



**CUSTOMER COMPLAINT BEHAVIOR TOWARD AN INDONESIAN
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Abstract

Social media has become a primary platform for customers to express complaints about airline services. This study aims to examine customer complaint behaviour toward an Indonesian private airline on social media by identifying the most frequent complaint issues and platforms, as well as the factors motivating customers to use social media as a complaint channel. A descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design was employed. Secondary data were collected from Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Google Maps between 2024 and 2026. The data were analysed using the six-step systematic thematic analysis proposed by Naeem et al. (2023) through a deductive–inductive approach. The findings indicate that complaints were primarily related to flight schedule disruptions, followed by customer service, technical issues, aircraft conditions, and baggage handling. Customers preferred social media because of its accessibility, the expectation of faster responses, and altruistic intentions to inform other consumers. They also expected effective service recovery, including compensation, refunds, and transparent resolution timelines. These findings provide practical insights for airlines in improving social media complaint management and enhancing customer service strategies.

Keywords: Customer Complaint Behavior, Social Media, Airline Industry, Systematic Thematic Analysis, Expected Service Recovery



INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed the way customers interact with organisations, particularly in expressing dissatisfaction with service experiences. Platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok have evolved beyond communication and entertainment tools into influential complaint channels because of their public visibility and ability to reach large audiences rapidly. According to Stříteský & Stránská (2015), social media provides an interactive environment where users actively share opinions and engage with emerging issues. Consequently, customer complaint behaviour has shifted from private communication to public and immediate interactions, enabling dissatisfied customers to influence public perceptions and shape the reputation of organisations through their online experiences.

In the airline industry, customer complaints are inevitable due to the complexity of service delivery, which includes ticket booking, check-in, boarding, in-flight services, and baggage handling. Service failures such as flight delays, schedule changes, baggage loss, and poor service quality frequently lead to customer dissatisfaction (Soares et al., 2017). As a result, customers increasingly use social media as a complaint channel because it offers greater accessibility, direct communication with service providers, and broad public visibility. Dissatisfied customers can rapidly disseminate negative experiences, influencing public opinion and potential customers' purchase decisions (Balaji et al., 2015; Jansen et al., 2009). Therefore, understanding customer complaint behaviour on social media is essential for improving complaint management, identifying complaint patterns and motivations, and protecting organisational reputation.

An Indonesian private airline has faced increasing customer complaints on social media. Observations during the researcher's internship revealed that complaint management remained ineffective because social media accounts were managed by a third-party agency primarily responsible for content publication rather than customer engagement. As a result, complaints submitted through comments and direct messages were often delayed or unanswered (Wulanjani, 2025). Although a 24-hour customer service centre was available, customers frequently reported long waiting times and limited accessibility (Fortunisa, 2022), prompting many to use social media as an alternative complaint channel.

Understanding customer complaint behaviour is essential for effective social media complaint management because customers use online platforms for various purposes, including seeking problem resolution, expressing dissatisfaction, warning other consumers, and attracting organisational attention



when conventional channels are ineffective (Yen & Tang, 2015). Prior research has identified three primary drivers of social media complaint behaviour: rapid response expectations, accessibility, and altruism (Kusumawati et al., 2024). These findings align with observations from an Indonesian private airline, where limited social media complaint management and ineffective customer service encouraged customers to seek assistance through social media. The public visibility of social media further increases expectations of prompt organisational responses (Abney et al., 2017), while accessibility, efficiency, and altruistic motives reinforce customers' preference for social media over traditional complaint channels (Istanbulluoglu, 2017; Yen & Tang, 2015).

Understanding customer complaint behaviour on social media enables organisations to identify common complaint categories, the factors driving customers to use social media as a complaint channel, and their expectations for service recovery. These insights support the evaluation of complaint management practices, enhance customer engagement, and facilitate the development of effective service recovery strategies. In the context of an Indonesian private airline, such understanding is particularly valuable for improving social media complaint handling and aligning organisational responses with customer needs. Therefore, this study aims to analyse customer complaint categories, the factors influencing complaint behaviour on social media, and customer expectations regarding service recovery in an Indonesian private airline.

