Electronic word of mouth: Challenges for consumers and companies

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It is well-established that, as a consumer decision aid, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) provides opportunities to both consumers and companies. By relying on eWOM, consumers believe that they are better able to make informed purchase decisions. By incorporating eWOM in their business strategies, companies believe that they can capitalize on its effects. However, both parties must overcome challenges in order to benefit from these opportunities. Consumers are confronted with the challenge of selecting the most useful and credible information amid the overwhelming amount of electronic word of mouth that is circulating on the internet. Companies are faced with the challenge of managing eWOM, especially when they are negatively portrayed in such communications. Although these challenges constitute a topic of both societal and managerial concern, they lack a strong scientific foundation. The objective of this dissertation is therefore to investigate these challenges.
ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH: Challenges for Consumers and Companies

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To C. Willemsen and M. H. van der Sloot
INTRODUCTION

In today’s media landscape, consumers are increasingly taking charge of the creation and communication of product and service information. The advent of social media is at the very center of this shift. Social media (e.g., review sites, blogs, consumer forums, and communities) provide consumers with opportunities to share their experiences and opinions about products and services with a multitude of other consumers (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). All over the world, consumers are seizing this opportunity. A study amongst 9027 consumers from 35 different countries shows that more than one third of all consumers post information about products and services on social media (Insites Consulting, 2011).

Consumer involvement in the production and communication of online product- and service information yields a wealth of electronic word of mouth in a variety of formats, including blog posts, tweets, comments, and reviews. Regardless of format, electronic word of mouth generally involves a direct or indirect recommendation (i.e., star rating or evaluation), which can be either positive or negative with regard to a product or service. The recommendations that consumers provide in electronic word-of-mouth messages are believed to aid others in their purchase decisions, even more so than traditional marketing messages (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Ha, 2002; Nielsen, 2012). Becoming aware that messages from marketers provide only information presenting themselves or their products in a favorable light, consumers are developing negative perceptions regarding the credibility of marketer-created messages (Koslow, 2000). More consumers are therefore turning to electronic word of mouth in order to guide their purchase decisions (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009).

With the declining credibility of traditional marketing, the evaluations of companies and their products or services are becoming increasingly determined by their ability to generate electronic word of mouth (Shankar & Malthouse, 2007; Sher & Lee, 2009). Companies are therefore incorporating electronic word of mouth into their business strategies in order to capitalize on its effects. Such strategies are appealing, as they combine the prospect of overcoming consumer resistance with significantly lower costs than traditional marketing efforts (Keller, 2007). Electronic word of mouth thus not only offers opportunities for consumers but also for companies. However, both parties must overcome challenges in order to benefit from these opportunities. Consumers are confronted with the challenge of selecting the most useful and credible information amid the overwhelming amount of electronic word of mouth that is circulating on the internet. Companies are confronted with the challenge of managing consumers’ articulations of electronic word of mouth. Given the importance of electronic word of mouth for both consumers and companies, these challenges lie at the heart of this dissertation.

ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH AS A DECISION AID

Even long before the introduction of the internet, word-of-mouth communication served as an important means of spreading information (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).
Traditionally, word of mouth (hereafter: WOM) refers to interpersonal communication between a perceived non-commercial sender and a receiver, with regard to the ownership, usage, or characteristics of products or services (cf. Arndt, 1968; Westbrook, 1987). Given the perceived lack of commercial intent on the part of senders, WOM is generally believed to convey unbiased information about the qualities of products or services that otherwise may be difficult to obtain before consumption. As a result, WOM is considered more credible and useful—and therefore, more persuasive—than marketer-created information (Alreck & Settle, 1995).

With the advent of the internet, and later social media, WOM communications gained even more significance, which enabled consumers to disseminate and access WOM on a much larger scale through electronic communication (Dellarocas, 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Schindler & Bickart, 2005). This electronic form of word of mouth (hereafter: eWOM) is able to generate more reach because of two important differences from its offline counterpart. First, because WOM involves the exchange of ephemeral spoken messages, its reach is restricted by time and geographical barriers; it is rather difficult to pass along WOM to anyone who is not present when and where the WOM is exchanged. In contrast, eWOM involves the exchange of digitally documented messages that are available to anyone with an internet connection for an indefinite period of time.

Second, while WOM is exchanged primarily in face-to-face encounters between strong-tie contacts (i.e., relatives, friends or other people who are close to each other), eWOM is usually exchanged between visually anonymous weak-tie contacts (i.e., strangers or others who have little or no prior relationship with one another). The possibility for consumers to exchange their opinions, knowledge, and experience with unfamiliar people broadens the availability of eWOM beyond the immediate social circles of individual consumers (Chatterjee, 2001; Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

Although consumers are more likely to value and trust the opinions of those with whom they are acquainted, consumers still regard eWOM as a valuable source of information (Nielsen, 2012). Through eWOM, people can obtain a large and diverse set of opinions from a myriad of consumers with experience, or even expert knowledge, about products or services. Given that such knowledge may not be available within one’s immediate social circles, eWOM provides people with more input for their purchase decision-making in terms of quantity, but potentially in terms of usefulness and credibility as well (Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

The wide availability of eWOM, combined with its perceived usefulness and credibility, renders eWOM a valuable decision aid. This is reflected by research demonstrating that the primary motivation for consumers to use eWOM is to make better-informed purchase decisions (Burton & Khammash, 2010; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004; Hicks, Comp, Horovitz, Hovarter, Miki, & Bevan, 2012). By relying on eWOM, consumers expect to obtain product information that may contribute to a more satisfactory decision outcome. They are therefore eager to use eWOM as input in their decision processes regarding purchases (Nielsen, 2012).

Given that consumers generally use eWOM as a decision aid, is has been found to be a powerful market force. A vast amount of research demonstrates that eWOM has considerable impact on consumers’ evaluations of products, services, and brands, as well as on their subsequent purchase decisions (e.g., Chakravarty, Liu, & Mazumdar, 2006; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). The overarching conclusion of this research is that negative eWOM discourages consumers from purchasing particular products or services, while positive eWOM encourages them to make such purchases. Positive eWOM thus offers major benefits to companies, and it has even been claimed to be the best predictor of business growth (Keller, 2007).

**FOCUS OF THIS DISSERTATION**

It is well-established that, as a consumer decision aid, eWOM provides opportunities to both consumers and companies. It is nevertheless accompanied by challenges that consumers must overcome in order to realize its full benefits as a decision aid. On the other hand, companies are faced with the challenge of managing eWOM, especially when they are negatively portrayed in such communications. Although these challenges constitute a topic of both societal and managerial concern, they lack a strong scientific foundation. The objective of this dissertation is therefore to investigate these challenges, as discussed in the following sections.

**CHALLENGES FOR CONSUMERS**

On a general level, eWOM may convey useful product information from credible sources. It would nevertheless be wrong to assume that all eWOM sources—or the content provided by these sources—are homogenous in composition, and thus of equal usefulness and/or source credibility (Metzger, 2007; Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Whether this is reflected in consumers’ evaluations of the usefulness and source credibility of eWOM remains a question to be answered. The question of whether consumers discern between more and less useful eWOM, or between more and less credible eWOM sources is important, given the lack of gatekeeping in social media. Within review sites, blogs, forums and communities, anyone can say anything about any products, services or brands (Winter, Krämer, Appel, & Schielke, 2010). In most cases, no editorial board is responsible for selecting relevant information or ensuring standards of reliability. It is thus the responsibility of consumers, instead of editors or authorities, to differentiate the usefulness of eWOM and the credibility of its (unknown) sources. In the literature, questions have been raised as to whether consumers are always successful in such efforts, as they may find it difficult to differentiate eWOM in terms of usefulness and source credibility.

One challenge mentioned in the literature is that eWOM occurs at an unprecedented scale, yet lacks any standard format (Lee & Youn, 2009; Metzger, 2007; Schindler & Bickart, 2005). The content of eWOM is therefore highly diverse, ranging from simple recommendations with extreme positive or negative statements to nuanced product evaluations that are supported by extensive argumentation. Research has only recently begun to examine what makes eWOM messages a useful source of information. One characteristic that has been consistently found to predict the tendency of consumers to adopt eWOM messages is the valence of their recommendations, often expressed by a five-point star rating located above the textual content of the eWOM message. Research has shown that negative recommendations are considered more useful and persuasive in guiding the purchase decisions of consumers than are equally strong positive recommendations (Busuoy, Chatterjee, & Ravid, 2003; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Sen & Lerman,
As evident from the discussion above, the same characteristics that render online communication effective (e.g., O’Keefe, 1998; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Although these theories have proven valid in the offline context, it is unclear whether they also explain consumer evaluations of messages in the context of eWOM. Because of the sheer abundance of eWOM, consumers may be constrained to paying attention only to the star rating instead of the textual content of eWOM. From a normative point of view, this is undesirable (cf. Winter & Krämer, 2012), as the textual content of eWOM may offer explanation and context to ratings, which consumers should consider in order to make an informed purchase decision (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

A second challenge mentioned in the literature is that it may be difficult for consumers to form impressions about the eWOM senders and their characteristics, such as their level of expertise, as they often involve visually anonymous weak-tie contacts (Chatterjee, 2001; Lee & Youn, 2009; Metzger, 2007b; Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Consumers are therefore assumed to know little about the sources of eWOM, except that they can be categorized (rightly or wrongly) as ordinary consumers like themselves (Burton & Khamsath, 2010; Metzger, Flanagan, & Medders, 2010). Past research shows that when consumers are not able to differentiate the individual identities of sources, consumers are likely to comply with the opinions of sources with whom they self-categorize or identify. These findings can be explained by social identification theories, which assert that social identification enhances overattributions of similarity and the tendency to form trusting attitudes towards social categories, especially in visually anonymous settings (for a review, see Walther & Carr, 2010). This is considered worrisome as ordinary consumers may not always have sufficient knowledge or expertise in order to assess products critically (Metzger, 2007; Metzger et al., 2010; Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

Although eWOM senders often remain visually anonymous, their messages often convey various cues that consumers can use to identify the expertise of eWOM senders and assess their credibility (Walther & Jang, 2012). These identification cues may include claims of real-world expertise, as expressed in the content of eWOM (e.g., “I’m an expert”; see Mackiewicz, 2010; Otterybacher, 2011). Offline persuasion theories predict that consumers tend to perceive experts as more credible than they perceive non-experts to be (e.g., Holand, Janis & Kelley, 1953; McCracken, 1989; for a review, see Pornpitakpan, 2004). It is nevertheless unclear whether these cues offer sufficient guidance to differentiate eWOM senders in terms of source credibility, as these cues are prone to deception. Sources may not be who they claim to be, or they may use their identities to promote marketing messages disguised as eWOM (Chatterjee, 2001; Lee & Youn, 2009). The latter practice is a topic of particular concern, as companies are increasingly attempting to influence eWOM to their own benefit by providing financial rewards to people as an incentive to communicate positively about their products and services on the internet (Chatterjee, 2001; Dellarocas, 2006; Mayzlin, 2006; Mayzlin et al., 2012; Resnick, Zeckhauser, Friedman, & Kuwabara, 2000; Sher & Lee, 2009).

As evident from the discussion above, the same characteristics that render eWOM a useful and credible source of information (large-scale, weak-tie communication) may also make it difficult for consumers to benefit from eWOM as a useful and credible source of information in their purchase-decision processes (Chatterjee, 2001; Dellarocas, 2006; Schindler & Bickart, 2005). In the societal debate, concerns have been expressed that consumers accept eWOM without differentiating between messages that are more and less useful and credible, thus relying on content and sender characteristics that signal a critical evaluation of products or services (e.g., Rezaabaksh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006; OECD, 2007). These concerns seem legitimate, as the assessment of usefulness and credibility is considered a consumer-empowering endeavor that can reinforce the ability of consumers to make informed decisions, and thus their ability to benefit from the decision-aiding function of eWOM (Rezaabaksh et al., 2006). The first part of this dissertation therefore aims to expand and deepen existing knowledge regarding how consumers evaluate eWOM messages and their senders in terms of usefulness (Ch2) and source credibility (Ch3). More specifically, the first part of this dissertation draws upon offline persuasion theories in order to answer the following research question:

RQ1. Do consumers differ in their evaluations of eWOM (senders), and if so, can these evaluations be explained by differences in content and sender characteristics?

CHALLENGES FOR COMPANIES

Aware that today’s consumers use eWOM as a key source of information to assist them in their purchase decisions (Lee & Cranage, 2012), companies attempt to influence eWOM. They launch viral marketing campaigns, build brand communities on social media, and introduce referral programs, all with the purpose of stimulating brand or product advocacy through eWOM (e.g., Chou & Cheng, 2003; Mayzlin, 2006). Because eWOM takes place between consumers, however, the content of eWOM is beyond the company’s control (Mangold & Faulds, 2009); consumers may communicate positively about a company and/or its products, services, but they may also discuss them negatively. The circulation of negative eWOM is cause of great concern for companies, especially in light of the general finding that negative eWOM has more impact on the assessments and behavior of consumers than positive eWOM does (e.g., Barasauy et al., 2003; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Son & Lerman, 2007).

Because of the priori limited control that companies have over eWOM, and because of their subsequent fear of negative eWOM, companies are increasingly responding to eWOM in an attempt to influence its effects once posted online. Responding to eWOM is also referred to as webcare, in this dissertation defined as: the act of engaging in online interactions with consumers, by actively searching the web to address consumer feedback (e.g., comments, questions and complaints). Although webcare may be posted in response to either positive or negative eWOM, it is considered particularly helpful as a means of countering negative eWOM and its undesirable effects on consumer behavior (Breitsohl, Khamsath, & Griffiths, 2010; Hong & Lee, 2005; Kerkhof, Beukeboom, & Utz, 2010; Lee & Song 2010; Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010). Through webcare, companies attempt to solve complaints that cause consumers to engage in negative eWOM, while limiting the potential damage that such complaints could have on other consumers. When they are
Although webcare is considered a valuable means of responding to negative eWOM, its effects have yet to be validated. The field suggests that consumers may not be equally appreciative of the webcare interventions of companies. Some consumers welcome, or even ask companies to respond to negative eWOM (Lee & Song, 2010). In contrast, others consider such interventions as an attempt to silence the voices of consumers who are critical of companies and their products and services, thus disapproving of companies that attempt to intervene in online consumer interactions (Breitsohl et al., 2010; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Havenstein, 2007). In the latter case, webcare can instigate a spiral of negative effects, with webcare in response to negative eWOM triggering even more negative eWOM (Lee & Song, 2010).

As suggested above, companies are confronted with the challenging task of using webcare as an adequate response to negative eWOM, especially given that the literature offers no empirically based guidelines on which to base their webcare policies. Thus far, only a few studies have examined the effects of webcare (e.g., Kerkhof et al., 2010; Van Laer & De Ruyster, 2011; Lee & Song, 2010). More specifically, these studies examined the types of response—accommodative (i.e., apology, compensation, and/or corrective action) or defensive (i.e., denial, attack, or shifting blame to others)—that yield the most desirable effects among readers of negative eWOM in terms of reputation and brand evaluations.

The notion that negative eWOM may have a negative effect on consumer behavior thus appears to have been translated into a somewhat one-sided examination of webcare effectiveness, considering only the effects of webcare on readers of eWOM. In practice, however, webcare is posted in a multiple-audience context consisting of both readers and senders of negative eWOM. Brands can benefit from webcare when it is well-received by both groups of consumers. The literature therefore calls for a more holistic approach that considers the perspectives of all consumers addressed by webcare (Breitsohl et al., 2010). In response to this call, this dissertation seeks to explore whether—and if so, under what circumstances—webcare can elicit positive responses from both senders and readers of negative eWOM.

Whether webcare instigates positive responses in senders of negative eWOM may depend largely upon their motives for engaging in negative eWOM. Prior studies on eWOM within the context of Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumer & Katz, 1974) suggest that consumers engage in negative eWOM because they seek to gratify specific needs and desires, which may include empowerment: the desire to enforce redress and service excellence (Bronner & De Hoog, 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Senders of eWOM who are driven by this desire may be likely to receive webcare favorably, more so than those who are driven by other motives, including the desire to vent frustration (venting) or to warn other consumers (altruism).

Whether webcare instigates positive responses in readers of negative eWOM may depend upon the desire of senders to receive webcare. Previous research suggests that consumers are likely to evaluate a company positively when it demonstrates a conversational human voice in its online interactions with consumers. In other words, they perceive that the company is communicating in a non-persuasive, natural, and engaging way, thus reflecting a genuine interest in engaging in dialogue with consumers (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006). When companies post webcare when it is desired and requested by senders of negative eWOM, they may demonstrate such a conversational human voice in the eyes of eWOM readers. In contrast, when companies push unsolicited webcare upon senders of negative eWOM, the reading public may perceive such actions as a desire on the part of the company to control eWOM, instead of a desire to engage in dialogical communication.

As this discussion of the literature suggests, it is important to examine the effects of webcare on both senders and receivers of eWOM. This is not only because doing so would allow a more complete understanding of webcare effectiveness amongst all consumers to whom it is addressed. Another important argument for focusing on both types of consumers is that the extent to which eWOM senders desire webcare may play an important role in explaining the effects of webcare among receivers of eWOM. The second part of this dissertation therefore aims to expand and deepen existing knowledge regarding how senders (Ch4) and readers of eWOM evaluate webcare and the companies that are responsible for webcare (Ch5). More specifically, the second part of this dissertation draws upon the literature on Uses and Gratifications Theory and on the conversational human voice to answer the following research question.

**RQ2.** Do consumers differ in their evaluations of (the company behind) webcare, and if so, can these evaluations be explained by differences in the characteristics of eWOM senders (i.e., motives, webcare desirability)?

**DISSERTATION OUTLINE**

This dissertation comprises four empirical studies, which are presented in the subsequent chapters. All of these studies have either been published or accepted for publication. Each chapter is self-contained, with its own abstract, introduction, discussion, and reference list. A summary of each chapter is presented below. Chapters 2 and 3 address the first research question, while Chapters 4 and 5 address the second research question.

