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# Webcare

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## Introduction

Consumers have made abundant use of social media to share their experiences with and evaluations of products, services, and policies—and with the organizations that produce them. Consumer voices, or electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), can be heard on social network sites, online review sites, the comments section of news sites, and, in general, in all online spaces that enable an active role for users. Whereas in the early days of the Internet, organizations typically chose not to respond to online consumer reviews or answer online consumer questions, since around 2010 it has become increasingly common for organizations to have an active presence in social media and to directly engage in interactions with consumers. This article defines *webcare* as the online interactions between organizations and consumers about consumer questions, complaints, and experiences with regard to the organization's products or services. Webcare interactions are typically (although not exclusively) public, which distinguishes webcare from customer service that takes place in nonpublic one-to-one interactions that organizations have with consumers, such as in call centers. The public character of webcare adds a new dimension to customer service: not only is the consumer in question engaged in interacting with the organization at hand, but bystanders are as well. This involves consumers who witness (and at times engage in) the webcare interaction and whose attitudes toward the organization may be affected by the nature of the interaction. As a result, public interactions between organizations and consumers make webcare an important part of an organization's online presence. Another distinguishing feature of webcare is that the interactions between organizations and consumers frequently move beyond typical customer service questions (e.g., a failed product, a faulty service delivery). Although customer service still makes up the bulk of webcare interactions of most organizations, webcare teams frequently receive compliments by consumers, questions regarding the organizations' ethics, or inquiries about the organization's stand on societal issues. When an organization gets involved in a public crisis, webcare teams need to deal with large groups of citizens and/or consumers expressing their opinions, often accompanied or inspired by pressure groups.

## General Overviews

Research on webcare is mainly reported in journal articles, most notably in the academic disciplines of communication and public relations, marketing and business, tourism and hospitality, and information systems. A query for the term *webcare* reveals only a limited number of journal articles. Yet many other papers deal with the topic of webcare but use a different name, often referring to management responses to reviews or complaints in social media, social media management, or online service recovery responses. Only one general literature overview on webcare, van Noort, et al. 2014, exists. This article describes the goals of webcare and the studies dealing with questions on whether and how organizations should respond to online complaints. Several general articles have been published in *Business Horizons* that deal with the question how to deal with consumer voices on social media. Stevens, et al. 2018 focuses on three dimensions of successful webcare: it should be timely, it should be public (in order to enhance transparency), and all interactions with consumers should be conducted in a personalized way that humanizes the webcare provider. Grégoire, et al. 2014 distinguishes six types of social media complaints and suggests ways to respond to these complaints.

Grégoire, Y., A. Salle, and T. M. Tripp. 2014. Managing social media crises with your customers: The good, the bad, and the ugly. *Business Horizons* 58:173–182.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2014.11.001>  
Distinguishes different types of complaints in social media and proposes ways to respond to complaints based on the type of complaint: directness, boasting (positive eWOM after successful service recovery), and badmouthing appear after an initial service failure. After a double deviation (service failure followed by a failed recovery), consumer responses can be characterized as “tattooing” (calling in a third party), “spite” (negative eWOM focused on revenge), and “feeding the vultures” (when competitors use the conversations for their benefit).

Stevens, J. L., B. I. Spaid, M. Breazeale, and C. L. Esmark-Jones. 2018. Timeliness, transparency, and trust: A framework for managing online customer complaints. *Business Horizons* 61:375–384.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2018.01.007>  
Discusses ways to deal with online customer complaints and introduces a 3T framework

(timeliness, transparency, and trust). Online customer complaints should be dealt with before the fire spreads (timeliness), complaints and responses should be visible and accessible (transparency), and interactions with consumers should be done in a civil and ethical manner (trust). van Noort, G., L. M. Willemsen, P. Kerkhof, and J. W. M. Verhoeven. 2014. Webcare as an integrative tool for customer care, reputation management, and online marketing. In *Integrated Communications in the Postmodern Era*. Edited by P. J. Kitchen and E. Uzunoglu, 77–99. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 9781349482047

This chapter describes the different goals of webcare: customer service, online reputation management, and marketing. It describes research on the question of whether organizations should respond to complaints in social media, on what and how to respond to such complaints, and on the communication style of webcare responses.

