

One Good Tweet Deserves Another:  
Essays on Firm Response to Positive Word of Mouth through Social Media

by

Scott W. Cowley

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Michael Wiles, Chair  
Douglas Olsen  
Sunghoon Kim

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## ABSTRACT

In two thematically related chapters, I explore the benefits incurred as companies actively respond to consumers who share positive word of mouth in digital environments (eWOM). This research takes a multi-method approach by first addressing the psychological impact of company response on the sharing consumer, followed by an examination of real behavioral consequences in a social media setting. Across six studies in Chapter 1, I find support for a conceptual model indicating that consumers who receive a company response to their positive eWOM experience greater satisfaction compared to no response, leading to increased intentions to engage in future positive eWOM on behalf of the company, both through social media and online review websites. Furthermore, I find that consumer perceptions of response personalization lead to judgments of company effort and that these two elements mediate the effect of response on consumer satisfaction. In Chapter 2, using a dataset of firm responses to positive consumer feedback on Twitter (tweets) from 79 apparel retailers, I find that company responses to positive consumer tweets can generate consumer engagement behavior in the form of continued interaction. Company responses that use consumer-oriented language increase the likelihood of consumer interactivity. However, this effectiveness depends on whether the consumer's audience is the company or their broader network of followers. I also show that, in some conditions, companies achieve higher consumer engagement by personalizing responses with the consumer's name. Together, the findings from these two chapters point to the need for companies to strategically practice positive eWOM management, both to promote consumer engagement behaviors and to avoid the negative outcomes associated with unresponsiveness.

## DEDICATION

To Kathy, for your love, help, belief, and sacrifice.

To Myra, Charlotte, and Noelle, for being my wellsprings of sunshine.

To my parents, Paul and Kerry, for supporting me in every way.

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## CHAPTER 1

### EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF FIRM RESPONSE TO ONLINE POSITIVE CONSUMER FEEDBACK

Consumers use social media to talk about their experiences with products and services, and the brands behind them. A 2014 survey showed that 23% of all U.S. consumers had posted brand-related feedback on social media with the most frequently cited motives being to praise a company for a great customer experience, vent frustration with a bad experience, or share information about the experience with a broader audience (American Express 2014). Consumer sharing of brand-related feedback online is natural in a digital ecosystem that makes it nearly costless to publicly comment on any number of social media platforms, review websites, and forums.

A company's ability to digitally monitor and publicly engage with individual consumers and their associated opinions is considered one of several hallmarks of the social web (Kietzmann et al. 2011). For the company, each consumer interaction represents an opportunity or hazard that may inform, or in some cases fundamentally transform, the nature of the customer relationship (Harmeling et al. 2015). Hence, it is useful for firms to understand the magnitude of opportunity or risk each consumer interaction presents.

Intuitively, companies devote a higher share of attention and resources to engaging in online interactions with a higher level of perceived threat—namely negative consumer feedback (Ma et al. 2015). A negative online expression not only reveals the company's at-risk relationship with the individual consumer, but has the potential to negatively influence perceptions of and relationships with other consumers who see it

(Schamari and Schaefer 2015). By responding online, the company has an opportunity to dampen the reverberations of negativity or hopefully provide individual, virtual service recovery in a way that salvages the customer relationship, promotes customer loyalty, and generates brand positivity among digital bystanders. A significant body of research is devoted to the nature of negative online word of mouth, service recovery, and its consequences for brand value (for a review, see Wilson et al. 2012).

While online marketing managers should rightfully be concerned about vocal dissatisfied consumers, managers might myopically view negative feedback as the only type of communication to be concerned about, and neglect the important opportunity provided by positive feedback. Online consumer feedback is more likely to be positive than negative (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Godes and Mayzlin 2004) and consumers generally use social media more for promoting positive media about their brand interactions than for negative behavior (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Wirtz et al. 2013). Consumers share positive feedback with brands, motivated by a desire to develop their consumer-brand relationships, convey satisfaction, and continue the relational benefits and value they have received (Kraft and Martin 2001). For consumers motivated by relational objectives, the expression of positive feedback represents a “relationship investment” that demonstrates trust and commitment toward the company (Morgan and Hunt 1994), especially when positive feedback is shared publicly online. However, firm mismanagement of positive consumer feedback may mean missed opportunities to exert a positive influence on the consumer relationship, and may even be harmful to some elements of the relationship.

Just as interpersonal compliments are given with an expectation of acknowledgment and acceptance (Pomerantz 1978), positive consumer feedback is shared online with an expectation of response. Social media data shows, however, that nearly 50 percent of messages directed at brands receive no acknowledgment (Masri et al. 2015). This prompts several questions which I address through this research. (1) How should companies manage unsolicited positive feedback received from consumers online? (2) How does the nature of the company's response to positive consumer feedback influence the consumer's propensity to engage in future positive behavior toward the brand online? (3) What is the mechanism through which a company's response influences consumer perceptions? (4) Are there elements of the positive feedback or company response that make positive feedback management more or less effective?

The objective of this research is to provide a deeper understanding of the nature of positive consumer feedback and the consequences of its management (or mismanagement) on positive consumer perceptions of and intentions toward the brand. Drawing upon relationship and communication theories, I propose that the consumer's expectations for a brand interaction will depend on the consumer's personal investment in sharing the positive feedback and that the company's investment in responding has consequences for the consumer's perceptions of the company. When satisfied consumers share unsolicited positive feedback about companies through social media, the company's decision to respond or not has differential effects on the consumer's future intentions toward the company online.

I use a series of six experimental studies to investigate the consequences of brand response to positive consumer feedback online. Studies 1 and 2 establish the relationship between company response or non-response to positive consumer feedback and response satisfaction in two contexts: online review and social media websites. The studies also demonstrate the mediating effect of response satisfaction on intention to engage in future positive feedback about the brand. Study 3 builds on these findings by showing the mediating influences of response personalization and effort on response satisfaction. In Studies 4-6, I examine three features of consumer feedback that may vary based on the consumer's desire to invest in the company relationship. Study 4 looks at the moderating role of feedback effort on the relative importance of response personalization and effort in predicting response satisfaction. Similarly, Study 5 looks at the positivity of the feedback and Study 6 examines how the level of specificity in the consumer's feedback has a moderating effect on the two response factors, effort and personalization. These show how elements of both feedback and response are important to successful interactions between company and consumer when positive feedback is given online.

This research makes three primary contributions to the literature. First, this research is the first to empirically validate the importance of active management of online positive consumer feedback. In so doing, I identify risk factors associated with receiving positive feedback online. I demonstrate that failure to effectively respond to positive feedback may disincentivize future positive feedback shared online, even if it does not result in customer defection. Second, I explicate the process by which the company's response contributes to satisfaction and intention to share positive feedback in the future. I show that the mediating effects of perceived response effort and personalization are

responsible for the differential effects observed between affirmative response strategies and non-response. Third, I demonstrate how aspects of the consumer's positive feedback contribute to consumer satisfaction during these interactions. Firms can use these insights to guide the management of positive online customers and deepen relationship with them.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Consumers and Brand Relationships*

Consumers form bonds with companies using schemas that resemble interpersonal relationships (de Chernatony and Dall-Olmo Riley 1998). Like interpersonal relationships, these bonds with companies vary in terms of strength, stability, and duration (Fournier 1998). Further, consumers invest in these relationships. Relationship investments refer to the magnitude and importance of personal resources contributed to a relationship (Rusbult et al. 1998; Palmatier et al. 2009). Consumers commit time, money, and energies toward brand-related activities such as learning about, acquiring, and using products, purchasing complementary brand products or services, or engaging in positive word of mouth about the brand (Breivik and Thorbjørnsen 2008).

Brand relationships also feature interactions that take place between the consumer and brand. Expectations or norms of social behavior both govern and influence the assessments of these interactions, as consumers interact with brands in ways that mimic their dyadic human interactions (Aggarwal 2004). Consumer-brand interactions have the capacity to go beyond exchanges that are merely transactional in nature and instead become relational interactions directed more by expectations of what is socially appropriate for the situation (Clark and Mills 1993; Harmeling et al. 2015). Front-line

service employees are expected to not only deliver an agreed-upon service, but to deliver in a socially appropriate way that underscores the importance of the consumer. When companies and their employees behave consistently with established relational norms, these interactions help move the relationship along a stable, positive trajectory (Jap and Anderson 2007). Over time, positive interactions maintain customer satisfaction and deepen customer loyalty (Harmeling et al. 2015). However, interactions that violate relational norms have the potential to significantly alter or damage the brand relationship. A violation may signal that the relationship may be worsening instead of improving (McLean and Pratt 2006). It forces the consumer to reassess the nature of the relationship and its benefits relative to their continued investments (Bolton 1961).

#### *Relationship Communication Norms*

Relationship communication is one area in which norms influence the amount, frequency, and quality of information shared between parties (Palmatier et al. 2006). Norms dictate that communication should be responsive, timely, and relevant to the expectations of each party (Grönroos 2004; Schultz et al. 1992). Norms such as turn-taking in a conversation (Sacks et al. 1974), facilitate effective communication, build trust, and enhance relationship quality (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Sharma and Patterson 1999). Communication norms between consumers and companies are largely dictated by context, in that an interaction often follows a particular script that both parties understand and adhere to, even if the communication is unspoken. For example, some communication norms are transactional and verbal (a cashier asking, “Would you like paper or plastic bags?”) while others are non-transactional and non-verbal (a door greeter smiling and acknowledging a patron entering the store).

### *Communication Norms Online*

Communication norms exist in the online world, where interactions are mediated by digital devices, but without many of the verbal and non-verbal cues that exist in the corporeal space. Notwithstanding, people interact with brands and brand representatives online as if they were physically present and engaged in a two-way dialogue (Labrecque 2014; Song and Zinghan 2008; Martin and Ballantine 2005). Particularly, consumers expect online interactions to be bi-directional—being able to both send and receive messages (Hoffman and Novak 1996). They also expect messages to be responsive, or to build on prior messages (Rafaeli 1988). Last consumers expect timeliness, or efficiency in the temporal proximity between messages (Heeter 2000). Consequently, consumers expect online treatment from brands that exhibits the characteristics of offline human conversations (Varadarajan and Yadav 2002; Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997), especially on social media where brands have a presence and are expected to respond (Altitude.com 2016). For brands, a major challenge of interacting online lies in understanding how a particular consumer context may impose added, unique communication norms that are critical to the health of the relationship.

### *Online Norms for Positive Communication*

Consumers have high expectations for company communication when they share negative brand feedback online (Van Noort and Willemsen 2012). However, research is less clear about the communication norms and expectations associated with sharing positive feedback. By definition, positive feedback suggests correct actions, strengths, or accomplishments (Finkelstein and Fishbach 2012). Positive consumer feedback typically

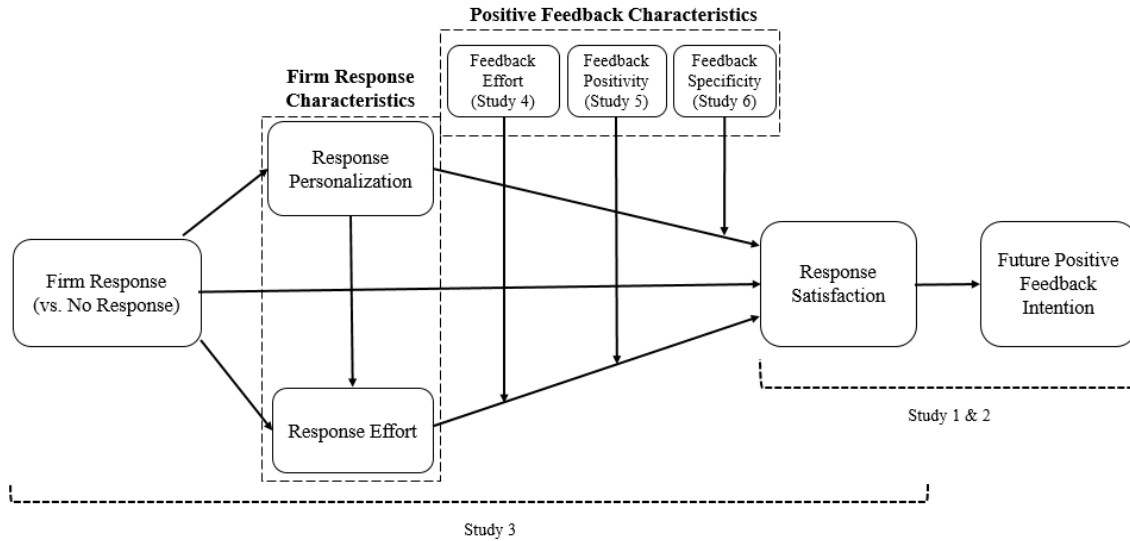


manifests following a consumer's positive experience with, or the observation of, desirable behavior by a company or its employees (Kraft and Martin 2001). Positive consumer feedback indicates a positive, committed relationship on a satisfactory trajectory, free from the need for service recovery efforts (Homburg et al. 2010). Given this positive relationship state, the literature is unclear about the company's need to engage with this type of communication. Firms may prefer to focus limited resources on dissatisfied consumers, whose feedback may prove more informative than that of satisfied consumers (Delarocas and Wood 2008), and whose risk of defection and negative influence on other consumers are known to be stronger than the social contagion from positive WOM (Herr et al. 1991; Park and Lee 2009).

Extant research regarding brand response to positive consumer feedback is limited and primarily descriptive without determining relational consequences. While evidence indicates that firms typically respond to unsolicited compliments received by traditional mail, usually with a form letter or one-time incentive (Erickson and Eckrich 2001), research using positive feedback through email and web forms reported that between 30 percent and 46 percent of companies failed to respond to customer compliments (Gulas 2012; Shields 2006). No research has explored the prevalent practice of unsolicited positive consumer feedback or corresponding company responses through social media and other public channels. However, the available evidence suggests that companies respond inconsistently to positive feedback online, suggesting that companies are either insensitive to consumer expectations for a response or rather lack an understanding of the effects of their communication (or non-communication) on consumer perceptions and behavior.

## HYPOTHESES

Communications research describes the norms associated with giving, receiving, and responding to compliments, approval, and praise—all forms of positive feedback. In her seminal work on the semantics of this process, Pomerantz (1978) underscores the norms associated with the compliment-response combination, calling them a *chained action*, “linked such that the performance of Action<sub>1</sub> provides the possibility of performance of Action<sub>2</sub> as an appropriate next action” (p.82). Compliment responses are divided into acceptance (agreement) and rejection (non-agreement) *superstrategies* (Pomerantz 1978; Herbert 1986). Acceptance includes a range of response behaviors, from simply acknowledging the compliment to supplementing it with commentary or even returning a compliment. Likewise rejection covers responses ranging from disagreeing with the compliment to downplaying it, to ignoring it altogether. Downplaying is occasionally considered culturally appropriate, but in general, individuals expect to receive affirming responses (Chen 1993). Recall that consumers anticipate company responsiveness to initiated communication (Labrecque 2014). Thus, I suggest that consumers adopt the same expectations of acceptance from companies when sharing positive feedback online and as a result, some response strategies will be perceived more favorably than others. Drawing upon a rich literature demonstrating the value of relationship investments, I posit that response personalization and response effort perceived by the consumer will lead to consumer satisfaction, influencing the consumer’s likelihood of making similar future investments into the brand relationship, as illustrated in Figure 1.



