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# Why Complain to a Chatbot?

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## [Aarni Tuomi](#)

lehtori, majoitus ja ravitsemisliiketoiminta  
lecturer, hospitality business  
Haaga-Helia ammattikorkeakoulu

## [Mário Passos Ascenção](#)

yliopettaja, palveluliiketoiminnan kehittäminen ja muotoilu  
principal lecturer, service business development and design  
Haaga-Helia ammattikorkeakoulu

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Digitalization has changed the way businesses handle complaints. A growing trend among millennials is the preference for voicing grievances through automated or partly automated chat agents instead of traditional customer service representatives or call centres.

As part of Haaga-Helia's HosByte: Smart Omnichannel Sales in Hospitality Sector -project, we wanted to delve deeper into the nuances of handling customer complaints via an automated or part-automated chat interface. Consultants and researchers alike seem to argue that this shift is more than just a matter of convenience; it reflects deeper psychological and social factors (Finneman, Ivory & Marchessou 2017).

## A broader trend towards automation of customer interactions

The co-creation of service is associated with 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983). Consumers and service employees often experience heightened emotions during the co-creation of service. As discussed by Kim & So (2023), customer complaints are damaging to service businesses and therefore require service recovery, which refers to the actions a service business takes in response to a service failure.

Research has found that one key reason millennials prefer chat-based customer service interaction is the avoidance of social discomfort or the desire to minimize emotionally taxing interactions. Complaining to a human agent often involves navigating a range of emotions,

including shame, frustration and e.g. guilt about potentially making someone's job more difficult (Tuomi, Tussyadiah & Hanna 2021).

Recent proliferation and implementation of artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and natural language processing technologies have sparked a significant shift in service delivery paradigms. This technological revolution has prompted numerous service businesses to deploy chatbots as automated or part-automated virtual agents, supporting or supplanting human employees in the execution of service tasks and the facilitation of transactions. This transition reflects a broader trend towards the automation of customer interactions, fundamentally altering the nature of service encounters in service businesses in general and in the hospitality industry specifically. For example, companies such as Expedia, Marriott International, Starbucks, and Domino's Pizza presently use chatbots to provide online service.

## Chatbots are non-judgemental and transparent

Automated digital interfaces such as chatbots offer a potential 'neutral', non-judgmental platform, allowing customers to express dissatisfaction without the fear of confrontation or negative judgment (Schwager Meyer 2007). This aspect can be particularly appealing to millennials and Gen Z, who often value low-stress interactions and emotional well-being.

Chatbots are equipped with functional features and increasingly also with social, emotional, and relational elements, which enable anthropomorphic interactions. From the service business perspective, chatbots provide a structured and efficient process for logging complaints. They can guide users through predefined steps to capture necessary details quickly, often resulting in faster resolutions (Luo et al. 2019). This efficiency resonates with younger consumers' preference for streamlined experiences and self-service touchpoints that align with a desire for immediacy and convenience. The impersonal nature of chatbots also grants users a sense of control; users can articulate their issues clearly and directly without the risk of emotional escalation that can accompany human interactions.

Transparency and accountability are other significant factors. Chatbots create a record of the conversation, ensuring that complaints are acknowledged and tracked, reducing the risk of being dismissed or forgotten (Feine, Morana & Gnewuch 2019). This aligns with the millennial and Gen Z demand for transparency and a fair response to their concerns. In essence, chatbots offer a low-pressure, efficient, and reliable avenue for voicing service-related grievances, making them an increasingly popular choice for managing customer dissatisfaction in the digital age. From an employee perspective, an automated service for capturing complaints may also reduce employees' emotional labour.

# The HosByte-project exploring digitalization

In the HosByte , we develop a series of multichannel solutions, connect SMEs in the hospitality industry with technology startups, and publish guiding materials on the implementation of digitalization.

We aim to explore different ways in which digitalisation may support hospitality SMEs to better serve their customers, and address topics such as resolution effectiveness, response empathy, and interaction personalisation. One potential pilot project could be using chatbots for generating sales leads, capturing customer feedback, and where feasible, handle customer complaints.

Platform economy, artificial intelligence, service robotics, and XR technologies offer new opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the hospitality sector to reach customers and enhance their business operations. The HosByte: Smart Omnichannel Sales in the Hospitality Industry project's outcomes support profitable and responsible growth for SMEs in the Uusimaa region. The project is co-financed by the European Union and will be implemented between 09/2024 – 08/2026.

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