### The Effect of Webcare on Consumers

An important question that organizations face when confronted with eWOM is whether or not to respond, as well as how to respond to different types of consumer messages. Most studies on webcare either use experimental designs or employ social media data. In experimental studies, different webcare responses (or no response) can be pitted against each other in order to test whether they lead to more positive or negative consumer evaluations of the company and how it responded, as in Schamari and Schaefer 2015. In studies employing social media data, like Wang and Chaudhry 2018, the absence or presence of webcare and the content of webcare responses are typically related to the valence and volume of subsequent eWOM and other indicators of consumer attitudes.

Schamari, J., and T. Schaefer. 2015. Leaving the home turf: How brands can use webcare on consumer-generated platforms to increase positive consumer engagement. *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 30:20–33.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2014.12.001>  
Investigates the effects of webcare as a tool for increasing online consumer engagement. It shows that webcare can be considered as a form of *social reward*, which stimulates observing consumers' willingness to become engaged as well. The article also shows that the effects of webcare in reaction to positive consumer engagement only apply to consumer-generated platforms and not to brand-generated platforms. The positive effects of *surprise* and of using *personal webcare* are also only applicable to consumer-generated platforms.

Wang, Y., and A. Chaudhry. 2018. When and how managers' responses to online reviews affect subsequent reviews. *Journal of Marketing Research* 55.2: 163–177.

<https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.15.0511>  
Investigates the effects of management's responses to online reviews on travel websites. Managers should engage in responses primarily for the purpose of complaint management. Management responses to *negative* reviews can influence

subsequent reviews in a positive way if those responses are observable at the time of reviewing. Findings show negative effects for management responses to *positive* reviews, since these are perceived as mere promotion. In case of responding to negative reviews, managers should tailor their response to each review.

### Comparing Responding to Not Responding: Experimental Studies

Several experimental studies have tested the effect of organizational responses in social media compared to no response on consumer outcomes such as trust or reputation. Typically, these studies show one or more—often negative—consumer reviews to respondents, followed by either an organizational response of some kind, or no response. Most studies find positive webcare effects. For example, in van Noort and Willemsen 2012, participants read a blog post containing a car recall announcement, followed by a negative response by a customer, which in turn was replied to (versus not replied to) by the automotive brand. The reply resulted in more positive brand evaluations. Similarly, Lee and Park 2013 finds that interactivity, which in this study meant that the company responded to consumer comments posted under a company video, led to more positive relational outcomes (e.g., trust, commitment) and to a more positive reputation. Sparks, et al. 2016 finds positive webcare effects, as does Abney, et al. 2017. Positive webcare effects were also found in Schamari and Schaefer 2015 (cited under \*Effect of Webcare on Consumers\*), a study on organizational responses to positive (rather than negative) eWOM. Although most experimental studies report positive effects of webcare, some report negative findings and/or mitigating conditions, such as the content of the webcare response, the valence and content of the consumer review(s), and the nature of the dependent variable (e.g., reputation, blame attribution). For example, Bhandari and Rodgers 2018 reports a direct negative webcare effect on purchase intentions, but a positive indirect effect through brand trust. Rose and Blodgett 2016 finds a positive webcare effect on corporate reputation, but only when the negative review mentioned problems that management could do something about. Lee and Song 2010 finds that not responding leads to less attribution of blame to the company when compared to a defensive response (e.g., shifting the blame to external conditions), but found no difference between not responding and an accommodative response (e.g., explaining what went wrong and offering full compensation). However, the company as a whole was evaluated more positively after an accommodative response (versus no response or a defensive response). Lee and Cranage 2014 finds that responding to complaints leads to more positive attitudes only when other consumer reviews were mostly positive.

Abney, A. K., M. J. Pelletier, T. -R. S. Ford, and A. B. Horky. 2017. #IHateYourBrand: Adaptive service recovery strategies on Twitter. *Journal of Services Marketing* 31.3: 281–294.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/JSM-02-2016-0079>