*Figure 1. Effects of Positive Feedback Response on Response Satisfaction and Future Positive Feedback Intent*

While extant research provides little explicit guidance about the effects of different responses on consumer evaluations, a non-response to positive feedback would be considered a norm violation (Aggarwal 2004), increasing the likelihood of a negative impact on consumer perceptions. First, the lack of communication may lead consumers to infer that their opinion was rejected or wrong (Raggio et al. 2014), and potentially feel insulted (Herbert and Straight 1989). Second, at a relational level, satisfied consumers are frequently motivated by a desire to help the company and develop their brand relationships (Kraft and Martin 2001). Sharing positive feedback with the company represents a consumer’s investment into the relationship, while the lack of response (particularly when expected) signals the company’s unwillingness to similarly invest (De Wulf et al. 2001), thus making the relational exchange inequitable (Oliver and Swan 1989).

Non-response may further disincentivize some consumers from sharing positive feedback or speaking positively about the brand online in the future (Moschis and Churchill Jr. 1978), since the consumer would perceive their positive feedback to be unappreciated. Non-response forces the customer to downwardly adjust the value of their positive feedback to the brand and their status in the brand relationship. I expect that the consequence of response or non-response on repeat positive feedback intentions is mediated by the consumer's satisfaction with the company response. Prior social media research finds a similar behavior link between interaction satisfaction and purchase intent (Hamilton et al. 2016).

**H1ab:** Brand response to positive feedback (vs. non-response) is associated with (a) higher response satisfaction and (b) greater consumer intentions to communicate positive online feedback in the future.

**H2:** The relationship between brand response to positive feedback (vs. non-response) and greater consumer intentions to communicate positive online feedback in the future is mediated by response satisfaction.

### *Response Characteristics*

Evaluations of a company's response to *negative* consumer feedback are largely dependent on both an outcome (typically some remunerative form of service recovery) and process factors such as the communication involved with the interaction (Blodgett et al. 1997; Mohr and Bitner 1995; Smith et al. 1999). Without some objective service outcome norm associated with positive feedback (aside from the expectation of a response), consumers are likely to turn to elements of the response as heuristics in assessing the quality of the interaction. Through these heuristics, consumers can gauge

their own importance to the company, the importance of their feedback, and the underlying status and trajectory of the relationship (Tidwell and Walther 2002). I explore two important process factors in the response communication that consumers can use to assess companies' investment in the relationship: response effort and personalization.

### *Response Effort*

Compliment research shows that there are various approaches for responding to positive feedback in accepting ways (Pomerantz 1978) and that cultures sometimes differ in terms of the complexity and number of strategies used to respond (Tang and Zhang 2009).

Some are low effort, such as a simple acknowledgment or a "thank you." Others are more involved, such as accepting the feedback with additional commentary that adds richness to the exchange. While the response fulfills the feedback giver's expectations, the effort put into the response may also communicate information about how much the party wishes to invest in the relationship (Rusbult et al. 1998). Equity theory suggest that efforts contributed to interactions are perceived as positive inputs into an exchange (Farkas and Anderson 1979; Lamm, Kayser, and Schanz 1983). I propose that a company's response effort, or the amount of energy put into the response (Mohr and Bitner 1995), shapes consumer perceptions because it provides a useful heuristic for the consumer to determine their own importance and the importance of the relationship to the company.

This response effort heuristic operates similarly to the way that consumers reward companies for efforts in other interactions. Understanding that companies and company representatives choose their own degree of effort during interactions, consumers give higher satisfaction scores to more effortful service employees (Bitner et al. 1994) and

larger tips to effortful restaurant waiters (Lynn and Grassman 1990). Consumers respond to effort favorably and reward where possible (Morales 2005). Consumers may rely even more heavily on the effort heuristic as a way to evaluate non-transactional exchanges, such as those initiated by online positive feedback. In interactive contexts that lack a specific target outcome, consumers tend to focus more on the process and experience (Parasuraman et al. 1985; Grönroos 1990).

Since company effort is unobservable, it must be inferred through cues or aspects of behavior (Mohr and Bitner 1995). On social media and in other computer-mediated environments, the absence of non-verbal or behavioral cues means that the consumer must make assessments of effort from available cues in the communication, which may include elements such as response speed, complexity, or textual cues that suggest behind-the-scenes effort on the consumer's behalf (such as documenting the positive feedback for leadership to see). Consumer response satisfaction will depend on these peripheral cues as heuristics in determining the brand's effort in contributing to the relationship. If the consumer perceives a lower effort investment, the interaction will likely fail to meet their expectations and result in lower evaluations.

**H3a:** The relationship between brand response to positive feedback (versus non-response) and response satisfaction is mediated by perceived response effort.

### *Response Personalization*

A key aspect of marketing associated with positive customer relationships is service personalization (Arora et al. 2008; Berry 1995; Miceli et al. 2007).

Personalization suggests behaviors by the firm during an interaction intended to

contribute to the importance of the individual (Montgomery and Smith 2009; Surprenant and Solomon 1987) by elevating their status in the relationship (Brady and Cronin 2001). Operationalized, personalization may include tailored offerings, greetings, recommendations, questions, introducing oneself, or using the customer's name (Koch and Benlian 2015; Kwortnik et al. 2009). Furthermore, the company can customize its response using information disclosed by the consumer, either explicitly in communication or peripherally. For example, consumer profiles used to communicate through social media frequently disclose valuable personal information including name, location, biographical description, tastes and preferences, relationships and friends, activity and influence. A firm can use this data to enhance its relationship with consumers by demonstrating an invested interest in them.

As with effort, personalization must be perceived by the consumer in order to have a positive effect on customer attitudes (Surprenant and Solomon 1987). Even if personalized communication is relatively easy and does not contribute objectively to service or product performance in the context of feedback response, it serves as a relationship investment that can signal the company's commitment to the individual consumer. When consumers feel that their interaction has been personalized, they are more likely to experience feelings of gratitude (Koch and Benlian 2015), evaluate employees and companies more positively (Surprenant and Solomon 1987), and demonstrate brand loyalty (Ball et al. 2006). A lack of desired personalization in the company's response means that the communication will fall short of expectations and lower satisfaction with the response.

**H3b:** The relationship between brand response to positive feedback (versus non-response) and response satisfaction is mediated by response personalization.

### *Feedback Characteristics*

The success of a firm's response to positive consumer feedback is partly a consequence of controllable elements in the response strategy, such as effort and personalization, which can be construed as the company's relationship marketing investments (De Wulf et al. 2001). However, the consumer experience and evaluations depend also on their set of expectations for the interaction and the brand's positive or negative deviation from them (Anderson 1973), resulting in satisfaction or dissatisfaction. According to equity theory, one partner's own perceived contributions will have a significant effect on whether that partner considers the other's contributions to be substantially equitable (Adams 1965). The investment of unrecoverable resources in a relationship by the consumer (time, effort, etc.) set an expectation of company reciprocation (Blau 1964). As such, I suggest that the consumer's own investments into the positive feedback they share will shift their response expectations and subsequent evaluations of company communication. I describe three characteristics of the consumer's positive feedback that may shift both expectations for the brand response and the relative importance of both response effort and personalization in driving consumer satisfaction with the exchange.

### *Feedback Effort*

Motivations guide the effort and persistence of many consumer behaviors (Locke et al. 1981), such that consumers are likely to spend more time and energy in the creation



of positive feedback when they have greater psychological drive. While higher effort may result in higher quality feedback, it also shifts the consumer's perception of their own contribution to an interaction with the company. Consumers are likely to compare the company's relationship investment against their own by juxtaposing the amount of effort they put into their portion of the compliment-response "chained action" (Pomerantz 1978) with the perceived effort of the company, in order to make inferences about relationship equity (Adams 1965). If a more effortful submission of positive feedback is met with a low effort response, perhaps a short acknowledgment, the consumer's expectations of an appropriate response will be disconfirmed, leading to dissatisfaction. However, a high effort response to low effort positive feedback has the potential to delight the customer beyond their already positive state (Oliver et al. 1997).

**H4:** Feedback effort moderates the relationship between response effort and response satisfaction. Response effort has a greater influence on response satisfaction when feedback effort is high.

### *Feedback Positivity*

When consumers share positive feedback, these positive expressions may span different degrees of intensity (Ortony et al. 1987), meaning that some types of *positive* feedback language may be more positive than others. Companies likely place a premium on highly positive online feedback as both an indicator of consumer satisfaction (Anderson 1998) as well as a predictor of sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Duan et al. 2008; Park and Park 2013). Likewise, research suggests that more highly positive consumer feedback would have a greater impact on employees (Nasr et al. 2014) and a

greater potential of being shared by others (Berger and Milkman 2012). Thus highly positive online feedback should be recognized as a more valuable relationship investment by the consumer.

In addition to providing added value through more positive feedback, research suggests that highly positive consumers may be channeling feedback efforts with greater exertion due to higher arousal states (Tannenbaum and Zillmann 1975). Given these investments in the company relationship, I anticipate the highly positive consumer to have higher expectations for the company's response. Reciprocity theory would suggest that the company's response effort is likely to be more salient because of the consumer's own efforts in producing more positive feedback, and therefore more important as a satisfaction determinant.

**H5:** Feedback positivity moderates the relationship between response effort and response satisfaction. Response effort has a greater influence on response satisfaction when feedback positivity is high.

### *Feedback Specificity*

The degree of specificity indicates the level of information included in feedback messages, including the volume, detail, or clarity of information (Goodman et al. 2004; Goldstein et al. 1968). Specific positive consumer feedback offers multiple sources of value to a company. First, it provides detail that can be a source of learning. Increased information helps guide feedback recipients toward better inferences about which behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate (Annett 1969; Baron 1988). Indeed, some research suggests that better performance results from specific positive feedback

compared to negative (Goodman and Wood 2004). When specific positive feedback pertains to service employee behaviors, the company can use it to recognize and reinforce those desired behaviors internally, promoting a healthy service climate (Johnson 1996). Second, specific feedback represents a source of information about the individual consumer's tastes, preferences, and sources of loyalty that the company can leverage in future targeted marketing activities (Heller Baird and Parasnis 2011). Lastly, companies that use positive customer feedback in their promotional activities may benefit from increased message persuasiveness that comes from consumers recommending specific products or services as opposed to generic praise (Herr et al. 1991).

Research suggests that consumers view their own disclosure of more personal information in terms of the benefits compared with the costs of disclosure (Andrade et al. 2002, Thibaut and Kelley 1959). People specifically consider how the recipient may appropriately use the disclosed information (Ajzen 1977; Dalto et al. 1979). I suggest that a consumer's disclosure of specific details in online positive feedback will elevate the consumer's expectations of the company to invest in the relationship by adapting its communication. Since specific positive feedback represents an investment that invites the firm to better personalize its response (Surprenant and Solomon 1987), these consumers have a higher likelihood of forming positive impressions when companies make efforts to incorporate consumer information into their correspondence.

**H6:** Feedback specificity moderates the relationship between response personalization and response satisfaction. Response personalization has a greater influence on response satisfaction when feedback specificity is high.

## METHODOLOGY

I use six experimental studies to test my theoretical framework. In a lab experiment, using an online review context, Study 1 establishes the mediating effect of response satisfaction on the relationship between company response to positive online consumer feedback and the consumer's intention to engage in future positive feedback activity. Study 2 confirms the robustness of these effects in a social media environment. Study 3 adds to these findings by demonstrating how response personalization and response effort mediate the effects of response (or non-response) on the consumer's response satisfaction. Studies 4, 5, and 6 are a series of lab experiments in different contexts, testing the relative influence of positive feedback characteristics on the relationship between perceived response personalization and effort on response satisfaction. Study 4 tests the influence of feedback effort, Study 5 tests feedback positivity, and Study 6 tests feedback specificity.

### STUDY 1: EFFECTS OF RESPONSE (NON-RESPONSE) ON CONSUMER SATISFACTION AND EWOM INTENT

*Procedure.* In Study 1, 256 business undergraduate students (ages 18-49,  $M_{age} = 23.8$ , 54.7% male) at a university in the western United States received course credit for participating in a scenario-based lab experiment. I assigned participants randomly to one of five between-subjects conditions (company response: no response vs. response conditions). Participants were asked to think of a recent positive experience they had enjoyed at a sit-down restaurant. Participants were instructed to write a review about their experience as if it were going to be posted on an online review website called Yelp, where companies have the option to respond to consumer reviews. In the control

condition, participants were told that the restaurant did not respond to their review. In company response conditions (see Appendix C), participants were told that the general manager of the restaurant responded publicly with one of the following four scripts: (1) “Thank you!” (2) “Was there anything particular about your visit that made it memorable? We love details.” (3) “We’re so glad you enjoyed your time with us!” (4) “I’m going to pass your review along to our kitchen staff.” After reviewing the response, participants completed the questionnaire.

*Company responses.* To develop the 4 response conditions in a way that represented a range of appropriate and representative company responses, I drew on research categorizing interpersonal compliment responses (Herbert 1989; Pomerantz 1978). Compliment responses span 11 general classifications, from no acknowledgment to rejecting or downplaying the compliment, to acceptance with simple acknowledgment or more elaborate acceptance, such as returning the compliment or committing to act on it. Rather than use all possible response conditions in the study, I empirically derived a subset of reasonable responses using a sample of actual company responses to positive feedback received on an online social network, Twitter.com. Consumers using Twitter are able to post public messages or “tweets” to other users, including companies, and any company response (or non-response) is publicly visible. I generated a sample of 178 companies with official Twitter accounts across dozens of industries from the American Customer Satisfaction Index. The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) is generally acknowledged to include companies representing the entire customer experience (Fornell et al. 1996). Using an anchor date, I identified the first positive tweet mentioning the company’s Twitter name and documented the company’s Twitter

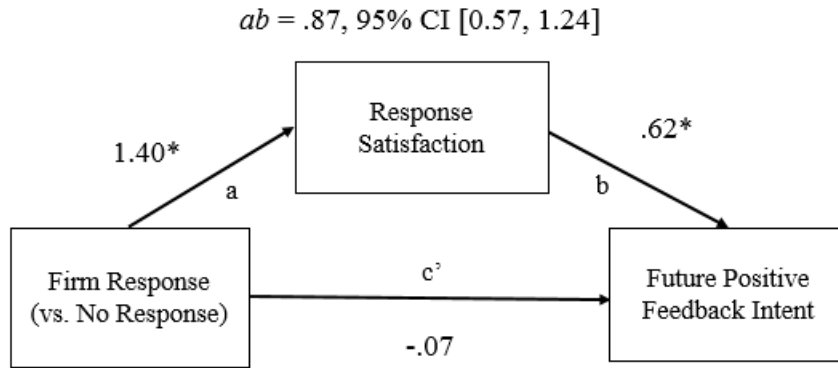
response using classifications provided by Herbert (1989). In cases where the response used combinations of items in the classification, I counted multiple items for the same response (see Appendix A for all observed response categories). In 42.7% of cases, the company did not respond to the consumer's positive tweet. Across all responses, there were no cases of the company rejecting or downplaying the positive tweet. Companies demonstrated frequent displays of tacit acceptance by "Liking" the positive tweet (clicking the tweet's heart icon) in 21.4% of the observations and "Retweeting" (sharing the positive tweet with their own network of followers) in 4.5% of observations. Among actual text responses, the 4 response conditions used in Study 1 are among the most frequently observed response forms: a brief thank you (23%), expressing gladness (24.7%), asking a follow-up question (11.8%), and shifting credit to someone within the organization (3.9%). I validated the selection of responses with an item, "The restaurant's response to my review was believable ( $M = 4.94$ )."

*Measures.* Participants responded to several measures (see Appendix B) to capture the constructs of interest on 7-point Likert scales. Response satisfaction was measured using a modified version of a generalized satisfaction scale (Spreng et al. 1996). Repeat positive feedback intent was measured with the following question: "How likely would you be to write a positive online review about this restaurant if you had a similar dining experience there in the future?" As controls, I measured participants' experience with Yelp, their relationship with the restaurant (number of times visiting the restaurant in the past year), the believability of the scenario, as well as age and gender.