**CHAPTER 2 HOW CONSUMERS EVALUATE THE USEFULNESS OF EWOM**

Although it has been widely established that the perceived usefulness of eWOM has a direct and positive effect on the product evaluations and purchase behavior of consumers, its predictors are less well understood (for a review, see Cheung & Thadani, 2012). The objective of the study reported in this chapter is therefore to gain more insight into what makes eWOM useful, defined here as the value of eWOM to guide consumer decisions about whether to buy or use a product or service (Purnawirawan, De Pelsmacker & Dens, 2012). Building on prior research
examining general eWOM characteristics (e.g., star ratings), this research goes a step further by examining message characteristics that are more central to the content of eWOM. One relevant question in this regard thus concerns whether consumers base their perceptions of the usefulness on content characteristics that reflect a critical assessment of the product (e.g., degree of argumentation), and a discussion that goes beyond the advantages of the product to address the disadvantages as well (or exclusively). Another question concerns whether consumers rely on identification cues, such as the claimed expertise of the eWOM sender in the content of eWOM (i.e., expertise claims), when evaluating the usefulness of eWOM. Although the offline persuasion literature understands these content and sender characteristics as significant predictors of perceived information value, they have received little attention in research aimed at explaining the perceived usefulness of eWOM (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

To address this void, a systematic content analysis was performed on reviews posted on Amazon.com (n = 400). For this purpose, a specific type of content analysis was applied—Network Analysis of Evaluative Texts (Van Cuijlenburg, Kleinnijenhuis, & De Ridder, 1988)—in order to capture the valence, argumentation density (proportion of arguments), and argumentation diversity (diversity of positive and negative arguments) of reviews, as well as the number of expertise claims made in the reviews. In addition, the content analysis includes a number of general product, reviewer, and review characteristics (e.g., price, reviewer reputation, star rating), as shown at the surface level of reviews. The insights derived through the content analysis were linked to the proportion of “useful” votes that reviews received from peers.

The results reveal that several general characteristics of reviews and reviewers are significantly related to perceived usefulness, including review length, star rating, and expertise. The second experiment (n = 96) expands the results of the first study by comparing a layperson and a self-proclaimed expert in terms of source identification and attitude towards the eWOM message. The second experiment (n = 265) examines the relative effects of laypeople and self-proclaimed experts on perceived trustworthiness and perceived expertise; two dimensions of source credibility. Perceived expertise refers to the degree to which the audience feels that the sender is capable of making valid assertions, and trustworthiness refers to the confidence that the sender is motivated to communicate valid assertions about products or services (Ohanian, 1990). The results demonstrate that these eWOM senders induce opposing evaluations of source credibility. A self-proclaimed expert is perceived as having more expertise, but at the same time, less trustworthiness than a layperson. The results further demonstrate that both perceived expertise and trustworthiness positively affect consumer attitudes towards messages. The results thus reveal the co-existence of two competing mechanisms: a self-proclaimed expert (as opposed to a layperson) has a positive indirect effect through perceived expertise, as well as a negative indirect effect on review attitude through perceived trustworthiness. When operating together, these mechanisms suppress the relationship between source identification and attitude towards the eWOM message.

The first experiment (n = 400) showed that source expertise (as a self-proclaimed expert) is perceived as having more expertise, but at the same time, less trustworthiness than a layperson. A rated expert, however, is perceived to have as much expert knowledge as a self-proclaimed expert, and as much trustworthiness as a layperson. The analyses further reveal that suspicion of persuasive intent—and not perceived lack of similarity—explains why proclaimed experts are regarded as less trustworthy. When the expert status of a source is confirmed by peer ratings, suspicion of persuasive intent diminishes, such that the eWOM source is perceived as having both expertise and trustworthiness.

The results of the study reported in Chapter 2 reveal that senders of eWOM often make claims about real-world expertise in the content of their eWOM messages. As reported in Chapter 2, these claims to expertise are only weakly related to the perceived usefulness of eWOM. This result is in line with studies in the broader domain of online communication, which have reported ambiguous results for the effects of source expertise (for a review, see Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). It nevertheless runs counter to studies in the context of face-to-face communication, which report that source expertise has a strong effect on message persuasion (for a review, see Pornpitakpan, 2004). This could be because consumers reserve doubts about the credibility of eWOM senders based on expertise claims. Given the visual anonymity in which eWOM is exchanged, the presented identity of eWOM senders and/or their motives to share product information may be suspect. For this reason, two experiments were performed in order to provide insight into the perceived credibility of eWOM senders.

The second experiment (n = 265) examines the relative effects of laypeople and self-proclaimed experts on perceived trustworthiness and perceived expertise; two dimensions of source credibility. Perceived expertise refers to the degree to which the audience feels that the sender is capable of making valid assertions, and trustworthiness refers to the confidence that the sender is motivated to communicate valid assertions about products or services (Ohanian, 1990). The results demonstrate that these eWOM senders induce opposing evaluations of source credibility. A self-proclaimed expert is perceived as having more expertise, but at the same time, less trustworthiness than a layperson. The results further demonstrate that both perceived expertise and trustworthiness positively affect consumer attitudes towards messages. The results thus reveal the co-existence of two competing mechanisms: a self-proclaimed expert (as opposed to a layperson) has a positive indirect effect through perceived expertise, as well as a negative indirect effect on review attitude through perceived trustworthiness. When operating together, these mechanisms suppress the relationship between source identification and attitude towards the eWOM message.

The second experiment (n = 96) expands the results of the first study by comparing a layperson and a self-proclaimed expert with a rated expert. A rated expert is a source whose expert status has been established through peer ratings on past eWOM performance (denoted by an expert-reviewer badge). The second experiment also aims to explain why self-proclaimed experts were found to be inferior with regard to perceived trustworthiness. Two explanations are possible: (1) those who present themselves as experts are perceived as less similar to the readers of eWOM, and hence less trustworthy (Huang & Chen, 2006), and (2) those who present themselves as experts are more suspicious of the intention to persuade and are therefore less trustworthy (cf. Burton & Khammash, 2010).

The results replicate those of the first experiment, showing that a self-proclaimed expert is perceived as having more expertise, but also as less trustworthy than a layperson. A rated expert, however, is perceived to have as much expert knowledge as a self-proclaimed expert, and as much trustworthiness as a layperson. The analyses further reveal that suspicion of persuasive intent—and not perceived lack of similarity—explains why proclaimed experts are regarded as less trustworthy. When the expert status of a source is confirmed by peer ratings, suspicion of persuasive intent diminishes, such that the eWOM source is perceived as having both expertise and trustworthiness.
CHAPTER 4 HOW EWOM SENDERs EVALUATE COMPANYs’ WEBCARE RESPONSEs

The objective of the study reported in this chapter is to examine whether and under what circumstances webcare can elicit positive responses from senders of negative eWOM. More specifically, this chapter draws upon Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Ruggiero, 2000) to test the notion that consumers differ in their receptiveness to webcare (i.e., the willingness to receive webcare favorably, depending upon the needs or desires they strive to address when posting negative eWOM. To date, no study has specifically investigated the motives underlying negative eWOM, nor has any study linked such motives to the responses that webcare can elicit from senders of negative eWOM. Two surveys were conducted to address these gaps. The aim of the first survey (n = 439) is to validate three motives that have been suggested as drivers for negative eWOM: empowerment, altruism, and venting. The aim of the second survey (n = 1132) is to examine the relative importance of these motives, along with their relations to webcare receptiveness, as measured through webcare desirability, satisfaction with webcare, and post-webcare eWOM.

The results of both surveys indicate that consumers engage in negative eWOM for reasons of empowerment, venting, and altruism. The second survey further reveals that these motives have differential effects on webcare receptiveness. Empowerment is positively related to webcare desirability, and satisfaction, although it is unrelated to post-webcare eWOM. Consumers who are driven by this motive are thus inclined to desire and be satisfied with webcare, although they are not inclined to engage in positive eWOM after receiving webcare. Venting and altruism are unrelated to webcare desirability, although they are negatively related to webcare satisfaction and post-webcare eWOM. Consumers who are driven by these motives are unlikely to be satisfied with webcare, and they are likely to engage in even more negative eWOM after receiving webcare. Finally, the results reveal that consumers who desire webcare (e.g., empowerment-driven consumers) have a greater chance of receiving webcare than consumers who do not desire webcare. Nevertheless, the desire for a webcare response does not mean that webcare will actually be offered. The results of this study indicate that less than half of consumers actually receive webcare.

CHAPTER 5 HOW EWOM READERs EVALUATE COMPANYs’ WEBCARE RESPONSEs

The objective of the study reported in this chapter is to examine whether and under what conditions webcare can elicit positive responses from readers of negative eWOM. More specifically, it tests whether webcare desirability on the part of eWOM senders plays a role in explaining the effects of webcare among the reading public. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, senders of negative eWOM differ in the degree to which they desire to receive webcare. When they desire webcare, they often make this explicit by requesting companies to respond to the complaints expressed in their negative eWOM messages (Lee & Song, 2010). This chapter includes an experiment (n = 163) examining the effects of webcare posted at the request of the eWOM sender (reactive webcare) and webcare that is not posted in response to a specific request (proactive webcare), within the context of a consumer-generated platform (consumer blog) and a brand-generated platform (corporate blog).

The results indicate that consumers generally evaluate brands more positively after reading webcare in response to negative eWOM than they do after reading only negative eWOM. The results also reveal an interaction effect of webcare response and platform on consumer brand evaluations. Reactive webcare, which is posted in response to negative eWOM at the consumer’s request, instigates favorable brand evaluations among the reading public, regardless of the platform on which negative eWOM is posted. Proactive webcare, which is unsolicited and posted in response to negative eWOM, is also able to elicit favorable brand evaluations, but only in the context of brand-generated platforms. In the context of consumer-generated platforms, webcare engenders brand evaluations that are less positive.

A similar pattern can be observed in the results for conversational human voice. Reactive webcare is perceived to enhance a human voice on both brand-generated and consumer-generated platforms. When brands act upon the requests of eWOM senders, such responses are perceived as motivated by a willingness to be engaged with consumers through dialogical communication. Proactive webcare is also perceived to enhance a human voice, but only in the context of brand-generated platforms. These platforms are often established by brands with the intent of stimulating dialogical communication between brands and their publics. Webcare posted in such contexts is perceived as a manifestation of this intent. In consumer-generated platforms, consumers are less likely to perceive proactive webcare as demonstrating a human voice. On platforms created “by consumers for consumers,” webcare interventions are perceived as driven by the desire to control online conversations, rather than by the desire to engage in conversational communication with consumers.

Finally, the results indicate that conversational human voice mediates the interaction effect of webcare response and platform on the brand evaluations of consumers.

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this dissertation is to examine eWOM as a consumer decision aid from the perspectives of both consumers and companies. More specifically, the dissertation aims to provide insight into two questions: (1) Do consumers differ in their evaluations of eWOM (senders), and if so, can these evaluations be explained by differences in content and sender characteristics; and (2) Do consumers differ in their evaluations of eWOM (company behind) webcare, and if so, can these evaluations be explained by differences in the characteristics of eWOM senders (i.e., motives, webcare desirability). Insight into the first question is important, as content and sender assessments are assumed to play a critical role in the ability of consumers to benefit from eWOM as a decision aid. Gaining insight into the second question is important, as companies are faced with the challenge of responding to negative eWOM and countering the unfavorable effects that negative eWOM can have on other consumers. The most important conclusions of this research endeavor are presented in this section.

CONSUMER EVALUATIONS OF EWOM (SENDERS)

The research conducted in order to gain insight into the first question yields two main conclusions. First, the results indicate that consumer evaluations regarding
the usefulness of eWOM vary as a function of the content characteristics that are conveyed in eWOM messages. Consumers do not rely solely upon general characteristics (e.g., star ratings) in order to evaluate the usefulness of eWOM; they also attend to characteristics that are more central to the textual content of eWOM. This is clearly demonstrated in the finding that the density and diversity of argumentation contribute to the perceived usefulness of eWOM, beyond general eWOM characteristics (including star ratings). Consumers are more likely to judge eWOM messages as useful when such messages contain considerable argumentation and address both the positive and negative attributes of the products in question. The overall valence of these product evaluations also contributes to the perceived usefulness of eWOM. Nevertheless, the effects of valence appear contingent upon the type of product being discussed in the eWOM message. For experience products, the results reveal a negativity bias, with negatively valenced eWOM content being evaluated as more useful than positively valenced WOM content is evaluated. The opposite pattern can be observed in the results for search products: while negative eWOM is perceived as useful in this context as well, positive eWOM is regarded as more useful. This finding indicates a positivity bias.

It was hypothesized that expertise claims would also explain the perceived usefulness of eWOM messages. According to the results, however, expertise claims are only weakly related to the perceived usefulness of eWOM, and they are unrelated to consumer attitudes towards eWOM. The lack of clear and significant effects from expertise claims does not imply that consumers disregard expertise when forming their opinions about eWOM messages. Consumers seem to rely upon expertise claims when evaluating the value of eWOM, but these evaluations are routed through perceptions of source expertise and trustworthiness (two dimensions of source credibility), which are not always consistent with each other. In comparison to laypersons, self-proclaimed experts are perceived as having greater expertise knowledge, but also as being less trustworthy, and vice versa. As demonstrated by the results, these opposing credibility evaluations undermine the effects of expertise claims on attitudes towards eWOM messages.

A second conclusion can be drawn from the latter findings as well: consumer evaluations of source credibility vary as a function of the sender characteristics that become apparent through identification cues conveyed through eWOM. As noted above, claims of real-world expertise inform consumers’ source credibility evaluations in terms of perceived expertise and trustworthiness, although not in the same direction. One striking finding is that evaluations of source credibility appear to be consistent with each other when the expert status of the eWOM sender is established by peer ratings instead of by self-claims. Rated experts sending eWOM message score favorably on both dimensions of credibility. More specifically, they are perceived as having just as much expert knowledge as self-proclaimed experts and as being just as trustworthy as laypeople.

The findings further demonstrate that perceived similarity is not a key factor in explaining the relationship between identification cues and perceived source trustworthiness. According to the results, suspicion of persuasive intent can explain why self-proclaimed experts score lower on perceived trustworthiness as compared to laypeople and rated experts. More specifically, favorable self-claims in terms of expertise are interpreted as a potential sign of persuasive intent, thus making consumers suspicious about the trustworthiness of self-proclaimed experts. In contrast, expertise that is established by a record of good conduct (as evaluated by peers in the past) serves as a signal that the eWOM sender has no intention to persuade and that the sender can be trusted as a source.

**CONSUMER EVALUATIONS OF THE COMPANY BEHIND WEBCARE**

The research conducted in order to gain insight into the second question also yields two main conclusions. First, the results demonstrate that the webcare evaluations of senders of negative eWOM vary as a function of the characteristics of eWOM senders. This is demonstrated by the finding that consumers’ motives for sending negative eWOM predict how they will evaluate webcare in response to negative eWOM. According to the results of this study, consumers who are driven by empowerment generally tend to receive webcare favorably. By making their dissatisfaction with companies known through negative eWOM, they seek to pressure those companies to provide redress for the problems that caused their dissatisfaction. Empowerment-driven consumers thus desire webcare, and when companies gratify this desire, they are likely to be satisfied with the webcare that is provided. The situation is different for consumers who send eWOM for reasons of venting and altruism. These consumers do not send negative eWOM because of a desire to receive webcare, and they are unlikely to be satisfied with webcare when companies then post webcare in response to their articulations of negative eWOM. They are likely to post even more negative eWOM. For those driven by altruism and venting, therefore, webcare may instigate a spiral of negative effects, in which a webcare response to negative eWOM is followed by even more negative eWOM.

Second, in addition to providing insight into the circumstances under which senders of negative eWOM are likely to respond positively to webcare, the results of this study reveal the circumstances under which readers of negative eWOM are likely to respond positively. In general, readers of negative eWOM are positively predisposed to brands that post webcare in response to negative eWOM. Nevertheless, readers do consider the webcare desirability of eWOM senders when evaluating webcare and the brand responsible for the webcare. The results show that senders’ webcare desirability shape readers’ responses to webcare, depending upon the platform in which the webcare is posted. Webcare that is desired and solicited by eWOM senders (i.e., reactive webcare) leads eWOM readers to evaluate brands favorably in the context of both consumer-generated and brand-generated platforms. Unsolicited webcare (i.e., proactive webcare) leads eWOM readers to evaluate brands favorably in the context of brand-generated platforms, but not in the context of consumer-generated platforms.

The results of this study also provide an explanation for why webcare has been reported to elicit divergent responses from the reading public. According to these results, conversational human voice plays a key role in enhancing favorable brand evaluations after exposure to negative eWOM and any subsequent webcare responses. Webcare that does not signal a genuine willingness to engage in dialogical communication with consumers is less likely to demonstrate a conversational human voice and engender positive brand evaluations. Such adverse consequences are more likely when companies push unsolicited webcare upon consumers in the context of consumer-generated platforms.
RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND THEORY ON EWOM

This dissertation contributes to the development of theory regarding the effects of eWOM in four ways. First, the research presented in this dissertation extends the results of previous studies on the effects of eWOM valence. Prior research has established that recommendations—whether implicit in the content of the eWOM message or explicit (e.g., in the form of star ratings)—are an essential element of eWOM. This is because consumers tend to consult these recommendations in order to guide their purchase decisions. Previous studies have also established a bias with regard to the effects of recommendation valence, in which consumers tend to assign greater weight to negative recommendations than they do to positive recommendations (e.g., Sen & Lerman, 2007; Forman et al., 2008; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). This dissertation indicates that the effects of valence may be more complex than previously suggested as the findings reveal a negativity bias only for experience products. For search products, the results reveal a positivity bias. One possible explanation for these effects is that the diagnostic character of negative eWOM is stronger for purchase decisions that involve more risk. Such is the case with experience products, which are dominated by intangible attributes that are difficult to assess prior to purchase, thus increasing the risk of incorrect decisions. This may make consumers more skeptical toward negative eWOM than they are toward positive eWOM with regard to experience products, as compared to experience products (see: Ahluwalia, 2002). Additional research is needed in order to provide further validation for this claim.

