each textual data bracket (comment) was given initial codes (right column) that consisted of a word or phrase that indicated what the comment is about or the significance of this comment. This initial coding is based on the researcher's perspective and will often refer to the aim of the research and problem statement. Although, this study will argue that if the researcher finds repeating initial codes in the data set, the codes support each other in their description of reality while still acknowledging the subjective researcher bias. This “comment-by-comment” analysis was done for each organisation with more and more initial codes developing.

Organisation: Yousee/Telenor 12 comments	Initial codes
<p>Når skramlet ikke virker og man endelig kommer igennem til support er svaret: Når vi har flere millioner kunder, så vil der jo altid være nogle, der brokker sig.....</p> <p>Synes godt om Svar 9 u.  1</p>	<p>Dissatisfying customer service/support</p>
<p>Internet og TV nede på fiber. Ringer til teknisk hjælp og sidder i kø en halv time hvorefter tlf lukkes pga jul. Flot!</p> <p>👍 Synes godt om Svar 9 u.  2</p>	<p>Dissatisfying support</p>
<p>Håber jer der er kunne ved dem er godt tilfreds for jeg er ny kunde og har haft rigtig dårlig oplevelse og meget dårligt kundeservice</p>	<p>Dissatisfying customer service</p>
<p>Tænk hvis i så faktisk også havde abonnementer der passede til de ældres behov</p>	<p>Product complaint</p>

Table 1: example of initial coding from “transcript”

### STEP 3+4 – clean-up of initial codes/search for themes /review themes

This step revolves around consistency in codes/names for codes within and across each “transcript” to create a framework of consistent names. Often the text is coded with slightly different or similar names in the initial coding, therefore covering the same code, for example, quality dissatisfaction and bad food are basically the same thing, a customer complaining about the product provided by the supplier/organisation. In this categorisation or clean-up of codes, the codes covering the same interpretation will

be aligned under one topic. For this analysis, I grouped the similar codes together within each “transcript” or data set. This is done without deleting the overlapping or repeated codes. In the table below, the codes are still divided into the three organisations, but the initial codes are reviewed and defined into groups of similar codes (words and phrases). By doing this, it is possible to see and develop patterns in the data and work towards a definition of overall themes. Overlapping or repeating codes are not deleted in this step as the repeating codes will later enable the researcher to rank the codes.

<b>Yousee/Telenor</b>	<b>X-Factor (TV2)</b>	<b>Jensens Bøfhus</b>
Dissatisfying customer service/support	Bad judges Dissatisfied with decision	Bad food Does not grill their own beef / poorly made food
Dissatisfying support	Disagree with judges	Sarcastic
Dissatisfying customer service	Disagree with the judges' choice	dissatisfaction
Dissatisfied customer service	Bad judges	Bad product
Dissatisfying customer service	Hate the judge Disagree with judge	Better restaurants should take over
Product complaint	Junk TV	Disagree with the name of the burger
Product/quality dissatisfaction	Poorly round of participants	A beef-house should not sell meat-free burgers
Bad quality	Does not like contestants	Vegetarian burgers are full of additives
Old re-runs of TVshows	Criticise hostessclothing	Meat-free meat should not be called meat
Does not include wanted TV series	Criticise hostessclothing	
(Negative) additional sales	Ridiculous	
(Negative) additional sales	clothing Ugly clothing hostess	Restaurants should be union members Bad image/reputation Union dispute

Table 2: Search for themes in each organization/transcript

Steps 5+6 – Developing a thematic framework and map

The thematic framework relates to the first part of the research question “What kind of negative comments are there in online debates?”. I have developed three overall themes based on the initial coding and revision of the themes found in steps 2-4. The aim of the themes is to contain all the found codes into themes that aim to answer the problem statement. The thematic analysis of this study found that most negative comments in online debates on the organisation’s social media platforms are: Negative comments about the organisational concept and negative comments about the products or services provided by the organisation. In addition to this, the analysis also found an unforeseen theme of negative comments: the unfair or unjustified negative comments that are often based on the user's solely subjective perspective such as aggressive expressions and comments without a rational basis or argument. Although there has been an increased focus on the harsh tone of voice on social media, this theme is unforeseen or unpredicted in the sense that the researcher did not expect this kind of negative comment to be so evident on organisational social media pages.

<b>Overall themes</b>	
<b>Negative comments about customer service</b>	
Dissatisfying customer service (5)	
Disagreement with the concept (8)	
<b>Negative comments about product/services</b>	<b>Unfair or unjustified negative comments</b>
Product/quality dissatisfaction (6)	Bad image/reputation
Dissatisfaction with the organisation (3)	(Negative) additional sales (2)
Junk TV (3)	Criticise hostess clothing (4)
Sarcastic dissatisfaction	Restaurants should be union members (2)

Table 3: Overall themes for all three organisations based on analysis

### Final thematic map

Below is shown the final thematic map that illustrates the steps and process of the thematic analysis. The table should be read from left to right, beginning with examples of the textual data, examples of initial codes, revision of codes, and finally, the overall themes of the concluded analysis. The data brackets in the first column are extracts and examples from the data set and initial codes are therefore based on the entire full data set with overlapping and repeating codes represented in the second column, revision of codes. For each column, the data set is condensed further and further until the three themes are developed and can be used to answer the problem statement of this study. This map visualises how thematic analysis can be used to convert textual data into themes that describe and condense a large amount of data in overall categories or themes. In addition to this, this final thematic map also confirms the relevance of the thematic method for this study as the results of the analysis does in fact answer the research question. Also, the reliability and the validity of the analysis are supported by making the analysis process transparent for other researchers and enabling them to confirm or question this method and analysis. This would also be relevant if conducting inter-rater-reliability tests where multiple final thematic maps can be developed for comparison and generalisability in the results and the study.