*Results.* To generate a comparison between response and non-response conditions, I collapsed the response conditions to create aggregate mean scores for the

dependent variables. The analysis involved a between-subjects ANOVA with response satisfaction and repeat review intent included as dependent variables. Supporting H1, participants were more satisfied with a company response versus non-response ( $M_{response} = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 1.22$  vs  $M_{non-response} = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ;  $F(1,254) = 49.46$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and had greater future intentions to communicate positive online feedback ( $M_{response} = 4.99$ ,  $SD = 1.75$  vs  $M_{non-response} = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ;  $F(1,254) = 8.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

To test the indirect effect of response satisfaction, I used the bootstrapping procedure espoused by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007), including 10,000 resamples with replacement and the popular *PROCESS* macro. Visual results of the analysis are included in Figure 2. Controlling for response condition, Yelp experience, company relationship, scenario believability, age, and gender, response satisfaction significantly predicted future positive online feedback intention ( $b = .62$ ,  $t(239) = 7.62$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Supporting H2, the indirect effect of company response on future feedback intention through response satisfaction was significant ( $b = .87$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $CI_{95}: .57, 1.24$ ). After accounting for the indirect effect of response on future feedback intention through response satisfaction, response has a negative, but non-significant direct effect on future intent ( $b = -.07$ ,  $t(239) = -.26$ ,  $p = .79$ ). Together, the mediating effect of response satisfaction represents 92.3% of the total effect of response on future feedback intention.



Note: \*  $p < .01$ .

Figure 2. *The Mediating Role of Response Satisfaction in the Effect of Positive Feedback Response on Future Positive Feedback Intent (Study 1).*

*Discussion.* The results of Study 1 support the framework showing that a company's response to positive online feedback generates greater consumer satisfaction compared with non-response and that this increased satisfaction mediates the relationship between company response and intentions to share positive feedback online in the future. In Study 2, I show that these results generalize to a social media context.

## STUDY 2: REPLICATION OF STUDY 1

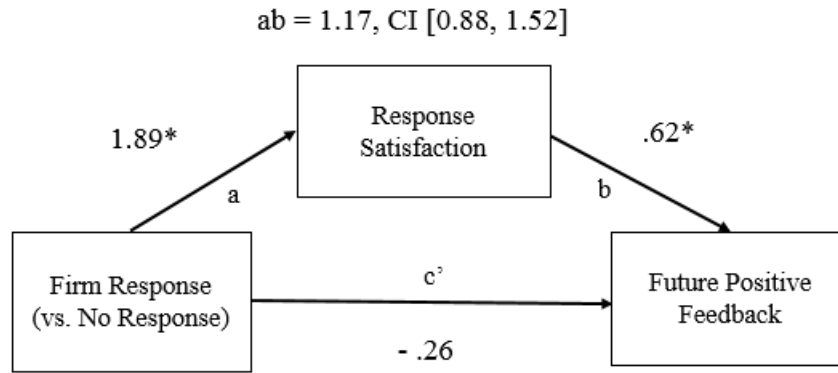
The purpose of Study 2 was to validate the results of Study 1 in a social media channel frequently used to share positive consumer feedback: Twitter. In an effort to generalize the conceptual model, I also sought to demonstrate that results from Study 1 were not attributable to the novelty of the company responding, since expectations for a company response to a review on Yelp are likely lower than the expectation of a company-directed tweet.



*Design and sample.* Study 2 used the same restaurant scenario and response conditions. Participants were instructed to write their own positive message to the company as if it would be posted publicly on Twitter. I used Twitter because conversations between companies and consumers occur publicly and frequently on the platform. The only change in response conditions from Study 1 was that the company response originated from the restaurant's Twitter profile instead of the restaurant's general manager, in accordance with platform norms. Otherwise, all response messaging was identical to that used in Study 1. The sample of participants included 416 undergraduate business students (ages 18-54,  $M_{age} = 23.6$ , 52.6% male) from a western U.S. university. All measures were kept consistent between Study 1 and Study 2, controlling for Twitter experience in place of Yelp.

*Results.* Consistent with Study 1, and in support of hypothesis 1, participants reported higher satisfaction with company response versus non-response ( $M_{response} = 5.74$ ,  $SD = 1.54$  vs  $M_{non-response} = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ;  $F(1,414) = 97.8$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and had greater future intentions to share positive tweets with the restaurant ( $M_{response} = 5.02$ ,  $SD = 1.81$  vs  $M_{non-response} = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ;  $F(1,413) = 42.2$ ,  $p < .01$ ). To test the indirect effect, I used the same bootstrapping procedure from Study 1, with results shown in Figure 3. Controlling for response condition, Twitter experience, company relationship, age, and gender, response satisfaction predicted future positive online feedback intention ( $b = .62$ ,  $t(407) = 12.14$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In support of hypothesis 2, the indirect effect of company response on future feedback intention through response satisfaction was significant ( $b = 1.17$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $CI_{95}: .88, 1.52$ ). Controlling for the indirect effect of response on future feedback intent, the remaining direct effect is not significant ( $b = .26$ ,  $SE = .21$ ,  $CI_{95}: -$

.15, .68). In sum, the indirect effect comprises 81.8% of the total effect of response on future feedback intent.



Note: \*  $p < .01$ .

Figure 3. The Mediating Role of Response Satisfaction in the Effect of Positive Feedback Response on Future Positive Feedback Intent (Study 2).

*Discussion.* The results of Study 2 support the framework and replicate the previous study, showing that company response to positive online consumer feedback yields greater satisfaction and future feedback intention. Additionally, the studies confirm that response satisfaction mediates the effect of company response on future feedback intention. Compared with the review website scenario, non-response in the social media scenario appears to be more negatively impactful on perceptions and behavioral intentions, potentially due to differences in platform expectations. In Study 3, I provide evidence for the underlying process that results in response satisfaction.

### STUDY 3: PROCESS MECHANISM INCLUDING PERSONALIZATION AND EFFORT

*Design and sample.* The purpose of Study 3 is to identify the underlying process mechanism that drives response satisfaction in the context of online positive feedback. The design of Study 3 is similar to Study 2, with participants randomly assigned to response conditions on Twitter. Again, participants were instructed to compose their own tweet to a restaurant that had recently provided a positive experience. The primary addition to Study 3 is the inclusion of measures of response personalization and response effort as mediators in the predictive model. This study was administered to 473 undergraduate business majors (ages 16-54,  $M_{age} = 23.7$ , 50.6% female).

*Measures.* There was no existing response personalization measure. However, the literature frequently uses personalization interchangeably with customization, when customization originates with the firm (Glushko and Nomorosa 2013; Aksoy et al. 2006). Thus the perceived response personalization measure was created by adapting a scale used to measure e-tailer customization, which captures the tailoring of products, services, and the environment to individual customers (Srinivasan et al. 2002). To measure perceived response effort, I adapted an existing multi-item scale used to measure employee effort (Mohr and Bitner 1995). Other measures were identical to prior studies.

*Results.* I used a serial multiple mediation model to test the indirect effects of condition on response satisfaction through response personalization and response effort simultaneously. Rather than using a parallel mediation model, which assumes the mediators are not related, this model includes an indirect causal path for personalization

to influence response satisfaction through perceived response effort. I selected this approach for the theoretical reason that in some cases, personalization may serve as a cue for effort (Mohr and Bitner 1995), suggesting that personalized response communication may exercise an influence on perceived effort in addition to having its own effect on response satisfaction. Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, I employed a bootstrapping method with 10,000 resamples. In Table 1, I report the regression coefficients for the effects of response on the two mediators, perceived personalization and effort, and response satisfaction. The table also contains regression coefficients for other paths outlined in the mediation model, with the inclusion of Twitter experience and restaurant frequency as covariates.

Antecedent	Consequent								
	Personalization			Effort			Response		
	Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	SE	<i>p</i>
Response	1.26	.19	< .01	.67	.10	< .01	1.13	.16	< .01
Personalization				.80	.02	< .01	.28	.07	< .01
Effort							.25	.07	< .01
Twitter Experience	.08	.04	.02	.03	.02	.14	-.09	.03	< .01
Restaurant Frequency	.14	.05	< .01	-.02	.02	.35	-.03	.04	.40
Response Believability	.01	.06	.86	.01	.03	.60	.24	.04	< .01
Age	.00	.01	.89	.00	.01	.72	.03	.01	.01
Gender	-.46	.16	< .01	-.08	.08	.30	.08	.12	.49
Constant	.58	.64	.36	-.53	.32	.10	-.53	.49	.29

Table 1. Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Model Summary for Study 3

Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, participants reported higher satisfaction with company response versus non-response ( $M_{response} = 5.2$  vs  $M_{non-response} = 3.19$ ;  $F(1,470) = 126.98$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Participants also reported greater perceived personalization ( $M_{response} =$

3.45 vs  $M_{non-response} = 2.16$ ;  $F(1,469) = 43.97$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and greater perceived effort ( $M_{response} = 3.59$  vs  $M_{non-response} = 1.88$ ;  $F(1,470) = 87.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ) in the response condition than non-response. The full proposed model demonstrates good fit with the data ( $F(8,459) = 72.1$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In support of hypothesis 3, both perceived personalization and perceived effort mediate the relationship between company response and response satisfaction. The indirect effect of company response on response satisfaction through perceived personalization was significant ( $b = .36$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $CI_{95}: .19, .57$ ). The indirect effect of company response on response satisfaction through perceived effort was also significant ( $b = .17$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $CI_{95}: .07, .30$ ). Lastly, the path from personalization through effort significantly predicts response satisfaction ( $b = .25$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $CI_{95}: .12, .43$ ). A comparison of path coefficient differences suggests that the serial mediating path (response influencing satisfaction through personalization, which influences perceived effort) is more influential than the path through effort alone ( $b = .08$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $CI_{95}: 0, .21$ ). Both the indirect mediation paths ( $b = .78$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $CI_{95}: .58, .99$ ) and direct effect of response on response satisfaction ( $b = 1.13$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $CI_{95}: .80, 1.45$ ) are significant, with the indirect effects representing 41.1% of the total effect of response on response satisfaction, as shown in Figure 4.

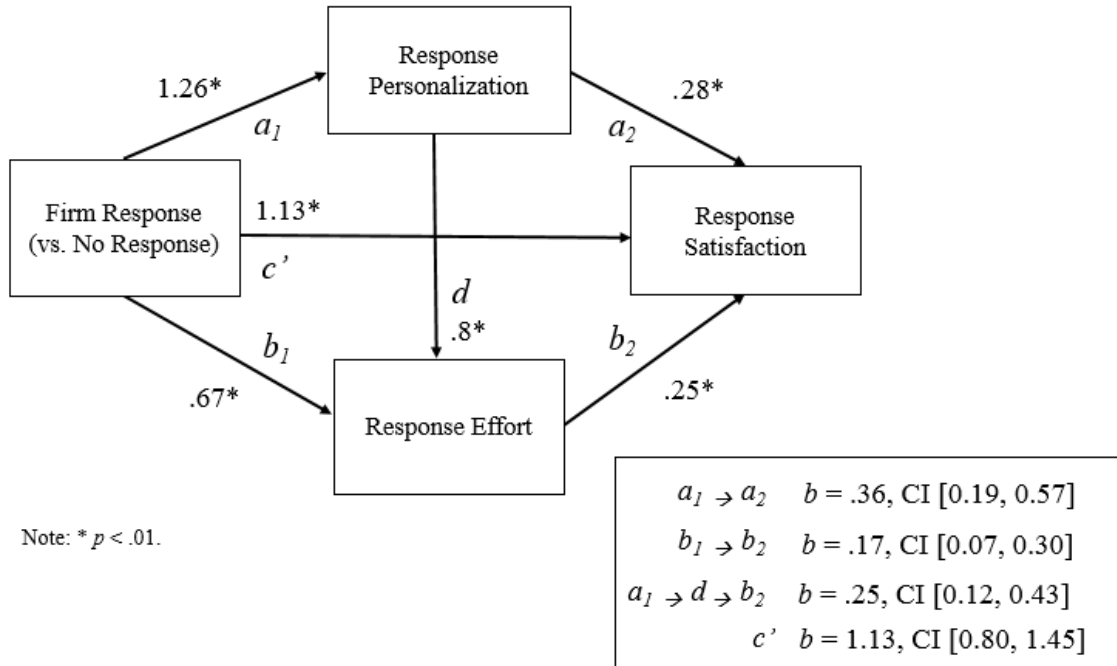


Figure 4. The Mediating Role of Perceived Response Personalization and Effort in the Effect of Positive Feedback Response on Future Positive Feedback Intent (Study 3).

*Discussion.* Study 3 supports my proposed framework, supporting hypothesis 3 and replicating the main finding from Studies 1 and 2. It extends findings from the first two studies by showing the underlying mechanism that results in consumer satisfaction with the response, namely that response influences satisfaction through personalization, which subsequently effects perceived effort. This increased perceived effort leads to greater consumer satisfaction with the company's response. Thus, consumers that perceive either more personalized or more effortful response communication are likely to experience greater satisfaction with the company's response. Findings from this study also suggest that perceived personalization exercises a stronger overall effect on response satisfaction than perceptions of effort, when serial mediation path from personalization

through effort is accounted for. In Studies 4, 5, and 6, I examine the role that consumers' own feedback plays in influencing the strength of the individual mediators.

#### STUDY 4: EFFECT OF FEEDBACK EFFORT

*Design and sample.* The purpose of Study 4 was to test the effect of positive feedback effort on the relationships between the company's response personalization, response effort, and resulting consumer satisfaction with the response. I conducted randomized 2 (feedback effort) x 2 (response personalization) x 2 (response effort) between-subjects design in which participants were shown consumer-initiated positive feedback posted to a fictitious pizza restaurant on Twitter and the restaurant's response (see Appendix D for stimuli). Studies 4-6 included a third-person scenario that measures perceptions and evaluations from the observer perspective, rather than from the first-person. This perspective has been used in related literature (Schamari and Schaefer 2014) as an appropriate way to evaluate online company communications when a first person perspective may be less practical for the particular study design. Study 4 included 760 undergraduate student participants (ages 16-49,  $M_{age} = 23.3$ , 51.8% male).

*Manipulations.* To manipulate consumer feedback effort, the high effort feedback condition described the consumer sending two positive tweets to the company, which included a 30-second pizza video taken at the restaurant. In contrast, the low effort condition was limited to one message with no media. To manipulate response personalization, the company's high personalization response used the consumer's name and referenced something specific from the consumer's tweet. The low personalization condition did not use the consumer's name or specific reference. Finally, I manipulated response effort with a scenario in which the company responded by "liking" and

“retweeting” the consumer’s tweet, in addition to a couple of reply messages. In the low effort condition, the company responded with a single tweet with no additional actions.

*Measures.* Study 4 used identical measures from Study 3 for all variables and all item measures used 7-point Likert scales. The measure of feedback effort was adapted from the existing response effort measure. In Studies 4, 5, and 6, I also control for the participant’s experience with Twitter, age, and gender.

*Results.* The manipulation checks showed statistically significant differences (all with  $p < .01$ ) in the expected direction between group means on questions about perceptions of feedback effort (5.26<sub>low</sub> vs. 5.65<sub>high</sub>), response personalization (3.79<sub>low</sub> vs. 4.62<sub>high</sub>), and response effort (3.78<sub>low</sub> vs. 4.44<sub>high</sub>).