- Examines ways that companies can interact with their customers in a service recovery context. Adaptive recovery responses positively impact consumers' evaluations of service recovery satisfaction, leading to more positive consumer behavioral intentions. Although responding in a personal and adaptive way to service failures may be more time-consuming for companies, consumers recognize and appreciate these efforts. They make consumers more forgiving of possible future service failures, since they feel that the company takes their specific problems seriously.
- Bhandari, M., and S. Rodgers. 2018. What does the brand say? Effects of brand feedback to negative eWOM on brand trust and purchase intentions. *International Journal of Advertising* 37.1: 125–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1349030> Investigates the effects of brand feedback to negative electronic word-of-mouth on consumers' information processing of online product reviews. The study shows whether and when brand feedback has positive and/or negative effects. Brand feedback may impact consumers' purchase intentions positively and negatively simultaneously, through two different routes: one positive route mediated by brand trust and a direct (not mediated by brand trust) negative route.
- Lee, C. H., and D. A. Cranage. 2014. Toward understanding consumer processing of negative online word-of-mouth communication: The roles of opinion consensus and organizational response strategies. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research* 38.3: 330–360. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1096348012451455> Consumer consensus plays an important role in influencing how consumers incorporate negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) into their evaluations of restaurants. In the case of consensus, consumers attribute the cause of the complaint more to the restaurant, which negatively affects their attitudes toward the restaurant. Furthermore, the effect of NWOM consensus on relational outcomes is dependent of a restaurant's response strategy: a defensive response turns out to be a more effective strategy than an accommodative response or no response at all.
- Lee, H., and H. Park. 2013. Testing the impact of message interactivity on relationship management and organizational reputation. *Journal of Public Relations Research* 25.2: 188–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2013.739103> Does message interactivity of organizational websites influence important relational outcomes (i.e., trust, commitment, and satisfaction) and company reputation? Main conclusion is that, regardless of a consumer's familiarity with a company, actively responding by a company to the public's comments posted on a website/blog site positively influences both relational outcomes and corporate reputation. Open, two-way communication proves to be effective for building relationships and increasing perceptions of reputation.
- Lee, Y. L., and S. Song. 2010. An empirical investigation of electronic word-of-mouth: Informational motive and corporate response strategy. *Computers in Human Behavior* 26.5: 1073–1080. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2010.03.009> Company response strategies (accommodative, defensive, taking no action) to online consumer complaints are related to company evaluation. Online bystanders (i.e., observing consumers on social media) exposed to complaints followed by a defensive company response were more likely to conclude that the company was responsible for the problem than exposure to companies taking no action. The study also found that consumer consensus is important in shaping company perceptions: opinions from peers are more critical than company messages in influencing consumers' perception.
- Rose, M., and J. G. Blodgett. 2016. Should hotels respond to negative online reviews? *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* 57.4: 396–410. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1938965516632610> Responding by hotels to negative online reviews is investigated for *controllable* (e.g., staff, service level) and *uncontrollable* (e.g., weather, external factors) situations. Negative reviews due to *uncontrollable* factors do not harm company reputation, whether the hotel management responds or not. Increasing numbers of negative reviews due to *controllable* factors damage company reputation—causing damage when the management does not respond, but with lower damage when the management responds. In general, management should respond to negative online reviews.
- Sparks, B. A., K. K. F. So, and G. L. Bradley. 2016. Responding to negative online reviews: The effects of hotel responses on customer inferences of trust and concern. *Tourism Management* 53:74–85. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.09.011> Investigates perceptions of customers toward a negative online hotel review in two situations: where the hotel is providing a response, and where it is providing no response in reaction to the review. Provision of a response (versus no response) enhances inferences potential consumers draw regarding the hotel's trustworthiness and customer care level. Additionally, the study examines *which aspects* of the responses affect customers' impressions. Using a “human voice” in online responses and the timeliness of responses yielded the most favorable customer inferences.
- van Noort, G., and L. M. Willemsen. 2012. Online damage control: The effects of proactive versus reactive webcare interventions in consumer-generated and brand-generated platforms. *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 26.3: 131–140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2011.07.001> Employing a 2 (pro-active vs. reactive webcare) x 2 (consumer-generated vs. brand-generated platform) experimental design, which also contained a no-webcare control condition, this study shows that providing webcare leads to more positive brand evaluations. A proactive webcare response resulted in more positive brand evaluations on a brand-generated platform; for reactive webcare response, no platform effects were found. The interaction between platform and webcare strategies on brand evaluations was

mediated by the perception of conversational human voice.