Table 4: Final thematic map and analysis process

### **Dealing with negative comments: A theoretical framework**

Having presented my analysis and discussing the significance of my results, I will present a framework for engaging with negative comments, even trolls, etc. and seeing them as opportunities rather than comments to be ignored qua “don't feed the troll”-strategies from the literature review. The analysis section above found three overall themes in negative comments on corporate pages on social media. This section will then present theories and strategies that organisations can use to deal with negative comments and how these negative comments and users can be turned into objects of opportunity. By doing this, I will argue that organisations can use a negative statement to promote a positive reputation and brand image. In order to do so, I will highlight or use some of the negative comments from the data and the responses the organisations gave to some of these comments. The section will conclude with some comments on more thoughtful practices that organisations can implement in their social media strategy.

### **Strategies for best practice**

Song and Mak (2012) use social-mediated crisis communication as a framework for crisis information processing. The model contains two main components concerning crisis information processing: information sources, which refers to the individual(s) who send out and consume crisis information, and information forms, which revolve around the platforms such as social media through which the crisis information is processed. Austin et al. (2012) found that the model categorises three types of publics in social-mediated crisis communication: 1) Influential social media creators, who create crisis information for others to consume and their influential content that may initiate a crisis for an organisation, 2) social media followers, who consume the influential social media creators' crisis information and 3) social media inactives, who may consume influential social media creators' crisis information indirectly through word-of-mouth communication with social media followers and/or traditional media who follow influential social media creators. In addition to Song and Mak's theory, Lin, Spence, Sellnow, and Lachlan (2016) argue that the prevalence of social media has changed the contemporary information media landscape in terms of information transmissions and accessibilities, which affect the applications of risk reduction and crisis management. Lin, Spence, Sellnow, and Lachlan (2016) Describe seven best practices for effective crisis communication specifically through the use of social media. They provide suggestions and approaches for improving the effectiveness of crisis communication between organisations and citizens.

### Actively engage in dialogue online

Crisis managers should actively engage in ongoing conversations online with the public, listening to stakeholders' concerns and replying to victims' requests for assistance in a timely manner. Social media technologies allow citizens to directly communicate their experiences.

### Be cautious about message update speed

Effective crisis management should focus on being quick with information updates on social media, which would lead the public to action by receiving updates from official or authoritative information instead of individuals, who might be spreading questionable or false information.

### Own the hashtag

It might be relevant to promote a hashtag to use for providing and supervising information. By "owning the hashtag," responses may be able to direct affected audiences to useful correct information while supervising other generated hashtags surrounding the crisis that may lead audiences or stakeholders to misinformation.

### Cooperate with the public and similar organisations

Social media provides both an opportunity and mechanism for members of the public to participate in the crisis discussion. The public now has a stronger voice in the conversation, and may often have information that is unavailable to the organisation.

### Monitor misinformation

On social media, managers have a chance to quickly correct any misinformation and prevent it from spreading (Lin, Spence, Sellnow, Lachlan, 2016). According to Thomas, Peters, Howell and Robbins (2012), social media has become the new word-of-mouth (WOM) in the digital context. Communication has become a two-way communication flow between the business and consumers that increasingly take more power over the message, leaving marketing managers out of control of the message. Online or digital WOM is different from traditional WOM because of online users, who can also communicate or post their individual responses to the larger community and the organisation in real-time for example when posting a comment in the comments section of an organisational post, the comment is not only visible to the organisation but also to the rest of the consumers reading along in the

## How to engage with negative user content on social media and turn it into objects of opportunity

comments section of the post. Thomas, Peters, Howell and Robbins (2012) identify general strategies in their study. Understanding and using these strategies can support organisations dealing with negative WOM and can potentially help them protect their brand image and reputation.

### Delay

The delay strategy is based on the idea that if an organisation delays the response, the negative social media content will die down on its own, allowing the organisation to not respond or ignore the customer complaint altogether. The argument of this is that what outrages the public tends to rise and fall quickly. A disadvantage of the delay strategy is the belief that an organisation is being unresponsive and unwilling to listen to their customers.

### Respond

The response strategy involves listening to, acknowledging, and potentially accommodating the negative feedback given on social media. When consumers express their negative feedback online, they force organisations to respond in order to protect and uphold their brand image and reputation. A company can use the response strategy to quickly react to a consumer's problems. This strategy has the potential to take unhappy customers and convert them into more loyal consumers with a stronger relationship with the company. A disadvantage of the response strategy is the potential disagreement that can happen with a consumer, especially if the negative attack is based on incorrect information or a misunderstanding. Actively participating in the conversation gives the organisation the opportunity to soothe the negative WOM and influence the conversation before they turn into rumours. Within social media, consumers want to know that a company's communication and actions are real, authentic, honest, and meaningful. An ignore or delay strategy can cause consumers to believe that the company is not being honest and authentic. However, the response strategy presents the company with the opportunity to tell its side of the story in an authentic and transparent way, which can influence consumer perceptions about the company and the brand.

In addition to these general strategies above, Bhavik (2021) suggests five specific ways that organisations can handle and respond to negative comments on social media:

### Listen and Act

An angry customer is most likely to mention the brand on various social media platforms to seek the organisation's attention. So, managers need to make sure they never miss any of those. Use the social media monitoring tools to track all mentions of your brand, hashtags, and URLs (internet links) related to your brand. This strategy is also often referred to as social media listening.

### Timely Action

In today's social media context, customers expect a fast response from the organisation. Timely action is the best way to resolve a customer's resentment towards your brand and avoid further negative comments or worse, a firestorm.