Results of the OLS regression are included in Table 2. Multiple linear regression was used to estimate response satisfaction based on response personalization, response effort, and consumer feedback effort. Cronbach’s alpha for each multi-item measure was greater than .9. The regression equation for the base model is significant ( $F(6,753) = 145.95, p < .01$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .54. In the base model, response personalization is a significant predictor of response satisfaction, with a unit increase in perceived personalization corresponding to a .17 unit increase in satisfaction ( $p < .01$ ). Response effort is marginally significant with a unit increase in perceived response effort corresponding to a .07 unit increase in response satisfaction ( $p = .05$ ). Perceived feedback effort is significant in predicting response satisfaction ( $p < .01$ ) with a unit increase in perceived feedback effort corresponding to a .63 unit increase in response satisfaction.



Antecedent	Full Model			Base Model		
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
Response Personalization	.10	.18	.58	.17	.03	<.01
Response Effort	.35	.18	.06	.07	.03	.05
Feedback Effort	.76	.07	<.01	.63	.03	<.01
Feedback Effort X Response Effort	-.05	.03	.11			
Feedback Effort X Response Personalization	.01	.03	.67			
Twitter Experience	.01	.01	.55	.01	.01	.64
Age	.00	.01	.64	.00	.01	.62
Sex	.12	.06	.05	.12	.06	.07
Constant	-.20	.45	.65	.60	.25	.02
	$R^2 = 0.54$			$R^2 = 0.54$		
	$F(8,751) = 110.58, p < .01$			$F(6,753) = 145.95, p < .01$		

Table 2. Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Model Summary for Study 4

The full model that includes two interaction terms is also significant ( $F(8,751) = 110.58, p < .01$ ). Among the main terms, feedback effort is significant ( $b = .76, p < .01$ ), while response effort is marginally significant ( $b = .35, p = .057$ ) and response personalization is partially significant ( $b = .097, p = 0.06$ ). The feedback effort interaction with response effort is not significant ( $b = -.05, p = .11$ ). Thus H4 is not supported.

*Discussion.* The Study 4 base model lends some support for the positive effects of perceived response personalization and response effort on response satisfaction, suggesting that these response factors are determinants of how satisfied consumers will be with company responses to positive online feedback. The analysis also suggests that while feedback effort is not supported in playing a moderating role, it may exercise its own positive main effect on response satisfaction, perhaps because the higher relationship

investment initiated by the consumer results in greater favorability toward any relational partner's actions at the beginning of a brand relationship.

#### STUDY 5: EFFECT OF FEEDBACK POSITIVITY

*Design and sample.* The purpose of Study 5 was to test the effect of feedback positivity on the relationships between the response personalization, response effort, and consumer satisfaction with the response. Study 5 included a scenario-based experiment involving a 2 (high versus low feedback positivity) x 2 (response personalization) x 2 (response effort) between-subjects factorial design, very similar to Study 4. However, in this study, participants were shown an interaction between a consumer and a fictitious apparel retailer on Twitter (see Appendix C for stimuli) The study had 605 undergraduate business student participants (ages 16-54,  $M_{age} = 23.9$ , 50.2% female).

*Manipulations.* To manipulate feedback positivity, the high positivity feedback condition displayed a great deal of positivity about a recent store visit and new fashion collection. Feedback included capitalized letters in some words and multiple uses of exclamation marks, whereas the "low" positivity was moderately positive about the recent store visit, but did not include exclamation marks or capitalized words. The study manipulated response personalization in a way similar to Study 4, with more personalized responses using the consumer's name and referencing the specific fashion collection mentioned in the consumer's original tweet. Similar to Study 4, in the higher effort condition, the company responded by taking multiple positive social media actions and sending multiple messages.

*Measures.* The measures used in this study were identical to those used in Study 4. Feedback positivity was measured with a question: “How positive is [Person] in tweeting?” (Not at all positive – extremely positive)

*Results.* The manipulation checks showed statistically significant differences (all  $p < .01$ ) in the expected direction between group means on questions about perceptions of feedback positivity (5.74<sub>low</sub> vs. 6.59<sub>high</sub>), response personalization (4.65<sub>low</sub> vs. 5.17<sub>high</sub>), and response effort (4.37<sub>low</sub> vs. 4.98<sub>high</sub>).

OLS regression results are included in Table 3. Multiple linear regression was used to estimate response satisfaction based on response personalization, response effort, and consumer feedback effort. Cronbach’s alpha for all multi-item measures was greater than .9. The base predictive model is significant ( $F(6,598) = 62.72, p < .01$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .39. In the base model, all main predictors were significant at  $p < .01$ . A unit increase in response personalization is significantly associated with a .32 unit increase in response satisfaction on a seven-point scale. Response effort is significant with a unit increase in perceived response effort corresponding to a .14 unit increase in predicted response satisfaction. Perceived feedback positivity is also significant with a single unit increase associated with a .31 unit increase in response satisfaction. In the base model, Twitter experience ( $b = .05, p < .01$ ) and gender ( $b = .16, p < .05$ ) are also positively associated with increased satisfaction such that more experienced Twitter users as well as females demonstrate higher response satisfaction.

Antecedent	Full Model			Base Model		
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
Response Personalization	.31	.29	.28	.32	.04	<.01
Response Effort	.12	.30	.69	.14	.04	<.01
Feedback Positivity	.29	.16	.08	.31	.04	<.01
Feedback Effort X Response Effort	.00	.05	.96			
Feedback Positivity X Resp. Personalization	.00	.05	.98			
Twitter Experience	.05	.02	.01	.05	.02	.01
Age	.00	.01	.76	.00	.01	.76
Sex	.16	.08	.05	.16	.08	.05
Constant	1.04	1.08	.34	.94	.35	.01
	$R^2 = 0.39$			$R^2 = 0.39$		
	$F(8,596) = 46.88, p < .01$			$F(6,598) = 62.72, p < .01$		

Table 3. Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Model Summary for Study 5

The full model including the interaction terms is also significant ( $F(8,596) = 46.88, p < .01$ ). Among the main terms, feedback positivity is the only term to demonstrate marginal significance ( $b = .29, p = .08$ ). The hypothesized interaction between feedback positivity and response effort is not significant ( $b = .002, p > .05$ ), therefore H5 is not supported.

*Discussion.* In Study 5, support for the conceptualized effects of perceived response positivity and response effort were evident in the base model. Furthermore, the model demonstrated a positive effect of feedback positivity on subsequent response satisfaction. One explanation may be that survey participants' satisfaction with the response may be influenced by their anticipation of how much the consumer is likely to appreciate the response. A more positive consumer could be seen as more grateful or more deserving. While the hypothesized effect of feedback positivity on the relationship

between response effort and response satisfaction was not supported by the full model, the pattern of results thus far continues to lend support to the core mediation model.

#### STUDY 6: EFFECT OF FEEDBACK SPECIFICITY

*Design and sample.* Study 6 tested the effect of positive feedback specificity on the relationships between the response personalization, response effort, and response satisfaction. This study included a 2 (feedback specificity) x 2 (response personalization) x 2 (response effort) between-subjects, including 458 undergraduate business students (ages 18-51,  $M_{age} = 22.3$ , 50.9% female). The scenario was very similar to the restaurant scenario provided in Study 4, with specificity being the key manipulation.

*Specificity Manipulation.* As in Study 4, participants were shown an interaction between a consumer and a fictitious pizza restaurant on Twitter (see Appendix C). To manipulate feedback specificity, the high specificity feedback condition specifically mentioned a pizza name and details about the positive experience. Low specificity did not mention the pizza by name or provide specific details. Manipulations of response personalization and effort were similar to Study 4.

*Measures.* Study 6 included previously used measures for all variables. Feedback specificity was measured with a question: “How specific is [Person’s] tweet?” (Not at all specific – extremely specific)

*Results.* Manipulation checks confirmed statistically significant differences at  $p < .01$  between different levels of response effort (4.17<sub>low</sub> vs. 4.6<sub>high</sub>), response personalization (3.85<sub>low</sub> vs. 5.05<sub>high</sub>), and feedback specificity (4.28<sub>low</sub> vs. 6.03<sub>high</sub>).

OLS regression results are included in Table 4. Multiple linear regression was used to estimate response satisfaction based on response personalization, response effort, and consumer feedback effort. Cronbach's alpha for each multi-item scale was greater than .9. The base predictive model is significant ( $F(6,450) = 24.06, p < .01$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .24. Consistent with base models from prior studies, coefficients for response personalization ( $b = .33$ ) and response effort ( $b = .15$ ) were both positive and significant at  $p < .01$ . Feedback specificity was also positive and significant ( $b = .09, p = .03$ ). Thus a unit increase perceived response personalization, response effort, and feedback specificity are associated with increases in response satisfaction of .33, .15, and .09 respectively. Gender is also positively associated with response satisfaction ( $b = .41, p < .01$ ).

Antecedent	Full Model			Base Model		
	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p
Response Personalization	.22	.19	.26	.33	.05	<.01
Response Effort	.18	.20	.37	.15	.06	.01
Feedback Specificity	.03	.13	.82	.09	.04	.03
Feedback Effort X Response Effort	-.01	.04	.89			
Feedback Positivity X Response Specificity	.02	.03	.54			
Twitter Experience	-.02	.03	.57	-.02	.03	.57
Age	-.01	.04	.89	.02	.02	.36
Sex	.02	.03	.54	.41	.13	<.01
Constant	2.70	.85	.00	2.34	.50	<.01
	$R^2 = 0.24$			$R^2 = 0.24$		
	$F(8,448) = 18.04, p < .01$			$F(6,450) = 24.06, p < .01$		

Table 4. Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Model Summary for Study 6

The full model including the interaction terms is also significant ( $F(8,448) = 18.04, p < .01$ ). None of the individual predictors or interactions, including the

hypothesized interaction between feedback specificity and response personalization, is significant besides gender. Therefore, H6 is not supported.

*Discussion.* The results of Study 6 demonstrate continuity with other studies in support of the conceptualized mediation model. Response personalization and response effort are both associated with increased response satisfaction such that when company responses are perceived as more personalized and more effortful, they elicit greater observer satisfaction. Furthermore, this study provides evidence of a positive association between consumer feedback specificity and response satisfaction, although a moderating influence was not detected.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across six studies, I demonstrate drivers of differences in satisfaction with firm responses to positive consumer feedback shared online. I also validate a framework that illustrates the underlying process mechanism leading to response satisfaction and subsequent intent to engage in future positive feedback sharing. In Studies 1 and 2, in both online review website and social media website contexts, I found that compared with non-response, company response to positive online feedback is associated with greater intent to share positive feedback in the future and that this effect is mediated by consumers' satisfaction with the response. Study 3 provided support for my proposed process in demonstrating that in addition to the consumer satisfaction being mediated by personalization and effort, satisfaction is also driven by consumer perceptions of response personalization influencing response satisfaction through the amount of effort they perceive. Finally, Studies 4-6 validated the influence of personalization and effort on

response satisfaction in a social media context, although the respective feedback characteristics of effort, positivity, and specificity do not appear to play a moderating role on the mediators of satisfaction.

In light of the conceptual model and foundational theory, the divergence between the hypothesized findings and the observed results among the feedback characteristics deserves some interpretation. I find that across the base models, an increase in consumer investment, whether effort, positivity, or specificity, is associated with greater response satisfaction. This suggests that while consumers seem to evaluate company responses as contributions toward an equitable exchange, they may not consider their own contributions to be part of this equity equation. This appears more reasonable if consumer's contributions and motivations for sharing positive feedback online are gratitude-induced rather than obligation-inducing for the company. This would also explain the lack of interaction between the company's response and feedback characteristics, while not undermining the base conceptual model.

### *Contributions*

This research makes several theoretical and substantive contributions. Theoretically, I contribute to the relationship marketing literature by extending the domain in which consumers have expectations for firm behaviors. I show that for consumer-initiated online interactions, positive feedback represents a potential interaction that has consequences not only for consumer perceptions, but intentions to engage in future firm-positive behaviors such as posting positive reviews or sharing positive feedback on social media. The present research specifically illustrates the negative



disparity in outcomes, both perceptual and behavioral, associated with firms' decision not to respond to positive consumer feedback.

In addition to showing the negative behavioral outcomes of this form of neglect, I also provide evidence for the process that drives this effect. I find that consumers may judge the firm's investment in the interaction by making inferences about the level of personalization and effort devoted to the exchange and that personalization likely drives effort perceptions in addition to having a direct effect on consumer satisfaction with the company's response. While personalization has been a long-understood contributor to consumer experience in both offline and online contexts, little has looked at firms personalizing communication through social media. This is, to my knowledge, the first research to begin to look at the role of effort in online communications. Historically, a study of effort has been limited to offline interactions with non-verbal behaviors playing a significant role, so this research demonstrates the range of effort perceived among a much narrower set of cues in an online context, and the subsequent impact this can have on satisfaction.

In terms of managerial applicability, the results of these studies support two primary recommendations. First, marketers should not discount the importance of engaging with positive consumers online. While marketer resources frequently focus on improving dissatisfied consumer experiences, marketers should also recognize that responsiveness to positive consumer engagement behaviors has a potential reinforcing effect. Companies should focus on cultivating all brand-positive behaviors, particularly in online public channels where positive consumer feedback and company activities can have a broader influence on observers. Second, companies should take care in how they

respond, as consumers use available cues to evaluate dyadic interactions with companies and are likely to be less satisfied with responses that they perceive to be lower effort or less personalized. For this reason, companies should provide training to their *online* frontline workforce for response approaches that go beyond basic acknowledgments or rote scripting and focus on more personalized ways of engaging with these positive consumers. This research also uncovered a secondary finding that can help inform online interactions. Studies demonstrated that greater effort, positivity, and specificity in consumer feedback are all associated with increased response satisfaction, so companies can likewise draw on these consumer-side cues to better prioritize their response activities. Consumers demonstrating higher involvement through the feedback they share are also likely to be more satisfied and engaged by the response they receive.

#### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

While this research makes multiple contributions to theory and practice, it has some potential limitations. One limitation is understanding the extent to which company responsiveness results in increased consumer satisfaction by exceeding consumer expectations versus decreases by failing to meet them. While my data cannot make a specific determination, the higher mean differences exhibited between satisfaction scores for equivalent studies conducted on Yelp versus Twitter, provide some indication that platform norms influence response expectations. Further research should help isolate the effects of platform on response satisfaction and how it interacts with consumers' own a priori expectations, independent of platform. For example, some consumers may be motivated to share positive online feedback as a culminating demonstration of gratitude

for the firm (suggesting less need for a response), while others may have more goal-oriented motivations for sharing.

Clarity is also needed in understanding different effects imposed by surveying consumers as primary participants with real companies in Studies 1-3 compared with measuring relationships with participants as observers of fictitious companies in Studies 4-6. All of the later studies showed the impact of feedback attributes in a way that would defy conventional reciprocity theory (that greater investments by one party invoke the expectation for equivalent reciprocal investments by another party). Future research should determine whether consumers experience the same positive feedback effects when they are the ones generating the positive feedback rather than observing.

This research presents multiple opportunities for further study. Understanding that consumers perceive company responses in different ways should lead to a more in-depth exploration of response components and their effectiveness. While responses can differ in terms of personalization, there are also syntactic and rhetorical differences between responses that remain unexamined. On social media, where companies frequently engage in very low-effort responses such as “liking” a consumer’s tweet or using visual emoticons, researchers should understand whether these platform-specific approaches yield the same effects as text-based responses, and whether there are other constructs being activated in the absence of personalizing text.

Researchers should also take efforts to understand the limits of personalization and effort in online interactions. While my models assume that the effects of these variables are linear, consumers may differ in their preferences for both and possibly

exhibit reactance to unnatural levels of effort or personalization. There are likely characteristics of the consumer, company response, and the relationship that determine the acceptable type of interaction behaviors, which should be understood in the context of positive feedback.

