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# THE IMPACT OF CORPORATE RESPONSE STRATEGIES TO NEGATIVE ONLINE WORD OF MOUTH ON COMPLAINERS' BRAND ATTITUDE

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## Abstract

*The advent of customer empowering technologies has provided customers with a plethora of online venues to exchange negative experiences with companies and a multitude of other consumers. To mitigate the effect of negative electronic word of mouth (eWOM) companies are increasingly reacting to customers' online complaints. However, little attention has been paid to examine the impact of companies' responses via various online platforms on complainers' brand attitude change. In addition, previous research has not examined whether customers' motives in voicing their complaints online and their choice of the online platform influence the effectiveness of corporate responses. The objectives of this research are threefold. First, the research aims to examine the impact of various corporate response strategies (accommodative, defensive and no reply) on customers' brand attitude. In addition, it examines the moderating impact of platform type (company social networking sites/ third party platforms) and customers' motives to write negative comments (venting, redress seeking and altruism) on the relationship between corporate response strategies and customers' brand attitude. The proposed conceptual model aims to explain the factors influencing the effectiveness of companies' responses to online negative WOM.*

*Keywords: Negative eWOM , Social network sites, Online corporate response, Brand attitude*

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Social online platforms have provided customers with various venues to share their unsatisfactory experiences with companies and a multitude of other customers. Complaints, expressed in one-to-one communication, are now publically shared on social network sites such as Twitter, Facebook, brand communities and review sites (Schanari & Schaefer, 2015).

Nowadays customers utilize eWOM as pre-purchase tool to seek information about the products to make better purchase decisions (Bettman 1979; Dowling & Staelin 1994; Rosen & Olshavsky 1987). Whilst Social media publicity may be beneficial to companies, negative online WOM poses new challenges for companies (Berry et al. 2010; Bolton & saxena-Iyer 2009; Hening –Thurau et al. 2010). Prior research suggests that negative eWOM impacts is stronger on consumer brand evaluation than positive eWOM (Ahluwalia 2002; Park & Lee 2009).

Literature suggests various motives for customers to complain online from venting frustration to revenge from the company or seeking redress (Blodgett et al. 1997). In addition, customers might also complain online for altruistic reasons of preventing others from damage to warning others (Sparks & Browning 2010).

Increasingly, companies are dealing with the detrimental impact of negative eWOM. Companies' responses to negative eWOM play a significant role in customer retention as well as attracting new customers (Lee & Song 2010; Puzakova et al 2013; Noort and Willemsen 2012). Complainers as well as potential customers will read companies' responses online. Therefore, the way complaints are dealt with in online environment craft the future relationship between the company and the complaining and prospective customers (Noort et al. 2014) . Whereas good complaint handling strengthens bonds, a bad response can destroy the firm's relationships with its previously most satisfied customers (Kelley et al 1994; Blodgett et al 1997; Smith et al 1999). A step in the wrong direction may stimulate a spiral of negative effects, wherein a response to negative WOM is followed by more negative WOM.

Despite the importance of companies' responses to negative eWOM, little attention has been directed at examining effective companies' strategies in response to negative eWOM (Lee & Song, 2010; Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010). Also, the issue of whether companies strategies should change based on the type of the online platforms customers have used to voice their dissatisfactions (Noort and willemsen, 2011) has not been addressed in academic literature. Thus, this research attempts to address this gap by proposing a research model that would help companies to develop more effective strategies to handle customers' complaints. The proposed model sheds light on the moderating impact of the platforms customer choose to voice their complaints and their intentions to articulate their dissatisfaction on their perceptions of the helpfulness of companies responses and their brand attitude.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Negative Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)

Customer dissatisfaction plays a vital role in understanding customer complaint behavior (Blodgett & Granbois 1992). Expectation disconfirmation is widely used to explain dissatisfaction (Woodruff et al. 1983). Negative WOM is defined as “interpersonal communication among consumers concerning a marketing organization or product which denigrates the object of the communication (Marsha & Richins 1984). On the other hand, a consumer complaint or customer complaint is defined as “an expression of dissatisfaction on a consumer's behalf to a responsible party” (Landon 1980). Customer Negative word-of-mouth and customer complaint differ in terms of the party to whom customers

address their dissatisfaction. Technology has enabled customers to voice their dissatisfaction on various online platforms. Customer's negative interaction online can be read by the writer of the negative comment, potential customers and companies (Gregoire et al. 2009; Andersen & Streukens 2013). Consequently the distinction between online customers complains and negative eWOM is blurred.