### Respond publicly, and then move to DMs

Consumers want legitimate and instant decisions that acknowledge their complaints and clear their misunderstandings. Therefore, managers can ask them to send personal messages to your inbox regarding their issues. This way, you can resolve the negativity without creating a public discussion about an issue.

### Sincerely Apologise

Organisations need to understand they have to prioritise and accept their customer's point-of-view even if they disagree with them. They must apologise and be sincere about it. A sincere public apology for accepting your mistake will only add credibility and transparency to your brand's value. A personalised message has the customer's name, summarises the issue, includes sincere apologies, and puts forth measures to resolve them.

### Never Argue with Customers

While dealing with negativity, managers need to be emotionally stable. Be mindful of the words you use and do not sound offensive. When current and potential customers see that organisations are polite to their customers, they are likely to build a positive image for the brand.



## Combining thematic results with practical strategies

This section will consist of a write-up of the results from the thematic analysis, including examples from the collected data set of negative comments, and the strategies from the theoretical framework above. Each of the three themes from the analysis will be discussed separately. Furthermore, this section will also include examples of responses from organisations to these negative comments and how they fall within the theoretical framework and literature review. This is done to answer the second part of the problem statement that aims to discuss how organisations might manage these negative comments in order to protect brand image and reduce the risk of future online firestorms.

### Theme 1: Negative comments about the organisation and concept

The first found theme focuses on negative comments about the organisation itself. Often these comments are based on real events and users' own perception of the organisation and their interaction with them, for example with the organisation's customer service. This theme was expected to occur in this analysis as customers tend to use social media to voice their dissatisfaction with an organisation. Especially in situations where they have already reached out via an official customer service email or phone number and not received acceptable support. In table 5, the customer is dissatisfied with customer service and the organisation chooses to respond publicly and then move the conversation to a private digital space in the email system, as recommended by Bhavik (2021). By doing this, Telenor limits the public display of dissatisfaction with their customer service, while still providing customer service and illustrating their desire to help towards other social media followers that might be potential customers (Austin et al, 2012). Although this customer did not have an actual or specific problem with a product, negative comments like this are important to respond to for image buffering.



Table 5 Telenor Denmark's Facebook page. Moving negative comments from public display to private digital space.

The comment in table 6 is another example of a customer complaint on Telenor Denmark's Facebook page but this one has been left unanswered by the organisation. Again, the complaint revolves around dissatisfaction with the organisation's customer service and without the social media manager's response to this comment, other users might see this comment and be influenced by the negative content. According to Austin et. al (2012), the sender is considered to be an influential content creator and the "angry emoji" reaction to the comment is a follower who might share this opinion (although, we cannot know for sure) and any social media inactives might get the impression that this is the common service level of the organisation's customer service. In sum, this comment might have a negative impact on the organisation's digital word-of-mouth and reputation, both in the digital and physical world, because this negative comment is left unanswered by the organisation.

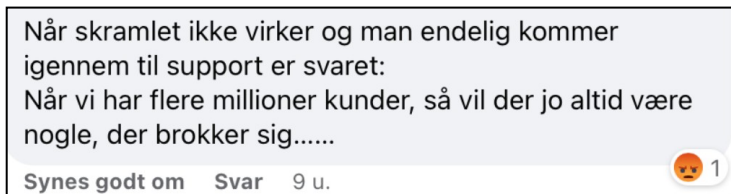


Table 6: Unanswered negative comment

If the organisation had responded to this comment, they would be able to contradict the statement or apologise for the unsatisfying service that the user received and display a desire to solve the situation towards other users. Even if the original commentator or user does not react to or is satisfied with the response, the organisation has a chance to protect their digital reputation and word-of-mouth among other potential users that might see this comment and their related response. Lin, Spence, Sellnow and Lachlan (2016) suggest that organisations monitor misinformation which might be relevant to this comment as it is unlikely that this comment is true, although this should never be questioned according to Bhavik's (2021) suggestion to never argue with customers. Instead, Bhavik suggests that when dealing with negativity like this, managers should be mindful of the words they use because when potential customers see that organisations are polite to their customers, they are likely to build a positive image for the brand. This alone should encourage the organisation to answer these kinds of comments. In these examples below from X-factor TV2, the responses from the organisation take a more democratic strategy where they accept the users' subjective opinions about the program that the users are expressing, but they also strive to "soothe" the negative expressions with positive and encouraging statements. This strategy might be referred to as a "kill them with kindness"-strategy where social media managers aim to smooth out the user's negative content and comments with a positive attitude.

## How to engage with negative user content on social media and turn it into objects of opportunity



Table 7: Democratic approach to negative comments



Table 8: Positive branding through a polite strategy

It could be argued whether or not it would damage TV2 or the program X-factor if they did not respond to these negative comments as these revolve around irreversible and non-changeable aspects and concepts of the show such as replacing the judges mid-season. According to the theoretical framework, the organisation would be suggested to “always apologise” but for these comments that revolve around negative personal statements about employees or members of the organisation, they again take a more democratic and “smoothing” approach where the negative comments are somehow neutralised. I would argue that this promotes a positive brand image, giving the organisation authority and honesty. Also, in recent seasons of the show there has been an increased focus on how contestants and judges are targets of negative comments and hate on social media from users. So, there might be a different, more broad sentiment behind answering democratically to these comments than “just” brand and image promotion. This current and new focus on the tone on social media means that this is now part of X-factor TV2’s identity to promote a better environment online. Therefore, it would not be successful or effective for them to argue with users or take a more offensive or aggressive strategy as we see with other organisations in this analysis. Furthermore, if the organisation chooses to follow Thomas, Peters, Howell and Robbin’s (2012) “delay-strategy” and hopes that the negative comments will die down on their own, they risk that other users regard it as hypocrisy and false identity. Also, there is an immediate risk that this kind of comment will appear every time the program runs and the negative comments will re-emerge every time. Social media managers might then have monitored these comments, evaluated the gain of responding to these and concluded that, although it might not be possible for X-factor to win the user over or change their mind, they would still benefit from responding because it is in line with their identity, image and values.