In conclusion, my research demonstrates that following the sharing of positive brand-related feedback online, consumers experience greater satisfaction when companies are responsive and when their communication is perceived to be personalized and effortful. This, in turn, has a direct bearing on the likelihood that the consumer will engage in future related behavior following a positive brand experience. Understanding that positive consumer behaviors can be reinforced, and how they should effectively be reinforced, ensures that the company can make even the smallest online interactions more impactful.

## CHAPTER 2

### HOW CORPORATE RESPONSIVENESS TO POSITIVE EWOM DRIVES SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIOR

Companies confront an imposing volume of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) directed to them and about them on social media channels. An analysis of 200,000 companies revealed an average of 14,000 brand mentions per company each year on Twitter alone (Delangue 2014). For companies, this eWOM phenomenon acts as a rich source of information about the attitudes and behaviors of potential and existing customers (Jansen et al. 2009). It also presents an enormous challenge, given the scale of brand-relevant information companies must detect, collect, interpret, and put to use. Fundamentally, the social web also facilitates direct interactions between companies and consumers. So in addition to gleaning what it can from these consumer-to-consumer conversations as an observer, a company must determine its own level of participation when social media conversations are brand-relevant (Godes et al. 2005).

Customer-centric firms have a variety of functional outcomes they might achieve through active management of eWOM, and in many cases these are dictated by whether the sentiment is negative or positive. For consumers who are clearly dissatisfied or even angry about some component of their brand experience, a firm's social eWOM intervention can be a means of service recovery (Ma et al. 2015, Lee and Song 2010), or at minimum, help quarantine the further social propagation of online negativity (Harris et al. 2006; Lee and Song 2010; Puzakova et al. 2013; Van Noort and Willemsen 2012).

Social eWOM, however, is comprised of brand mentions that are more frequently positive than negative in nature (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Wirtz et al. 2013; Chevalier

and Mayzlin 2006; Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Jansen et al. 2009). In these cases, the company must determine whether involvement is likely to foster positive outcomes, perhaps by enhancing brand perceptions, strengthening existing brand relationships, or motivating consumer engagement behaviors, which I define as non-transactional, but firm-focused behaviors resulting from positive motivational drivers (Van Doorn, et al. 2010). Furthermore, companies may be unaware of the many silent observers to these interactions, whose brand perceptions are actively shaped by their interpretations of the encounter (Schamari and Schaefers 2015). While positive eWOM on social media poses little direct brand risk, it represents a brand touch point on the customer experience journey where a firm's response (or lack thereof) can have a direct bearing on the customer relationship trajectory and subsequent engagement behaviors (Edelman 2010; Meyer and Schwager 2007).

In practice, companies appear to be overlooking opportunities engage with positive eWOM and prolong positive outcomes. Indeed, there has been little direct examination of firm intervention in consumers' *positive* eWOM as a way to produce positive consumer engagement behaviors. In nearly half of all cases, firms don't even respond to positive e-mails from consumers (Shields 2006), prompting questions about whether companies will be any more responsive to consumers' positive eWOM on social media, where it may be shared with an audience.

In particular, this research seeks to answer three questions that have implications for both theory and practice. First, how is firm intervention in positive eWOM associated with social media engagement behaviors? Second, does engagement vary by whom the consumer chooses to share it with or by consumer characteristics? Consumers differ in

their motivations to share positive eWOM, which may influence their expectations and the subsequent effectiveness of responses they receive (King et al. 2014). Third, does the likelihood of consumer engagement with the company's response vary by particular attributes of the response that the company provides?

This research investigates the nature of consumer social media engagement behavior as a consequence of company-acknowledged positive eWOM. I examine this with an analysis of company-specific positive consumer eWOM, corresponding company responses, and consequent consumer response engagement around 79 apparel brands on Twitter during January 2016. I suggest that the focal audience of the eWOM, the consumer's social media popularity, and the personalization of the response all play a role in whether the firm's response leads to engagement behaviors. Drawing upon script theory, I suggest that when positive eWOM is shared with the company specifically (narrowcasted eWOM), the consumer's attention is focused on the company, activating expectations consistent with interpersonal, reciprocal communication norms. Conversely, when positive eWOM is shared to a social media audience (broadcasted eWOM), the consumer attentions are more self-focused and motivated by self-enhancement, resulting in fewer expectations of the company. I also provide evidence that consumer characteristics and company communication characteristics play a role in the level of engagement behavior resulting from company responsiveness.

This research makes two primary contributions to the literature. First, I provide the first empirical evidence of the engagement consequences when companies respond to positive eWOM. This is important because a significant portion of companies do not acknowledge positive eWOM, missing these opportunities to engage and deepen

relational bonds with their customers. This provides new guidance to firms wanting to identify and optimize critical touch points of consumer experience online.

Second, I show that both consumer elements and response elements are determinants of consumer response engagement with a company's response. I also show that the consumer's social media popularity impacts their engagement level with the company's response. I also show that companies can personalize their response language in ways that generate further social media engagement. This provides further evidence to support the idea that subtle adaptations in discrete encounters make a difference to consumers. Companies can thereby leverage this information toward more effective communication and customer relationship management.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Positive Electronic Word of Mouth*

Positive eWOM constitutes any positive statement “made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p.39). Consumers’ positive feedback indicates correct actions, strengths or accomplishments by the firm (Finkelstein and Fishbach 2012), and may include complimenting the firm’s products or services (Curren and Folkes 1987) or expressing gratitude for other firm-provided benefits (Palmatier et al. 2009; Morales 2005). Positive eWOM is a common, yet valuable phenomenon to marketers because of its high credibility relative to marketer communication (Bickart and Schindler 2001; Gruen et al. 2006). It has the potential to influence purchase behavior (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; East et al. 2008),



recommendations (Liu 2006), involvement (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), product adoption (Algesheimer and Wangenheim 2006; Thompson and Sinha 2008) and future positive eWOM (Moe and Schweidel 2012). Companies also use positive eWOM to extract valuable customer insights the company can strategically act upon (Dellarocas 2003; Cespedes 2015; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). These benefits motivate brands to use marketing activities to drive consumer eWOM behavior where positive brand sentiment can influence others (Stephen and Lehmann 2016; Godes and Mayzlin 2009; Trusov et al. 2009). Social media, in particular, empowers brands to be able to manage consumers’ positive eWOM—choosing when to observe, facilitate, or actively participate in it (Godes et al. 2005; Harwood and Garry 2015).

#### *Positive eWOM Motivation and Objectives*

At a foundational level, the literature indicates that consumers share their experiences with others as a way to deal with salient positive emotions (Rimé 2009; Westbrook 1987; Christophe and Rimé 1997), often the result of satisfying discrete or cumulative brand experiences (Swan and Oliver 1989; Anderson 1998; Sundaram et al. 1998). When consumers report their own motivations for sharing positive WOM, they list self-enhancement, product involvement, a desire to help the company, and altruism (Sundaram et al. 1998), although consumers frequently list more than one (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Berger (2014) argues that these motivations, including altruistic ones, are self-interested and part of a fundamental human desire to belong (Fiske 2009; Baumeister and Leary 1995; Schlenker 1980; Goffman 2008). This desire fuels behaviors designed to self-enhance (Leary 1996; Schlenker 1980), which explains why people naturally share positive information about themselves and downplay the negative

(Tedeschi and Reiss 1981). Not surprisingly, self-interested consumers form the largest segment of those sharing eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004) and this self-interest provides insight into the goals of the consumer and potential outcomes for sharing *positive* eWOM.

Research suggests that strong positive emotions elicit two psychological needs: (1) the need to express one's thoughts and feelings with others, as previously discussed, and (2) the need to get feedback or receive appropriate support from the communication partner or audience (Rimé 2009, Lin et al. 2014). This second desire for social support (Goffman 2008) corresponds to the concept of *approval utility* derived from sharing eWOM and receiving social approval from others (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Sundaram et al 1998). Social recognition of positive eWOM may take on different forms, including praise, agreement, approval, showing pleasure, support, validation, and caring (Gable et al. 2004; Reis and Patrick 1996; Reis and Shaver 1988). Social media platforms commonly include non-verbal ways for users to express support, such as endorsing the positive eWOM or giving helpfulness ratings.

I suggest that firms have the ability to drive positive consumer affect and engagement behavior by providing social support for the goals of those who share positive eWOM on social media. Some evidence suggests that company interventions in brand-related customer-to-customer conversations online can increase consumer sentiment (Homburg et al. 2015; Dholakia et al. 2009) and participation in brand communities (Schamari and Schaefers 2015). Consumers also exhibit higher engagement behaviors in online communities if their contributions are recognized by a sponsoring firm, not just their peers (Jeppesen and Frederiksen 2006). While no research exists

showing the benefits of company response to positive eWOM specifically, I suggest that companies effectively fill the role of social support in their responses to eWOM. In supportive dyadic contexts (Gable and Reis 2010; Langston 1994), the benefits of support include increased positive emotions, subjective well-being and self-esteem as well as relational closeness (Lambert et al. 2012; Balasubramanian and Mahajan 2001) and greater affinity toward the support source (Clark et al. 2001). Finally, we know that consumers react differently to firms' social media interventions and activities, depending on consumer characteristics (Chen and Xie 2008; Godes and Mayzlin 2009). Little is known about whether different motivations to share or consumer characteristics may influence the effectiveness of company responsiveness on engagement behavior. This research, as expressed in Figure 1, suggests that these consumer- and company-side factors all make unique contributions to the dynamics of positive eWOM and resulting consumer-firm interactions.

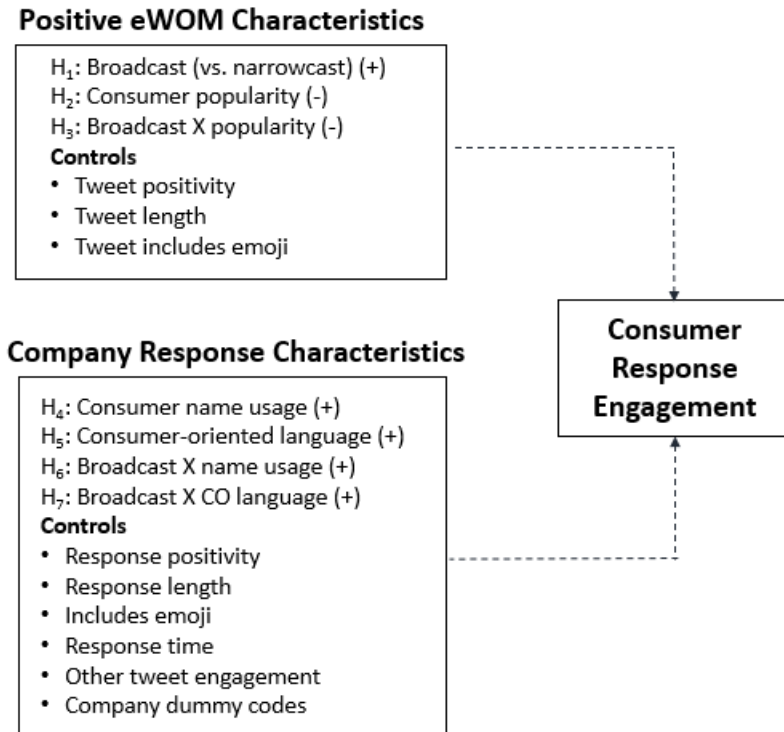


Figure 5. Conceptual Model for the Effect of Response to Positive eWOM on Consumer Response Engagement

## HYPOTHESES

Electronic word of mouth is characteristically different from traditional word of mouth in that messages have the potential to reach individuals, groups, or large audiences (Dellarocas 2003). Social media websites facilitate ways for consumers to deliberately share their eWOM messages with a single individual, or to direct eWOM to more than one person. Barasch and Berger (2014) dichotomize this choice of audience selection between individual and group audience as narrowcasting versus broadcasting. On social media, broadcasting frequently occurs in an undirected manner, e.g., posting a social

media message to be viewed by a digital audience of followers or subscribers, even if the broadcaster can't be sure of who or how many have viewed it (Steffes and Burgee 2009). Nevertheless, the imagined audience (Litt 2012) exercises a powerful influence on behavior (Gruzd, Wellman & Takhteyev 2011), and what people post on social media (Berger 2014). Depending on their motivations and objectives, people sometimes share indiscriminately to whomever will listen and at other times with a specific or trusted other (Nadkarni and Hofmann 2012; Pempek et al. 2009). In the context of sharing positive eWOM, these two audience conditions exhibit characteristic distinctions associated with underlying motivational differences, which become critical to the consumer's expected response to sharing. However, these motivational differences alone are incomplete. In accordance with script theory (Abelson 1981), I contend that a narrowcaster who shares positive eWOM *to* a company directly initiates an interaction opportunity that has scripted expectations and is fundamentally different from the broadcaster who shares positive eWOM *about* a company to a social media audience. Consumers will anticipate, experience, and engage with the response differently as a result.

### *Narrowcasting Positive eWOM*

Where eWOM typically involves sharing information to a multitude of people, consumers also frequently choose to share their positive brand experiences with the company directly, a practice made substantially easier with social media. The literature concludes that narrowcasting positive information focuses more on the needs of the other more than on the individual (Barasch and Berger 2014; Chiou and Lee 2013; Ellis and Holmes 1982). In a consumer context, research confirms that when consumers share

positive feedback directly, they are driven more by relationship-oriented motives and seek to help the company by engaging in reciprocal behaviors (Kraft and Martin 2001). With attention toward the company, narrowcasters can focus not only on personalizing the message (Schau and Gilly 2003), but also on whether the company's reacts in a way that validates the narrowcaster's opinions and feelings (Rimé 2009), generating approval utility from the exchange (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

Positive feedback shared individually activates a well-established reciprocal norm (Gouldner, 1960) that adheres to a conversational social script (Abelson 1981) associated with interpersonal compliments and gratitude expressions. Social scripts are conceptual representations of typical events with set sequences (Gable et al. 2004) that people routinely perform and follow or risk social harm (Abelson 1981; Schank and Abelson 1977). Positive communication contexts have several familiar scripts in which communicators expect a response from the communication partner: friendly small talk (Lydon et al. 1997), exchanges with frontline service employees (Solomon et al. 1985), expressions of gratitude (Abelson 1981), and compliments (Pomerantz 1978; Herbert 1986). While simple, the conversational script for responding to compliments involves two axioms: agree with the speaker and avoid self-praise (Pomerantz 1978). Agreement can take number of forms such as saying "thank you" or some other acknowledgment, but the dialogue is decidedly formulaic and follows a standard protocol in order to generate goodwill between parties (Herbert 1986).

Consumers are able to apply these same social rules to online exchanges (Nass and Moon 2000; Labrecque 2014) by adapting conversational scripts for text-driven digital interactions. Company profiles are also human-run as well as humanized in their

communication on social media (Delbaere, McQuarrie, and Phillips 2011), so consumers converse with them as if they were other consumers (Labrecque 2014). I suggest that narrowcasting consumers highly expect to receive a company response to positive eWOM because narrowcasting positive eWOM triggers the familiar social interaction script. The degree to which the company upholds the script with an appropriate response determines the consumer's satisfaction and engagement (Solomon et al. 1985), while a lack of response would violate the script, generating psychological discomfort and tension (Wilson and O'Gorman 2003).

#### *Broadcasting Positive eWOM*

Broadcasting on social media often occurs to multiple overlapping, unknowable audiences (Krämer and Haferkamp 2011; Steffes and Burgee 2009), making them much less salient and more psychologically distant than narrowcasting's single recipient audience (Gino and Galinsky 2012; Kreilkamp 1984). The decision to share with an audience of multiple people is associated with greater attention toward oneself and a motivation to self-enhance by presenting oneself favorably to others (Barasch and Berger 2014). Recent research suggests that communicating with psychologically distant audiences through social media generates self-enhancement motives that result in more positively valenced eWOM (Dubois et al. 2016). Sharing positive eWOM to a social media audience thus helps satisfy the consumer's desire to self-enhance.