Second, although it is widely acknowledged that the perceived usefulness of eWOM plays a key role in affecting the purchase behavior of consumers, theoretical contributions regarding the determinants of the perceived usefulness of eWOM (except in the case of star ratings) is scarce (for a review, see Cheung & Thadani, 2012). This dissertation contributes in this regard by examining the applicability of traditional persuasion theories in order to enhance understanding with regard to the usefulness of eWOM. With regard to the effects of argumentation, the assumptions of these theories are supported by the results presented in this dissertation, which reveal that (balanced) argumentation is a predictor of perceived eWOM usefulness. This finding demonstrates that theories pertaining to the effects of argumentation in settings involving offline persuasion are applicable within the context of eWOM as well (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; O’Keefe, 1998), and that they warrant consideration in future research. One important question that should be addressed in such future research concerns whether reader characteristics (e.g., involvement with the product/service) moderate the identified effects of argumentation. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984) and other persuasion theories, involvement moderates both attention to and the influence of argumentation, such that consumers are more likely to attend to and be influenced by argumentation under conditions of higher involvement. Although many readers of eWOM may only find themselves searching and reading these eWOM messages due to a modicum of topic involvement (cf. Ruggiero, 2000), it is plausible that the effects demonstrated in this dissertation pertain to only a portion of eWOM readers (i.e., highly involved readers).

Third, this dissertation also provides more insight into the applicability of traditional persuasion theories to enhance our understanding of the source credibility of eWOM. The current findings resonate with traditional persuasion theories by demonstrating that perceived source expertise and perceived source trustworthiness (two dimensions of source credibility) predict consumer evaluations of eWOM. Such theories are less successful, however, in predicting the basis upon which perceived expertise and trustworthiness are established. The results reported in this dissertation challenge the assumption underlying traditional theories of persuasion, in which the identification of a source as an expert has parallel effects on the two dimensions of source credibility (for a review, see Pornpitakpan, 2004). According to the current findings, this is the case only when the identification of a source as an expert is based on peer ratings, and not when it is based on self-claims. This finding is consistent with Warranting Theory (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009), which predicts that peer ratings have more warranting value than self-claims do. This is because, in contrast to self-claims, peer ratings are beyond the control of the person to whom they refer, thus leading readers to trust the identity of such sources as experts, as well as their motivation for sharing eWOM. These findings suggest a more nuanced view with regard to the applicability of traditional persuasion theories to the prediction of perceived credibility on the part of eWOM senders and, potentially, for the senders of online messages in general. It is not the source’s identification as an expert, but the grounds on which this identification is based (in terms of who confers the identification and how) that drives consumers’ source credibility evaluations. Further research is needed in order to validate this view.

Finally, this dissertation provides support against the notion that eWOM (and online messages in general) constrain the expression or detection of users’ identity online when represented only by text. According to the results reported in this dissertation, readers do identify various subcategories of peers (e.g., laypeople, self-proclaimed experts, credentialed by peers), and they vary their responses to gain insight into this question, as the reported findings may not hold for types of platforms other than those used as the research context in this dissertation (i.e., online review sites). Although online review sites are the most preferred source of online product/service information (Nielsen, 2011), other platforms (e.g., social
network sites, blogs, and micro-blogs) may also serve as sources. Such platforms would make interesting venues for research, as they differ in the extent to which they offer individuating cues from which sender characteristics can be gleaned.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND THEORY ON WEBCARE**

This dissertation also contributes to the development of theory with regard to the effectiveness of webcare. This contribution lies in the investigation of the effects of webcare from a holistic perspective that recognizes all eWOM agents addressed by webcare (i.e., senders and readers). This research endeavor enhances future theory and research on webcare effectiveness in three ways.

First, the current research adds to the literature that so far has not investigated the effects of webcare on senders of eWOM. Insight in the effects of webcare on senders of eWOM, and its determinants is therefore rather limited. To address this gap in the literature, this dissertation examines the responses of eWOM senders to webcare by drawing upon Uses and Gratifications Theory, which ascribes a central role to the motives that consumers have for using particular media in order to explaining their satisfaction with media use. This dissertation shows that (a) venting, altruism, and empowerment are key motivational drivers of negative eWOM activity, and (b) that these motivational drivers determine the responses of consumers to webcare. These findings demonstrate that Uses and Gratifications Theory is useful in explaining why consumers invest time and energy in order to voice their complaints about product and services as negative eWOM. It also demonstrates that Uses and Gratifications Theory may serve as a viable theoretical framework for explaining the effectiveness of webcare among senders of eWOM.

Additional research is needed in order to examine the effects of webcare from the perspective of the sender. More specifically, further research is needed in order to identify the relationship between the motives that people have for sending negative eWOM and their responses to webcare. The study reported in this dissertation examines this relationship according to a survey, which provides no insight into the content of the negative eWOM messages or the content of subsequent webcare responses. Such insight may elucidate the process through which motives affect eWOM senders’ responses to webcare. It is plausible that the motives that drive consumers to engage in negative eWOM, prompt different types of eWOM messages. Different eWOM messages, in turn, can prompt different webcare responses (e.g., proactive/reactive or accommodative/defensive), and thus different responses in eWOM senders. Content analysis combined with survey research is recommended for future research in order to validate this expectation.

Second, the research reported in this dissertation is the first to introduce reactive webcare (i.e., webcare desired by the eWOM sender) and proactive webcare (i.e., webcare that is not desired by the eWOM sender) as two possible strategies for countering negative eWOM. It is also the first to demonstrate that these strategies yield different brand evaluations, depending upon the platform in which these strategies are used (i.e., consumer-generated or brand-generated). This finding suggests that characteristics of eWOM senders (i.e., webcare desirability) and the context (i.e., platform type) are important factors to consider when theorizing about and predicting the effectiveness of webcare strategies among readers of negative eWOM. Further research is needed in order to validate the effects of reactive and proactive webcare for different contexts. Social networking sites and micro-blogging sites (e.g., Twitter) could provide relevant research venues, as consumers often use these platforms as arenas for negative eWOM.

Third, the results of this research indicate that conversational human voice serves as an underlying mechanism for the identified differences in brand evaluations for reactive and proactive webcare across platforms. Studies in the broader field of online communication have already established that conversational human voice plays an important role in online interactions between consumers and companies (e.g., Kelleher, 2006; Yang, Kang, & Johnson, 2010). This dissertation confirms the importance of this concept for webcare interactions. Further research is therefore warranted in order to identify possible strategies that could contribute to the perceived conversational human voice of webcare. This dissertation addresses only one possible strategy to demonstrate a conversational human voice: the use of proactive versus reactive webcare. As demonstrated by Kerkhof and colleagues (2010), webcare responses are also more likely to demonstrate a conversational human voice when such responses are personalized. Because research on webcare is still in the early stages, it is not yet known whether and, if so, in what way these two strategies interact with each other in influencing conversational human voice. Additional insight into this question would be relevant, particularly within the context of consumer-generated platforms, in which unsolicited webcare is perceived as relatively low in conversational human voice.

Another question concerns whether webcare would be an effective means of bolstering readers’ evaluations of brands following exposure to positive eWOM. Brands may demonstrate a conversational human voice, not only when responding to negative eWOM, but also by responding to positive eWOM, thereby having positive effects on consumer evaluations of those brands. Although webcare is used primarily as a means of countering the effects of negative eWOM, its potential to reinforce the effects of positive eWOM warrants attention as well (Bronner & De Hoog, in press).

**PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This dissertation has important implications for the ongoing debate about eWOM as a consumer decision aid. As noted earlier, the value of eWOM as a consumer decision aid is a topic of both societal and managerial concern. Societal concerns relate to the challenges for consumers to select the most useful and credible information amid the overwhelming amount of eWOM. Managerial concerns relate to the challenges for companies to manage eWOM, especially when they are negatively portrayed in such communications. This section reflects upon these concerns.

**SOCIETAL CONCERNS**

The results of this research can alleviate some of the concerns that have been expressed with regard to the decision-aiding function of eWOM. One of these concerns is that consumers may adopt eWOM content without making any effort to engage in critical assessment regarding the usefulness of eWOM and the credibility of its senders. The finding that consumers use a variety of content characteristics and identification cues to evaluate the usefulness and source credibility of
eWOM suggests that consumers do make an effort to assess eWOM messages and their senders. Nevertheless, they do not appear to be able to discern between more and less credible eWOM senders. Although consumers seem to rely on source identification cues in order to assess the credibility of eWOM senders, the interpretation of source identification is neither straightforward nor easily discerned within the context of eWOM. This is convincingly demonstrated by the co-existence of opposing evaluations along the two dimensions of source credibility: perceived expertise and source trustworthiness.

The conclusion that expertise claims evoke opposing credibility evaluations validates the presence of the “authenticity dilemma” that has been proposed to exist in online communication contexts (Metzger et al., 2010). In a visually anonymous environment in which consumers cannot be confident about the true identity of sources and/or their motivations for sharing information, consumers use source identification cues to assess the credibility of sources as best as they can. Because these cues are prone to manipulation and subject to interpretation, they may lead to ambiguous source evaluations. Consumers thus seem to have difficulty discerning the credibility of eWOM sources.

Platforms on which eWOM is exchanged can help consumers to improve their ability to cope with the authenticity dilemma through the implementation of peer-rating systems. As demonstrated in this dissertation, peer ratings are effective in guiding consumer evaluations of source credibility. However, the availability of peer ratings is largely dependent upon the input of the online community. For this reason, not all eWOM messages are accompanied by expertise badges based on peer ratings. When peer ratings are unavailable, the assessment of source credibility may remain a challenging task. For eWOM platforms, this stresses the importance of encouraging consumers to rate each other’s eWOM contributions.

Moreover, eWOM platforms should encourage senders of eWOM to elaborate on their arguments when posting their evaluations of products or services, in addition to disclosing their relationships to the companies that are discussed in their eWOM messages. In this way, eWOM platforms may improve the quality of eWOM postings and the credibility of its senders. This is not only to the benefit of consumers, but also to the benefit of eWOM platforms. If eWOM platforms are to be used as sources of information, it is important for them to provide online content that customers perceive as useful and credible.

Finally, in addition to eWOM platforms, policymakers play a role in protecting consumers from non-credible eWOM as well. This is becoming increasingly recognized in Western societies, in which policies and rulings are emerging in this regard. For example, the UK Advertising Standards Authority reprimanded the review site TripAdvisor in early 2012 for promoting the review site with claims that could not be substantiated, namely, that it offers “honest, real, and trusted” hotel reviews from “real travelers”. The fact that increasing numbers of eWOM senders are motivated by persuasive intent (Chatterjee, 2001; Dellarocas, 2006; Mayzlin, 2006; Mayzlin et al., 2012; Resnick, Zeckhauser, Friedman, & Kuwabara, 2000; Sher & Lee, 2009), combined with the current finding that consumers tend to be suspicious of such persuasive intent, provides justification for the implementation of such rulings and policies.

MANAGERIAL CONCERNS
This dissertation provides support for the notion that eWOM, whether positive or negative, is a useful source of information for consumers. For experience products, negative eWOM is even considered more useful than positive eWOM. This conclusion indicates that negative eWOM messages are worthy of concern, and highlights the need for companies to monitor and respond to eWOM, particularly those that offer experience products. Many companies are already doing so, and an increasing number of companies are responding to eWOM in order to mitigate the undesirable effects that eWOM can have on other consumers when the valence is negative (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Shankar & Malthouse, 2007). Despite the growing popularity of such webcare interventions, many companies are still hesitant to respond to negative eWOM because of the concern that such webcare will backfire (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Lee & Song, 2010; Vásquez, 2011). If it backfires, webcare fails to counter (the effects of) negative eWOM, instead triggering even more negative eWOM.

As demonstrated by the findings reported in this dissertation, the possibility that webcare might backfire is a legitimate cause for concern. In addition to penalizing companies for unsatisfactory consumer responses, consumers also penalize companies for unsolicited webcare interventions. In light of this finding, it is important for companies to distinguish between consumers who are motivated by venting and altruism from those motivated by empowerment, as only the latter types of consumers desire webcare, and are likely to be satisfied with webcare. Consumers who do not desire webcare (e.g., those driven by venting and altruism), are unlikely to be satisfied with webcare, and respond to webcare by posting even more negative eWOM.

The findings discussed above indicate that companies can satisfy dissatisfied consumers and prevent the further escalation of online complaints only by providing webcare that caters to the motives and desires of consumers. The findings of this dissertation indicate that companies already seem to be differentiating between consumers who are likely to desire webcare and those who are unlikely to desire it. As demonstrated by the current results, the former type of consumer is far more likely to receive webcare than is the latter type of consumer. On the other hand, not everyone who desires webcare is likely to receive webcare. In the absence of additional information, the content of negative eWOM does not make it easy for a company to infer whether a consumer is likely to desire webcare. As shown in this dissertation, some—but certainly not all—consumers request or demand webcare responses in the content of their negative eWOM messages. Thus, companies must now weigh the potential advantages of responding to every sender of negative eWOM with a webcare message against the risk that someone will retaliate. Companies must also determine whether it would be better to send webcare responses only to those who specifically request them, thus accepting the risk of ignoring some dissatisfied consumers. To ignore these customers would be to miss an opportunity, as this dissertation demonstrates that webcare has the potential to improve customer satisfaction among those who desire webcare. Further research is therefore needed in order to gain insight into indicators that can be used to identify consumers who are likely to retaliate to webcare.

It is encouraging to find that readers of negative eWOM are positively predisposed towards companies that post webcare in response to negative eWOM. This does not imply, however, that any one-size-fits-all strategy would suffice.
Companies should adopt a strategic approach that centres on the needs and desires of the eWOM sender. This will not only elicit positive responses from consumers who send negative eWOM messages, but also from consumers who read negative eWOM messages. As demonstrated by the results of this research, the desire for webcare on the part of eWOM senders apparently guides the ways in which eWOM readers evaluate webcare (and the companies responsible for webcare). This finding suggests that companies should be careful not to push webcare in response to negative eWOM when it is not desired, and requested by the sender. In the context of consumer-generated platforms, this type of webcare response signals a lack of genuine interest in engaging in dialogue with complaining consumers, and it thus demonstrates no conversational human voice. In such cases, webcare is likely to be less successful in countering the effects of negative eWOM among the reading public. The success or failure of webcare depends upon its ability to demonstrate a conversational human voice.

Instead of pushing unsolicited webcare in response to negative eWOM messages posted on consumer-generated platforms, companies could choose to build brand-generated platforms where consumers can articulate their complaints with companies in the form of negative eWOM. When brand-generated platforms invite consumers to express their concerns and complaints, this demonstrates that the company is willing to engage in dialogical communication with its consumers. Consumers who are exposed to negative eWOM in the context of such brand-generated platforms are likely to perceive webcare responses as reflecting a high degree of conversational human voice, regardless of whether the sender of the negative eWOM message has asked for a response. Moreover, the option of voicing their complaints in a brand-generated context may prevent consumers from voicing their complaints elsewhere (e.g., in consumer-generated platforms). This may be beneficial, as negative eWOM in consumer-generated platforms may reach a much broader audience.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to gain a better understanding of the content characteristics that make online consumer reviews a useful source of consumer information. To this end, we content analyzed reviews of experience and search products posted on Amazon.com ($n=400$). The insights derived from this content analysis were linked with the proportion of “useful” votes that reviews received from fellow consumers. The results show that content characteristics are paramount to understanding the perceived usefulness of reviews. Specifically, argumentation (density and diversity) served as a significant predictor of perceived usefulness, as did review valence although this latter effect was contingent on the type of product (search or experience) being evaluated in reviews. The presence of expertise claims appeared to be weakly related to the perceived usefulness of reviews. The broader theoretical, methodological and practical implications of these findings are discussed.
INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of consumer-generated media platforms, word-of-mouth conversations have migrated to the World Wide Web (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007), creating a wealth of product information that is often articulated in the form of online consumer reviews (Schindler & Bickart, 2005). These reviews provide product evaluations from the perspective of the customer, and have a strong influence on consumers’ product and brand attitudes and purchase behavior (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Park & Kim, 2008; Senecal & Nantel, 2004), even more so than marketer-generated information (Chiou & Cheng, 2003). The persuasive impact of online consumer reviews, as well as of other forms of word-of-mouth, is often attributed to the perceived non-commercial nature of their authors. Consumers are believed to have no vested interest in recommending a product or brand, and their implied independence renders reviews more credible and consequently more useful than marketer-generated information (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Ha, 2002; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991).

As reviews gain in popularity, it becomes harder for consumers to find their way in the wealth of reviews and to assess the usefulness of the information offered (Park & Lee, 2008). To circumvent the problem of information overload, many review websites have invested in peer-rating systems that enable consumers to vote on whether they found a review useful in their purchase decision-making process. These votes serve as an indicator of review diagnosticity, and are used as a signaling cue to users to filter relevant opinions more efficiently (Ghose & Ipeirotis, 2008; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

Variations in the proportion of ‘useful’ votes provide evidence that ‘all reviews are not created equal’ (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007) and, hence, that all reviews are not evaluated as equal. Consumers do not follow a structured format when posting their product evaluations on the web (Park & Kim, 2008; Pollach, 2008). As a consequence, reviews range from simple recommendations that are accompanied by extremely positive or negative statements, to nuanced product evaluations that are supported by extensive reasoning. However, hardly any research has been conducted in order to catalogue differences in the content of reviews, or study the impact of such differences on the perceived usefulness of reviews (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). To fill this research gap, our research aims at gaining a better understanding of the message that make online consumer reviews a useful source of information. More specifically, we seek to understand how three types of content characteristics—that is, expertise claims, review valence and argumentation style—affect the perceived usefulness of reviews. In addressing these aims, we perform a systematic content analysis of consumer reviews and the proportion of useful votes that reviews received from fellow consumers via peer rating mechanisms. This research endeavor extends research on online consumer reviews in two ways.