Negative eWOM has created various challenges for companies. First, Customer complaint once limited to one-to-one communication between a company and a customer is now shared by multitude of other customers including prospective customers (Noor et al. 2014). Second, companies are not able to control the creation and dissemination of negative eWOM (Kim et al. 2016). Third, as customers' intentions to voice their complaints online vary, developing effective response that addresses the customer's need is challenging. In online environment WOM is not only a problem focused issue but also emotion focused. To illustrate, customers may use Negative eWOM as a way to seek redress (Berry et al., 2002), harm the company image (Lee et al. 2010), warn other customers or vent their frustrations (Henning-Thurau et al. 2004). Customers may also complain online with multiple intentions simultaneously. Another challenge faced by companies is the availability of various online platforms such as social network sites that are managed by companies and those that are generated by customers. Companies need to decide whether the customer's choice of platform to complain online requires different response strategies.

## **2.2 Companies' Responses Online**

Online platforms have facilitated customers' sharing their negative experiences with companies and multitude of other customers. Customers' empowerment to voice their dissatisfactions online pose new threats for companies (Berry et al 2010; Fournier & Avery 2011; Gensler et al. 2013, Henning-Thurau et al. 2010). Companies once predominantly in control of their brands are increasingly dealing with customers' negative interactions online (Fournier & Avery 2011). The detrimental effects of Negative eWOM and their impact on the future of the brands have been extensively demonstrated in prior research (Chakravarty et al 2010, Sen & Lerman 2007). Thus, companies have initiated measures to monitor and intervene in negative eWOM (Van Noort & Willemsen 2012). Companies monitoring negative eWOM are used as a tool to improve customer relationship and brand evaluation (Lee & Song 2010) of complainants as well as prospective customers.

While companies' responses to negative eWOM seem to be effectual, it can also backfire on a company (LEE and Song 2010). Companies' responses that seem inappropriate by customers may cause spiral of negative effects (Van Noort & Willemsen 2012). Therefore, appropriate response strategies to negative eWOM are critical (Berry et.al. 2010). Van Noort & Willemsen (2012) suggest a company reactive response (customers explicitly ask for companies' response) to negative eWOM creates positive brand evaluation on customer-generated and company-generated online platforms. However, companies' proactive response (consumers did not ask for companies' response) in the context of consumer-generated platform is considered as intrusive.

Research on developing appropriate company responses to negative eWOM and their impact on customers' brand attitude is in its infancy. This research aims to address this research gap and examine the impact of corporate response strategies on complainants' brand attitude. In addition, this research attempts to answer the questions that whether complainants' choice of various online platforms changes the impact of companies' response strategies.

## **3 RESEARCH MODEL**

This research aims to examine the impact of various corporate response strategies on complainers' brand attitude. In addition, we argue that such impact may vary for platform types (company's social networking sites/ Third company controlled complaint websites) and customers' motive to write online. In the following section, we will discuss the research model (Figure 1).