#### *Broadcaster Expectations*

For the self-focused broadcaster on social media, the lack of a priori knowledge about the actual recipient of the positive eWOM (Steffes and Burgee 2009) means lower

expectations for any particular recipient, such as the company, to respond (Berger 2014). The lack of any familiar social script in communicating with a broader audience also indicates that the broadcaster is less likely to expect a specific response.

I suggest that by responding to positive eWOM, a company may support the broadcaster's self-enhancement goal and generate positive engagement behaviors. First, consumers benefit from company recognition (Cova and Dalli 2009) and interactions (Nambisan and Baron 2007; Porter and Donthu 2008) because they generate *reputation capital* in the community (Sekhon et al. 2015; Jeppesen and Frederiksen 2006). This benefit likely induces reciprocal feelings of gratitude toward the firm, which can lead to engagement behaviors (Palmatier et al. 2009). Second, consumers are positively surprised by firms' social media interventions in public discussions between consumers (Van Noort and Willemsen 2012; Schamari and Schaefers 2015). Third, at a basic level, receiving positive social support is associated with personal well-being (Gable et al. 2004), which may drive satisfaction-related behavior. In sum, firm response to broadcasted positive eWOM is associated with several outcomes that support the consumer's self-enhancement motivations, lead to positive engagement behaviors.

Any type of unsolicited positive eWOM presents an interaction opportunity for the company to reinforce this brand-positive behavior (Sutton and Barto 1998) and promote other engagement behaviors (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Vivek et al. 2012). However, the more company-focused narrowcasting consumer expects to receive a company response as the continuation of a familiar social script. People expect polite, affirming responses to both compliments (Herbert 1986) and expressions of gratitude (Brown and Levinson 1987). So while social scripts conveniently help the company craft



an appropriate response to company-directed positive eWOM, the customer may also recognize the response as routine and obligatory, and thus may derive less social approval utility. I suggest that comparatively, the self-focused broadcaster has no social script and no direct audience and thus lower expectations for a company response. However, because the response contributes to self-enhancement, this benefits the broadcasting consumer and promotes positive response engagement.

**H1:** Positive eWOM broadcasted *about* a company is associated with higher engagement behavior toward the company's response than positive eWOM narrowcasted *to* the company.

### *Social Media Popularity*

The degree of popularity that one enjoys on social media will likely influence activities and social interactions, including eWOM. Social media popularity and sociometric, or interpersonal popularity share a base of meaning, but are not synonymous. Literature defines sociometric popularity in terms of having friends, being agreeable, liked or accepted by one's peer group (Bukowski and Hoza 1989, Coats and Feldman 1996; Peery 1979). Social media has proxy indicators of sociometric popularity, e.g., the number of friends, connections, or followers one has, or subscribers on digital publishing platforms (Zywica and Danowski 2008; Walther et al. 2008). However, the meaning of these popularity metrics depends on characteristics of the social network. In an *undirected* social network, all links or connections must be reciprocated by both parties in order to exist. On Facebook, popularity measured by number of friends is conceptually similar to sociometric popularity (Tong et al. 2008). However, most social

media platforms incorporate *directed* network capabilities, where users can follow or subscribe to other users, without reciprocation. Hence, popularity on YouTube may mean likeability and friendships, but conceptually includes elements of prestige, or the inferred respect, esteem, and social regard an individual receives (Barkow 1975; Anderson et al. 2001; Anderson & Kilduff 2009; Parkhurst and Hopmeyer 1998). Consumers view social media popularity as a signal of reputation, visibility, and centrality (Kietzmann et al. 2011) and form impressions of others using this social media “social proof” (Zywica and Danowski 2008; Tong et al. 2008). Some companies use consumers’ social media popularity to prioritize service response (Gunarathne et al. 2015), so more popular consumers may hold higher expectations. Hence, some researchers have used social media follower counts as both a measure of popularity as well as influence (Cha et al. 2010; Kwak et al. 2010; Toubia and Stephen 2013). Since this research focuses on directed social media, popularity is framed in terms of social prestige.

In addition to using these reputation signals to evaluate others on social media, consumers also use them to make inferences about themselves in ways that alter self-beliefs and behaviors (Trammell and Keshelashvili 2005; Marwick and Boyd 2010). Social media popularity indicators may provide more feedback to popular individuals, who generally have greater impression management concerns (Lin et al. 2014; Hogan 2010), about how much others like and defer to them (Carlson and DesJardins 2015; Bukowski et al. 1996), so that merely having a large number of followers provides image-related utility (Toubia and Stephen 2013). This is consistent with research showing that people accommodate feedback into their self-assessments, particularly when it

suggests concrete and desirable attributes (Alicke 1985; Brown 1990), as social media indicators may suggest.

While the phenomena of social media popularity has benefits for the popular consumer, I suggest that relative to less popular individuals, consumers with more online popularity will exhibit lower levels of engagement behavior toward responses to positive eWOM they share. More popular consumers receive asymmetric amounts of attention, esteem, and deference compared to what they provide (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989; Olk and Gibbons 2010). Consequently, more popular consumers naturally expect a higher volume of social interactions with others, and a higher rate of response to their own attempts to initiate social interaction, making any audience response or communication, including from a company, more expected. Popular people, as a result, are less likely to be influenced by the emotions or communication of others (Briñol et al. 2007; Galinsky et al. 2008), whereas less esteemed consumers are likely to benefit more from social approval (Baumgardner et al. 1989).

**H2:** Consumer social media popularity is associated with lower levels of engagement behavior with a company's response to positive eWOM.

### *Popularity and Audience Focus*

Personal attributes, like popularity, may play an outsized role in shaping the self-beliefs, social goals, and expectations of a consumer when they are more salient and relevant. Broadcasting corresponds with self-focus in the pursuit of self-presentation goals (Barasch and Berger 2014) so social media popularity is likely to be more relevant to the self-beliefs and expectations of eWOM broadcasters more than narrowcasters, who

care more about the dyadic interaction. Consumers derive diminishing marginal utility from gaining new social media followers (Toubia and Stephen 2013), likely because people view acceptance from larger audiences differently from smaller audiences (Marwick and Boyd 2010). This suggests that self-presentation goals may weaken at high levels of popularity, lessening the broadcaster's valuation of a firm response to positive eWOM. Furthermore, broadcasting consumers may have a greater tendency to use their popularity to explain the response activity of others, since self-focused individuals likely gravitate toward more self-serving attributions for others' behaviors (Alicke 1985; Brown 1990). This suggests that the popular broadcaster would have greater expectations for audience response and other interactions than narrowcasters (Bukowski et al. 1996). This shift in expectations means less value derived from any response, so popularity should mitigate a broadcaster's own online engagement behavior following a response.

While narrowcasted eWOM happens in a public social media environment, the narrowcasting consumer is less likely than the broadcaster to change expectations and corresponding engagement in response to increasing popularity. Popularity is less salient, due to the consumer's focus on the recipient (Barasch and Berger 2014). The single audience suggests that the consumer's goals are less oriented toward impression management. Most importantly, the narrowcasting of positive eWOM initiates a social communication script (Abelson 1981) in which the company's response is expected foremost out of politeness and reciprocity (Brown and Levinson 1987; Gouldner, 1960), and only secondarily because of contextual characteristics like consumer popularity, consumer status, or message factors. In sum, the relative difference between popular and less popular narrowcaster engagement is likely to be negligible compared to broadcasters.

**H3:** The negative relationship between consumer popularity and consumer engagement behavior toward a company response is stronger for broadcasted than narrowcasted eWOM.

### *Response Personalization*

Consumers prefer and reward personalized exchanges with companies over rote, impersonal exchanges (Arora, et al. 2008; Mittal and Lassar 1996; Rafaeli et al. 2008). Personalization refers to any behavior during an interaction intended to elevate the status of the consumer and contribute to their individuation (Surprenant and Solomon 1987). Digital technology facilitates multiple ways for companies to personalize consumer experiences. Shen and Ball (2009) categorize these approaches in terms of interaction, outcome, and continuity personalization. Interaction personalization includes individualized conversation behavior, including small talk, addressing customers by name, or referencing particulars about the customer. Transaction personalization adapts products or services based on customer specifications. Continuity personalization refers to the adaptation that occurs over time in response to accumulated customer information.

Of the three personalization approaches, interaction personalization is most relevant to the type of exchanges taking place between consumers and companies through social media. Consumers consider personalized communication when evaluating company interactions, particularly when the desired outcome of the interaction is ambiguous (Mohr and Bitner 1995; Parasuraman et al. 1985). Considering the consumer's desired outcome is far less determinable during a positive eWOM encounter than negative, a personalized response is one way firms can demonstrate the consumer's

importance, increase satisfaction, and promote consumer engagement in positive situations (Mohr and Bitner 1995). I examine two approaches to interaction personalization that firms can use in responses to positive eWOM to elevate the importance of the sender and generate positive engagement behavior: using the consumer's name and focusing language on the consumer.

### *Personalization with Consumer Name Use*

Addressing a customer by name is one of the most ubiquitous personalization practices in business, mentioned frequently in both research and popular press (Cox III et al. 1974; Goodwin and Smith 1990). While consumer name usage may seem banal, considering its disassociation from outcomes a consumer might care about, we know that factors influencing the *process* of interaction, not merely the outcome, are important to consumers (Parasuraman et al. 1985; Grönroos 1990). Accordingly, small efforts to personalize communication, including name usage, appear to have a sizable influence on consumer measures of satisfaction and service evaluations (Surprenant and Solomon 1987). Researchers suggest a variety reasons to explain the effectiveness of customer name usage, from communicating friendliness (Goodwin and Smith 1990) to inviting intimacy (Shen and Ball 2009) to signaling the company's investment in the relationship (Koch and Benlian 2015).

Beyond altering perceptions of the company interaction, there are several reasons why consumer name use in a company's response to positive eWOM should drive positive engagement behaviors. First, the positive eWOM-sharing consumer is predisposed to respond favorably to company relationship-building activities. Consumers

occasionally respond negatively to name personalization, but this typically only happens in contexts without some preexisting positive relationship or interest (Porter and Whitcomb 2003; Koch and Benlian 2015), when consumers may question the sincerity of personalization or experience feelings of privacy intrusion (Shen and Ball 2009). Second, while consumers detect name personalization in a variety of offline contexts (Surprenant and Solomon 1987), they may be more aware of these personalization efforts in online conversation, when their attentions are focused on discrete pieces of text communication (Maslowska et al. 2016), making the effects stronger. As a result, consumers will be better able to recognize relationship investments by the company, leading to reciprocating behaviors (Palmatier et al. 2009). Last, research has identified other instances in which personalization efforts online result in activities desired by marketers, such as clicks (Ansari and Mela 2003) and referral behavior (Koch and Benlian 2015). In sum, I suggest that consumers recognize and appreciate name personalization as the company's effort to improve the relationship, leading to increased engagement behaviors.

**H4:** Response personalization involving consumer name use is associated with higher engagement behavior toward the company's response to positive eWOM.

#### *Personalization with Consumer-Oriented Language*

In addition to addressing consumers by name, companies can also personalize communication by other linguistic choices that show special attention paid to the consumer (Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010). Linguistic choices are embedded with social meanings that can enhance relationships and manage social impressions (Holtgraves 2002; Pennebaker et al. 2003), especially in text-based social media communication

(Bazarova et al. 2013). In brand-related social media conversation, eWOM and responses differ by the object of focus, whether focused on products or people. Person-focused speech can further be divided into self-referential or recipient-referential communication (Toder-Alon et al. 2014). I suggest that when companies use more consumer-oriented, i.e., recipient-referential communication (second-person pronouns such as “you” and “your”) in responding to positive eWOM, this elevates the importance of the consumer in the conversation, resulting in enhanced consumer engagement.

Interestingly, linguistic research finds that recipient-referential language is often associated with negative behavior and conflict in dyadic relationships (Seider et al. 2009; Sillars et al. 1997; Simmons et al. 2005). The explanation is that “you” statements during conflict are indicative of blaming, defensiveness, and emotional distancing (Williams-Baucom et al. 2010). In response to positive eWOM, we would expect the opposite. The company’s consumer-focused response should indicate support, give credit, and help the consumer feel special, all things that would indicate intentions to deepen the relationship, moreso than the company using self-referential language (“we, us, our”), which would place the focus on itself (Rude et al. 2004). Moreover, consumer-oriented language may be more likely to elicit positive engagement behaviors because it draws the recipient in and implicitly invites response (Pollach 2005) while being faster to respond to than other functional forms (Ditman et al. 2010).

**H5:** Response personalization involving consumer-oriented language is associated with higher engagement behavior toward the company’s response to positive eWOM.



### *Personalization and Audience Focus*

Some consumers differ in their preference for and response to personalization (Bettencourt and Gwinner 1996; Rafaeli and Sutton 1990). Naturally, consumers respond better to personalization attempts that account for their goals and preferences (Gwinner et al. 2005), whether stated or implied (Montgomery and Smith 2009). Consumers indicate latent goals by what they share online and by the language they use (Toder-Alon et al. 2014; Schau and Gilly 2003). Generally, broadcasting behavior is characteristic of an impression management objective, so responses that affirm the consumer's opinions and individuation should align with the consumer's implicit goal to be perceived favorably by others (Goffman 2008) and be more engaging. Narrowcasting is driven by more other-focused motives (Barasch and Berger 2014) and so attempts to focus on the sharer are generally less aligned with the altruism goal, and thus less effective.

The two personalized response practices, name usage and consumer-oriented language, both elevate the importance of the individual consumer and should therefore provide the broadcaster of positive eWOM with support that will be interpreted in light of the consumer's own self-presentation interests. As further support for the suggestion that both of these personalizations are likely to promote more engagement among broadcasters than narrowcasters, one may look at the linguistic choices generally made by broadcasters in their state of self-focus. Barasch and Berger (2014) find that broadcasters are more likely to use self-focused personal pronouns ("I, me, and my") than narrowcasters. Language style choice signals a specific attempt to manage impressions (Pennebaker et al. 2003). I propose that a personalized response, adapted to maintain that focus on the broadcaster, will be more engaging because it affirms not only the

consumer's importance, but also the acceptability of the consumer's efforts to self-enhance (Montgomery and Smith 2009; Toder-Alon et al. 2014).

For narrowcasters, the social script that governs the expected conversation flow between consumer and company helps frame the appropriateness of personalization attempts. Company responses to positive eWOM that focus on and elevate the narrowcasting consumer through linguistic choices would not be inappropriate in a positive context, because response scripts generally accommodate personalization like name usage (Sacks et al. 1974; Goodwin and Smith 1990). However, personalizations that focus attention on the consumer are ultimately less important to the other-focused consumer in terms of goals and expectations.

**H6:** The positive effect of consumer name use on consumer engagement behavior with a response to positive eWOM is higher for broadcasting consumers.

**H7:** The positive effect of consumer-oriented language use on consumer engagement behavior with a response to positive eWOM is higher for broadcasting consumers.

## METHODOLOGY

This study investigates consumer engagement behaviors following company responses to positive eWOM, which I address using data taken from the popular social networking site, Twitter, which has over 300 million active users (Twitter.com 2017) and has appeared frequently in the marketing literature (Toubia and Stephen 2013; Ma et al. 2015; Hewett et al. 2016). Compared to other social networks, Twitter is an exceptional source of brand-related eWOM (Smith et al. 2012). Among Twitter users, 80% mention

brands in what they post (Midha 2014). Many companies have a corporate presence on the platform that they use to monitor for brand-related conversation, promote branded content, and interact with customers.