First, this study responds to the need to perform content analyses to gain more insight into the composition of reviews (Mazzarol, Sweeney, & Soutar, 2007; Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Content analyses have heretofore been missing due to a lack of proper measurement tools to process the linguistic complexity of online reviews (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Godes et al., 2005). Mixtures of closely linked positive and negative statements, domain-specific language (e.g., technical terms to describe product attributes), anecdotal information and the lack of grammar and structure have challenged efforts to document the content of reviews, manually and automatically (Ganu, Elhadad & Marian, 2009). This study employs a relational content analysis that was especially developed to unravel complex evaluative discourses: the Network analysis of Evaluative Texts (hereafter: NET-method, see Van Vuuren, Kleinijenhuis, & De Ridder, 1988). The results deriving from this analysis represent a first step towards a better understanding of the nature of reviews.

Second, this study uses real data to unpack the content characteristics that drive people to respond and value online consumer reviews. By using measures that let people speak for themselves in an unsolicited manner—i.e., the proportion of useful votes—and linking these with the results from the content analysis, we follow up on Schindler and Bickart’s (2005) call to “take advantage of the frozen chunks of word-of-mouth exchanges saved on the Internet to more effectively study what makes a persuasive message” (p. 58).

THE CONTENT CHARACTERISTICS AND THE PERCEIVED USEFULNESS OF REVIEWS

Online consumer reviews contain open-ended comments and ratings (Park & Kim, 2008). Open-ended comments display reviewers’ assessments of the positive and/or negative qualities of a product as voiced in the textual content of reviews. Ratings are numeric summary statistics, often prominently shown in the form of five-point star recommendations at the surface level of the review, and encapsulate reviewers’ general assessments of the product. In addition to ratings that reflect reviewers’ products assessments, most review sites nowadays also publish ratings that reflect users’ review assessments.

The perceived usefulness of a review serves as the primary currency to gauge how users evaluate a review. Expressed by an annotation such as ‘10 out of 12 people found the following review useful’, the perceived usefulness of reviews appears along with the product ratings at the surface level of the review (see Figure 1, panel A). The perceived usefulness of a review has been found to be a significant predictor of consumers’ intent to comply with a review (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008). Interpreting perceived usefulness as “a measure of perceived value in the purchase decision-making process” (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010, p. 186), scholarly research has recently started to explore the factors driving the perceived usefulness of reviews. This pioneering work shows that insight into the composition of reviews is imperative in understanding the effects of reviews on consumer judgment, as consumers seem to react differently to different types of reviews. For example, by linking useful votes to the product rating of a review, several studies found that clearly negative or positive product ratings (i.e., 1- and 5-star ratings) are perceived as more useful than moderate ratings (i.e., 3-star ratings, see Dinescu-Niculescu-Mizil, Kossinets, Kleinberg, & Lee, 2009; Forman, Ghose, & Wiesenfeld, 2008). Others found that the polarity of product ratings contribute to the perceived usefulness of reviews, such that negative reviews have more impact on consumer judgment than positive reviews (Basuroy, Chatterjee, & Ravid, 2003; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Sen & Lerman, 2007).

Although these studies have broadened our knowledge with regard to the perceived usefulness of product ratings, there is more to a review than its rating guage (e.g., technical terms to describe product attributes), anecdotal information and the lack of grammar and structure have challenged efforts to document the content of reviews, manually and automatically (Ganu, Elhadad & Marian, 2009). This study employs a relational content analysis that was especially developed to unravel complex evaluative discourses: the Network analysis of Evaluative Texts (hereafter: NET-method, see Van Vuuren, Kleinijenhuis, & De Ridder, 1988). The results deriving from this analysis represent a first step towards a better understanding of the nature of reviews.
that makes it a useful decision aid, that is: its textual content. Recent research sug-
gests that the content of eBay and YouTube comments provides a nuanced view of the positive and/or negative qualities of the object under review (e.g., retailers, film clips), and contributes more to the perceived usefulness of eBay and YouTube comments than numeric ratings (Li, Zhai, & Sundaresan, 2009; Siersdorfer, Chelaru, Nejdl & Pedro, 2010). However, no study has examined the contribution of positively and negatively valenced statements to the perceived usefulness of reviews above and beyond numeric star ratings. Also content characteristics pertinent to the per-
suasive impact of message content, such as argumentation style and the presence of expertise claims have garnered little consideration in the literature although such characteristics are understood to be significant (Galdini, 2001; McGuire, 1985; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). They offer explanation and context to product ratings, and as such may be important drivers of a review’s perceived usefulness (cf. Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

Against this background, we expect to find that the open-ended comments of reviews, and in particular three content characteristics within open-ended com-
ments of reviews—i.e., expertise claims, review valence and argumentation—con-
tribute to the perceived usefulness of reviews.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Expertise claims

When making purchase decisions, consumers are inclined to seek and follow the advice of expert sources (e.g., Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger & Yale, 1998) as they are believed to provide information that is based, more than non-
expert ones, on accurate representations of reality (Howland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). Information that is attributed to an expert is found to be more trustworthy and useful, and to have more influence on the brand attitudes, purchase intentions and purchase behaviors of consumers (Harmon & Coney, 1982; Lascu, Bearden, & Rose, 1995).

The degree to which a source is considered an ‘expert’ is determined by evalu-
at ing the knowledge and competence that a source holds regarding the topic of in-
terest (Gotlieb & Sarek, 1991). However, in online settings it is difficult to make such an evaluation given the limited availability of personal information (Cheung et al., 2008; Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Impression formation takes place in a reduced and altered cues environment in which the author’s attributes and background can-
not be verified. Evaluations of expertise must therefore be based on “the text-based resource exchange provided by actors” (Brown et al., 2007, p. 7), that is, based on reviewer’s self-claims.

If reviewers claim to have expert knowledge regarding the product under consideration, which reviewers frequently do according to a content analysis by Pollach (2008), their evaluations are likely to be perceived as useful. Indirect sup-
port for such an expectation has been provided by Eastin (2001), who studied the effects of source expertise on the credibility of online health information. He found that people use expertise to evaluate the credibility of unfamiliar information. A message authored by a person who identified him/herself as an expert was deemed more credible than a message authored by a person who identified him/herself as a layperson. This finding has been explained by the literature through the opera-
tion of the ‘authority’ heuristic (cf. Hu & Sundar, 2010; Tan, Swee, Lim, Detenber, & Alsagoff, 2008); a cognitive decision rule (‘expert statements are true’) established through prior experience that teaches that experts are a valid source of information due to their authority on a subject. This heuristic inference steers people’s judgment of a message whenever a source’s expertise becomes salient, such that it will be positively evaluated irrespective of the kind of information offered (e.g., Challen, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989). Hence, we hypothesized the following:

H1. The higher a reviewer’s claimed expertise, the more useful a review is perceived to be.

Review valence

The literature has demonstrated a positive relationship between review valence and consumer behavior (Clemons, Gao, & Hitt, 2006; Dellarocas, Awad Farag, & Zhang, 2004; Park et al., 2007). The more positive (negative) the valence of a review, the more (less) likely people are to purchase the reviewed product. However, some studies have shown that consumers give greater weight to negative than positive reviews. For example, Basuroy and colleagues (2003) demonstrated that negative reviews hurt a movie’s box office performance more than positive reviews contribute to its performance. Similarly, in a study that examined the effect of consumer reviews on relative sales of books at Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com, Chev-
alier and Mayzlin (2006) found that reviews with 1-star ratings have a stronger ef-
fect on sales figures than reviews with 5-star ratings. These findings are indicative of a negativity bias, whereby negative information has a systematically stronger impact on judgment and choice than objectively equivalent positive information (Skowronska & Carlson, 1989).

The negativity bias has been explained by a variety of mechanisms, includ-
ing that negative information is more novel and attention-grabbing and has great-
er salience (e.g., Fiske, 1980; Pratto & John, 1991). The most accepted explanation for the asymmetry in valence evaluations is offered by the category diagnosticity theory (Ahuwalia, 2002; Herr et al., 1991; Skowronska & Carlson, 1989), which holds that negative information is more diagnostic and useful than positive infor-
mation when classifying products according to quality and performance. This is because negative product attributes are thought to be characteristic primarily of low quality products, while positive product attributes are thought to be charac-
teristic of both low and high-quality products.

Scholars have recently postulated that negative information may not be equally diagnostic for all products because of differences in the pre-purchase performance veracity (Park & Lee, 2009; Xia & Bechwati, 2008). In terms of pre-
purchase performance veracity, products can be classified as either search prod-
ucts or experience products (Girard, Silverblatt, & Korgaonkar, 2002; Nelson, 1970). Search products, such as electronics, are products that can be accurately evaluated prior to purchase because they are characterized by concrete and func-
tional attributes for which valid information can be obtained before product use. Experience goods, such as recreational services, are dominated by tangible attrib-
utes that cannot be known until purchase, and for which performance evalua-
tions can be verified only by (sensory) experience or consumption. When the attributes of a product are intangible or not immediately verifiable—which is the case with experience products—there is a greater chance of making an incorrect decision. Accuracy concerns steer consumers to adopt a
risk-averse outlook when reading reviews of experience products, thereby leading
to a higher perceived diagnosticity and hence greater scrutiny and evaluation
of negative information (Ahluwalia, 2002). In contrast, when a review evaluates a
search product for which attribute information is verifiable and the chance of loss
is not very likely, people may be less inclined to seek and value negative information.
Accordingly, we expected review valence and product type to interact:

**H2.** Negatively valenced reviews induce a higher perceived usefulness than positively va-
lenced reviews. This effect is more pronounced for experience products than for search
products.

**Argumentation**

Reviews usually contain not only valenced statements in the open-ended comments of
reviews (Park & Kim, 2006), but also arguments to support those valenced state-
ments. Whereas research has delved into the valence of reviews, hardly any re-
search has been conducted on the presence of arguments in reviews. This is sur-
prising, since the effect of argumentation has been well-established in a myriad of
empirical studies in communication science. These studies show that the propor-
tion of arguments in messages is positively related to people’s intent to comply
with those messages (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2006;
Raju, Unnava, & Montgomery, 2009). As explained by O’Keefe (1998), explicitly ar-
ticulating the arguments upon which an opinion is based “opens the advocated view for critical scrutiny” (p. 61). The mere presence of arguments consequently
leads people to have more confidence in a communicator and to find his/her judg-
ment more persuasive.

In the vein of computer-mediated communication, online discussants may be
especially apt to judge information based on the rigor of arguments, as they are
not able to rely on social cues—such as gestures, intonation and facial expres-
sions—that serve to validate information in face-to-face settings (Walther, 1996).
In a study by Price, Nir and Cappella (2006) that examined 60 online group discus-
sions about the tax plans offered by rival presidential candidates George W. Bush
and Al Gore, it was indeed found that the mere presence of arguments makes
online messages more persuasive. Although the focus of this study was on politi-
cal behavior rather than consumer behavior, and on asynchronous rather than
asynchronous communication, similar forces can be expected for online consum-
er reviews. A qualitative study by Schindler and Bickart (2005) indicates that since
reviewers are visually anonymous on the Internet, people will not easily accept
or believe a review if it does not provide sufficient information on the arguments
used when making claims about or evaluating a product or service. We therefore
hypothesized that reviews are more valuable if they offer more arguments to back
up their valenced statements (hereafter ‘argument density’):

**H3.** The higher the argument density, the more useful a review is perceived to be.

In addition to the density of argumentation, the content of the argumentation
may play a powerful role in what consumers gain from reviews. For instance, a
substantive finding in the persuasion literature is that texts that present both
sides of an argument are generally more persuasive than other forms of texts
(Eisend, 2007). Specifically, people are more likely to align their attitudes and
brand and product preferences with the content of a message after reading the
pros and cons of a position (i.e., two-sided argumentation) than after reading the
pros or cons alone (i.e., one-sided argumentation). This effect has been explained
in the context of attribution theory (e.g., Easley, Bearden, & Teel, 1999; Eisend,
2007; Kamins, 1989; Kelley, 1972), which suggests that recipients’ views of why
someone is sharing information influences how the information is received. The
inclusion of negative information along with positive information serves as a vali-
dation cue that the text derives from a consumer who has authentic first-hand ex-
perience, and not from a commercial endorser who has an interest in recommend-
ing a product. Such inferences are important because of consumers’ concern that
the anonymous nature of online reviews encourages commercial endorsers to
write product evaluations under false consumer identities in order to promote
products and brands (Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Consumers will discredit a re-
view if they suspect that the source is not telling the truth, and that the recom-
mandation is not based on an accurate evaluation of the product under considera-
tion (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Pechmann, 1992). Following this line of reasoning,
we hypothesized that reviews are perceived as more useful if they rely on a large
diversity of positive and negative arguments (hereafter ‘argument diversity’):

**H4.** The higher the argument diversity, the more useful the review is perceived to be.

**METHOD**

Testing hypotheses 1–4 required a systematic content analysis of a varied sam-
ples of reviews on both search and experience products. In view of these restric-
tions in mind, it was decided to content analyze reviews from Amazon.com. Amazon.
com is the largest online retailer (in terms of international revenue and website
visits, Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006), that not only provides consumers with the op-
portunity to order goods from a wide range of product categories, but also to read
and post reviews on those goods. Particularly important for the present study, is
that Amazon.com also allows consumers to cast a vote on whether posted reviews
were useful to them in the purchase decision-making process. As such, Amazon.
com enabled us to analyze the relationship between content characteristics and
perceived usefulness of online consumer reviews.

**PRODUCT SELECTION**

Before collecting the reviews from Amazon.com, we first had to identify products
most appropriate to represent the product category variable. This was done in two
steps. In the first step we selected a list of products offered on Amazon.com that,
according to the definitions of Nelson (1970), represented search or experience
products. In line with these definitions (see p. 9), four products were identified
as search products (i.e., a digital camera, a laser printer, a DVD player and a food
processor) and five products as experience products (i.e., sunscreen, an espresso
machine, running shoes, shaving equipment and diet pills).

As products can be categorized along a continuum from pure search to pure
experience, we performed a pilot test in step 2 to ascertain which of these Amazon.
com products is most representative of each end of the continuum. On the basis of
Krishnan and Hartline (2001, cf. Bronner & De Hoog, 2010), undergraduate stu-
dents (n = 50) were asked to indicate their ability to judge the performance of each
product (a) before use and (b) after use, on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7
(very well). The results as presented in Table 1 showed that sunscreen and running
shoes can be viewed as experience products, given the relatively low mean scores
on the ‘before use’ scale (M_{sunscreen} = 3.2; M_{running shoes} = 3.8) and the high mean scores
on the ‘after use’ scale (M_{sunscreen} = 5.7, M_{running shoes} = 6.2). Digital cameras and DVD
players, in contrast, can be considered search products as they received high mean
scores on both the ‘before use’ (M_{camera} = 4.6, M_{dvd players} = 4.8) and the ‘after use’ scale
(M_{camera} = 6.2, M_{dvd players} = 6.4). Furthermore, evaluation differences between the be-
fore and after use scales were significantly higher for experience than for search
products, F(3, 196) = 4.91, p < .01, indicating a clear difference in pre-purchase per-
formance veracity. The results correspond with other studies that sought differ-
ences between the experience and search attributes of products (e.g., Archibald,
Haulman, & Moody, 1983; Park & Han, 2008).

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Before Purchase</th>
<th>After Purchase</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food processor</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>6.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun screen</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>5.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Espresso machine</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>6.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital camera</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>6.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running shoes</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>6.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVD player</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>6.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printer</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>6.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diet pills</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>4.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaving equipment</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>6.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Mean scores on a seven-point scale (with standard deviations).

SAMPLE SELECTION
Based on the results of the pilot test, reviews that had been posted between 2005
and 2009 and had at least one useful vote were extracted from Amazon.com
(Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). The population comprised 42,700 reviews covering
38,745 reviews of cameras, 2,497 of DVD players, 1,032 of running shoes and 426
of sunscreen. To ensure equal group sizes for experience and search products,
the uploaded reviews were subjected to a stratified random sampling method, with
product type as stratum. This procedure resulted in a sample of 400 reviews equal-
ly distributed over the two experience and search product categories.

CONTENT ANALYSIS
To unravel the valence of product evaluations in reviews, as well as the arguments
used to support those evaluations, this study employed the NET method (Van
Cuilenburg et al., 1988); a relational content analysis (Popping, 2000) that enables
one to extract from a given text a network of objects (e.g., actors, values, issues).
Although never applied to online reviews or any other form of word-of-mouth, the
NET method was opted as it has proven to be a useful means to analyze valence and
argumentative structures in evaluative texts. Moreover, the NET method enables
one to code actors and their personal characteristics, which was needed to tap re-
viewer’s claimed level of expertise (e.g., Kleinnijenhuis, De Ridder, & Rietberg, 1997).

‘Subject/predicate/object’ triples as core phrases
The NET method divides a text into core phrases (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 1997): state-
ments that describe the relations between objects in the form of triples. These
triples consist of a predicate with a positive, neutral or negative meaning to indicate
the degree of association/dissociation of a subject with an object, ranging from
−1 (maximal dissociation) to +1 (maximal association). For example, if a reviewer
states that the ‘camera is very easy to use’, the reviewer associates the product
with the attribute ‘ease of use’ (i.e., product) +1 (ease of use). In a similar vein, if a
reviewer claims that s/he has no knowledge about a camera, the reviewer disso-
ociates her/himself from the attribute ‘expertise’ (i.e., reviewer) −1 (expert). In the
case of purely evaluative statements, a subject is associated/dissociated with a
special object called ‘ideal’, which represents a positive evaluation of the object
under consideration. Thus, a sentence like ‘this product is highly recommendable’
is coded as a core phrase in which the product is associated with the positive ideal
by calling it recommendable (i.e., product) +1 (ideal) (see Figure 1 for more example
codings).