This example in table 8 of a product complaint comment is an example of how organisations can and have used their answer to protect their reputation when they respond to complaints on social media.



Table 8: Protecting the organisation's brand and monitoring misinformation online

In this case, the organisation has already tried to help the customer in a private conversation, but the customer still chooses to write a negative comment about the organisation in a very explicitly negative tone in their comments section. Again, it is evident how important Lin, Spence, Sellnow and Lachlan's (2016) suggestion to constantly monitor comments sections and misinformation in these as seen in this example where unsatisfied users tend to post and comment via different channels e.g., direct messages, comments, Trustpilot, Google and so on where the same negative content can be rapidly spread among users and customers. Here, Yousee has the chance to contradict the user's claim that the organisation does not care about their customers by clarifying that they have already tried to solve the situation without the necessary feedback from the customer. Without the response from Yousee, the comment portrays a very negative image of the organisation but by giving a clear, concise and factual response, the negative impact is instead focused on the consumer who "loses face" instead of the organisation. Here, it is also evident how important the role of social media management is and how the different strategies can be used effectively and reduce the risk that comments like this escalate and damage the image and reputation of the organisation.

## Theme 2: Negative comments about products

This second theme revolves around negative comments about products and services such as complaints about the quality of products. These comments differ from theme 1 because they focus on dissatisfying experiences that the user has had when in contact with the organisation's products. As the examples from theme 1 show, the comments in this are often influenced by misinformation or misunderstandings between the user and the organisation's customer service, human to human. The comments in this theme are based on personal real experience or interaction with a product or service that did not live up to their expectations. As with theme number 1, this theme was expected to be found in the datacollection and to consist of people communicating their dissatisfaction or disagreement with a product supplied by the organisation. Previously, a dissatisfied customer would share their negative experience with an organisation's product physically by word-of-mouth and the bad reputation would spread at a slow analogue pace and among a smaller group of people. Today with social media, digital negative word-of-mouth can spread rapidly to an incredibly large group of current and potential customers. The same goes for organisations' responses to these comments and organisations have a chance to save face and gain credibility based on their responses to the negative comments.



Table 9: Personalising your answer by using the commentator's name

In this example in table 9 from Telenor Denmark, we see how their social media managers uses the response strategy by Thomas, Peters, Howell and Robbins (2012) that involves listening to, acknowledging and accommodating the negative comment. This strategy of actively participating in the comments section allows the organisation to reduce the negative word-of-mouth by responding for example "your feedback has been noted" and indicating that the organisation is honest, authentic and listening to consumer needs. Furthermore, we can also look at these responses from Bhavik's theory of how organisations should never argue with customers and always be sincere. As seen in these

examples, this is often done by personalising the response with the customer’s name, summarising the issue and working to resolve them. As mentioned earlier, Bhavik argues that when current and potential customers see that organisations are polite in their responses to their customers, they are more likely to build a positive image for the brand. This is also the case in table 9 above where Telenor Denmark includes the name of the sender, acknowledges the question and resolves the problem by answering the question. It could also be argued that the fact that social media managers sign the answer with their name is supporting the presentation of the organisation as being authentic and transparent.

The study found that the organisations handle negative comments differently where for example Telenor Denmark uses the more traditional “your feedback has been noted”-strategy as a way of acknowledging the user and the comment. Another strategy is presented by Jensens Bøfhus that takes a more active, follow-up social media listening strategy where they actively engage in the dialogue with the customer and the negative comment by asking for concrete suggestions for improvement. The “your feedback has been noted”- response from Telenor Denmark seems rather hollow and vague since they are not interested in asking how to improve their products for this target group.



Table 10: “Your feedback has been noted”-strategy

In these two examples above in table 10, Telenor Denmark and Jensens Bøfhus have chosen a strategy that focuses on social media listening, where they use Lin, Spence, Sellnow and Lachlan’s (2016) theory and best practices on how organisations should actively engage in dialogue online and cooperate with the public. This strategy is also presented by Bhavik (2021) as the listen and act strategy when Jensens Bøfhus ask the sender of the negative comment how they can improve their product. By doing this, the customer might feel seen and heard by the organisation, which again might soothe and reduce their negative associations with the organisation and their products. Although the organisations might not follow up on these comments or feedback from their consumers, they can display their willingness

to listen to the needs of their customers which reflects positively on the organisation's brand and towards potential customers that might see this comment (social media followers). Although with this follow-up strategy, there is a chance that the user will describe more negative experiences with the organisation in the public space (comments section) and so, it might be relevant to discuss whether Bhavik's (2021) "respond publicly, then move to DM"- strategy would be appropriate for this context. By using this strategy, the organisation can still actively engage publicly in the conversation and acknowledge the user without risking more negative comments or content about their products in the public space on Facebook.

In table 11 below from Telenor Denmark, it is clear how social media listening and social mediamanagement can be used to reduce misinformation. This comment is unjustified as it contains misinformation about the organisation's product. By giving a quick and correcting response, it is possible to reduce the harmful impact on image and reputation because other users can read the response and question the validity of the negative comment. If this comment had been left unanswered, it might have caused the opposite effect where other users consider this negative statement to be the truth and that the organisation is avoiding the "truth" by not responding.