Several features of Twitter are relevant to the domain of interest. On Twitter, consumers can write messages less than 140 characters called “tweets.” As a public, directed social network, other consumers can see any of the messages by searching for them among all public tweets or more typically by “following” the consumer’s Twitter account (subscribing to the individual’s messages). Consumers have the choice about where to direct an individual tweet, whether to post it to the public Twitter stream to their full audience of subscribers (broadcasting) or whether to limit message visibility by directing it toward a specific user (narrowcasting), by beginning the tweet with the user’s unique Twitter username, tagged using the “@” symbol. Directing a tweet like this limits the audience to those who subscribe to both the sender and recipient’s accounts, meaning that directed tweets receive far less natural visibility. Consumers can also tag other Twitter users in tweets sent to their subscribing audience. Tagged users receive platform notifications about the tweet.

### *Data*

The data include positive consumer tweets mentioning 79 brands in the apparel industry, during January 2016. The selection of apparel specialty brands comes from the 2012 Chain Store Guide’s list of Top 100 Apparel Specialty Stores Ranked By Industry

Sales, which is considered representative of the industry (Shaw et al. 2013). I excluded companies from the sample for several reasons. First, between the list publication and sampling period, some companies ceased operations. Second, I removed existing companies with no official Twitter presence. Third, I removed companies with an official Twitter presence, but which did not respond to any consumer tweets during the data collection period, presumably using the account as a broadcasting channel only. In cases where companies own multiple brands, I collected data for individual brands that met the data criteria for Twitter activity and included a brand-level dummy variable to account for differences between brands.

I acquired 94,608 consumer tweets about apparel brands through a social media data provider, which were pre-filtered to exclude retweets (duplicate tweets from one user sharing another user's tweet). The data provider's sentiment analysis classification identified tweets as 44.7% positive, 45.6% neutral, and 9.7% negative. For the target sample, I define a focal positive eWOM event as a unique user posting an unsolicited, non-incentivized positive tweet which tags the company's official Twitter profile. I applied a number of filtering criteria to arrive at this target sample of positive eWOM, as shown in Table 5. This was necessary to isolate the phenomenon of interest from a sizable volume of non-qualifying data. I removed tweets that mentioned more than 1 account to minimize issues with identifying the consumer's target audience. I also removed any tweets with more than 1 hyperlink, as a sampling of these suggested that nearly all were tweets to news stories or other commercial content. I commissioned the development of software that uses metadata from Twitter to identify and remove those sent in response to another user rather than originating with the consumer. I removed

tweets containing questions, which would naturally increase the likelihood of a company response. I deleted duplicate tweets from the same period, which are often the result of promotions or automation. To isolate unsolicited tweets, I excluded incentivized tweets when they contained terms associated with paid promotion disclosure (#ad, #spon, #sponsored) or contests (contest, giveaway, sweepstakes). I also filtered consumers who mentioned the company multiple times during the collection window in order to keep the sample free from the bias induced by more highly involved consumers. During the filtering process, I also employed three separate sentiment filters before arriving at the final sample: a data provider-supplied filter, a third-party text analysis program, and human coders.

<b>Data Filters</b>	<b>Tweets remaining</b>
Original dataset	94,608
Removed: >1 account mentioned	52,277
Removed: >1 hyperlink mentioned	49,441
Removed: Replies to existing tweets	40,589
Removed: Negative/neutral tweets (data provider)	19,945
Removed: Questions in tweets	12,715
Removed: Duplicate tweets	12,089
Removed: Commercial and promotional tweets	11,178
Removed: Duplicate authors	9,575
Removed: Requests in tweets	7,400
Removed: Deleted or hidden accounts	7,222
Removed: Non-positive tweets (LIWC)	5,348
Removed: Negative/neutral tweets (coding)	4,032
Removed: Unresponsive tweets	711
Removed: Questions in responses	651

*Table 5. Waterfall Chart of Twitter Data Filtering Criteria*

### *Positive Sentiment Determination*

Identifying positive language among social media data poses several challenges. At a basic level, sentiment detection requires comparing text against dictionaries of positive and negative words to make simple categorizations. However, a human analysis component is nearly always required because automated systems produce incorrect classifications for a variety of reasons. Positive words used in a negative context, sarcasm, slang, short strings of text, and an increasing use of imagery and emoticons to express emotion on social media all contribute to sentiment classification difficulties (Neuendorf 2016; Neuendorf and Kumar 2006; Lewis et al. 2013).

My multi-step process for arriving at positive tweets includes using two different automated sentiment analysis approaches followed by verification through human coding. The Twitter data provider included automatic sentiment classification of every tweet as positive, negative, or neutral based on a log likelihood approach of being either positive or negative, given the sentiment-laden words or groups of words contained in a string of text. Neutral words are those with a low likelihood of being positive or negative. This approach filtered out the most obvious non-positive tweets. For the second phase of sentiment detection, I used Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), a commonly used text analysis software that computes separate positive and negative scores based on emotional word density in a string (Pennebaker et al. 2015). LIWC is frequently used in marketing and psychology literature (Barasch and Berger 2014; Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010). At this stage, I removed any tweets that lacked positive words.

With the remaining sample of tweets, I directed two coders to classify each tweet on whether it was positive or not. Coders were instructed to determine whether the tweet suggested some correct action, strength, or accomplishment by the company (Finkelstein and Fishbach 2012) by complimenting the company, products, services, employees, or some other part of the customer experience, which could include past-, present-, or forward-looking statements. I specifically invited coders to look at the original tweets in context, to determine whether specific emoji or images suggested sarcasm or mixed emotions. Coders also acted as a second check on my original sample criteria to eliminate commercial, promotional, contest, or employee tweets about the companies. Following two rounds of training calibration on a separate set of tweets, coders classified 5,348 apparel tweets as positive or not positive. Coders achieved 90.8% agreement were able to resolve the remaining discrepancies through discussion. Of the coding sample, 75.4% were positive and fit the sampling criteria, leaving a final set of 4,032 positive eWOM tweets. However, only 711 (17.6%) of these received any company response. Just as I removed consumer tweets that included questions to the company, I removed company replies that included questions to the consumer, as a potential confounding element. This resulted in 651 tweets comprising the final sample.

### *Variable Operationalization*

Each case in the dataset is represented by a consumer's positive eWOM tweet, the focal company's response, and the consumer's response engagement (if any), with descriptive variables for each segment of the conversation. I commissioned the development of a software program to collect and appended metadata about each original positive tweet. Then for each case, the program also used a combination of the Twitter

application programming interface (API) and web scraping to determine whether the company responded to the consumer’s tweet, collecting all relevant metadata associated with the company’s response. Using a similar approach, the program collected the consumer’s second tweet in response to the company. Table 6 provides a summary of consumer positive eWOM, company response, and consumer response variables.

Descriptive statistics and correlations are provided in Tables 7 and 8.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>Description</b>
Consumer / positive eWOM characteristics	Narrowcasted or broadcasted tweet	A binary variable representing whether or not the tweet mentions the company at the start of the tweet.
	Social media popularity	The log (x+1) number of people following the consumer's Twitter account.
	Positivity	The LIWC score for text positivity.
	Length	The character length of the tweet, excluding characters devoted to the company username, hyperlinks, and emoji.
	Emoji inclusion	A binary variable representing whether the tweet contains emoji.
Company response characteristics	Consumer name use	A binary variable representing whether the response contains the consumer's first name as displayed in the Twitter profile.
	Consumer-oriented language	The difference between the LIWC scores for second person pronoun use and first person pronoun use.
	Positivity	The LIWC score for text positivity.
	Response Length	The character length of the tweet, excluding characters devoted to the company username, hyperlinks, and emoji.
	Emoji inclusion	A binary variable representing whether the tweet contains emoji.
	Response time	The difference (in minutes) between the consumer's tweet and the company's response.
Consumer engagement behavior	Other tweet engagement	A binary variable representing whether the company also "liked" or "retweeted" the consumer's tweet in addition to responding.
	Response engagement reply	A binary variable representing whether the consumer replied to the company's response.

*Table 6. Variable Operationalization*



	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Consumer Response	.00	1.00	.14	.34
<b>Consumer and eWOM Characteristics</b>				
Broadcast	.00	1.00	.70	.46
Consumer popularity (ln)	1.10	11.48	5.79	1.55
Positivity level	3.70	50.00	13.17	7.61
Length (character count)	18.00	140.00	88.09	34.41
Emoji inclusion	.00	1.00	.36	.48
<b>Company Response Characteristics</b>				
Consumer name usage	.00	1.00	.39	.49
Consumer-oriented language	-33.33	33.33	.25	9.87
Response positivity level	.00	100.00	18.93	15.80
Response length	1.00	134.00	60.08	33.56
Emoji inclusion	.00	1.00	.43	.50
Response time (minutes)	.32	30,328.45	421.66	1,588.84
Other tweet engagement	.00	1.00	.21	.40
n = 651				

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics

<b>Dependent Variable</b>												
Consumer Response												
<b>eWOM Characteristics</b>												
Broadcast	.02											
Popularity (ln)	.11	.23										
Positivity level	-.03	-.04	-.01									
Length	.06	-.08	-.12	-.51								
Emoji inclusion	.00	.14	.16	.06	-.27							
<b>Response Characteristics</b>												
Consumer name usage	.02	.01	-.07	.00	.09	-.01						
Consumer-oriented language	.08	.06	.03	-.03	-.07	.08	.05					
Response positivity level	.04	-.03	-.05	.09	-.04	-.06	.01	.02				
Response length	.05	-.07	-.10	-.10	.33	-.19	.22	.02	-.15			
Emoji inclusion	-.03	.15	.12	.07	-.14	.17	.08	.00	-.13	-.16		
Response time	-.05	-.06	.02	.04	-.02	-.01	-.08	.01	.07	-.07	-.08	
Other tweet engagement	.03	-.11	-.08	.03	-.01	-.12	-.24	.01	.22	-.30	-.27	.13

Note: Absolute values  $\geq .08$  are significant at the .05 level. Absolute values  $\geq .10$  are significant at the .01 level.

Table 8. Correlation Matrix

*Positive eWOM characteristics.* I operationalize a narrowcasted tweet as mentioning the company at the start of the tweet, showing it to be directed to the company specifically, e.g., “@Applebees I love your new appetizers!” A broadcasted tweet mentions the company later in the tweet, e.g., “I love the new @Applebees appetizers!” I operationalize consumer social media popularity as the log number of followers the consumer’s account has, a measure consistent with other research (Cha et al. 2010; Kwak et al. 2010; Toubia and Stephen 2013). Specifically, I took the log (follower count + 1) to account for the uneven distribution of social media followers and to mathematically accommodate users with no followers. I control for the positivity of the tweet using the LIWC measure of positive word usage. More positive tweets may indicate greater consumer positivity, a characteristic which may dispose the consumer to engage positively with a response. I control for tweet length, as measured by the number of characters used in the tweet, excluding characters devoted to hyperlinks and emoji. Lower effort associated with a shorter tweet may denote that the consumer has lower involvement or lower expectations for a response. Last, I control for whether the tweet includes emoji (two-dimensional pictographs used to express emotion or substitute for words) as these may indicate a type of consumer playfulness that may also predispose the consumer to engage (Kelly and Watts 2015).

*Company response characteristics.* I operationalize consumer name use by whether the company response contains the consumer’s first name as contained in their Twitter profile. This is in addition to the name possibly appearing in the consumer’s Twitter username. I operationalize consumer-oriented language using the LIWC measure for second person pronoun use (Pennebaker et al. 2015), which measures the

concentration of “you,” “your,” and similar pronouns in a text string. From this score, I subtract the LIWC score for personal first person pronoun use (“I,” “me,” “my” “we,” “us,” “our”), which represent more self-focused language. I create this composite score because responses containing combinations of company- and consumer-focused pronouns will likely be perceived differently by consumers than those that are wholly consumer-focused. I control for response positivity, length, and the inclusion of emoji as well as response time—the time difference (in minutes) between the consumer’s positive tweet and the company’s response, presuming that faster response times will produce higher engagement. I control for whether the company also “liked” or “retweeted” (shared) the consumer’s positive eWOM tweet in addition to responding as these added company engagement actions may strengthen the effectiveness of the company’s response. Finally, I include a dummy variable for each company in the sample to capture differences in engagement propensity between consumer groups.

*Social media engagement behavior.* The dependent variable in the model is whether the consumer engages with the company’s response through a subsequent tweet to the company. I select this for several reasons. First, this social media action demonstrates greater engagement versus other forms of consumer engagement on Twitter. “Liking” and sharing the company response can both be accomplished with a button click, whereas responding requires the consumer to devote more conscientious effort. Second, a continuation of consumer-company dialogue can lead to more impactful relationship building as the amount of direct communication with the company increases. Third, this engagement outcome provides a better determination of what companies must do to shift broadcasters’ attention away from their own audiences toward engaging

directly with the company for the first time. In this data, 13.7% of consumers engaged by dialoguing with the company after receiving a company response, while 30% of consumers “retweeted” or shared the company’s response and 58.5% “liked” the response.

### *Analysis*

I conducted a logistic regression to estimate the log odds of consumers engaging with the company response to their positive eWOM by continuing the dialogue and responding to the company. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 9, with a hierarchical comparison of a model containing control variables only (including company-specific controls), a model with hypothesized main effects, and a full model with the hypothesized interactions. While logistic regression is less reliant on traditional measures of fit like  $r^2$ , the increasing likelihood ratio chi-square statistic suggests an improvement in fit for the full model compared with the base model. Among control variables, the effect of response length is positive and significant, suggesting that longer company responses increase the likelihood of the consumer responding to the company, although this may be tied more to the ability of longer responses to contain more information that the consumer may want to respond to. Understandably, the coefficient for response time is significant and negative across the models, suggesting that the longer the company waits to respond, the less engagement the response produces.

	<b>Model 1: Control Variables Only</b>		<b>Model 2: Main Effects + Controls</b>		<b>Model 3: All Independent Variables (Full Model)</b>	
	<b>Coeff.</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Coeff.</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Coeff.</b>	<b>p</b>
Intercept	-12.49	.96	-13.94	.95	-14.33	.95
<b>Hypotheses</b>						
H <sub>1</sub> : Broadcast			.01	.95	.26	.18
H <sub>2</sub> : Popularity			.18	.03	.23	.02
H <sub>3</sub> : Popularity X broadcast					.00	.45
H <sub>4</sub> : Consumer name usage			-.02	.90	.64	.04
H <sub>5</sub> : Consumer-oriented language			.03	.03	.09	< .01
H <sub>6</sub> : Consumer name X broadcast					1.64	.01
H <sub>7</sub> : Consumer language X broadcast					-.07	.04
<b>Consumer eWOM Controls</b>						
Positivity level	.00	.90	.01	.67	.01	.80
Length	.00	.50	.00	.29	.00	.33
Emoji inclusion	-.15	.31	-.10	.48	-.12	.43
<b>Firm Response Controls</b>						
Response positivity level	.01	.60	.00	.64	.01	.42
Response length	.01	.07	.01	.08	.01	.04
Emoji inclusion	.23	.44	.11	.46	.09	.58
Response time	.00	.05	.00	.05	.00	.05
Other tweet engagement	-.11	.71	-.11	.72	-.01	.97
Observations	651		651		651	
$\chi^2$	61.81		71.6		82.19	
p	.12		.05		.02	

*Table 9. Logistic Regression Analysis of Consumer Response Engagement*

To test the hypotheses, I calculated the logistic regression coefficient for each variable and additional hypothesized interactions. The estimated coefficient for broadcasted tweets is not significant ( $b = .26, p = .18$ ), therefore H1 is not supported. One possible explanation lies in the determination of broadcasted tweets. The consumer's

decision to communicate positive eWOM to an audience, but mention a company with its precise Twitter username (e.g., @nordstrom), may indicate that the company is actually part of the target audience; moreso than if the consumer had more casually mentioned the company name (Nordstrom) in the tweet.