Given the growing use of social media for airline service complaints, understanding customer complaint behaviour is essential for improving complaint management and service recovery. This study examines customer complaint behaviour toward an Indonesian private airline by analysing complaint categories, the factors influencing customers' use of social media as a complaint channel, and their service recovery expectations. The findings contribute to the literature on digital complaint behaviour in the airline industry while offering practical implications for enhancing social media complaint management, customer engagement, and more responsive, customer-centred service recovery strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has fundamentally transformed customer–organisation interactions by providing an open and interactive environment for expressing dissatisfaction. Unlike conventional complaint channels, social media enables complaints to spread rapidly, reach large audiences, and stimulate interactions



among consumers, thereby amplifying their influence on organisational reputation (Arora et al., 2025). Because of its public visibility, complaints posted on social media can quickly attract attention from other users, creating pressure for organisations to respond promptly and effectively (Bacile, 2024). Furthermore, customers can interact with others who have experienced similar service failures, strengthen collective discussions and increase organisational accountability (Istanbulluoglu & Sakman, 2024). Consequently, social media has become an important platform for customer complaint management, particularly in service industries where customer experiences are highly visible.

The airline industry is especially vulnerable to customer complaints because service delivery involves multiple interconnected stages, including ticket booking, check-in, boarding, in-flight services, and baggage handling. Service failures at any stage may generate dissatisfaction and negative customer experiences. Previous studies consistently classify airline complaints into five major categories: flight schedule issues, technical problems, baggage handling, aircraft conditions, and customer service (Awa et al., 2021; Kızılcan et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022; Maria et al., 2015). Flight delays and cancellations are the most frequently reported complaints because they directly disrupt passengers' travel plans (Maria et al., 2015). However, customers evaluate service failures differently depending on their causes. Lucini et al. (2020) found that delays caused by adverse weather conditions are generally perceived as more acceptable than delays resulting from technical failures or operational inefficiencies, which customers consider to be within the airline's control. In addition, complaints related to baggage handling, aircraft conditions, and customer service continue to influence customers' perceptions of overall service quality (Kızılcan et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022).

Beyond understanding complaint categories, previous studies have emphasised the importance of explaining why customers choose social media to express dissatisfaction. Kusumawati et al. (2024) identified three primary drivers of social media complaint behaviour: expectations of rapid responses, accessibility, and altruism. Customers increasingly prefer social media because it enables direct communication with organisations without the procedural barriers associated with conventional complaint channels. Its accessibility allows complaints to be submitted anytime and anywhere while supporting multimedia evidence, such as photographs, screenshots, and videos, that strengthens customers' claims (Arora et al., 2025). In time-sensitive service industries such as aviation, rapid responses are particularly important because unresolved problems, including flight cancellations, delays, or check-in failures, may



immediately disrupt customers' travel plans (Hien et al., 2024). Moreover, the public visibility of social media creates additional pressure for organisations to respond quickly to protect their reputation (Bacile, 2024). Altruistic motivation also encourages customers to publicly share negative experiences to warn potential consumers and help others avoid similar service failures (Istanbulluoglu & Sakman, 2024; Kusumawati et al., 2024).

Customer complaints also reflect expectations regarding service recovery following service failures. Effective service recovery involves organisational efforts to restore customer satisfaction through timely responses, transparent communication, appropriate compensation, refunds when necessary, and efficient problem resolution (Fan & Niu, 2017). Previous studies suggest that customers evaluate service recovery not only based on financial outcomes but also on procedural fairness, empathy, and the speed of complaint resolution (Nikbin et al., 2015; Wei et al., 2020). Likewise, Lucini et al. (2020) demonstrated that response timeliness significantly shapes customers' evaluations of airline service quality, while prolonged complaint resolution may intensify dissatisfaction even when organisations eventually provide appropriate solutions (Hogreve et al., 2017; Istanbulluoglu & Sakman, 2024). Therefore, integrating complaint categories, the drivers of social media complaint behaviour, and customer service recovery expectations provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding customer complaint behaviour and improving digital complaint management in the airline industry.