Table 11: Monitoring and correcting misinformation

### Theme 3: Unfair or unjustified negative comments

This theme was developed to cover comments that did not belong or fit into the themes above as they do not revolve around real experiences with products or services as such. The negative comments in this theme revolved around statements that might be referred to as "light trolling", without being threatening, inappropriate or unacceptable with regard to Facebook's community standards. These comments are often based on users' subjective opinions that they communicate in an explicit language in

these comments. Therefore, as opposed to the other themes and the comments within these, the comments in this theme are not legitimate complaints, enquiries or based on reel interaction with the organisation but rather “opinion-stating” comments, where users wish to share their opinion, belief, concern, disagreement etc. with the organisation itself and not products/services. This is shown in table 12 below where the hostess of X-factor (TV2) is criticised for her choice of clothing and would be categorised as a category of trolling since these comments are made to communicate their subjective opinion and receive a reaction to this. Based on the number of likes and reactions, it could be argued that their aim is reached with other users agreeing with them. These comments are also an example of the negative sides of social media as described by Baccarella, Wagner, Kietzmann and McCarthy (2018) who argue that social media functionalities can also function in a negative way. In these examples below, we see how the functionalities of conversation and groups are used negatively. The function of conversation is used to communicate a negative, unfair and inappropriate opinion that criticises other people for their choices, in this case, clothing. Furthermore, the group function is also present when other users “like”, react or somehow confirm this negative statement. When this happens an echo chamber occurs in which the sender's own beliefs are reinforced and supported which can escalate this negative reputation further. This activity on negative comments also pushes the comment to the top of the comments section for more people to see and react to.

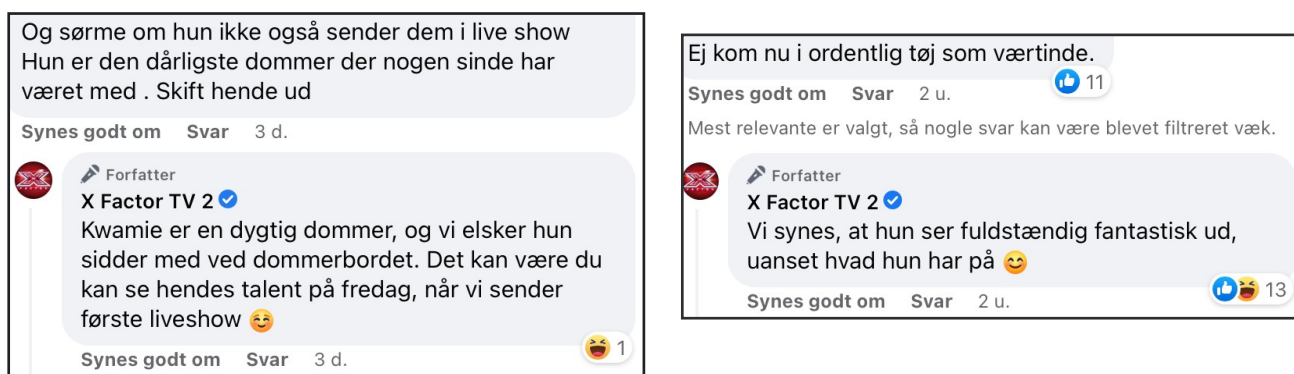


Table 12: example of debatejacking

These comments above can also be described as debatejacking, where users take focus away from the actual post, in this example the actual contestants of the talent show, and instead choose to communicate a negative comment about the hostess' clothing. A statement that is highly irrelevant to the actual post and instead aims to receive a comment or reaction from the organisation or other users. These comments from X-factor (TV2) are also an illustration of Austin et al (2012) theory on types of public (users) in communication: the influential social media creators, who create content information for



others to consume, which in table 12 would be the senders of the unfair negative comments, the social media followers, who consume the content, which would be the users liking the comment, and social media inactives, who may consume the content indirectly through word-of-mouth communication. The social media “inactives” could also be described as users observing the comments section and seeing the negative content without interacting with it, liking or commenting.

### Unfair comments with fair responses

Based on the theoretical review and framework of this paper, I will discuss and argue how organisations might want to deviate from the “always apologise”-strategy for this theme that was presented by many of the scholars in the literature review. For these kinds of comments, I would argue that there is a fine line between acknowledging feedback and complaints, and on the other hand, accepting inappropriate and shaming comments towards members of the organisation as is the case with the examples in table 12 from X-factor (TV2). As Thomas, Peters, Howell and Robbins (2012) argued in the theoretical framework, the response strategy has the disadvantage that it can turn into an unsuccessful discussion between user and organisation that can damage the reputation of the organisation further. This risk might be even higher with unfair comments as the chance of winning a discussion based on different subjective opinions is often low. But when the organisation chooses to respond to such unfair comments, it also gives them the opportunity to influence how this user, and other users that might read the response, perceive the organisation and their brand. While most of these unfair comments are often made to get attention, they can be treated by the organisation as a chance to display themselves in a certain way to a larger community on social media. In table 12, X-factor TV2 has received negative comments about members of the organisation and has chosen to stand up for these members and justify their presence. They might have estimated these comments to be unfair and opinion stating and then it would be difficult to change the user’s mind. Based on this evaluation, they chose to address the comment in a neutral and professional way that takes an agree-to-disagree approach. By doing this, they protect their members, their product and their brand which I would argue have a positive impact on the organisation's reputation. This strategy might be relevant to study or implement in strategies for turning negative content into objects of opportunity where organisations can display their identity and values. Although, this strategy would always be based on an evaluation of the negative comment and the potential outcome of engaging in the discussion by responding. This is also evident in the examples below in table 13 from Jensens Bøfhus that were posted on a Facebook post promoting their new vegetarian burger. Some users argued that a “steakhouse” should not be serving meatless products and stated their opinion about this in the comments section. Other users in the comments section were

positive about the fact that the organisation had implemented the vegetarian alternative to the menu.