### **Comparing Responding to Not Responding: Studies Employing Social Media Data**

Research that analyzes social media data to establish the effects of webcare mostly focuses on indicators of customer satisfaction and organizational performance. Most of these studies have been conducted in the context of hotels, where hotel reviews and ratings, as well as webcare responses, are readily available on platforms like TripAdvisor or Expedia. Some studies combine social media data with data taken from other sources, such as a company's customer relationship management (CRM) system (Maecker, et al. 2016) or financial data services (Xie, et al. 2017, cited under \*Webcare and Organizational Performance\*). Several studies have focused on the effect of webcare on customer satisfaction, mostly indicated by online ratings of the kind that can be found on sites like TripAdvisor. Gu and Ye 2014 shows that receiving webcare has a positive effect on how customers rate the hotel on a repeat visit, but only among low-satisfaction customers. Liang, et al. 2017 looks at the response rate of upscale hotels in three large Chinese cities and finds an average hotel response rate of 31 percent. The response rate of hotels is positively related to hotel ratings by customers, especially among customers who did not frequently post hotel reviews. Ma, et al. 2015 finds that the relationship between a company and customers is enhanced by webcare, but that offering webcare also invites more complaints. In order to explore the question of how observing webcare affects the valence of online ratings, several studies have made use of the fact that when a customer prepares a review, he or she is exposed to a subset of previous reviews that were posted in the hours or days before. These subsets of reviews vary in the number of management responses, which may affect subsequent ratings. Wang and Chaudhry 2018 (cited under \*Effect of Webcare on Consumers\*) shows that observing webcare leads to more positive ratings on travel websites, but only in the case of responses to negative reviews; responses to positive reviews were associated with lower subsequent ratings. Gu and Ye 2014 finds negative effects when consumers observe others receiving webcare while asking for but not receiving webcare themselves. Proserpio and Zervas 2017 finds positive effects of observing webcare on hotel ratings. Additionally, the authors find that hotels that engage in webcare receive more reviews and fewer but longer negative reviews.

Gu, B., and Q. Ye. 2014. First step in social media: Measuring the influence of online management responses on customer satisfaction. *Production and Operations Management* 23.4: 570–582. <https://doi.org/10.1111/poms.12043> Hotel ratings on Ctrip, the largest online travel agency in China, are used to predict customer satisfaction. The ratings of customers who over time left multiple reviews for the same hotel show that the satisfaction of unsatisfied customers increases after receiving a management response.

- Liang, S., M. Schuckert, and R. Law. 2017. Multilevel analysis of the relationship between type of travel, online ratings, and management response: Empirical evidence from international upscale hotels. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* 34.2: 239–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2016.1156613> This study shows that customers who are traveling for leisure purposes (vs. business purposes) and with more online review experience (vs. less review experience) give higher ratings on online review websites. Increasing the frequency of management responses is an effective way to stimulate and increase customer satisfaction. When responding, hotel managers need to pay more attention to customers who have less online review experience, since responding to less experienced reviewers has more impact than responding to experienced ones.
- Ma, L., B. Sun, and S. Kekre. 2015. The squeaky wheel gets the grease—An empirical analysis of customer voice and firm intervention on Twitter. *Marketing Science* 34.5: 627–645. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.2015.0912> A study among customers of a large telecommunications firm that analyzes tweets about and interactions with the firm, both of customers and their networks in Twitter. The findings suggest that the relationship between a company and customers is enhanced by webcare, but that offering webcare also invites more complaints.
- Maecker, O., C. Barrot, and J. U. Becker. 2016. The effect of social media interactions on customer relationship management. *Business Research* 9:133–155. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40685-016-0027-6> This study uses the data of over 300,000 customers of a mobile phone provider in a major European country, including their social media interactions with the company, upselling behavior, and churn. Findings show that social media interactions after a purchase predict more upselling at a later stage, fewer passive contract terminations, but more service requests.
- Proserpio, D., and G. Zervas. 2017. Online reputation management: Estimating the impact of management responses on consumer reviews. *Marketing Science* 36.5: 645–665. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2521190> The relationship between hotels' use of management responses and their online reputation is investigated. Hotels are likely to start with responding to reviews following a negative tendency in their ratings. Hotels respond to positive, negative, and neutral reviews at roughly the same rate. When hotels start responding, they receive fewer but longer negative reviews, as unsatisfied consumers become less likely to leave short indefensible reviews when hotels are likely to scrutinize them.

### **Webcare and Organizational Performance**

Positive webcare effects can also be found when looking at customer behaviors following webcare. Using CRM data of a telecom company, Maecker, et al.