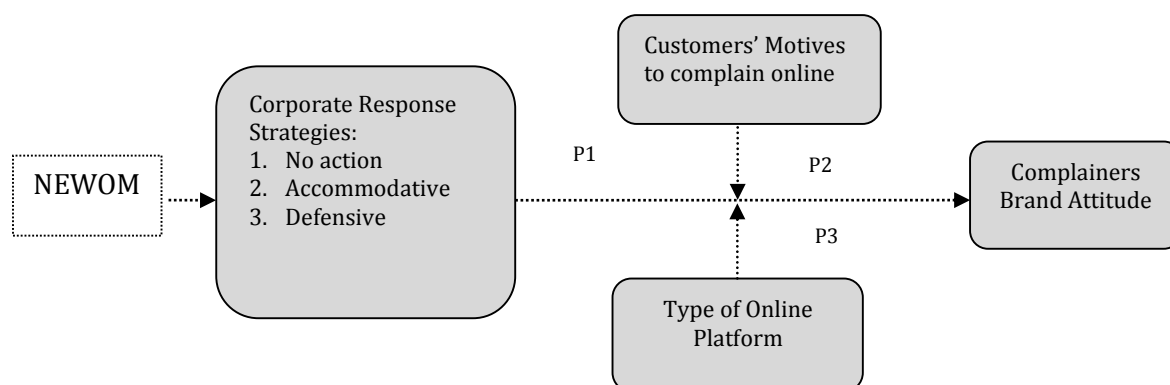


Figure 1. Conceptual Model: Corporate response strategies to negative eWOM

### 3.1 Direct effects of Corporate Response Strategies

Increasingly, companies have realized the critical role that online platforms play in their success or failure. While positive eWOM improves companies' reputation, negative eWOM adversely impact the company. Research suggests prompt responses to negative eWOM contribute to regain customers' trust (Kim et al. 2016). Companies use various strategies to alleviate the negative impact of online complaints. Company's responses range from strategies that put companies' interests first (defensive) to strategies that put complainers' interests first (accommodative) (Coombs 1999; Marcus & Goodman 1991). According to psychological equity theory, individuals who experience or observe injustice will try to reduce distress by restoring either physical or psychological equity (Goodwin & Ross 1992). Conlon and Murray (1996) suggest companies' accommodative responses that attempt to restore financial or emotional loss of dissatisfied customers lead to favorable brand evaluation and boost the possibility of purchase intention in future (Lee, 2005). Literature suggests accommodative responses including apologies, compensation, and/or corrective actions are most effective when customers feel companies are at fault (Coombs 1999). In addition, research suggests companies accommodative approach on the negative events restore the company's positive image (Griffin et al 1992).

On the contrary, companies' defensive approaches (e.g. denying responsibility, shifting the blame to others) lead to customers' disappointment. Dissatisfied customers see themselves in an unfair situation. Defensive strategies not only compensate dissatisfied customers emotionally or financially but also escalate their frustrations (Lee & Song 2010).

Companies may offer no response to customers who complained online. Companies with "No response" strategy attempts to separate themselves from the negative events by remaining silent (Lee 2004). Research suggests that "no response" strategies leave the negative information about the company unchallenged, which lead to damaging brand reputation (Smith 2002, Rhee & Yong, 2014). Noort and Willemsen (2011) suggest customers perceive companies' response on consumer-generated social media intrusive. They suggest companies' strategies should change in terms of responding or

not responding to customers' complain based on the type of the platform they have used to voice their dissatisfactions.

Therefore we propose:

**P<sub>1</sub>:** Companies' response strategies to negative eWOM influence complainers' brand attitude.

### **3.2 Moderating Effects of Customers' Motives**

Motives are cognitive representation of what individuals expect to achieve with the use of media (Wentzel 2000). Feather (1982) stated that motivation is a function of expectation. Therefore, customers' online complaining behaviors are likely to be motivated by certain expected results (Willemsen et al. 2013). If a company responds in a manner that exceeds (or equals) the customer's expectation, the consumer would most likely be satisfied with that specific company. Hence, the effectiveness of corporate response strategies in terms of resulting complainers' attitude may depend on the complainers' motives for engaging in negative eWOM.

Technology has enabled unsatisfied customers to share their negative emotional experiences with others on various online platforms (Kim et al. 2016; Ladhari 2007; Maute & Dubes 1999; Muntinga et al. 2011). They do so for various reasons; 1) venting frustration to reduce cognitive dissonance, 2) altruistic reasons, 3) retaliation against the company, 4) redress seeking (Henning-Thurau et.al. 2004; Sundaram et al. 1998).

Venting is the most common motivation for negative eWOM (Alicke et al. 1992). It is defined as "to give outlet and expression to" (Chambers 20<sup>th</sup> century dictionary). Venting of frustration allows for a release of stress due to experiencing a dissatisfying experience (Stiles 1987). The goal is to release frustration and unhappiness so as to feel better (Stiles 1987; Kowalski 1996; Richins 1980). Mattila and Wirtz (2004) suggest venting is a "free-and-forget" situation. They suggest customers who complain online to vent frustration don't expect companies' reply. Also, Willemsen et al. (2013) suggests defensive strategies would amplify their anger.

The literature also recognizes altruism as a central motive underlying customers' complaint (Ward and Ostrom, 2006). Consumers who are motivated to complain for altruistic reasons desire to warn others regarding their unsatisfactory consumption experiences. These consumers are anxious about other customers' welfare, and they want to avert them from the problem they encountered (Willemsen et al. 2013). Therefore, companies' responses are unwarranted. Kim et al. (2016) suggest apology on public websites has a positive response on viewers but not complainers. Similarly, we propose accommodative responses create less favorable impact on complainers attitude compare to those with empowerment motives.

In addition to venting and altruism, customers use negative eWOM as an empowering tool. The wide accessibility of negative eWOM by a large number of customers and prospective customers increases the bargaining power of customers and enforcing redress (Willemsen et al. 2013).

Therefore we propose:

**P<sub>2</sub>:** The relationship between corporate response strategies and the complainer's brand attitude is moderated by complainer's motivation to complain.