Table 13: Monitoring and contradicting misinformation about products

In this case, Jensens Bøfhus uses the comments as an opportunity to contradict the misinformation and allegations about the contents of their burger and that beef should be filled with chemicals. Although many people might perceive this comment from the sender as a false allegation, it is important that the organisation ensures that other users do not see this comment as the truth about their product. Furthermore, the organisation promote themselves as a family restaurant and can use these comments as an opportunity to promote this identity and other positive statements about the organisation. In addition to this, they also use these comments to point out the absurdity of these comments by stating that one vegetarian option does not replace all the existing meat options on their menu. This strategy shows authenticity and personality when responding on social media and allows organisations to brand themselves through their responses. This is in line with the organisation's more offensive social media strategy when it comes to these unfair comments, although it is crucial for social media managers to distinguish between unfair comments and genuine complaints as this analysis has argued for the different strategies and effect on the different categories of negative comments.

### Implementation of active and preventive social media management

In addition to the themes and examples above, the study also found examples of how monitoring and managing the comments section can display organisations as responsible e.g., in table 14 where a comment has been posted with unacceptable language and Telenor clarifies the community standards for their organisational space.



Table 14: Take responsibility and clarify the community standards in your digital space



Table 15: Setting the ground rules for debating

By addressing this comment, Telenor Denmark will appear as responsible for their social media and their comments section. The likes and reactions in both table 14 and 15 can be interpreted as positive feedback from users appreciating that these unacceptable or inappropriate comments are reacted upon by the organisation and if necessary, removed from the public debate. Furthermore, it could be argued that “likes” creates “goodwill” with users and is an important aspect of organisational branding and image protection.

This other example in table 15 is from a campaign about cybersecurity and identity theft where the debate among users in the comments section has turned to victim-blaming and discussing whether the girls featured in the campaign are to blame for their own identity theft as they gave away their personal information. Again, in this example, Telenor manages the specific comments section by outlining a set of rules for the debate “Let's talk together nicely” and at the same time addressing the fact that the purpose of the article or post is to bring attention to identity theft and not blame the individuals. Again, with the number of likes and reactions to this comment, it could be argued that communicating a set of “debate rules” for the comments section can work both preventive and branding of the organisation.

Profilen modereres efter DR's regler for god opførsel: <a href="https://dr.dk/talpaent">https://dr.dk/talpaent</a> Se mindre
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*Table 16: Organisations can link to their community standards on their page*

Preventive if people actually stop to think before they post negative comments and as brand support because Telenor Denmark appears as a responsible organisation. Organisations can also address the debate rules on their social media page by referring to their own set of community standards as DR (red. Danish Broadcasting Corporation) has done here in table 16 with a link to their own webpage.

All of these examples above illustrate how organisations use Song & Mak's suggestion to actively engage in online dialogue and conduct social media listening, where comments sections are regularly monitored and unacceptable comments are responded to, deleted or blocked out. Social media listening is also included in Bhavik's listen and act-strategy where organisations actively monitor both their internal but also external pages for comments about the organisation. Especially within their own comments section, it should be evident for users that organisations are present and take responsibility for their comments section.

In addition to the collected data used for this analysis above, the article also found examples of the types of negative comments mentioned in the literature review by Dall, Lorentzen, & Thielke (2019). The study found examples of grammatrolling (appendix D), whataboutism (appendix B) and lastly, debatejacking (appendix C) that many of the included comments in the analysis were examples of. In addition to this, it is also relevant to include that the negative comments are based on the dark sides of social media that were mentioned in the literature review: conversation, sharing, reputation and groups. These elements of social media constitute an environment where negative comments can damage an organisation's brand and image when other users consume the content of the "influencers" that post negative comments. But when organisations respond to the comments and explicitly display their reaction, they might be able to "save face" or reduce the negative impact by displaying their wish to help, to solve the situation or even stand up for their values and beliefs. All these factors contribute to the positive promotion and branding of the organisation's brand and its image towards other users and potential customers of the organisation.

## Discussion of theoretical and methodological implications

This section will discuss the theoretical and methodological framework of this study by looking at how existing theories and my concluded results above confirm or deviate from each other. Furthermore, this section will also discuss the methodology and any observations that occurred during this process, as a disadvantage or advantage for the research.

### One-fits-all-strategy

Based on the concluded data collection and analysis, the study found both examples of complaints and enquiries concerning products or services offered by the three organisations. Bhavik's (2021) categories of negative comments include complaints, queries and trolling comments which is also what this study found to be evident in the comments section. So, I would argue that this article did in fact study the phenomenon of negative comments that this paper set out to study as the results are consistent with other studies and existing theories. Furthermore, the study also found that the organisations involved, Yousee/Telenor Denmark, Jensens Bøfhus and X-factor TV2, mostly followed the same strategies as recommended in the theoretical framework when it comes to managing negative comments. Although, Jensens Bøfhus did take a more straightforward approach when it comes to dealing with unfair comments, which I will discuss further in this section. In addition to the existing categories of complaints and enquiries, this article also found that there are sub-categories for each of the found main themes. A complaint can be a negative comment about customer service, a product, a campaign, a member of staff, etc. This means that one general strategy for dealing with complaints might not be the most efficient and successful way of handling negative comments. Many of the theories from the literature review suggest: never argue, sincerely apologise, delay your response, don't feed the troll strategies, but this might not be efficient when it comes to protecting one's brand and image and preventing future online firestorms. This article found that social media managers have a key role in branding the organisation and supporting their external image when communicating to customers online on social media. This was especially evident when organisations were responding to the category of unfair comments, where the social media managers had to evaluate the comment's potential level of threat and how they can turn the negative comment into a positive outcome. As I also touched upon in the results section above, it is relevant to evaluate the type of negative comments and the potential outcome of responding to them. For example, should companies respond to unfair or unjustified comments about the organisation itself or an employee of the company? What if the comment contains damaging misinformation or inappropriate language? If they do not respond to these comments, would other users then consider this unfair comment to be true? To illustrate this, I have found an example from Jensens