2016 (cited under \*Comparing Responding to Not Responding: Studies Employing Social Media Data\*) shows that customers who had engaged in social media interactions with the company were less likely to terminate their contract and showed higher rates of upselling. Although these customers also engaged more in service requests and filed more complaints using traditional communication channels, they were still more profitable than customers who did not have social media interactions. Kim, et al. 2015 uses online ratings and the response rate to negative comments to predict two often used hotel performance metrics, ADR (the average daily rate per occupied room) and RevPAR (the revenue per available room). The findings show that both the overall online rating and response rate to negative comments positively predict both dimensions of hotel performance. Using Yelp data, Kumar, et al. 2018 finds similar positive webcare effects on the performance of restaurants. Lui, et al. 2018 also finds positive effects of response rate, and shows that response strategies that focus on very positive and very negative reviews are more strongly related to performance than responding to all reviews or responding without a clear strategy. Using TripAdvisor data, Xie, et al. 2016 and Xie, et al. 2017 report several studies that focus on webcare and hotel performance. Xie, et al. 2016 does not find a direct relation between providing webcare and financial performance, yet does establish that the positive relation between financial performance and review volume is stronger for hotels with higher levels of management responses to reviews. A similar study, Xie, et al. 2017, finds that the timing and content of management responses also matter: providing lengthy and timely responses is positively related to financial hotel performance, whereas responses that don't add information to the review they respond to are negatively related to financial hotel performance.

Kim, W. G., H. Lim, and R. A. Brymer. 2015. The effectiveness of managing social media on hotel performance. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 44:165–171. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2014.10.014> Using data from 128 US hotels (all part of an international hotel chain) and from several social media websites (e.g., TripAdvisor, Expedia, Yelp), this study shows that the response rate to negative online comments predicts the revenue per room (RevPAR) and the average daily rate per room (ADR) above and beyond the effect of the overall online rating.

Kumar, N., L. Qiu, and S. Kumar. 2018. Exit, voice, and response on digital platforms: An empirical investigation of online management response strategies. *Information Systems Research* 29.4: 849–870. <https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.2017.0749> When in 2009 the restaurant review site Yelp introduced the possibility to respond to reviews, not all restaurants decided to use this feature. This study shows that restaurants using the new response feature showed better performance in terms of restaurant check-ins than restaurants that did not use the response feature.

Lui, T. W., M. Bartosiak, G. Piccoli, and V. Sadhya. 2018. Online review response strategy and its

effects on competitive performance. *Tourism Management* 67:180–190.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.01.014> Higher webcare rates are positively related to financial hotel performance, especially when the average ratings are negative. The paper distinguishes four different response strategies: no response, full response, strategic customer orientation strategy (responding only to very positive or negative reviews), and no strategy (no pattern in responding). Both full response and strategic customer orientation strategies outperform no response and no strategy responses, and strategic customer orientation strategies are related to higher performance compared to full response strategies.

Xie, K. L., K. K. F. So, and W. Wang. 2017. Joint effects of management responses and online reviews on hotel financial performance: A data-analytics approach. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 62:101–110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2016.12.004> Linking TripAdvisor and quarterly financial performance data, this study shows that lengthy and timely management responses are positively related to financial hotel performance, whereas short and meaningless responses are negatively related to financial hotel performance. The effect of timeliness and length of responses diminishes when review volume is high, whereas the effect of lengthy responses is more pronounced when the average rating is high.

Xie, K. L., Z. Zhang, Z. Zhang, A. Singh, and S. K. Lee. 2016. Effects of managerial response on consumer eWOM and hotel performance. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 28.9: 2013–2034. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-06-2015-0290>

In a study among over 1,000 hotels in five cities in Texas (USA), it is shown that management responses to reviews on TripAdvisor lead to more positive hotel ratings and an increase in the number of subsequent consumer ratings. Moreover, for hotels with a high management response rate, quarterly financial performance over a six-year period is more strongly and positively linked to online review volume.