### **3.3 Moderating Effects of Platform Type**

The most common online platforms used by customers to write their negative feedbacks are company social networking platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) (Boyd & Ellison 2008) and third party controlled complaint websites (e.g. TripAdvisor, Epinion, Yelp). Mattila and Wirtz (2004) suggest that customers' choice of complaint medium is based on the degree of interactivity associated with that particular channel. They suggest consumers looking for tangible compensation might perceive face-to-face or phone channels to be more effective due to higher level of interactivity. Conversely, customers who want to vent their frustration, they more likely to choose remote channels such as written letters or e-mail. Theory of Electronic Propinquity (Korzenny 1978) refers to 'electronic proximity, electronic nearness, and electronic presence' (Blau et al 2009; Walther & Bazarova 2008). This theory suggests customers evaluate the level of interactivity and closeness of various communication channels before choosing a particular media. It also suggests an individual's psychological feeling of nearness is associated with the opportunity to converse and a psychological feeling of involvement with others. Similarly, electronic nearness is conceptualized as a range of the subjective perception an individual holds that he or she is functionally, if not physically, close to someone else. Korzenny (1978) suggests 'complexity of exchanged information; number of communication rules and the variety of communication channels' decreases propinquity.

Drawing on this theory, the current research suggests company controlled social networking sites and third party controlled websites offer different level of electronic closeness and interactivity. Companies' social networking websites provide more interactivity and consequently provide more psychological feeling of nearness. These sites provide a convenient platform for consumers to freely create and disseminate brand related information (Chu & Kim 2011). They allow direct interaction with customers with minimum rules and complexity (Dekay 2012). However, third party controlled websites impose some rules and criteria on how customers need to write their complaint. After a customer writes a review it will be examined for conformity with website rules and then will be published online (TripAdvisor, 2015). In addition, third party controlled platforms do not allow interactive communication between customers and the target company. That means customers are allowed to write their complaints and once the company replies, the customer is not allowed to reply back online. Also, Customers who use third party controlled websites do not send complaints directly to the companies, but to a third party. Third-party complaint websites post complaints as rating or general opinions or both. While most feedback systems are open to the public, some accept only registered users (e.g., <http://www.complaints.com>). Consequently, it can be assumed that third party controlled platforms are perceived as less interactive and a more remote channel of communication with regards to voicing complaints. Also, Mattila and Wirtz (2004) suggest customers choose the more remote channels to vent their frustration. Accordingly, the negativity effect of no reply and defensive strategies may be weakened on these platforms.

Therefore we propose:

**P3:** The relationship between corporate response strategies and a complainer' brand attitude is moderated by platform type.

## **4 IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

In recent years, technology has dramatically changed companies-customers relationships. Empowered customers share their negative experiences with companies among a wide-range of audience. Online complaints that are shared with other customers and prospective customers in the form of negative electronic word of mouth (eWOM), pose a severe threat for businesses. Effective complaint management is considered as a significant competitive advantage for companies (Fornel & Wernerfelt 1987). Taking complaint management seriously would benefit various aspects of a business by incorporating helpful comments in the business and resolve customers' problems. Although literature

has emphasized the negative impact of negative eWOM, little research has been conducted to examine how companies should react to online complaints to counter their undesired impacts (Henning Thureau et al. 2010; Hong and Lee 2005). In addition, the fact that customers are exposed to various platforms to voice their complaints and whether their choice of a particular platform requires different response has not been addressed in prior literature.

This research has practical and theoretical implications. The results of this study inform managers to develop appropriate complaint management strategies that facilitates repeat business and customer loyalty Efforts. In addition, this research contributes to development of theory regarding the effectiveness of online corporate response strategies. This contribution is with regard to incorporating the effects of platform type and customers' motivations in the effectiveness of the companies' complaint management.

While this research provides some preliminary understanding regarding online corporate responses to negative eWOM, much remains to be done. Future research should empirically examine the impact of various corporate strategies on complainers' brand attitude. Also, whether company's response is moderated by customer's intention to write online negative WOM need to be investigated. In addition, empirical research should examine whether the effect of corporate responses varies based on the channels customers choose to voice their complaints. An experimental design accompanied by content analysis is recommended to validate the model.

This research has examined the impact of corporate response strategies on complainant's brand attitude. Future research may compare the impact of a company response to online complaint with the impact of positive eWOM on prospective customers' brand attitude. This comparison may be conducted on various online platforms. This would shed light on whether the companies' responses are more influential or the positive WOM. Also, whether this difference varies over various online platforms.



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