Bøfhus where the social media manager has responded with an answer that does not follow the theoretical framework's more “apologetic” suggestions when it comes to responding to negative comments.



Table 17: Branding through social media strategy

Table 18: Responding to unfair comments using a strong social tone of voice strategy and community

But in this specific case and for these specific comments in table 18, I would argue that this strategy for responding is successful because the response is supported and carried by the 13 reactions and the comment made by another user that disagrees with the negative user. The same goes for the second example to the right, where other users give value to both the negative comment and Jensens Bøfhus’ response with the “reactions” and likes. The negative comments have received almost solely negative “reactions” from other users whereas Jensens Bøfhus has received solely positive “reactions” on their response. This is an example of how Jensens Bøfhus turns negative comments into objects of opportunity and frame and brand themselves toward other users that are both loyal stakeholders and potential new loyal stakeholders and users. Although, I would also argue that this strategy should be done with careful consideration and thorough knowledge of one's stakeholder’s behaviour and loyalty to the brand. Furthermore, the response strategy must also align with the organisation's identity. Would this bolder response-strategy work for other organisations with a more traditional or conservative identity and brand? Or if a similar straightforward response had been posted to a product complaint with a genuine disappointed or dissatisfied customer looking for help? This also illustrates the necessity of evaluating the context and category of the negative comment, where the results of this study might help social media managers as there seems to be a tendency that this “bolstering” and straightforward strategy might be relevant for negative comments in the “unfair or unjustified” category. Although, communication practitioners should still keep in mind that even if this social media manager in these examples above might have a more passive-aggressive strategy for dealing with unfair comments that

appears to be effective but there is no guarantee that this response strategy would not backfire if used in a different context with a different organisation and a different crowd of users. Again, this underlines how this bolder strategy should be used with careful consideration of the organisation's brand and image. Based on this theoretical discussion, it is clear that both contemporary and previous social media studies are still highly relevant when it comes to dealing with negative comments on social media. In this article, I found that organisations do receive negative comments concerning complaints and enquiries about products or services offered by the organisation. For this kind of comment, the study found that the theoretical framework and the suggestions for response strategies are still highly relevant on social media platforms. But this article's findings also deviate from the theoretical framework in the sense that it found that organisations also receive another category of comments, the unfair or unjustified comments, that were not presented in the theoretical framework as such. Furthermore, the study also found that the organisations received positive feedback when monitoring, regulating and managing their comments sections actively and responding to unfair comments with informal, personal and honest responses. When organisations received negative unfair comments, the strategy was more uncertain with some organisations not responding and others responding with a strong branding strategy. This straightforward, branding strategy also deviates from the suggested strategies in the literature review and based on the positive feedback from other users on the platform to this, I would argue that this strategy is relevant to study and discuss further for implementation in social media strategies.

#### Advantages and disadvantages of netnography

The study wished to investigate the negative comments and online community on Facebook and chose netnography as the most suitable method for this as netnography allows the researcher to conduct online field observations. The advantage of netnography is also that the method provides easy access to relevant online data and the collection of this data can be highly time saving compared to other methods. In addition to this, I would also argue that netnography extracts "real-life" data from the lived reality of the internet and online space. By using this method, data can be collected "straight from the horse's mouth" and give the researcher an insight into the "raw" material. In this case, netnography allows me to collect real comments that are made in "real digital life" to the organisation and not a hypothetical, fictive scenario of negative comments. This is again due to the fact that netnography enables the researcher to collect data with a limited bias by the presence of the researcher and also the concept of desirability bias where respondents are affected by other respondents' presence and the social context of the data collection. Based on this, I will also argue that the advantage of this method is that it enables the researcher to observe the online community and its users in an unobtrusive way but

paradoxically this is also one of the most discussed disadvantages. This is due to the implications and complex considerations connected to ethics and general data protection regulation (GDPR) that I described in more detail in the ethics section of the methodology. When conducting this study, I found that observing people without their knowledge is connected with many ethical considerations that one must consider before extracting data from an online platform. I found that one disadvantage of netnography is that I did not have a relation to the users in the community and based on that, I was not able to ask follow-up questions. I also provided the users with full anonymity, meaning that after the data collection, I did not have further access to their information or identity. Furthermore, I would also argue that this step of netnography where researchers ask users follow-up questions or conduct interviews, is difficult if the topic of the research is of a negative, intimate or personal character. Would it be relevant to ask a user follow-up question concerning why he wrote: “Jensens Bøfhus is a loser” as a comment to the organisation’s post? In the theoretical framework, Barnes’s (2018) argues that online commenting culture is a result of factors of personality, our offline world, and emotions that impact the comments we make. Based on this, it could be argued that negative comments might stem from an experience in the offline world. Barnes also argues that comments influence the values and norms in the community in which we participate. When negative comments are posted frequently in the public online space, this becomes the culture and norm of this space. This theory might also be the base of the negative commenting culture and that social media facilitates and consists of a culture that accepts a negative and even inappropriate environment. Based on Barnes theory, I would therefore argue that negative commenting does not necessarily stem or come from a negative experience in the offline world but can also be facilitated by the negative commenting culture in the online world of Facebook. That might also be what makes online firestorms so damaging for organisations since the negative digital word-of-mouth influences other users to join this culture, although they themselves might not have had negative experiences with the organisation. This also matches with Baccarella, Wagner, Kietzmann and McCarthy’s (2018) theory about group identity on social media as a negative way of using social media and how users take part in the group identity and culture to “fit” into the digital space. In addition to this, scholars have also debated the concepts of online and offline identity and behaviour, especially on social media for example influencers on Instagram, and whether they match or clash. Netnography does not distinguish between these two identities when it comes to observing online behaviour, although it could be argued that doing interviews with the users behind the online activity gives the researcher the possibility to investigate the difference between the users' online and offline world and identity. The use of netnography in this study only gave insight into the user’s online identity and therefore it could be discussed whether users would make comments like this in an offline context.