### Receiving Webcare

Although most webcare studies focus on the effects of observing webcare delivered to other consumers, a few studies have focused on the effect of webcare on webcare recipients. In Willemsen, et al. 2013, researchers asked webcare recipients to indicate their satisfaction with the response they received and found that satisfaction was low (5.1 on a 10-point scale). In Gunarathne, et al. 2017, researchers approached consumers on Twitter who had just interacted with an airline and asked how they felt after this interaction. Over half the respondents reported feeling worse, and only one of five felt better after the webcare interaction. Feeling worse was especially prevalent among customers who had complained before, who complained about process (rather than outcomes), who were handed off to other

departments, and whose problems were not solved by the airline's webcare team. Yet Gunarathne et al. 2017 also shows high levels of dissatisfaction among consumers who had not received a response from the airline.

Gunarathne, P., H. Rui, and A. Seidmann. 2017. Whose and what social media complaints have happier resolutions? Evidence from Twitter. *Journal of Management Information Systems* 34.2: 314–340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421222.2017.1334465> Consumers partaking in Twitter conversations with a US airline were asked whether their problems were solved and whether the webcare interaction made them feel better, worse, or the same. Only 20 percent indicated they felt better, whereas 53 percent felt worse after the webcare conversation. Consumers with process-related complaints were more likely to feel worse. Management responses that did not solve the problem at hand or handed the consumer off to another department were also related to feeling worse.

Willemsen, L., P. C. Neijens, and F. A. Bronner. 2013. Webcare as customer relationship and reputation management? Motives for negative electronic word of mouth and their effect on webcare receptiveness. In *Advances in advertising research*. Vol. IV, *The changing roles of advertising*. Edited by Sara Rosengren, Micael Dahlén, and Shintaro Okazaki, 55–69. Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler. ISBN: 9783658023645

This study focuses on the determinants of webcare receptiveness: the willingness of consumers to receive webcare favorably as indicated by webcare desirability at the time of posting, webcare satisfaction, and post-webcare eWOM. A survey among consumers who had engaged in eWOM regarding their summer vacation shows that indicators of webcare receptiveness are differentially related to eWOM motives: venting, altruism, and empowerment. Webcare desirability and satisfaction were positively related to empowerment, whereas webcare satisfaction and post-webcare eWOM were negatively related to venting and altruism.

### How Should Organizations Respond: The Content of Webcare Responses

The effects of webcare depend on the kind of webcare that is offered; that is, the *content* of the message delivered by the webcare team, the *tone of voice* of the webcare response, and the *speed* with which the response is delivered. Studies employing social media data show that there is much variation between organizations in the content of webcare responses to eWOM. Levy, et al. 2013 analyzes management responses to negative hotel reviews and finds that a majority of responses contained apologies and signs of appreciation, whereas referring to compensation and follow-up actions were rare. Fan and Niu 2016 provides a qualitative analysis of webcare interactions and describes different types of webcare responses of airlines. The largest category of responses (40 percent) are labeled as showing empathy and offering apologies. This study shows that responses that do not require consumers to take

further action (e.g., make a phone call to the company) are related to higher satisfaction and more positive emotions. Most of the studies regarding differences in the content of webcare responses are conducted using experimental methods. These studies often mirror frequently used distinctions in the crisis communication and service recovery literature. Typically, a distinction is made between accommodative responses (e.g., apologies, offering compensation) and defensive responses (e.g., denial). For example, Lee and Song 2010 (Experiment 2, cited under \*Comparing Responding to Not Responding: Experimental Studies\*) tests the effect of a defensive response (shifting the blame to others) versus an accommodative response (apologies, explanation, offering compensation), and finds that an accommodative response led to more positive company evaluations. The effect of accommodative responses versus defensive responses to an online complaint depends on the extent to which other reviews support the negative claim that was made. Lee and Cranage 2014 (cited under \*Comparing Responding to Not Responding: Experimental Studies\*) distinguishes an accommodative response (apologizing and taking full responsibility) and a defensive response (apologizing but only partially taking responsibility). An accommodative response appeared to be as effective as a defensive response in preventing negative attitude change when the negative review was supported by many other consumers (high eWOM consensus). When eWOM consensus was low, a defensive response was more effective than an accommodative response. The moderating role of the opinions of other consumers was also established by Dens, et al. 2015, which distinguishes six different responses and finds that response type matters most when prior reviews are neutral or negative. When reviews are mostly negative, effortful service recovery strategies are needed for recovery (i.e., apologies combined with an explanation and compensation).

Dens, N., P. De Pelsmacker, and N. Purnawirawan.