Direct and indirect core phrases
The object of one core phrase may be the subject of another core phrase (see Figure 1, panel B). Hence, by coding single statements in the form of ‘subject/ predicate/object’, the NET method provides quantitative measures of the whole
network of relations between objects (see Figure 1, panel C). As a feature of net-
works, these relations can be either direct or indirect (when interconnected).
By combining direct and indirect relations via summation and multiplica-
tion (De Ridder, 1994), one can construct the argumentative structure of a text
as well as its valence. The rationale underlying multiplication is that of evalua-
tive transitivity (Van Cuilenburg et al., 1988); if product X scores well on ‘ease of
use’ and ‘ease of use’ is evaluated as a desirable attribute of the product, then
this implies that product X will also be evaluated as desirable. The direction of
such indirect relations gauges the valence of arguments, since interconnected
relations amount to chain arguments: claims that evaluate an object in terms
of its (un)favorable consequences or (dis)advantages (cf. Perelman & Olbrechts-
Tyteca, 1969).
ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH - CHALLENGES FOR CONSUMERS AND COMPANIES

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 2 HOW CONSUMERS EVALUATE THE USEFULNESS OF EWOM

CODING PROCEDURE

Reviews were coded sentence by sentence in accordance with the NET method. Reviews were content analyzed only if they contained core phrases that emphasized relations between the reviewer, product, reviewer/product attribute(s) and the evaluative object ‘Ideal’. Reviews that did not meet this criterion (e.g., reviews that evaluated Amazon.com rather than a product offered on Amazon.com) were excluded from the analysis, resulting in a final sample size of 388 reviews. The coding was supported by a semi-automated computer program, iNET. Six coders were trained in using the computer program and coding instructions. Throughout the coding period, each coder analyzed about 15% of the sample. An additional 10% was analyzed by two or more coders in order to determine intercoder reliability. Using the F1-score (a measure that computes the similarity of the networks extracted from the same texts by different coders) the overall agreement was .77, which provided a good level of intercoder reliability based on the criteria of Landis and Koch (1977). More precisely, the F1 score was .73 for reviews of search products, and .81 for reviews of experience products.

MEASURES

Valence

The valence of reviews was operationalized as the weighted mean value of core phrases with the product under review as subject and Ideal as object. A statement was coded as a core phrase with the product as subject and Ideal as the object if the reviewer considered the product good, essential, virtuous, praiseworthy or capable. Weighted mean scores range from −1 (negative valence) to +1 (positive valence).

Argument density

As indirect valenced statements are considered arguments (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 1997), we calculated argument density as the proportion of indirect core phrases with Ideal as object (e.g., statements where a product is evaluated based on its (dis)advantages in terms of weight or ease of use, see sentence 2 and 3 in Figure 1) as opposed to the total number of direct and indirect core phrases with Ideal as object (e.g., all evaluative statements about the product, see sentence 1−3 in Figure 1). The resulting score is expressed in percentages ranging from 1 to 100 and presents the degree to which evaluative statements are substantiated by arguments.

Argument diversity

To gain insight into the diversity of positive and negative arguments, we calculated the variance of the values of indirect valenced core phrases (see De Ridder, 1994, for the calculation operation). Scores range from 0 (low diversity) to +1 (high diversity).

Expertise claims

Reviewers’ expertise claims were operationalized as the weighted mean of the values of direct core phrases in which the reviewer (dis)associates him-/herself with the trait ‘expertise’. Expertise was defined as all statements in a review that emphasize the reviewer’s product or product class knowledge that is derived from experience, study or training (Friedman & Friedman, 1979). Claimed expertise scores range from −1 (no expertise) to +1 (high expertise).

Figure 1. Core phrases as a network of direct and indirect statements. Numerals in parentheses correspond with the sentences in the review from which the (in)direct core phrases are deduced from.
Perceived usefulness

We collected the useful votes and total votes given above posted reviews in the form: ‘[number of useful votes] out of [number of members who voted] found the following review useful’ (see Figure 1). By calculating the fraction of useful votes among the total votes, useful votes were translated into percentages ranging from 1 to 100 that indicate the ‘perceived usefulness of a review’ (Forman et al., 2008; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

Control variables

To control for the effects of possible confounding variables, we collected several product and reviewer characteristics as mentioned at the surface level of the review as these were found to affect review effects in prior research (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Ghose & Ipeirotis, 2008). Product-related controls included the price of the product and the star rating (number of stars assigned to the product by the reviewer). Reviewer-related controls included the reviewer’s disclosure of real name* (0 = no disclosure of real name; 1 = disclosure of real name) and place of residence (0 = no disclosure of location; 1 = disclosure of location), and his/her reputation as a top-1000 reviewer (0 = no top-1000 reviewer; 1 = top-1000 reviewer). Finally, we measured certain message-related factors, such as the length of the message (i.e., number of words) and the elapsed date (i.e., number of days since the posting of the review).

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics for Reviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total useful votes</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>18.74</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived usefulness (%)</td>
<td>77.15</td>
<td>33.32</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star rating review</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length review (no. words)</td>
<td>115.43</td>
<td>97.77</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise claims</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review valence</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument density (%)</td>
<td>74.25</td>
<td>25.21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument diversity</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESULTS

SEARCH VERSUS EXPERIENCE PRODUCTS

The present study expects product category to play an important role in determining the relationship between content characteristics and perceived usefulness. We therefore collected reviews of four types of products that, according to the pilot test, could be assigned to either the search product category or the experience product category. To test whether reviews of DVD-players and digital cameras (search products) and running shoes and sunscreen (experience products) showed differences in content characteristics, we performed a series of t-tests. The results yielded no significant differences for DVD-players and digital cameras in terms of review valence, \( t(198) = 1.13, p = .26 \), expertise claims, \( t(198) = -.19, p = .85 \), argumentation density, \( t(198) = 1.21, p = .23 \), and argument diversity, \( t(198) = 1.43, p = .15 \). Hence, reviews of both products were taken together to represent the search product category.

When comparing content characteristics for running shoes and sunscreen, no significant differences were found regarding review valence, \( t(186) = -.13, p = .89 \), expertise claims, \( t(196) = 1.52, p = .13 \), and argument diversity, \( t(186) = .55, p = .59 \). An exception is the significant difference for argumentation density, \( t(169) = -3.57, p < .001 \). Argumentation was significantly more dense in reviews of sunscreen (M = 81.58, SD = 19.9) than in reviews of running shoes (M = 68.02, SD = 29.06). However, since this is the only message characteristic on which reviews of running shoes and sunscreen differed, it was decided to take these reviews together to represent the experience product category. Summary statistics of content characteristics for reviews are given in Table 2.

REGRESSION ANALYSES OF CONTENT CHARACTERISTICS ON PERCEIVED USEFULNESS

A series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions were performed to assess whether content characteristics add to the perceived usefulness of reviews above and beyond general characteristics as shown at the surface level of reviews. In these analyses, purchase price, star rating, elapsed date, length, top-reviewer status and self-disclosure (name and location) as control variables in the baseline model (Model 0). Model 1 included expertise claims in addition to the aforementioned control variables in order to test H1. Valence and product type were added in the regression equation in Model 2. This latter model also included the interaction term between product type and review valence to test H2. Before computing this interaction term, review valence was centred to minimize potentially problematic multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). Argument density and diversity were finally entered in Model 3 to test H3 and H4. Table 3 presents the results of this regression analyses and reports the contribution of each of the independent variables toward perceived usefulness.
In model 2, we added review valence, product type (search vs. experience, dummy coded) and the interaction term between product type and review valence. Overall, the three variables explained an additional 2.0% of the variance in perceived usefulness, $F_{\text{change}}(3, 347) = 2.74, p < .05$. Results showed that review valence had a marginally positive main effect on perceived usefulness ($\beta = .14, p = .08$). In addition, and consistent with H2, this effect was qualified by a highly significant interaction between review valence and product type ($\beta = -.18, p < .01$). The interaction effect (see Figure 2) showed that the negativity bias was prevalent only for experience products. In fact, simple slopes analysis, using the procedures described by Aiken and West (1991), demonstrated that review valence was negatively related to the perceived usefulness of reviews discussing experience products ($\beta = -.15, p < .05$, one-tailed), and positively related to the perceived usefulness of reviews discussing search products ($\beta = .14, p < .05$, one-tailed).

### Model 3: argument density and diversity

The inclusion of argument density and argument diversity made a significant contribution, adding another 3.3% of the variance in perceived usefulness, $F_{\text{change}}(2, 345) = 6.88, p < .001$. As predicted, argument density appeared to be a significant predictor of perceived usefulness ($\beta = .15, p < .01$). In line with H3, reviews are evaluated as more useful when product evaluations are supported by a higher number of arguments. Support was also found for H4. Model 3 in Table 3 revealed a positive relationship between argument diversity and perceived usefulness ($\beta = .14, p < .05$), indicating that negative arguments along with positive arguments contribute to a higher perceived usefulness.

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**Figure 2. Perceived Usefulness by Review Valence and Product Category**

- • Search product
- •• Experience product

---

**Table 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting the Perceived Usefulness of Online Consumer Reviews from Content Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 0</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purchase price</td>
<td>-.136 **</td>
<td>-.133 **</td>
<td>-.129 *</td>
<td>-.120 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star rating</td>
<td>.219 ***</td>
<td>.211 ***</td>
<td>.186 *</td>
<td>.164 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elapsed date</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of review</td>
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<td>.217 ***</td>
<td>.232 ***</td>
<td>.184 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.031</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure location</td>
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<td>.217 †</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>.089 †</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.031</td>
<td>.018</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.086 †</td>
<td>.096 †</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valence</td>
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<td>.182 *</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>.055</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence x Product type</td>
<td>-.180 **</td>
<td>-.160 *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Argumentation density</td>
<td></td>
<td>.150 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument diversity</td>
<td></td>
<td>.144 *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>.122</td>
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<td>.151</td>
<td>.184</td>
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<tr>
<td>R2 change</td>
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<td>.020 *</td>
<td>.033 **</td>
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<tr>
<td>F-value</td>
<td>6.975 ***</td>
<td>6.614 ***</td>
<td>5.622 ***</td>
<td>5.993 ***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients (betas).

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.
DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to gain a better understanding of the content characteristics that make online consumer reviews a useful source of information. To address this aim, we performed a content analysis of reviews discussing experience and search products offered by Amazon.com and the usefulness scores that reviews received from fellow consumers. The results indicate, after controlling for a variety of characteristics shown at the surface level of reviews (e.g., star rating, characteristics of reviewer, purchase price of product), that differences in the perceived usefulness of reviews are related to differences in the content of reviews. We identify this finding as an indication that as ‘all reviews are not created equal’, all reviews are not evaluated as equal.

This becomes evident in the finding that the relation between review valence and perceived review usefulness differs for experience and search products. Prior research reported a negativity bias for the effects of review valence, showing that negative information has a stronger impact on judgment and choice than objectively equivalent positive information (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Park et al., 2007). In the research reported here, this negativity bias was present only for experience products: negatively valenced reviews were perceived to be more useful than positively valenced reviews when the product under consideration could be classified as an experience product (i.e., negativity bias), whereas the reverse was observed when the product could be classified as a search product (i.e., positivity effect). As explained by Ahluwalia (2002), a negativity bias can attenuate or reverse into a positivity bias when a product is familiar and liked. In such circumstances, consumers are inclined to defend their liking of a product (even if weak), by giving more scrutiny to positive information about the product. The positivity effect is likely to be more evident in the situation where reviews discuss search products for which performance evaluations can be made prior to the purchase because of consumers’ familiarity with the products’ attributes. Although the positivity effect was not expected, it provides stronger support for the suggestion that positive and negative review content instigate different effects for search versus experience products because of differences in pre-purchase performance veracity (Park & Kim, 2008; Xia & Bechwati, 2008).

Beyond review valence, argumentation also appeared to be an important predictor of the perceived usefulness of reviews. Reviews that are marked with high levels of argument density and diversity are perceived as more useful. This finding extends previous studies that focused on heuristic cues to explain the effects of reviews, that is, on characteristics shown at the surface level of reviews (e.g., star rating, reviewer identity disclosure) that can be processed with minimal cognitive effort (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Ghose & Ipeirotis, 2008). The finding that consumers use argument density and diversity to gauge the usefulness of a review provides initial support for the notion that consumers pay attention to characteristics that are more central to the content of the review and that require more elaborate processing (Pettty & Cacioppo, 1984). Finally, we found a positive, albeit relatively weak relation between expertise claims and the perceived usefulness of reviews. This seems to counter the work of Tan and colleagues (2008) on the effects of source expertise on people’s perceptions of online political discussants. The results revealed no significant relation between expertise and perceived message informativeness. A possible explanation for this differential effect of expertise may lie in its conceptualization: while the study of Tan et al. used status cues to represent a source’s level of expertise (i.e., cues provided by a website to indicate a person’s experience with the website), the present study used expertise claims (i.e., claims provided by the reviewer to indicate his/her experience with the subject), which involves more relevant expertise to the object of discussion. As asserted by Biswas, Biswas, and Das (2006, p. 19), “expertise is topic-specific”; a source must possess knowledge on a particular topic rather than a generalized level to be perceived as an expert.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

By demonstrating that review message characteristics make additional contributions to the perceived usefulness of reviews, and by focusing on the characteristics shown at the surface of reviews, our research offers several implications. First and foremost, this study makes a theoretical contribution to the literature by showing that the effects of online reviews might not be as straightforward as suggested in the literature. Consumers attach different weights to different reviews depending on which content characteristics are present and which products are evaluated. This means that the use and effects of online consumer reviews cannot and should not be generalized.

A methodological implication of this finding is that when tracking online consumer reviews, one should refrain from using recommendation scores in the form of star ratings as a proxy for review valence. While star ratings provide an important contribution, they explain only part of the variance in perceived usefulness, presumably because of the mainly positive values allotted to star ratings. It was observed in this study, as well as in others (Mulpuru, 2007; Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002), that the vast majority of reviews tend to receive positive recommendation scores. As such, recommendation scores do not offer a lot of information to prospect purchasers. Moreover, star ratings “fail to convey important subtleties of online interactions” (Resnick, Zeckhauser, Friedman, & Kuwabara, 2000, p. 47). One such important subtlety involves the proportion of positive versus negative reasoned statements in the open-ended comments of reviews (i.e., argument diversity). The present study shows that variation in the valence of reviews is as important as the overall valence of a review in predicting the review’s perceived usefulness. Such dynamics can be revealed only by analyzing the textual content of a review rather than its star rating.

A practical implication of the finding that review effects cannot be generalized concerns the importance for review sites to develop effective mechanisms that help consumers to gauge information reliability and that enhance consumer trust. Our study provides an empirically based set of tools that may help to unleash the full potential and benefits of information sharing on consumer review sites. For example, based on the finding that argument diversity in reviews is positively related to the perceived usefulness of those reviews, website developers might want to adopt a review format in which reviewers are asked to voice their opinions in a structured way that considers both the positive and negative points of a product.
LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study responded to the various calls to use naturally occurring consumer interactions on the internet (e.g., Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Although this provides a rich insight into the differences in the content of consumer reviews and the consequences of these differences for the perceived usefulness of reviews, our approach has several limitations, most of which are due to the nature of the data used. One such limitation is that the sample of reviews analyzed for this study were derived from one particular online review site: Amazon.com. Future research should examine whether similar findings will emerge in other online review sites. This is particularly important since message evaluations can be simultaneously affected by a chain of sources. Recent research suggests that people may evaluate online messages in reference not only to the individual contributor of that information, but also to the website the message derives from (Bronner & De Hoog, 2011; Hu & Sundar, 2010).

Second, the naturalistic design of the present study necessitates some caution in making causal inferences. To control for spurious relationships, we made a good effort to isolate the effects of content characteristics from those emanating from third variables. Despite these efforts it is possible that other, unmeasured variables have affected the results. For example, the design of this study did not allow us to measure variables related to the consumers who have casted useful scores, like consumers’ involvement with the reviewed product. Such variables may be important to take into account, since message effects are generally agreed to result from an interaction between source characteristics, content characteristics, and receiver characteristics (MacInnis, Moorman, & Jaworski, 1991).

A final consideration for future research is the relationship between perceived usefulness and consumer behavior. This study used perceived usefulness as a reflection of review diagnosticity, i.e., the degree to which a review is considered to be useful in the consumer purchase decision-making process (cf. Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). This measure does not capture purchase decision-making per se. Although prior research has found a positive relation between perceived review usefulness and purchase intention (Cheung et al., 2008), additional research is needed to test whether the conclusions of this study can be extended to purchase behavior.

The lessons learned here are important despite the questions that remain. This study suggests that people use several aspects of an online product review in judging the merit of its recommendation, and provide empirical evidence to document the content characteristics that make online reviews a useful source of consumer information. As this is an endeavor that had not previously been accomplished, the present study serves as a springboard for the development of future research directions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. To cast a vote, one is required to have a password-protected Amazon.com account which is used for at least one purchase to verify account holder’s identity through credit card information. By asking consumers to log into the account before casting a vote, Amazon prohibits users to vote more than once on a review or to vote on their own review.

2. The values −0.5 and 0.5 were applied in situations where conditions were expressed (i.e., if A, then B), nuanced statements were made (identified by such terms as ‘possibly’, ‘maybe’, etc., or future happenings were described.