Based on the reviewed literature, this study conceptualises customer complaint behaviour on social media as a process consisting of three interconnected aspects. First, social media functions as the primary platform through which customers publicly express complaints regarding airline services. Second, customer complaint behaviour is examined by identifying complaint categories and exploring the factors that motivate customers to use social media, namely rapid response expectations, accessibility, and altruism (Kusumawati et al., 2024). Finally, the study investigates customers' service recovery expectations, including refunds, compensation, and resolution time, following service failures. Using a qualitative thematic analysis of customer-generated content collected from Instagram, X, Facebook, TikTok, and Google Maps, this framework (shown in Figure 1) provides a basis for understanding customer complaint behaviour and generating practical recommendations for improving social media complaint management in an Indonesian private airline.

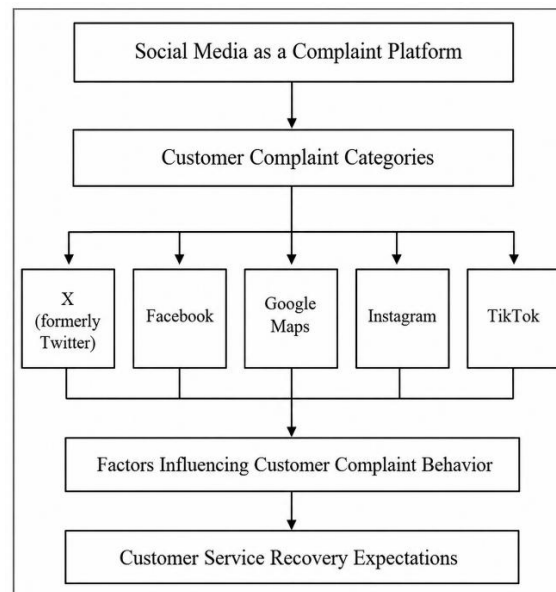


Figure 1.
Framework Model

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative case study approach to examine customer complaint behaviour on social media in the context of an Indonesian private airline. Secondary data were collected from internal records and publicly available customer complaints posted on Instagram, TikTok, X, Facebook, and Google Maps between 2024 and 2026. Internal data were obtained during the researcher's internship from 10 February to 10 June 2025. Data were collected through documentation and selected based on their relevance to airline service complaints. To ensure trustworthiness, source triangulation was conducted across the five social media platforms. Data were analysed using the six-step Systematic Thematic Analysis proposed by Naeem et al. (2023) through a combined deductive–inductive coding approach to identify themes related to customer complaint behaviour.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 287 customer complaints were collected from six social media platforms, comprising Instagram Direct Messages ($n = 12$), Instagram comments ($n = 116$), TikTok comments ($n = 103$), X (formerly Twitter) ($n = 20$), Facebook ($n = 6$), and Google Maps ($n = 30$). Internal data were obtained during the researcher's internship, whereas comments and reviews from other platforms were collected from publicly accessible official social media accounts of the Indonesian private



airline. All data were screened based on their relevance to airline service complaints. Duplicate entries and comments unrelated to the research objectives were excluded, resulting in 257 valid complaints for thematic analysis. The distribution of data before and after the screening process is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Distribution of Customer Complaint Data Across Social Media Platforms

Platform	Data Type	Initial Data (n)	Final Data (n)
Instagram			
Direct Messages	Customer messages	12	12
Instagram comments	Public comments	116	100
TikTok Comments	Public comments	103	89
X (Formerly Twitter)	Public comments	20	20
Facebook	Public comments	6	6
Google Maps	Public comments	30	30
Total		287	257

Source: Data Processed (2025)

Next, the thematic analysis of 257 customer complaints generated 395 coded segments, as a single complaint could contain multiple issues and therefore be assigned to more than one code. Following the coding process, 11 codes were identified and organised into three overarching themes: (1) customer complaint categories related to airline services, (2) factors influencing complaint behaviour on social media, and (3) customer expectations regarding service recovery. The coding results and thematic structure are presented in Table 2, while the relationships between the identified codes and themes are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2.