2015. "We(b)care": How review set balance moderates the appropriate response strategy to negative online reviews. *Journal of Service Management* 26.3: 486–515.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/JOSM-03-2014-0082>

Prior reviews affect the effectiveness of different webcare responses. The authors differentiate six response types that differ in the amount of effort they take: no response, refutation, apology only, apology + prospective explanation, apology + compensation, apology + prospective explanation + compensation. They test these responses for differently valenced prior review sets (negative, neutral, and positive). Findings show that effortful responses are more needed in the case of negative prior reviews. When prior reviews are predominantly positive, no response is needed.

Fan, Y., and R. H. Niu. 2016. To tweet or not to tweet?

Exploring the effectiveness of service recovery strategies using social media. *International Journal of Operations & Production Management* 36.9: 1014–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOPM-10-2013-0461>

Examines the relationships between webcare agent responses and customer complaints, customer emotion changes, and customer satisfaction. Webcare agent responses that do not require customers to take further actions for solving the problem have positive effects on customer emotion alleviation and customer satisfaction. Contrarily, responses that need customers to take further action pose a negative effect on service recovery outcomes. The findings emphasize the benefits of equipping webcare agents with the necessary knowledge and experience for service recovery operations.

Levy, S. E., W. Duan, and S. Boo. 2013. An analysis of one-star online reviews and responses in the Washington, D.C., lodging market. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* 54.1: 49–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1938965512464513> Using social media data, the authors analyzed the content of negative (one star) hotel reviews and management responses to these reviews. They distinguish several elements that are found in management responses (e.g., apologies, appreciation, correction, compensation) and show that highly rated hotels more frequently explained what caused the complaint but were less likely to share details regarding corrective actions. Offering compensation occurred in very few cases, whereas a large majority of management responses contained some kind of an apology and a sign of appreciation.

### **The Tone of Voice of Webcare Responses**

Several studies have been conducted about the *tone of voice* of the response, with the main focus on the effects of the informal and personal way of communicating that is often seen in webcare responses. With regard to the tone of voice of the response, *conversational human voice* has developed as a central theoretical construct in studies on the effect of the tone of voice of webcare responses. Kelleher 2009 describes conversational human voice as “an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization’s publics based on interactions between individuals in the organization and individuals in publics.” Several studies have tested whether the perception of such a style of organizational communication in webcare is related to more positive consumer attitudes toward the organization (cf. Kelleher 2009). Dijkmans, et al. 2015 is a longitudinal study concerned with customers and noncustomers of an international airline and shows that exposure to the airline’s social media communication, the bulk of which consisted of webcare interactions, in time predicts perceiving a conversational human voice, which in turn predicts a more positive corporate reputation. Van Noort and Willemsen 2012 (cited under \*Comparing Responding to Not Responding: Experimental Studies\*) also shows that perceiving a conversational human voice in webcare is positively related to brand evaluations. Several studies have directly manipulated the presence of a conversational human voice by comparing informal and personal responses to responses employing a more typical corporate tone

of voice. Schamari and Schaefer 2015 (cited under \*Effect of Webcare on Consumers\*), a study on responding to positive eWOM, finds that personal (vs. impersonal) webcare, when delivered on a consumer-generated platform, leads to more positive consumer intentions, and that this effect is mediated by conversational human voice. Min, et al. 2015, an experimental study, reports that a more empathic webcare response positively affected consumer satisfaction with the response. Sparks, et al. 2016 (cited under \*Comparing Responding to Not Responding: Experimental Studies\*) finds that after an informal and personal webcare response, consumers report higher brand trust and perceived brand concern for customers. Yet some studies find boundary conditions for the effect of more personal responses or even find negative effects. Gretry, et al. 2017 studies brand familiarity as a moderator of the effects of an informal way of communicating and finds that brand trust is positively affected by an informal communication only when the brand is familiar. For unfamiliar brands, authors find the reverse effect. Puzakova, et al. 2013 discusses the effects of humanized brands among consumers who believe people have relatively stable personalities compared to people who believe that people are less stable. Consumers who believe in the stability of humans are less forgiving toward a humanized brand after reading a negative report about that brand.

Dijkmans, C., P. Kerkhof, A. Buyukcan-Tetik, and C. J. Beukeboom. 2015. Online conversation and corporate reputation: A two-wave longitudinal study on the effects of exposure to the social media activities of a highly interactive company. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20.6: 632–648. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12132> Based on a longitudinal survey among 1,969 consumers, both customers and noncustomers of an international airline, this study shows that witnessing the social media activities of the airline leads to more positive perceptions of a conversational human voice. In turn, perceptions of a conversational human voice predict a more positive corporate reputation.