3. Traditional metrics for intercoder reliability (e.g. Krippendorff’s alpha and Cohen’s kappa), assume that each coder assigns one of a number of possible categories to each unit of observation, and calculate the degree of agreement corrected for chance based on marginal frequencies. Such metrics are difficult to apply to network analysis as each possible relation serves as a unit of observation and the assigned association (−1 . . . +1) as the observation. This results in a large set of units of observation, of which many have a missing value as category. In such cases, the marginal frequencies used for correcting for chance agreement are not proper indicators of relations, leading to widely divergent scores for similar networks. To overcome this problem, we used a measure from computational linguistics called the F1 score which can be directly compared to alpha or kappa values. To obtain the F1-score, a computer extracts a multiset of extracted relations—i.e., a network—from a given text. Reliability is then assessed by comparing the automatically generated network created by a human coder. This logic was extended to compare networks as generated by two or more human coders (see Van Atteveldt, 2008).

4. With real name, we refer to a registration procedure that Amazon provides for users to indicate their actual name by providing verification with a credit card.

5. The data collected were examined for violation of outlier contamination before performing the OLS regression analysis. Using Cook’s D (critical value: 4/N), 11 cases were identified as outlying cases and, hence, omitted from further analysis.

REFERENCES


HOW CONSUMERS EVALUATE THE CREDIBILITY OF EWOM SENDERS

ABSTRACT

This study posits that sources of online product reviews can induce differential effects on two dimensions of source credibility, perceived expertise and perceived trustworthiness. Study 1 shows that experts are perceived as having more expert knowledge, but at the same time as having less trustworthiness than laypersons, and vice versa. These opposing credibility evaluations suppress the effect of online source identification on readers’ attitudes toward online product reviews. Study 2 finds that these opposing credibility assessments only emerge when the expert status of the source is based on self-claims. When the expert status of the online source is based on peer ratings, the source is assessed as having both expertise and trustworthiness.


A version of this article was nominated for the 2010 Top Student Paper Award at the International Conference on Research in Advertising.
CHAPTER 3 HOW CONSUMERS EVALUATE THE CREDIBILITY OF EWOM SENDERS

INTRODUCTION

User-generated content moves advocacy away from traditional one-way mass communication in which a central sender addresses a mass audience. Using today’s interactive media, people formerly known as “the audience” (Rosen, 2006) are increasingly dictating product information themselves. The opportunity for people to engage actively in the public information process with regard to products and services provides consumers with a rich and varied set of electronic word-of-mouth messages, often posted in the form of online product reviews.

User-generated product reviews are a persuasive source of information in shaping consumers’ attitudes and their purchases (see e.g., Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Consumers rely on online reviews to make decisions that range from which movie to watch to which insurance to buy. The persuasiveness of online reviews has often been attributed to their source credibility. Consumers regard product evaluations from fellow consumers, whose brand or product endorsements presumably have no persuasive intent, as more credible than product information from marketers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007).

However, not all reviewers are likely to be equally credible. Review sites allow anyone to post anything about any product (Winter, Krämer, Appel, & Schielke, 2010), whether one is qualified to assess a product critically or not. Reviewers thus include laypersons who claim little knowledge of the product under review, to self-proclaimed experts who claim to know about a product as part of their profession (Mackiewicz, 2010). Finally, rated experts are reviewers whose status has been vetted through the ratings of other users based on their past helpfulness.

This study examines the relative effects of laypersons and self-proclaimed experts, and compares these with the effects of rated experts in invoking different evaluations of perceived source expertise and perceived source trustworthiness, i.e., two dimensions of source credibility. We posit that, due to these differential evaluations, there may be an ironic effect in which a form of source identification has a boomerang effect on readers’ assessment of source credibility, and subsequently, on readers’ attitudes toward the review. Teasing apart these differential evaluations may facilitate a better understanding of how source identification affects readers’ judgments in the online context.

STUDY 1

Consumers are inclined to seek and use reviewers’ personal identifying information as cues for assessing their credibility (Xie, Miao, Kuo & Lee, 2011), including information that categorizes the reviewer as an expert or layperson (Metzger, Flanagan, & Menden, 2010; Smith, Menon & Sivakumar, 2005). However, inferences about the expertise of a source on a review site can often only be drawn from what the source discloses in the review (Brown et al., 2007). According to a study of digital camera reviews, Mackiewicz (2010) found that online reviewers often begin their reviews with expertise claims. With these claims, reviewers construct a persona of expertise from the outset (“In my line of work, wedding and special event photography, durability and adaptability are critical”), or the lack thereof (“I am not an expert on digital cameras or digital photography”). The presence of such claims in online reviews has also been observed in a number of other studies. For example, Otterbacher (2011, cf. Willemsen, Neijens, Brunner, & De Ridder, 2011) found that almost a quarter of online reviews makes reference to the reviewer’s level of expertise. Do consumers readily use these claims as an indication of source credibility? Given the prominence of expertise claims in online reviews, this study aims to shed light on how expertise claims are interpreted in terms of perceived credibility.

PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY OF REVIEW SOURCES

Source credibility is a multi-faceted construct, and generally believed to consist of expertise and trustworthiness perceptions (see Ohanian, 1990 for a review). Whereas perceived expertise refers to the degree to which a source is considered to be capable of making valid assertions, perceived trustworthiness refers to the degree of confidence that a source is motivated to communicate valid assertions (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; McCracken, 1989). The rich body of credibility research demonstrates that more credible sources produce more attitude change than less credible sources (see Pornpitakpan, 2004 for a review). Reliance on perceived source expertise versus trustworthiness as a criterion for credibility assessments does not seem to affect these results (Mills & Jellison, 1967; Rhine & Severance, 1970).

In line with traditional credibility research, research on electronic word of mouth has found source credibility to have a profound effect on consumers’ judgment and choice (Brown et al., 2007; Lim, Sia, Lee, & Benbasat, 2006). However, the contribution of source identification—experts or laypersons—to a source’s perceived credibility remains unclear (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). In face-to-face settings expert endorsers have repeatedly been found to induce more source credibility than laypersons (DeBono & Harnish, 1980; Pallak, Murrow, & Koch, 1983). In online settings, however, although some studies have found expert endorsers to induce more credibility than laypersons, others have found laypersons to induce more credibility than experts (e.g., Schindler & Bickart, 2005; Smith et al., 2005; Wang, 2005). A third group of studies finds no differences in the perceived source credibility of experts and laypersons (see for a review Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009).

The ambiguous results with regard to the role of online source identification may be due to their differential effects on perceived expertise versus trustworthiness. A source may be perceived to have great expertise but little trustworthiness, and vice versa (Pornpitakpan, 2004). These differential effects may cancel each other out when expertise and trustworthiness are assessed as part of one and the same credibility judgment, as many studies involve. The approach of the present study is therefore to establish the effect of different review sources separately on perceived source expertise and trustworthiness.

PERCEIVED EXPERTISE AND PERCEIVED TRUSTWORTHINESS

Source expertise is based on the accumulation of skills, competences, or knowledge through experience (Ohanian, 1990). If a reviewer claims to have topic mastery because of (formal) training or a hobby relevant to the product under review, consumers may be likely to perceive this reviewer to be an expert. The self-proclaimed expert status of a source serves as a cue signalling that the source provides valid information due to his/her authority on the subject. As humans are
"cognitive misers" (Taylor & Fiske, 1978), who do rely on no more cues than necessary to form an impression, this cue prompts people to attribute expertise to a source, regardless of the quality of the information he or she offers. Metzger et al. (2010) found that discerning expertise was critical for consumers in determining a source’s competence and authority on a subject.

Different results may be expected for source trustworthiness. Source trustworthiness is determined by attributions about the motives of a source to share particular information. Thus, consumers who judge a review source on trustworthiness, will base their judgment on the causal inferences they make regarding the reviewer’s motivation to endorse a product (McCracken, 1989). Consumers thereby attribute product endorsement to either the product’s actual attributes or to factors unrelated to the product, such as dispositional characteristics of the reviewer (Sen & Lerman, 2007). Following the discounting principle of attribution theory (Kelley, 1973), consumers will discredit an endorsement when they attribute it to non-product related factors, that is, when the consumer suspects that the endorsement is not based on product performance but, instead, a reviewer’s intent to persuade.

On this basis, a reviewer who claims to be an expert is likely to be perceived as less trustworthy than a reviewer who claims to be a layperson (Huang & Chen, 2006; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Self-proclaimed expertise creates the impression that the reviewer wants to present him/herself favorably, potentially with the intention to persuade others. Consumers are often skeptical about the truthfulness of such favorable self-presentations (Walther, VanDerHeide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009) and the presence of persuasive intent (Doh & Hwang, 2009; Metzger et al., 2010; Schindler & Bickart, 2005). These concerns are legitimate since some marketers stimulate expert consumers (given their knowledge of the product category) to endorse their products by providing an incentive for posting online reviews (Huang & Chen, 2006). Marketing messages can be easily disguised as unbiased reviews given the lack of social cues in online environments. This makes reviews prone to manipulation, and consumers wary of their authenticity.

Authenticity concerns stemming from fear of other’s manipulations may be less likely when the reviewer claims to be a layperson. A claimed lack of expert knowledge signals sincerity and serves as a validation cue that the review does not come from someone who (falsely) claims to have expert knowledge to impress online consumers, and influence their judgment or behavior (Mackiewicz, 2010; Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Moreover, consumers are inclined to trust people whom they perceive to be homophilous to themselves (McCroskey, Richmond, & Daly, 1975; Wang, Walther, Pingree, & Hawkins, 2008). As everyday consumers have generally no expert knowledge of the product that they may read about, they are more likely to identify with, and form trusting attitudes towards a layperson than an expert (Huang & Chen, 2006; Metzger et al., 2010).

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The discussion above implies that consumers may be left in a quandary when assessing the credibility of reviewers. While a self-proclaimed expert may exhibit more expertise than a layperson, the latter may be more trustworthy. This means that the effect of source identification on attitude formation may not be as straightforward as suggested in the traditional credibility literature. The effect of a source who claims to be an expert (vs. layperson) is likely to induce two mechanisms that work in opposite directions by increasing one dimension of source credibility (perceived expertise) while simultaneously decreasing the other dimension of credibility (perceived trustworthiness). Since perceived expertise and trustworthiness are both positively related to attitude change (Gilly, Graham, Wolfinharger, & Yale, 1998; Harmon & Coney, 1982; Lascu, Bearden, & Rose, 1995), source identification is likely to produce two opposing indirect effects on attitude towards the review—i.e., one positive indirect effect through perceived expertise and one negative indirect effect through perceived trustworthiness. More precisely, a self-proclaimed expert (vs. layperson) will increase perceived expertise, which then induces a more positive attitude towards the review, but simultaneously lower perceived trustworthiness, which induces a less positive attitude towards the review. When operating together, these opposing indirect effects are likely to cancel each other out, thereby producing a non-significant effect of source identification on attitude towards the online review. Such a situation, also referred to as one of suppression (MacKinnon, Krull, & Lockwood, 2000; Preacher & Hayes, 2008), would explain the inconsistent findings in the literature regarding the role of source identification.

Indeed, the literature suggests evidence of a suppression situation. In a series of experiments on herding in online product choices, Huang and Chen (2006) showed that an expert source was perceived as having significantly more expert knowledge than a layperson, but as being less trustworthy. Although these results suggest that source identification invokes different mechanisms through perceived expertise and trustworthiness, it is yet to be established that suppression is an outcome of these differential mechanisms en route to influencing message attitude. Hence, it is hypothesized:

H1. A review source who claims to be an expert is perceived as having (a) more expertise, but (b) less trustworthiness than a review source who claims to be a layperson.

H2. Perceived expertise (a) and perceived trustworthiness (b) are positively related to attitude towards the review.

H3. Review source identification (self-proclaimed expert vs. layperson) induces (a) a positive indirect effect on review attitude through perceived expertise, and (b) a negative indirect effect through perceived trustworthiness, which (c) in tandem, will suppress the effect of source identification on attitude towards the review.

METHOD

Participants
Participants in a student subject pool were invited via email to participate in the experiment, which was administered online to allow maximum realism. A total of $n = 265$ participated and were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. The sample consisted of 31% men and 69% women, with a mean age of 22.9 years ($SD = 3.19$).

Stimuli and independent measures
Participants were asked to evaluate a product review posted on a fictitious review site which endorsed either a television set or a hotel accommodation. Reviews
RESULTS
Measurement assessment
The scale items from source trustworthiness, source expertise, and review attitude were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the measurement model. Constructs were modeled as three correlated first-order constructs. Indices signaled a satisfactory model fit: $\chi^2(51) = 118.10, p = .001, CFI = .98, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .058, 95\% CI[.04, .07]$. Item reliabilities were evaluated by examining the standardized loading of each measure. All items yielded high standardized loadings on their intended constructs (λ > .70), and hence were retained for analysis.

Convergent validity was assessed using Composite Reliability (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE) as recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The CR values ranged from .82 to .89, all exceeding the cut-off value of .70. AVE values ranged from .77 to .86 and thus surpassed the cut-off value of .50. Hence, the measurement model was considered acceptable. Discriminant validity among constructs was examined by comparing the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) with the correlation between two latent constructs. Discriminant validity is satisfied when the square root of the AVE exceeds this correlation. This criterion was met for all pairs of constructs in the model, including expertise and trustworthiness, indicating that source expertise and trustworthiness are two separate constructs. This was also confirmed by the weak correlation between source expertise and trustworthiness (r = .14).

Manipulation and confound check
The manipulation check indicated a successful manipulation of review source identification. Respondents assigned to the layperson condition (vs. self-proclaimed expert condition) more often mentioned that they read a review from a layperson than respondents assigned to the self-proclaimed expert condition and vice versa. $\chi^2_{\text{layperson}}(1) = 98.48, p < .001; \chi^2_{\text{self-proclaimed expert}}(1) = 79.26, p < .001$. The conditions showed no differences in respect to review quality, message tone, participant expertise, gender or age (all Fs < 1.19).

Source identification
To test whether source identification has differential effects on the two dimensions of source credibility—perceived expertise and trustworthiness—a mixed analysis of variance was conducted with source identification and product type as between-factors, and trustworthiness and expertise as repeated measures. As expected, the results revealed a significant interaction between source identification and its effect on perceived expertise versus trustworthiness. Wilk’s $\lambda = .71, F(1, 263) = 106.41, p < .001$, multivariate η$^2 = .29$, indicating that source identification indeed has different effects on perceived expertise and trustworthiness. As shown in Table 1, follow-up contrast tests showed that a self-proclaimed expert scored significantly greater on perceived expertise than a layperson, which provides support for H1a. A reverse pattern was found for perceived trustworthiness. In line with H1b, a self-proclaimed expert was considered to be less trustworthy than a layperson. No significant differences were found between the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of review sources among the different product categories ($F < 1$). Therefore, the product conditions were collapsed in subsequent hypotheses tests.

Table 1. Effects of Source Identification on Perceived Expertise and Trust

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Perceived expertise</th>
<th>Perceived trust</th>
<th>Perceived expertise</th>
<th>Perceived trust</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (M (SD))</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>n (M (SD))</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layperson</td>
<td>136 2.04 (.71) 3.81 (.56)</td>
<td>3.54 (.77) 4.00 (.49)</td>
<td>30 2.83 (.66) 4.00 (.49)</td>
<td>34 3.24 (.89) 3.56 (.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proclaimed expert</td>
<td>129 2.77 (.74) 3.39 (.74)</td>
<td>3.35 (.77) 3.79 (.63)</td>
<td>33 3.46 (.85) 3.79 (.63)</td>
<td>33 3.46 (.85) 3.79 (.63)</td>
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</table>

Note: Mean scores on a five-point scale (with standard deviations). Scores with different superscripts in the same column denote significant differences, p < .05, in post-hoc tests with Bonferroni adjustments.

Attitude towards the review
Hypothesis 2 posits that perceived source expertise and trustworthiness are positively related to attitude towards the review. Regression analyses were performed with attitude towards the review as outcome variable, and perceived expertise and perceived trustworthiness as predictor variables. In line with our hypothesis, the results revealed that perceived expertise (β = .34, p < .001) and trustworthiness (β = .43, p < .001) were both positively related to attitude towards the review. The two variables together explained 35% in the variance of attitude towards the review, F(2, 264) = 69.28, p < .001.
Suppression analysis

The results presented above showed that a review source (rated expert vs. layperson) has differential effects on what are assumed to be the two dimensions of credibility—i.e., perceived source expertise and trustworthiness—and that both dimensions have a positive effect on attitude towards the review. To assess whether these differential effects suppress the relationship between source identification and attitude towards the review, a formal test of suppression was performed as recommended by MacKinnon et al. (2000; see also Cheung & Lau, 2008; Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). According to these authors, suppression is closely related to mediation and can be tested using the same methods, i.e., by analyzing the total, direct, and indirect effects between a set of variables. Within the mediation model presented in Figure 1, suppression would be present when: (1) the direct effect and indirect effects of source identification on review attitude through perceived expertise or trustworthiness have opposite signs, which produce a total effect close to zero; and (2) controlling for the effects of perceived expertise and trustworthiness increases the regression coefficient of source identification such that the direct effect becomes larger in magnitude than the total effect. To assess these criteria, bootstrapping analyses were conducted with 5,000 resamples and a bias corrected and accelerated 95% confidence interval (CI), using Preacher and Hayes’ (2008) INDIRECT macro for SPSS. Generally, when the bias-corrected CI does not include zero, the effect can be said to differ significantly from zero (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

In line with H3a, bootstrapping analyses revealed a significant positive indirect effect of source identification (dummy-coded) on attitude towards the review through perceived expertise, $b = 0.31$, 95% CI [.21, .43]. A self-proclaimed expert (vs. layperson) had a positive effect on perceived expertise ($b = 0.72$, $p < .001$), and perceived expertise, in turn, had a positive effect on review attitude ($b = 0.43$, $p < .001$). As predicted by H3b, the results also showed a significant negative indirect effect of source identification on attitude towards the review through perceived trustworthiness, $b = -0.19$, 95% CI [-.28, -.11]. A self-proclaimed expert source (vs. layperson) had a negative effect on perceived trustworthiness ($b = -0.41$, $p < .001$), which in turn, had a positive effect on attitude towards the review ($b = 0.45$, $p < .001$). Thus, source identification (self-proclaimed expert vs. layperson) produces two indirect effects on attitude towards the review, i.e., one positive indirect effect through perceived expertise and one negative indirect effect through perceived trustworthiness.