Themes and Codes Identified from the Thematic Analysis

Theme	Code	Frequency
Customer Complaint Categories Related to Airline Services	Flight schedule issues	162
	Customer service	50
	Technical issues	30
	Aircraft conditions	10
	Baggage handling	8
Factors Influencing Complaint Behaviour on Social Media	Accessibility	14
	Rapid response	9
	Altruism	11
	Compensation	71



Customer Expectations Regarding Service Recovery	Refund	13
	Resolution time	17

Source: Data Processed (2025)

Table 2 summarises the results of the thematic analysis, showing the 11 codes grouped into three overarching themes. Each code was identified through recurring keywords extracted from customer complaints. For instance, the code flight schedule issues included keywords such as flight delays, cancellations, rescheduling, and rerouting. At the same time, customer service comprised keywords related to unresponsive service, insufficient information, and staff professionalism. The frequency of each code reflects its occurrence in the dataset, highlighting the most prominent complaint categories, the factors driving customers to use social media as a complaint channel, and their expectations regarding service recovery.

Discussion

The thematic analysis of 257 customer complaints identified three overarching themes: customer complaint categories related to airline services, factors influencing complaint behaviour on social media, and customer expectations regarding service recovery. These findings provide a comprehensive understanding of how customers express dissatisfaction on social media, why they prefer digital platforms over conventional complaint channels, and the types of organisational responses they expect following service failures. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that customer complaint behaviour extends beyond reporting service problems and reflects broader expectations regarding responsiveness, accessibility, and effective service recovery. The following discussion interprets these findings by relating them to the existing literature and previous empirical studies.

Customer Complaint Categories Related to Airline Services

The findings indicate that customer complaints were primarily related to flight schedule issues, customer service, technical issues, aircraft conditions, and baggage handling, suggesting that passengers evaluate airline services across the entire service journey rather than solely based on transportation outcomes. These complaint categories demonstrate that customer experiences are influenced by interconnected operational and service-related factors before, during, and after the flight. Among these categories, flight schedule issues emerged as the most frequently reported complaint. Delays, cancellations, and schedule changes disrupted passengers' travel plans and often resulted in additional costs, lost time, and inconvenience. These findings are consistent with previous studies identifying flight disruptions as the dominant source of airline complaints (Awa



et al., 2021; Kızılcan et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022; Maria et al., 2015). They also support Lucini et al. (2020), who argued that delays perceived to be within an airline's control generate greater dissatisfaction than disruptions caused by external factors. This suggests that customers regard schedule reliability as a core component of airline service quality.

The second major complaint category concerned customer service, particularly inadequate information, delayed responses, and insufficient assistance from frontline staff. These findings indicate that customers evaluate not only the outcome of service recovery but also the quality of communication throughout the complaint-handling process. This observation is consistent with Maria et al. (2015), who identified staff communication as a major complaint category, and Awa et al. (2021), who emphasised responsiveness and empathy as essential elements of effective service recovery. Consequently, poor communication may intensify customer dissatisfaction even when operational problems are eventually resolved.

Technical issues, including online check-in failures, mobile application errors, and boarding pass problems, also represented an important complaint category. As digital technologies have become integral to airline services, customers increasingly perceive system failures as the airline's responsibility. This finding supports Maria et al. (2015), who classified technological failures as internal service failures that negatively influence customers' perceptions of service quality.