Gretry, A., C. Horváth, N. Belei, and A. C. R. van Riel. 2017. “Don’t pretend to be my friend!” When an informal brand communication style backfires on social media. *Journal of Business Research* 74:77–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.01.012> This study confirms earlier work on the effect of informal webcare responses on brand trust, yet shows that this effect is only true for familiar brands. For unfamiliar brands, a formal way of communicating is more effective. Departing from theories on social norms, the authors show that this reversed effect is mediated by the perceived social appropriateness of the response.

Kelleher, T. 2009. Conversational voice, communicated commitment, and public relations outcomes in interactive online communication. *Journal of Communication* 59.1: 172–188. <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1460-2466.2008.01410.X>

A study among followers of Microsoft blogs in which the perception of conversational human voice is measured and related to relational



outcomes such as trust, commitment, and satisfaction. The findings show positive correlations between conversational human voice and several relational outcomes.

- Min, H., Y. Lim, and V. P. Magnini. 2015. Factors affecting customer satisfaction in responses to negative online hotel reviews: The impact of empathy, paraphrasing, and speed. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* 56.2: 223–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1938965514560014>  
In a 2 (empathic vs. nonempathic) x 2 (paraphrasing statement: paraphrased vs. nonparaphrased) x 2 (speed of response: quick vs. slow), the authors show that showing empathy in a webcare response is strongly and positively related to consumer satisfaction with the response. Paraphrasing a complaint in a response to a negative review also leads to positive effects. No effect of speed of response was found.
- Puzakova, M., H. Kwak, and J. F. Rocereto. 2013. When humanizing brands goes wrong: The detrimental effect of brand anthropomorphization amid product wrongdoings. *Journal of Marketing* 77.3: 81–100. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.11.0510>  
In a series of experiments, this paper explores differences between “entity theorists,” people who believe in the stability of human personalities, and “incremental theorists,” people who believe human personality is malleable, in their response to humanized brands. The findings show that entity theorists are less forgiving of humanized (vs. nonhumanized) brands, and that for entity theorists, offering compensation is the most effective strategy.

### **The Speed of Webcare Responses**

Besides the content and the tone of voice of webcare responses, the *speed of response* is a third factor that has been studied in the context of webcare. Since consumers continuously post their experiences, complaints, and questions, organizations need to decide on the speed of their responses. Istanbuluoglu 2017 collects data among consumers who complained on Facebook or Twitter and finds that consumers expect a response within three hours on Twitter and within six hours on Facebook. The actual mean response time was between one and three hours on both Facebook and Twitter. Faster company responses were associated with higher satisfaction, regardless of the content of the response. Several other studies show positive effects of a swift response. Sparks, et al. 2016 (cited under \*Comparing Responding to Not Responding: Experimental Studies\*) shows that responses within one day generated more brand trust than responses that took one month. Ghosh 2017 finds similar positive effects of speed of response, yet another experimental study, Min, et al. 2015 (under \*The Tone of Voice of Webcare Responses\*) does not find such effects. Using social media data, Xie, et al. 2017 (under \*Webcare and Organizational Performance\*) shows that fast webcare responses are positively related to the financial performance of hotels, especially when review volumes are low, or when the average rating is high.

- Ghosh, T. 2017. Managing negative reviews: The persuasive role of webcare characteristics. *Journal of Internet Commerce* 16.2: 148–173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332861.2017.1305254>  
Studies the effects of webcare strength (using strong vs. weak arguments) and timeliness (timely vs. delayed webcare) for reviews that differ in perceived helpfulness. The results of the experiment show that timely and strong webcare responses (especially in response to an unhelpful review) contribute to consumer forgiveness.
- Istanbuluoglu, D. 2017. Complaint handling on social media: The impact of multiple response times on consumer satisfaction. *Computers in Human Behavior* 74:72–82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.04.016>  
Based on a survey of consumers who left a complaint on one of the social media pages of one hundred companies, the author shows that consumers expect response times of less than three hours on Twitter and less than six hours on Facebook. Faster company responses were associated with higher satisfaction, regardless of the content of the response.

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