This pattern of indirect effects demonstrate the presence of two mechanisms that work in opposite directions, which in tandem, could undermine the relationship between source identification and attitude towards the review. This is confirmed after inspection of the direct and total effect. Controlling for the effects of perceived expertise and trustworthiness, a self-proclaimed expert, in contrast to a layperson, was found to have a negative direct effect on attitude towards the review ($b = -0.17$, $p < .05$). As such, the results meet the first criterion of suppression, i.e., an opposing direct effect and indirect effect: The direct effect of source identification on attitude towards the review is consistent in sign with its indirect effects through perceived trustworthiness, but opposite in sign with its indirect effect through perceived expertise. The results also support the second criterion of suppression. Accounting for perceived expertise and trustworthiness increases the regression coefficient of source identification such that the direct effect becomes larger in magnitude than the total effect ($b= -0.17$, $p < .05$ vs. $b= -0.05$, $p = .61$). Thus, perceived trustworthiness and expertise show indirect effects that cancel out as demonstrated by a total effect closer to zero than the direct effect (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Hence, H3c is supported.

**Figure 1.** Suppression analysis. Path values represent unstandardized regression coefficients. The value outside of the parentheses represents the total effect of source identification on attitude towards the review prior to the inclusion of the mediating variables. The value in parentheses represents the direct effect of source identification on attitude towards the review when the mediators are included into the model. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

**DISCUSSION**

Study 1 examined the relative effects of self-proclaimed experts and laypersons on perceived trustworthiness and perceived expertise—i.e., two dimensions of source credibility—and their subsequent effects on consumers’ attitude towards an online product review. In line with hypotheses, the results indicate that a self-proclaimed expert, in comparison to a layperson, is perceived as having more expertise, but at the same time, less trustworthiness (H1). Also, perceived expertise and trustworthiness were both positively related to review attitude (H2). The result is the presence of two competing mechanisms: A layperson (vs. self-proclaimed expert source) had a positive indirect effect on review attitude through perceived trustworthiness, and a negative indirect effect through perceived expertise. The co-occurrence of these mechanisms were found to suppress the relationship between source identification and review attitude (supporting H3). Thus, self-proclaimed experts and laypersons evoke different evaluations in terms of perceived source expertise and perceived source trustworthiness, and due to these differential evaluations, there is an ironic effect of source identification on readers’ assessment of source credibility, and subsequently, readers’ attitudes towards online reviews.
STUDY 2

The expert status of a source can be expressed not only by means of self-claims, but also by means of peer ratings (Winter et al., 2010). In the context of review sites, peer ratings allow website users to provide feedback about the performance of reviewers by rating whether they found the review helpful (Resnick, Zeckhauser, Friedman, & Kuwabara, 2000). Based on such ratings, review sites such as Amazon or Epinions publicly recognize reviewers through so-called badges. Badges are credentials such as “Top Reviewer” or “Advisor” granted to reviewers who have proven to be a helpful source of information in the consumer decision-making process. Badges are usually presented in a sidebar next to the name of the reviewer, and allow demarcation between laypersons and experts (hereafter: rated experts).

Similar to those who claim to be experts, rated experts are likely to accrue perceptions of greater expertise. Unlike self-proclaimed experts, their status as experts is warranted by others. According to the warranting theory, people attach credence to personal information when it is perceived to be immune to manipulation by the person to whom the information refers (see for a review Walther et al., 2009). Since rated experts are not able to manipulate the peer ratings on which their status is based, they are likely to be perceived as having expert knowledge more so than self-proclaimed experts.

Also, unlike proclaimed experts, rated experts are likely to be perceived as very trustworthy. Their identification by others reduces readers’ suspicion about the possibility that reviewers are driven by persuasive intent. Websites only publicly recognize the expert status of reviewers when peers have consistently vouched for reviewers based on good review performance across different products of the same product category. When a reviewer has provided valid information on different products, it demonstrates that he/she has no intentions to promote one in particular. Good performance as evidenced by peer ratings is thus likely to translate into attributions about good intentions, and, subsequently, trustworthiness. Evidence consistent with this logic appears in e-commerce literature that repeatedly has shown peer rating systems to build trust (e.g., Ba & Pavlou, 2002; Bolton, Katok, & Ockenfels, 2004). Hence, rated experts may be perceived as equally trustworthy, or even more trustworthy, than a layperson.

However, based on the principles of perceived homophily, a rated expert may also be perceived as being less trustworthy than a layperson (Howland et al., 1993; McCroskey et al., 1975). Based on this principle, consumers are likely to ascribe less similarity to a reviewer that has expert knowledge of a product than a reviewer that, like themselves, lack such expertise. As perceived similarity is positively related to trust, a layperson instead of a rated expert may induce more trust (Metzger et al., 2010; Huang & Chen, 2006; Smith et al., 2005). Based on the above, the following research questions arise:

RQ1. How do rated experts, self-proclaimed experts, and laypersons differ with respect to (a) perceived expertise, and (b) perceived trustworthiness?

RQ2. Can reviewers’ differences in perceived trustworthiness be attributed to differences in (a) suspicion of persuasive intent, or (b) perceived similarity?

METHOD

Participants and design

Ninety six graduate students voluntarily participated in the experiment, and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (layperson vs. self-proclaimed expert vs. rated expert). The average age of the participants was 29.3 years, and 53% were females.

Procedure and stimuli

The procedure and stimuli were similar to Study 1, except for the type of product (digital camera) and the source identification manipulations. Respondents read a review endorsing a digital camera. Reviews were identical across conditions except for their source. The layperson source stated that he had bought the camera for his work as an event photographer. The rated expert source was similar to the other conditions with the exception that it did not contain any expertise claims. Instead, this condition showed a badge with a label designating “Rated as Top Reviewer” in a sidebar next to the reviewer’s name.

Measures

The questionnaire included the same items as in Study 1 to measure perceived trustworthiness (α = .90) and perceived expertise (α = .91). In addition, based on prior homophily research (McCroskey et al., 1975), subjects indicated, their agreement with four statements (e.g., “The reviewer has a similar background as I have”) on 5-point scales, α = .70. To measure suspicion of persuasive intent, subjects indicated their agreement with six items from Obermiller and Spangenberg’s (1998) skepticism scale that was adapted for the purpose of the study (e.g., “The reviewer is driven by ulterior motives”, α = .78).

RESULTS

Manipulation check

to determine whether there was a perceptible difference in the treatment levels of source identification, participants indicated (1) the extent to which the source of the review was present to be an expert, and (2) the extent to which the review community rated the source of the review to be an expert (1—Not at all an expert, 5—Very much an expert). ANOVA yielded a significant main effect for source identification on the first manipulation check: expertise presentation, F(2, 93) = 11.47, p < .001, η² = .20. According to post hoc contrast tests, participants more strongly agreed that the sources in both expert conditions (Mselfproclaimed-expert = 3.59, Mrated-expert = 3.81) were presented as experts than the source in the layperson condition (Mlayperson = 2.53), t(93) = 3.73, p < .001. ANOVA on the second manipulation check, expertise rating, also indicated significant differences across sources, F(2, 93) = 7.78, p = .001, η²α = .14. Intended by the study design, participants agreed that the review community rated the source in the rated expert condition as significantly more expert (Mrated-expert = 3.69) than the source in the self-proclaimed expert condition (Mselfproclaimed-expert = 3.20; Mlayperson = 2.60), t(93) = 3.34, p = .001. Thus, these manipulation checks suggest that source identification was manipulated successfully.
Perceived source expertise and perceived source trustworthiness

RQ1 asked how rated experts, self-proclaimed experts, and laypersons differ with respect to perceived expertise and perceived trustworthiness. A mixed analysis of variance was conducted, using source identification (layperson vs. self-proclaimed expert vs. rated expert) as the between-subjects factor, and perceived expertise and trustworthiness as repeated measures. A significant interaction emerged between source identification, and its effect on perceived expertise versus trustworthiness, Wilk’s $\lambda = .84$, $F(2, 93) = 9.13$, $p < .001$, multivariate $\eta^2 = .164$, indicating that source identification differed in perceived expertise and trustworthiness. Post-hoc contrasts were conducted using Bonferroni corrections (See Table 1). Results demonstrated that a layperson was perceived as having significantly less expert knowledge than the self-proclaimed expert, or the rated expert source. No significant differences were found between the latter two sources. With regard to perceived trustworthiness, a layperson was perceived as significantly more trustworthy than the self-proclaimed expert source, whereas the rated expert source was not significantly different from either of the two.

Suspicion of persuasive intent and perceived similarity

A MANOVA assessed source identification as independent variable and suspicion of persuasive intent and perceived similarity as dependent variables. Results showed a significant effect of source identification on suspicion of persuasive intent, $F(2, 93) = 4.95$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .10$, but not perceived similarity, $F(2, 93) = 1.58$, $p = .21$. Post-hoc tests with Bonferroni corrections showed that a self-proclaimed expert scored higher on suspicion of persuasive intent than a layperson or a rated expert, with no significant differences among the latter two conditions (see Table 2).

To test further whether source differences with regard to trustworthiness could be explained by perceived suspicion of persuasive intent (RQ2), bootstrapping analyses were conducted with 5,000 resamples and a bias corrected and accelerated 95% confidence interval (CI), using Preacher and Hayes’ (2008) INDIRECT macro for SPSS. Bootstrapping analyses revealed a significant negative indirect effect of source identification (dummy-coded: self-proclaimed expert vs. rest) on perceived source trustworthiness through suspicion of persuasive intent, $b = -.13$, 95% CI [-.29, -.04]. A self-proclaimed expert (vs. rest) had a positive effect on suspicion of persuasive intent ($b = .42$, $p < .01$), and suspicion of persuasive intent, in turn, had a negative effect on perceived trustworthiness ($b = -.32$, $p < .01$). Moreover, the results indicated that the effect of source identification on perceived source trustworthiness ($b = -.33$, $p < .02$) became non-significant when controlling for the effect of suspicion of persuasive intent, while the effect of suspicion of persuasive intent remained significant ($b = -.020$, $p = .16$). This provides support for full mediation, meaning that suspicion of persuasive intent explains why a self-proclaimed expert is perceived as less trustworthy than a rated expert or a layperson.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Identification</th>
<th>Suspicion of persuasive intent</th>
<th>Perceived similarity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Layperson</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.89 (.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proclaimed expert</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3.31 (.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rated expert</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2.89 (.57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Mean scores on a five-point scale (with standard deviations). * Scores with different superscripts in the same column denote significant differences, $p < .01$, in post-hoc tests with Bonferroni adjustments.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present study examined three types of sources of online reviews in terms of source credibility: laypersons, self-proclaimed experts and rated experts. Study 1 showed an ironic effect where source identification induced opposing evaluations on the two dimensions of source credibility: perceived source expertise and perceived source trustworthiness. In the perception of readers, self-proclaimed expert reviewers exhibit more expertise but at the same time less trustworthiness than laypersons. As both perceived expertise and trustworthiness are positively related to attitude towards the review, the ironic effect of source identification produced two competing mechanisms en route to attitude formation. A self-proclaimed expert (vs. layperson) was found to have a positive indirect effect on attitude towards the review through perceived expertise, and a negative indirect effect through perceived trustworthiness. In tandem, these opposing indirect effects suppress the relationship between source identification and readers’ attitude towards review. Although opposing effects of (self-proclaimed) expert and layperson sources on perceived trustworthiness and perceived expertise have been found in previous research on online reviews (Huang & Chen, 2006), our study was the first to demonstrate such a suppression situation.

Study 2 showed that the presence of an ironic effect depended on the way an expert source was demarcated from a layperson. An online source was found to induce opposing credibility evaluations only when the expert status of the source was based on self-claims. When the expert status of the source was based on peer ratings, the twin judgments of source credibility were in line with each other. Replicating the results of study 1, a self-proclaimed expert is considered to have more expert knowledge than a layperson, but also less trustworthiness. A rated expert, however, is perceived to have as much expert knowledge as a self-proclaimed expert, and as much trustworthiness as a layperson. Expertise conferred by ratings seems capable of closing the gap between the two dimensions of source credibility.

The finding that rated experts are evaluated equally trustworthy as laypersons, suggests that, in the context of online review sites, it is not perceived similarity that drives trustworthiness. Prior research demonstrates that consumers are likely to trust people who they perceive to be homophilous, that is, people who like themselves do not have expert knowledge of the product under review (McCroskey et al., 1975; Huang & Chen, 2006). In contrast to what can be expected...
based on this prior work, rated experts did not differ from laypersons in perceived trustworthiness. Both sources, however, were evaluated more trustworthy than self-proclaimed experts. This seems to indicate that reviewers’ self-presentations as experts make consumers suspicious of reviewers’ motivations to share reviews, and doubt their trustworthiness. This was supported by mediation analyses. Suspicion of persuasive intent, and not perceived similarity, was found to explain the effects of review source identification on perceived trustworthiness. Reviewers who present themselves favorably in terms of expertise (i.e., self-proclaimed experts) make themselves suspect of the intention to persuade other consumers, which negatively affects perceived trustworthiness. This was not the case with reviewers whose expert status has been vetted through peer ratings (i.e., rated experts).

A record of good conduct as evaluated by the review community thus serves as a validation cue that the reviewer does not intend to disguise persuasive messages as unbiased reviews, and can be trusted as a source.

Taken together, the results of these studies show that online review sources provide two routes to perceived source expertise and perceived source trustworthiness, i.e., the two dimensions of source credibility. The route to perceived expertise stems from self-proclaimed experts and rated experts and the route to perceived trustworthiness stems from laypersons and rated experts. However, only one type of source—rated experts—connects both routes such that it scores high on overall credibility.

Theoretically, the findings highlight the “authenticity dilemma” (Metzger et al., 2010) inherent to online media where impressions are formed in an environment that provides extremely few social cues. In forming impressions based on the cues that nevertheless remain, cues that sources disclose about themselves and their occupations are not as compelling as cues provided by other users, as credibility assessments move from “a model of single authority based on hierarchy […] to a model of multiple authorities based on […] networks of peers” (Metzger et al., 2010, p. 415). This is also in line with warranting theory (see Walther et al., 2009): Compared to online information based on sources’ self-presentations, people give more weight to information that is immune to a source’s manipulation, as peer ratings provide. In the context of online product reviews, if the expertise of a source is conferred by others, a reader has more faith in the source’s identity and motivations (i.e., lack of persuasive intent) for reviews.

Methodologically, the results support previous calls in the literature (see Pornpitakpan, 2004) to assess the isolated effect of perceived source expertise and trustworthiness. This study finds that perceived source expertise and perceived source trustworthiness operate separately and produce differential effects on attitude formation. This suggests that scholars should assess these dimensions of credibility orthogonally to gain a better understanding of the effects of source evaluations in computer-mediated communication. Assessing perceived expertise and trustworthiness as part of one and the same credibility scale may obscure the complexity of source evaluations in online environments.

The results also show that consumers seem to integrate perceptions about the expertise and trustworthiness of a source into evaluations about the source’s review itself. This mitigates societal concerns that consumers adopt content without discerning credible from non-credible online sources (Hu & Sundar, 2010; Metzger, 2007). However, the present results do not make clear whether consumers are generally disposed to judge online review sources as credible or not. The present study compared the conferral of credibility in terms of self-claims vs. peer ratings. It did not include a control condition in which no identification cue was present. More research is needed to learn how consumers evaluate reviewers’ credibility when neither the reviewer nor the community offer expertise assessments.

Another consideration is that reviews were studied in just one context: a site on which reviews come from unknown sources with whom consumers have no prior relationship. The findings may not describe other platforms where recommendations are exchanged between acquainted contacts (e.g., social network sites, special interest communities, etc.). Research is needed to demonstrate how credibility perceptions differ depending on the platforms and relationships in which electronic word of mouth is exchanged. Finally, future research needs to compare source credibility across online versus offline contexts, in order to learn better how credibility differs between them and what might explain the differences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines online complaints that consumers share through negative electronic word of mouth (eWOM), as well as the online remedial responses of companies (i.e., webcare). More specifically, drawing upon Uses and Gratifications Theory, this article investigates (a) why consumers engage in negative eWOM, and (b) how this affects their receptiveness to webcare. Two surveys demonstrate that consumers engage in negative eWOM for reasons of altruism, venting, and empowerment. Moreover, these motives have a differential impact on webcare receptiveness in terms of webcare desirability, webcare satisfaction, and post-webcare eWOM. Consumers driven by empowerment are likely to desire and be satisfied with webcare, but are unlikely to voice such satisfaction in the form of positive eWOM. In contrast, consumers driven by altruism and venting are unlikely to be satisfied with webcare, and they are likely to engage in even more negative eWOM after receiving webcare. These results present challenges and opportunities for companies in their efforts to deal with negative eWOM.
INTRODUCTION

Social media enable consumers to easily share satisfying or unsatisfying consumption experiences with a multitude of other consumers. The result is a wealth of electronic word of mouth (eWOM), varying in tone from very positive to very negative. For companies, the circulation of negative eWOM is a source of great concern. Unsatisfactory consumption experiences, which were previously communicated as complaints only to a company representative or a few peers, are now publicly available through negative eWOM, which can seriously damage a company’s reputation and sales (Breitsohl, Khammash & Griffiths, 2010; Lee & Song, 2010; Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010).

To alleviate the effects of negative eWOM, companies are increasingly providing online remedial responses by means of webcare: “the act of engaging in online interactions with (complaining) consumers, by actively searching the web to address consumer feedback” (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012, p. 115). These efforts centre on the aim to restore or improve customer satisfaction and to limit the potential damage that negative eWOM could have on fellow consumers. The desired outcome is that complainants will stop sending negative eWOM messages and, more favorably, will start to spread positive eWOM about their online encounters with the company.