Finally, although aircraft conditions and baggage handling were reported less frequently, they remained important because they directly affected passenger comfort and trust. Complaints related to cabin cleanliness, onboard facilities, damaged baggage, and baggage security indicate that customers continue to evaluate both tangible service quality and operational reliability. These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting aircraft conditions and baggage handling as recurring complaint categories within the airline industry (Kızılcan et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022; Maria et al., 2015). Overall, the results suggest that customer complaints on social media are largely driven by failures in service reliability, communication quality, and operational performance, emphasising the importance of integrating operational excellence with effective customer communication and timely service recovery.

Factors Influencing Customer Complaint Behavior on Social Media

The findings reveal that customer complaint behaviour on social media was primarily influenced by accessibility, rapid response, and altruism. These factors



suggest that customers' decisions to use social media are driven not only by dissatisfaction with airline services but also by the characteristics of social media as a communication channel. Beyond providing a platform for expressing complaints, social media offers convenience, immediacy, and opportunities to share experiences with a wider audience.

Accessibility emerged as an important factor influencing complaint behaviour. Many customers reported difficulties contacting official customer service channels, including unreachable telephone numbers, unresponsive customer support, and inconsistent service information. As a result, social media was perceived as a more accessible and practical alternative. This finding is consistent with Kusumawati et al. (2024)), who identified accessibility as a primary driver of social media complaints, and with Arora et al. (2025), who argued that customers prefer platforms that are readily available in their daily digital activities. Furthermore, Bacile (2024) suggested that social media reduces the psychological barriers associated with formal complaint channels, enabling customers to communicate their concerns more easily and effectively.

The findings also demonstrate that rapid response strongly influenced customers' choice of social media as a complaint channel. Complaints frequently reflected dissatisfaction with delayed or absent responses from the airline, particularly during urgent situations such as flight delays, cancellations, and check-in problems. These results support Kusumawati et al. (2024), who emphasised response speed as one of the primary motivations for complaining through social media. Likewise, Lucini et al. (2020) argued that response time is a critical indicator of service quality, as prompt acknowledgement of customer complaints can reduce frustration and improve perceptions of organisational responsiveness, even when the underlying problem has not yet been fully resolved.

Another important factor identified in this study was altruism, indicating that some customers complained not only to seek solutions but also to warn other consumers about negative service experiences. This behaviour was reflected in comments encouraging other passengers to be cautious when using the airline's services. The finding supports Arora et al. (2025), who described altruism as customers' motivation to protect others by sharing negative experiences. Similarly, Istanbuluoglu & Sakman (2024) argued that the participatory nature of social media encourages users to exchange experiences, allowing negative information to spread rapidly and influence public perceptions and future purchase decisions.



Overall, these findings suggest that both functional and social motivations shape customer complaint behaviour on social media. While accessibility and rapid response reflect customers' expectations for convenient and responsive communication, altruism demonstrates that complaints can also serve broader social purposes beyond individual problem resolution. Consequently, social media functions not only as a complaint channel but also as a public space where customer experiences influence organisational reputation and shape other consumers' perceptions of service quality.

Customer Expectations Regarding Service Recovery

The findings indicate that customers expected service recovery through compensation, refunds, and timely resolution. These expectations suggest that customers evaluate not only service failures but also organisational responses after complaints are submitted. Effective service recovery therefore requires fair, transparent, and timely actions that restore customer confidence and satisfaction.

Compensation emerged as the most prominent service recovery expectation, particularly following flight delays, cancellations, and other service disruptions that caused financial losses or inconvenience. Customers expected the airline to acknowledge its responsibility by providing compensation proportional to the impact of the service failure. This finding is consistent with Kusumawati et al. (2024), who argued that compensation represents an essential component of service recovery by demonstrating organisational accountability. Furthermore, Wei et al. (2020) emphasised that customer satisfaction depends not only on the amount of compensation provided but also on whether it is delivered consistently and supported by clear communication.

Another important expectation concerned refunds, especially in cases involving cancelled flights. Customers frequently expressed dissatisfaction with prolonged refund processes, limited transparency, and the provision of travel vouchers instead of monetary reimbursement. These findings support Nikbin et al. (2015), who proposed that customers evaluate service recovery based on perceived distributive justice. Customers are therefore more likely to perceive the recovery process positively when refunds are processed fairly, transparently, and within a reasonable timeframe.