## How to engage with negative user content on social media and turn it into objects of opportunity

Further research into the concepts of online and offline identities might provide researchers with relevant results for developing social media strategies for dealing with negative content and user/customer insights.

### Limitations and further research

This article discussed how organisations should deal with negative comments, but it is difficult to conclude which strategy for managing negative comments on social media is the most efficient or successful as this is dependent on the users and their interpretation of the answer. So, it might be relevant to study users' expectations of organisations' social media spaces, the public debate or the social tone of voice on social media. It could be done using both qualitative or quantitative data such as interviews or questionnaires about the tone of voice on social media. If I had chosen to support this study with interviews, it would be possible to study the user expectations and associations mentioned above by showing respondents different examples of responses and answers from organisations to the different categories of comments. This could include different fictional answers based on parameters such as sarcasm, irony, passive-aggressiveness, politeness, ignorance, personality, defensive and offensive strategies. This would provide the study with insights into how users interpret answers as good or bad, while also adding thick and descriptive data about this user or customer evaluation of good and bad. By doing interviews, it would then be possible to develop a framework or guidelines between being personal and professional in corporate communication. Furthermore, personal interviews could be used to examine how different corporate identities and brands determine and influence customer expectations and associations. These expectations might also reflect how users online expect organisations to reply to enquiries and complaints on their social media. There might be different expectations to the social tone of voice online when communicating with organisation that is traditional and conservative compared to communicating with a young and trendy organisation. This would help organisations create guidelines for managing social media and the balance between the “the customer is always right”-perspective and standing up for themselves and their organisation or employees.

## Conclusion

The article and thematic analysis found that organisations will often encounter negative comments within these three themes: Negative comments about products, negative comments about customer service and the organisation, and lastly, unfair or unjustified comments that the organisation cannot fundamentally fix by improving their product or customer service. The study found that organisations should respond to all negative comments, fair or unfair, to save face and visualise their willingness to help, fix the problem or justify themselves. With product or customer service complaints, organisations can benefit from guiding negative commentators to the right channels such as a customer service email or at a minimum acknowledge their comments with Bhavik's (2021) response-strategy as silence will be considered as "hiding" or indirectly accepting the negative comment as truth. Based on this, the study then chose to discuss how organisations might be able to reduce and limit the negative digital word-of-mouth by actively engaging in the conversation and thereby stunt the negative firestorm. By guiding customers to other channels, the organisation can reduce or limit the public display of dissatisfaction and negative digital word-of-mouth. In addition to this, the study discussed how organisations can use some comments as an opportunity to brand the organisation and display their identity and image. Originally, this study set out to find the best and most effective strategy for dealing with negative comments on social media. But during the collection and analysis of the data, it was clear that it is difficult to develop a one-fits-all strategy for all organisations and comments as users are unpredictable in the sense that organisations can only to a certain extent control what is posted on their social media platforms. Also, it is difficult to predict how users interpret and understand an organisation's response to a negative comment. Therefore, organisation's social media managers must constantly "read the digital room" with no guarantee that their platform will not be the target of an online firestorm. The study also discussed how organisations can use and evaluate the negative comments as objects of opportunity by using their responses and the comments section to brand the organisation towards other users. Here the study found that organisations should react to all negative comments and especially unfair comments that tend to contain misinformation or inappropriate content. When organisations respond to negative comments, they have the opportunity to brand themselves towards other users and customers. This response-strategy should be comparable with the organisation's brand and identity, and social media managers should carefully evaluate the potential outcome of responding to negative comments. Although this can be difficult, the study indicated a tendency that other users react positively to active engagement and monitoring from the organisation's social media team. Lastly, the study also discussed the limitation of this study and method, and how this topic of social media management and negative commenting culture could be researched further with the aim of creating more nuanced and

diverse strategies. This discussion included suggestions for interviews, interview topics and how these could be used to contribute to the study with thick, descriptive data and user insights. This insight might provide organisations with data such as expectations to professional corporate communication on social media and how these are interpreted by third party users and their associations with the organisation. To end this article, I would again like to clarify why this approach to social media management is relevant in today's media-world. This article can be used by organisations and communication practitioners to rethink traditional social media management and crisis communication on social media. The constant and rapid development of technology and interactive social platforms give rise to a similar constant debate or reconsideration of one's social media strategy. Managers might benefit from implementing a constant focus on branding, image and reputation in their social media strategy, especially when it comes to responding to negative comments. This article might therefore be regarded as an encouragement to implement and work with more preventive actions on social media and a branding-strategy when it comes to dealing with and responding to negative content and comments on corporate social media platforms.

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