An analysis of the popularity coefficient suggests that the coefficient is positive and significant ( $b = .23, p = .02$ ). This suggests that, contrary to H2, as consumer social media popularity increases, the likelihood of continuing their engagement with a company's response to positive eWOM also increases. While my data does not provide a specific explanation for this effect, it may be due to unobserved characteristics that drive the consumer to accumulate followers through higher social media activity. An analysis of the interaction term indicates that broadcasting vs. narrowcasting does not have a moderating effect on popularity ( $b = .00, p = .45$ ), thus H3 is not supported. Given the positive effect of popularity on engagement, this is not altogether surprising. Popularity may have a strong enough association with online engagement activity that popular consumers engage with company responses regardless of the consumer's intended audience.

An analysis of the logistic regression coefficients associated with response characteristics finds a significant influence of both personalization variables. Consumer name usage is positive and significant ( $b = .64, p = .04$ ) indicating that as companies use available consumer name information in their responses, the likelihood of engagement increases. However, this effect is only visible in the full model, so H4 is not supported. Additionally, the effect of consumer-oriented language is also positive and significant ( $b$

= .09,  $p < .01$ ), in support of H5. Thus, companies can modify their language to be more customer-centric as a way to drive further conversation.

In support of H6, consumer name use has a stronger effect on subsequent response engagement, specifically when the tweet is broadcasted ( $b = 1.64, p = .01$ ). However, contrary to the prediction of H7, the coefficient for the interaction between consumer-oriented response language and broadcasting behavior is both significant and negative ( $b = -.07, p = .04$ ), suggesting that consumer-oriented language appears to lower the probability of engagement when the consumer broadcasts the tweet.

While the main effects of the personalization factors appear to align with my theory and predictions, the moderating effects of audience hypothesized in H<sub>6</sub> and H<sub>7</sub> display opposite signs. One explanation that may resolve this discrepancy is the concept of language mimicry, which holds that when speech elements are mimicked by a dyadic partner, this leads to successful communication outcomes (Pickering and Garrod 2004). Researchers also suggest that this principle is more relevant to positive situations (Kurzius and Borkeu 2015) and operates successfully in text-based environments (Ludwig et al. 2013; Swaab et al. 2011). Hence, if the company's response mimics the consumer's language style, the consumer will be more engaged by the interaction. To explore this possibility, I conducted a deeper analysis of the social media data using LIWC measures of specific pronoun characteristics. Linguistically, the analysis supports Barasch and Berger (2012) in affirming that broadcasters have a higher average concentration of self-focused pronouns than narrowcasters ( $M_{\text{broadcaster}} = 2.69$  vs.  $M_{\text{narrowcaster}} = 5.12, p = 0.05$ ) while narrowcasters are more inclined to use second person pronouns ( $M_{\text{narrowcaster}} = 4.62$  vs.  $M_{\text{broadcaster}} = 2.7, p < .001$ ). Hence, our analysis suggests

that companies responding with consumer-focused language are more likely mimicking narrowcasters, but not broadcasters, which results in more successful communication, i.e., greater engagement propensity among narrowcasters.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In this research, my analysis demonstrates that multiple factors play an active role in determining consumer response to company acknowledgment of their positive eWOM. I find that consumer-oriented language increases the probability that consumers will engage with a response. Furthermore, name use is associated with a greater propensity for consumers to engage with the response when they have initially broadcasted positive eWOM to a public social media audience rather than privately and directly. The findings of this research also suggest that popular consumers are more likely to engage with company responses.

### *Contributions*

This research offers three primary theoretical contributions. First, it provides the some initial empirical determination of how company responsiveness to positive eWOM results in continued consumer engagement. Where research typically studies the eWOM phenomenon in aggregate, this research looks at individual-level eWOM using social media data in a way that simultaneously captures characteristics of both the message and sender as well as company response and its immediate engagement impact. In so doing, I identified characteristics of both the consumer and response that result in differential levels of engagement behavior.



Second, this research contributes to the body of brand communication literature by studying the effects of brand communication on consumer engagement at the linguistic level. While previous relationship literature has found second-person language to be associated with negative outcomes in dyadic conflict situations, I find the opposite to be true during positive interactions. The use of “you-focused” response language increases the likelihood of subsequent consumer engagement. This provides some evidence that the same linguistic styles have differential outcomes depending on the interaction or relational context. There are likely other linguistic decisions that exhibit these same effects in positive scenarios, and future research can explore the underlying mechanism for these effects.

Third, while consumer-focused language style was associated with higher propensities to engage with the company response, but this propensity due to language style diminished if the consumer’s tweet was broadcast to an audience. The finding that company is more engaged by the linguistic style that they are prone to use themselves is consistent with the mimicry literature, suggesting that deliberate mimicry of a dyadic communication partner produces better relational outcomes. However, this would be the first research to provide support for strategic communicative mimicry’s positive benefits after a single exchange (most mimicry research has demonstrated these relational benefits in longer interactions such as negotiations or speed dating). Additional research can help determine the robustness of these effects at such a discrete level.

Marketers understand that along the customer journey are innumerable touchpoints that contribute to eventual conversion, profitability, and loyalty. Non-transactional interactions with the brand have the potential to engage consumers in ways

that deepen the consumer relationship. This research highlights a context in which companies have an unsolicited engagement opportunity, but are largely ignoring it. It suggests that when companies do respond to positive eWOM, even when not directed to them specifically, a subset of consumers seek additional connection with the brand by continuing to engage. Furthermore, this research identifies opportunities for firms to be strategic in how they respond, in terms of customer prioritization and language choice. Companies can be more conscientious to use language that is consumer-focused in style, particularly when the consumer messages them directly. Companies can also engage better by taking time to use consumer names in more personalized responses.

This research also suggests that companies benefit by providing more content in their responses. Longer responses perform better in terms of engagement, perhaps because very short responses may lack the warmth or sincerity needed to build rapport and promote additional dialogue. Companies should also make efforts to respond soon after the consumer's message is posted. In my dataset, I observed longer response times decrease the probability of response engagement, with some companies taking as long as 3 weeks to respond to positive eWOM. Responsiveness requires both technological resources to detect relevant online consumer conversations in a timely manner as well as human resources to communicate effectively. Companies can make sure that these solutions are in place to take greater advantage of interaction opportunities.

Finally, this research recognizes that some types of consumers, particularly those with more social media popularity, are more likely to engage with company responses. While companies may already be prioritizing more popular consumers for brand correspondence, this finding has other implications for areas such as influencer

marketing. Companies are increasingly turning to consumers to use their personal online influence to promote more authentic marketing messages. If more popular consumers are increasingly likely to engage with company responses in positive circumstances, they may be more likely to engage with consumer responses when sharing positive eWOM about the company. Thus companies may achieve additional gains by coordinating marketing campaigns with more popular social media endorsers because they can expect popular endorsers to be influential, but also to exhibit more follow-up engagement with their audiences as a result of their brand-sponsored activity.

#### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

While this research contributes to our understanding of online engagement in several ways, it is not without limitations. The generalizability of my findings to other platforms and types of companies deserves further exploration. A social media platform may have unique, emergent communication norms that combine with platform features to create brand interactions that are distinct from those on other platforms. Twitter provided a mature, brand-rich venue where communication is plentiful and public. Less public platforms, or those where brand communication is less welcome, may experience different effects from company responsiveness. Likewise, the extent to which these results robustly apply to other industries deserves consideration. The consumer experiences that drive positive eWOM about apparel companies may differ from those of less conspicuous products or services or those characterized by lower aggregate levels of consumer positivity.

One limitation in this analysis is potential presence of selection bias. Consumers make deliberate decisions about when to share positive eWOM about a brand and what to share. In my dataset, a number of companies either do not have a public Twitter account or choose not to correspond directly with consumers. Consumers may also share based on the type of response they expect to receive from the brand. Similarly, companies decide which tweets to respond to, based on available resources, estimated firm value of responding, customer information, and other factors. Therefore, without a knowledge of these decision parameters, there may unaccounted factors that influence consumer engagement. In my model, I implicitly control for brand-level factors and expected engagement differences with the inclusion of brand dummy variables. Future research could help enrich the findings of this work with the inclusion of a selection model, as suggested by Heckman (1979).

This research prompts multiple opportunities for further exploration. Here, I focus solely on discrete interactions with immediate, measurable engagement. However, research should address whether responsiveness has a longer-term influence on engagement behavior. Some research suggests that responsiveness to negative eWOM may actually stimulate additional complaints later (Ma et al. 2015). Therefore, broader research efforts should determine whether responding to positive eWOM online may generate similar positive effects by reinforcing eWOM. Response may also stimulate an increase in negative eWOM if the consumer determines the company to be more generally responsive. If so, companies would do well to understand the total benefits and costs associated with responsiveness.

This research points to the influence of linguistic decisions in the company response that contribute to effective brand communication. Further research should seek to understand the meaning embedded in positive eWOM content at the consumer level and its relevance to the effectiveness of company response activity. For example, the temporality of eWOM determines how consumers speak about the company or company experiences and what they choose to share (Weingarten and Berger, in press). More clarity is needed about whether companies can make meaning inferences from such text-based cues in order to better personalize and enhance the quality of their interactions. Additionally, research can make a better determination about the extent to which consumer motivations to share positive eWOM result in content differences and engagement propensities.

In conclusion, this research begins to examine the engagement consequences when firms respond to positive word of mouth through social media. I identify several response characteristics that increase or decrease the likelihood of continuing consumer interaction. At the linguistic level, companies can adapt their response styles to enhance response effectiveness by using consumer-oriented language and incorporating the consumer's name as a personalization measure, particularly when the consumer is broadcasting their message to a social media audience. Companies concerned with improving the myriad of digital consumer touchpoints should view every positive eWOM event as an invitation to further enhance the consumer experience. This research suggests that companies can be strategic about types of consumer engagement that are too frequently disregarded.

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APPENDIX A  
CLASSIFICATION OF COMPANY RESPONSES TO POSITIVE CONSUMER  
TWEETS

<b>Classification</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Example Tweet Response</b>
Reply (Basic Acknowledgment)	23.0%	Thanks for the shout-out!
Reply (Gladness)	24.7%	We're glad we could help!
Reply (Agreement)	2.8%	I'm with you! So exciting.
Reply (Detail)	1.7%	Great! We are here 24/7 if you need anything.
Reply (Transfer)	3.9%	We'll be sure to forward ur compliments to the District Mgr.
Reply (Return)	1.7%	The feeling is mutual!
Reply (Follow-up Question/Request)	11.8%	Thanks! Which store location did you visit?
Reply (Well-wishes)	7.3%	Wonderful. Have a good one.
"Like" (Twitter-specific)	21.3%	N/A
"Retweet" (Twitter-specific)	4.5%	N/A
No Acknowledgment	42.7%	N/A

n=178 companies listed in the American Customer Satisfaction Index, March 2, 2015

APPENDIX B  
STUDY MEASURES

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**Constructs (Scale Sources): Items**

**Response Satisfaction (Adapted from Spreng et al., 1996)**

Please rate how you feel about the restaurant's response:  
Very dissatisfied -- Very satisfied  
Very displeas -- Very pleased  
Frustrated -- Contented  
Terrible -- Delighted

**Repeat Positive Feedback Intent**

How likely would you be to write a positive online review about this restaurant if you had a similar dining experience there in the future?

**Response Personalization (Adapted from Srinivasan et al., 2002)**

The company's response was tailor-made for [Person].  
The company's response made [Person] feel that they are a unique customer.  
The company's response was tailored to [Person's] tweeting.  
The company's response was customized for [Person].

**Response Effort (Adapted from Mohr and Bitner 1995)**

The company's response to [Person] took effort.  
The company put a lot of thought into responding to [Person].  
It took work for the company to respond to [Person's] tweeting.  
The company put time into responding to the tweeting.

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**Constructs (Scale Sources): Items**

**Feedback Effort (Adapted from Mohr and Bitner, 1995)**

[Person's] tweeting to the company took effort.  
[Person] put a lot of thought into tweeting to the company.  
It took work for [Person] to tweet.  
[Person] put time into tweeting to the company.  
[Person] tried hard in tweeting to the company.

**Feedback Specificity**

How specific is [Person's] tweet? (Not at all specific -- Extremely specific)

**Feedback Positivity**

How positive is [Person] in tweeting? (Not at all positive -- Extremely positive)

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Notes: All items were measured using seven-point scales anchored by 1 = "completely disagree" and 7 = "completely agree" unless otherwise stated.

APPENDIX C  
EXPERIMENTAL STIMULI

## Study 1 Stimuli: Yelp Restaurant Responses


### A. Thank You

Was this review ...? [Useful](#) (1) [Funny](#) [Cool](#)

[Bookmark](#) [Send to a Friend](#) [Link to This Review](#)

---

Comment from Angela T., General Manager

 Thank you!

[Flag this comment](#)

### B. Expressing Gladness

Was this review ...? [Useful](#) (1) [Funny](#) [Cool](#)

[Bookmark](#) [Send to a Friend](#) [Link to This Review](#)

---

Comment from Angela T., General Manager

 We're so glad you enjoyed your time with us!

[Flag this comment](#)

### C. Follow-up Question

Was this review ...? [Useful](#) (1) [Funny](#) [Cool](#)

[Bookmark](#) [Send to a Friend](#) [Link to This Review](#)

---

Comment from Angela T., General Manager

 Was there anything particular about your visit that made it memorable?  
We love details.

[Flag this comment](#)

### D. Shifting Credit

Was this review ...? [Useful](#) (1) [Funny](#) [Cool](#)

[Bookmark](#) [Send to a Friend](#) [Link to This Review](#)

---

Comment from Angela T., General Manager

 I'm going to go pass your review along to our kitchen staff!

[Flag this comment](#)

110

110

## Study 4 Stimuli: Twitter Restaurant Responses

### A. Low Feedback Effort, Low Response Personalization, Low Response Effort Stimuli





## B. High Feedback Effort, High Response Personalization, High Response Effort Stimuli



## Study 5 Stimuli: Twitter Apparel Company Responses

### A. Low Feedback Positivity, Low Response Personalization, Low Response Effort Stimuli



B. High Feedback Positivity, High Response Personalization, High Response Effort Stimuli

 **Kara Lopez** @KaraLopez  
@Cappa LOVE LOVE LOVE the new Fall Collection I saw at your store last weekend!!!! SOOOO excited to go back for the next sale!!!  
10:12 AM - 9 Oct 2016

 **Cappa** @Cappa  
@KaraLopez So glad to hear you like the Fall Collection, Kara!

 **Cappa** @Cappa  
@KaraLopez Thanks and have a great day.



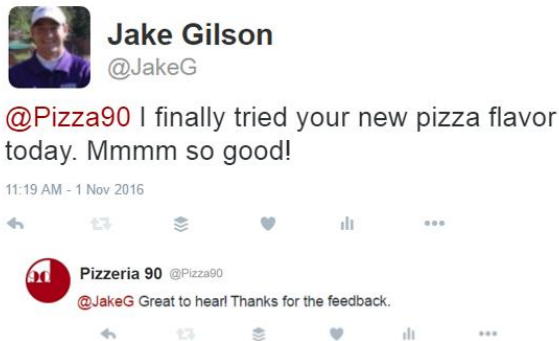
THANK YOU

CAPPA

 **Cappa** @Cappa  
@KaraLopez See you at the next sale!

## Study 6 Stimuli: Twitter Restaurant Company Responses

### A. Low Feedback Specificity, Low Response Personalization, Low Response Effort Stimuli



### B. High Feedback Specificity, High Response Personalization, High Response Effort Stimuli