The findings also highlight the importance of resolution time in shaping customers' evaluations of complaint handling. Customers expressed frustration over delayed compensation, prolonged refund processing, and insufficient follow-up. Consistent with Kusumawati et al. (2024), they expected prompt resolution and clear updates throughout the complaint process. Hogreve et al.



(2017) identified recovery time as a critical dimension of service recovery, while Istanbuluoglu & Sakman (2024) emphasised that customers value not only rapid responses but also effective solutions to underlying problems.

Overall, the findings suggest that successful service recovery depends on more than providing financial compensation or refunds. Customers also expect organisations to demonstrate accountability through timely, transparent, and effective complaint resolution. These results reinforce the view that service recovery is a multidimensional process in which fairness, communication, and responsiveness collectively influence customer satisfaction and trust following service failures.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that customer complaint behaviour on social media extends beyond expressions of dissatisfaction and reflects broader expectations regarding service quality and recovery. Customer complaints were primarily concerned with flight schedule issues, followed by customer service, technical issues, aircraft conditions, and baggage handling, indicating that passengers evaluate airline services throughout the customer journey. Accessibility, rapid response, and altruism emerged as the main drivers of social media complaint behaviour, highlighting social media's role as both a communication channel and a public platform for sharing service experiences. Customers also expected effective service recovery through fair compensation, timely refunds, and prompt complaint resolution. These findings contribute to the literature on digital complaint behaviour while providing practical insights for improving social media complaint management, customer satisfaction, and organisational reputation.

This study has several limitations. First, it examined customer complaints only on social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, X, Facebook, Google Maps, and Instagram Direct Messages, excluding complaints submitted through call centres, email, or face-to-face services. Second, the analysis relied solely on secondary data, limiting deeper insights into customers' motivations and experiences. Third, as a qualitative case study of an Indonesian private airline, the findings are context-specific and not intended for broad generalisation. Finally, the observation period was limited, and changes in organisational policies, digital technologies, and customer behaviour may influence future complaint patterns. Future studies should compare multiple



airlines, incorporate primary data, and adopt mixed-methods approaches to provide broader insights into digital complaint behaviour.

The findings of this study provide several managerial implications for airline service providers. Social media should be viewed not only as a communication platform but also as a strategic source of customer feedback for monitoring service quality and identifying recurring service failures. Airlines should strengthen communication during service disruptions by providing timely, accurate, and consistent information to reduce customer uncertainty. They should also improve complaint management by establishing dedicated response teams, implementing standardised complaint-handling procedures, and enhancing coordination across operational and customer service units. In addition, effective service recovery should prioritise transparent compensation, efficient refund processes, and timely complaint resolution to strengthen customer satisfaction, trust, and organisational reputation.

The findings of this study provide several managerial implications for airline service providers. Social media should be treated as a strategic customer relationship management channel rather than solely a marketing platform, as it offers valuable insights into customer expectations and recurring service failures. The predominance of flight schedule complaints highlights the need for stronger coordination between operational and customer service units to ensure timely, accurate, and consistent communication during service disruptions. Airlines should also enhance social media complaint management by establishing dedicated response teams, standardised complaint-handling procedures, and effective cross-functional coordination. Furthermore, service recovery should prioritise transparent compensation, efficient refund processes, and timely complaint resolution to improve customer satisfaction, strengthen trust, and protect organisational reputation in an increasingly digital service environment.

This study suggests several directions for future research. Comparative studies involving multiple airlines could improve the generalizability of findings on customer complaint behaviour. Future research may also integrate social media data with primary data, such as interviews or surveys, to provide deeper insights into customers' motivations and experiences. In addition, mixed-methods approaches combining thematic analysis with quantitative techniques, such as sentiment analysis or text mining, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of complaint behaviour. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to examine how customer complaints and service recovery



expectations evolve in response to changes in airline policies, digital communication, and service practices.

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