Many scholars and practitioners consider webcare a promising tool in support of customer relationship and reputation management, reporting anecdotal evidence that webcare can elicit positive consumer responses (e.g., Williams, 2008, Breitsohl et al., 2010). Others are more skeptical, however, warning that companies should enter social media with caution. Although social media are no longer the sole domain of consumers, consumer-to-consumer interactions still serve as the foundation of these media. For such reasons, companies that intervene in consumer-to-consumer interactions with spam, marketing, or any other form of branded activity such as webcare, may be considered “unwelcome” (Marwick & boyd, 2010), “intrusive” (Fournier & Avery, 2011), and to be “interloper[s]” (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009).

These divergent consumer reactions to webcare may be explained according to the motives that consumers have for engaging in negative eWOM. Research suggests that consumers engage in negative eWOM in order to warn other consumers about unsatisfactory consumption experiences (i.e., altruism), or to vent anger in order to harm the companies responsible for their unsatisfactory consumption experiences (i.e., venting; see Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004). Companies that interfere in such communal and protest-driven conversations with webcare may indeed be regarded as intrusive. On the other hand, consumers may also engage in negative eWOM to enforce service excellence (i.e., empowerment; see Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Aware of the impact of such communication, consumers share their complaints with a broad community of fellow consumers in order to draw the attention of companies and obtain redress for unsatisfactory consumption experiences. Consumers who are driven by this motive may thus be more receptive to the remedial responses of companies in the form of webcare.

The above suggests that consumers differ in their motives for engaging in negative eWOM and that, due to these motives, consumers also differ in webcare receptiveness, defined here as the willingness of consumers to receive webcare favorably. To the best of our knowledge, no study has specifically investigated the motives underlying negative eWOM, nor has any study linked these motives to the responses that webcare can generate among senders of negative eWOM. Two surveys were conducted in order to address these gaps in the literature. The first survey validates altruism, venting, and empowerment as motives for negative eWOM activity. The second survey examines the relative importance of these motives, and their effects on webcare receptiveness in terms of webcare desirability, webcare satisfaction, and post-webcare eWOM. The results provide valuable insight into negative eWOM and the ways in which companies can adapt their webcare policies to be better suited to the motives that consumers have for engaging in negative eWOM.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ONLINE COMPLAINING AND NEGATIVE EWOM

According to the literature on service marketing (Hirschman, 1970; Singh, 1990), a consumer can engage in two types of behavior when dissatisfied with a consumption experience: exit and voice. Consumers engage in exit behavior when they decide to stop using a company’s products/services and take their business to a competitor. Consumers engage in voice behavior when they communicate their complaints to third parties, (i.e., third-party response), the company itself (i.e., complaint behavior), or other consumers (i.e., negative word of mouth). The exit-voice model, which is widely used to classify consumers’ coping strategies in response to unsatisfactory consumption experiences, treats complaint behavior and negative WOM as two distinct concepts (Hirschman, 1970). Complaining has traditionally been used in reference to dyadic communication involving only the complainant and the company. Because consumers are now sharing their complaints on social media platforms, however, complaining has shifted into triadic communication, extending beyond the complainant and the company to include other consumers as well (Breitsohl et al., 2010; Hong & Lee, 2005; Tuzovic, 2010; Lee & Song, 2010; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). The distinction between complaining and negative word of mouth has thus begun to fade in the online context.

The blurring of these boundaries is clearly demonstrated in a study by Vásquez (2011). In a content analysis of online consumer reviews, which are considered to be typical articulations of eWOM (Chevelier & Mayzlin, 2006; Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009; Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & De Ridder, 2011), Vásquez observes that reviewers often address a dual audience with the negative evaluations that they post on the web, consisting of consumers and companies. Reviewers thus simultaneously communicate their unsatisfactory consumption experiences to fellow consumers, as well as to the companies responsible for their unsatisfactory consumption experiences. Moreover, one fifth of the reviewers make explicit references to the act of complaining. They do so, by concealing that what they are doing is complaining (e.g., “these complaints I’ve made,” see Vásquez, 2011, p. 7). In the online context, complaint behavior has thus become intertwined with negative word of mouth. In the remainder of this article, therefore, the terms “online complaining” and “negative eWOM” are used interchangeably.
**CHAPTER 4 HOW EWOM SENDERS EVALUATE COMPANIES’ WEBCARE RESPONSES**

**MOTIVES FOR NEGATIVE EWOM**

This study employs Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G) to gain a better understanding of the motives that drive consumers to voice complaints as negative eWOM (Blumler & Katz, 1974). A core assumption underlying U&G is that people are active and goal-oriented in their selection of media and media content. According to U&G, media use is motivated by specific needs and desires and an expectation that those needs and desires will be satisfied by particular types of media and content (for a discussion, see Ruggiero 2000). Thus, in the tradition of U&G research, motives are considered to be causes of goal-oriented activity (e.g., Atkinson, 1964). They are cognitive representations of what individuals expect to achieve with the use of media or media content (Wentzel, 2000).

Because U&G assumes an active audience, it is considered as a useful framework for understanding consumers’ use of social media, as these media require active participation from its users, especially from those who create content (Ruggiero, 2000). Hence, various studies have employed U&G to explore the possible motives of consumers to create content in social media (e.g., Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011). Along these lines, motives have also been studied as antecedents of eWOM activity. These studies suggest three motives that may underlie negative eWOM: venting, altruism, and empowerment.

The desire to vent has been identified as the most common motive underlying complaint behavior, and therefore as a potential motive underlying negative eWOM (Alicke et al., 1999; Hong & Lee, 2005; Tuzovic, 2010). Venting unburdens people by allowing them to release or express their feelings (Nyer & Gopinath, 2005), and is found as an important driver for articulations of negative personal experiences (Alicke et al., 1992; Berkowitz, 1970). Accordingly, the communication of complaints to sympathetic others through social media may help consumers to obtain emotional relief (Grainer, 2003). That is, in a situation in which a product or service failure is followed by failed complaint-handling attempts, consumers who engage in negative eWOM often experience such a double deviation situation. Before consumers start complaining online, they try to seek redress for unsatisfactory consumption experiences through traditional complaint-handling channels, often with unsatisfactory results. Roughly half of all complaints are not resolved satisfactorily through traditional complaint handling (e.g., Estelami, 2000; Grainer, 2003). Feelings of anger and frustration resulting from the coincidence of product failure and complaint-handling failure encourage consumers to air their complaints online in the form of negative eWOM (Ward & Ostrom, 2006).

Venting may help consumers to obtain emotional relief, not only by giving expression to negative feelings associated with unsatisfactory consumption experiences, but also by taking vengeance upon the companies that are responsible for these experiences (Gregoire & Fisher, 2008; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Because online complaints can harm a company’s reputation among observing consumers, venting thus also serves as a tit-for-tat strategy (“The company has harmed me, and now I will harm the company.” Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Because venting and vengeance achieve similar intrapsychic goals (i.e., emotion-based coping), they are highly correlated and are thus often taken together as a single motive (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Bronner & De Hoog, 2011).

In addition to venting, the literature also identifies altruism as an important motive for negative eWOM (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). When consumers are driven by altruistic motives to complain online, they desire to warn other consumers about unsatisfactory consumption experiences. These consumers are concerned about the welfare of fellow consumers, and they want to spare them the problems that they have encountered with particular products or services.

Finally, the literature on eWOM suggest empowerment as a potential motive as well (Muntinga et al., 2011; Bronner & De Hoog, 2011). For empowerment-driven consumers, online complaining is an instrument of power. Aware of the impact that negative eWOM can have for companies, consumers voice their complaints online in order to draw the attention of companies, and enforce service excellence. The setting (i.e., social media) is believed to work in favor of these consumers. It improves their bargaining and redress power, as the company’s interaction with the complaining consumer is observed by many other consumers. Consumers anticipate that this method of complaining is more effective than complaining through traditional channels (i.e., face-to-face, telephone, e-mail) in order to achieve adequate complaint handling (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

**WEBCARE AS A TOOL FOR CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP AND REPUTATION MANAGEMENT**

Consumers are likely to differ in their motives for engaging in negative eWOM. Nevertheless, one characteristic that these consumers have in common is that they are dissatisfied about a consumption experience. By engaging in webcare, companies take corrective action by resolving, apologizing, and/or providing compensation for any product or service failure that causes consumers to be dissatisfied (Kotsohl et al., 2010; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). By doing so, companies hope to restore customer satisfaction and prevent customers from abandoning the company for its competitors (Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2011). As the costs involved with recruiting new customers greatly exceed those associated with retaining current customers (Hart, Heslett, & Sasser, 1990), complaint handling through webcare is considered to be of crucial importance for customer relationship management.

Webcare is also believed to support reputation management, as it can limit the potential damage that unsatisfactory consumption experiences could have on consumers other than the complainant alone, when these experiences are voiced in the form of negative eWOM (Lee & Song, 2010). Because of its reach, as well as because of its informational value, eWOM has considerable impact. Against a myriad of positively branded messages propagated by marketers, the actual experiences from consumers are considered a valuable source of information in the purchase decision-making process (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Willemsen et al., 2011; Bickart & Schindler, 2001). The literature reports many examples of companies that have suffered massive exit and reputation loss as a result of negative eWOM (e.g., Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2011). If unresolved, therefore, online complaints as voiced through negative eWOM can have detrimental consequences for a company.

If resolved, online complaints may even work in favor of companies. When webcare resolves complaints to the satisfaction of consumers, companies can demonstrate that they are responsive to the needs and desires of their customers,
Thereby enhancing their competitive positions. Moreover, consumers may tell other consumers about their positive online encounters with the company, which could transform the tone of eWOM from negative into positive (Hong & Lee, 2005; Lee & Song, 2010). Thus, as proposed by Breitsohl and colleagues (2010, p. 653), a satisfactory webcare response is “not only crucial in terms of customer retention, but also in the form of increasing corporate reputation and brand equity generated by third-party online consumers who read about the positive complaint resolution.”

Although webcare is considered a valuable tool in support of customer relationship and reputation management, its effects on consumer responses have yet to be demonstrated. Research on the effects of webcare has been limited (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012), and the relatively few studies that have addressed this topic focus largely on the content of webcare responses and how they affect the reputation of a company. More specifically, these studies investigate the types of webcare responses (e.g., accommodative/defensive response) that are most likely to engender desirable effects for companies (e.g., Lee & Song, 2010; Kerkhof, Beukeboom, & Utz, 2010; Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2011).

In addition to determining which type of webcare response is most desirable, companies should also question whether webcare is considered desirable at all. Research suggests that consumers vary in the extent to which they desire companies to intervene in consumer-to-consumer conversations. Indeed, some consumers do desire companies to respond to the complaints that they express in negative eWOM. As demonstrated in a study by Lee and Song (2010), consumers sometimes even explicitly ask companies to respond. Other consumers do not desire companies to intervene in consumer-to-consumer conversations (e.g., Marwick & boyd, 2010). These consumers interpret a company’s webcare intervention as a maneuver intended to gain control over consumer-to-consumer conversations and a violation of consumers’ right to be heard and respected. This is reflected in several case studies demonstrating that consumers perceive branded activity in social media, including webcare, as intrusive (e.g., Fournier & Avery, 2011). One such case study describes the public dissatisfaction that was fueled when Walmart used Facebook in a campaign to turn negative eWOM into positive eWOM. One consumer wrote, “Facebook should take the number of negative comments on this page as a note that we don’t support [Walmart for] its use of space for social networking. This space is for people talking to other people” (Havenstein, 2007). Webcare, in this case, instigated a spiral of negative effects wherein negative eWOM was followed by even more negative eWOM.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The present study has three objectives. First, we aim to gain a better understanding of why consumers post their complaints as negative eWOM. Our literature review demonstrates that altruism, venting, and empowerment are considered potential drivers of negative eWOM. However, no study to date has successfully linked these three motives with negative eWOM. Only altruism has been found to be a significant predictor (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008; Henning-Thurau et al., 2004).

These findings may be explained by the way motives have been conceptualized in prior research. According to Cutler and Danowski (1980), media use serves two distinct classes of gratifications: content gratifications (i.e., motives related to the communication of message content) or process gratifications (i.e., motives related to the process of being involved in communication). Prior studies have conceptualized motives as process gratifications, as they have focused mostly on consumers’ motives for engaging in general eWOM activity, rather than engaging in specific eWOM content (i.e., negative eWOM content). Accordingly, these studies have examined altruism, venting, and empowerment as part of a broader set of motives that also includes motives for positive eWOM. The literature, however, argues that motives for negative eWOM are likely to differ from motives for positive eWOM and that they should therefore be investigated separately (cf. Sundaram, Mitra & Webster, 1998). This is especially important, as positive eWOM outperforms negative eWOM in terms of occurrence (but not terms of impact). Only one third of all eWOM that is posted on social media platforms is critical of any company or product (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel & Chowdury, 2009). Because of the skewed proportion of positive eWOM relative to negative eWOM, altruism may have appeared more important in prior research, as this motive has been shown to be a driver of both positive eWOM (i.e., helping others with the purchase decision process) and negative eWOM (i.e., warning others about unsatisfactory consumption experiences; see Sundaram et al., 1998). Venting and empowerment may have appeared less important, as these motives are characteristic only of negative eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Following this line of reasoning, we assert that venting, altruism and empowerment all emerge as motives for negative eWOM, when negative eWOM is examined independently of positive eWOM. We therefore adopt a content gratification perspective, and examine the relative importance of venting, altruism and empowerment as motivational drivers of negative eWOM:

**RQ1. What is the relative importance of venting, altruism, and empowerment as motives for negative eWOM activity?**

Second, we aim to demonstrate that different motivations underlying negative eWOM activity have different effects on consumers’ receptiveness to webcare in terms of webcare desirability, webcare satisfaction and post-webcare eWOM activity. With regard to webcare desirability, the literature suggests that some consumers seem to desire for companies to intervene in consumer-to-consumer conversations, while others desire for companies to stay out of consumer-to-consumer conversations (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Lee & Song, 2010). Consumers who are driven by empowerment, are likely to desire webcare, as they use negative eWOM for constructive goals: as a means of attracting the company’s attention, thereby enforcing redress and service excellence. According to U&G (Blumler & Katz, 1974), people’s motives for media use are directly related to the gratification of their needs and desires. Thus, when companies gratify consumers’ desire for webcare, consumers are likely to be satisfied and to voice such satisfaction in the form of post-webcare eWOM. This assumption is also supported by the customer satisfaction literature, in which service-failure recovery efforts have been shown to increase satisfaction with service encounters, in addition to increasing positive word of mouth about the provider of the service encounter (e.g., McCollough, Berry, & Yadav 2000; Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999).
In contrast, when consumers aim to vent negative emotions associated with unsatisfactory consumption experiences, or aim to warn other consumers about unsatisfactory consumption experiences, a company’s webcare response is unwarranted and likely to be interpreted as defensive and/or interfering behavior. Consumers who are driven to engage in negative eWOM activity for reasons of venting or altruism are therefore less likely to desire webcare, to be satisfied with webcare, and to engage in positive eWOM after receiving webcare. To test whether different motivations underlying negative eWOM activity have different effects on consumers’ receptiveness, we formulate the following research question:

RQ2. Is webcare receptiveness in terms of (a) webcare desirability, (b) webcare satisfaction, and (c) post-webcare eWOM activity related to consumers’ motives for engaging in negative eWOM activity?

Our third and final objective is to assess whether companies consider the motives that consumers have for engaging in negative eWOM in their webcare endeavors. If consumers differ in their motives for engaging in negative eWOM activity, and if these motives determine consumers’ receptiveness to webcare in response to negative eWOM, it is important for companies to recognize and anticipate the motives of eWOM senders. We therefore ask how likely consumers with different motives are to receive webcare in response to their articulations of negative eWOM (hereafter: webcare response):

RQ3. Is the likelihood of receiving a webcare response in reply to negative eWOM related to consumers’ motives for engaging in negative eWOM activity?

STUDY 1

Before testing the research questions, we aim to validate the assumption that altruism, venting, and empowerment emerge as motives underlying negative eWOM activity, when negative eWOM is examined independently of positive eWOM. To this end, we draw on survey data collected in The Netherlands through CASI (Computer Assisted Self-Interviewing) by the market-research company TNS-NIPO (see Bronner & De Hoog, 2011). The data were collected as part of the Continuous Vacation Panel (CVO), which is intended to provide insight into the holiday plans and decision-making processes of consumers. Among CVO panel members (n = 3500), those who had taken summer vacations were asked to complete a questionnaire, which also included items about eWOM in relation to their summer vacations. In all, 3176 valid surveys were received, which translates into a response rate of 91%—far above the average of 51% for panel survey studies in The Netherlands (Van Ossenbruggen, Vonk, Vonk, & Willems, 2008). Of the panel members participating in the survey, 439 consumers (14%) indicated that they had engaged in eWOM (male = 43%, M_age = 47, SD_age = 14.73).

MEASURES

The survey included measures of the panel members’ eWOM contributions and eWOM activity. With regard to their eWOM contributions, panel members were asked whether the tone of the eWOM that they had posted was positive, neutral, or negative. Consistent with the literature, consumers are generally inclined to speak positively about companies; 69.7% of the consumers had posted positive eWOM, 22.5% had posted neutral eWOM, and 7.8% had posted negative eWOM. As this study aims to test the assumption that venting, empowerment, and altruism differ in importance for positive versus negative eWOM, only those who had engaged in these types of eWOM were retained for analysis.

With regard to their eWOM activity, panel members were asked about their motives for posting the eWOM. More specifically, we used seven statements adapted from Hennig-Thurau and colleagues (2004) to measure venting (e.g., “I posted the eWOM to shake off frustration about the company”), altruism (e.g., “I posted the eWOM to help other consumers with my experiences”), and empowerment (e.g., “I posted the eWOM because companies are more accommodating when I publicize the matter”). On a five-point scale (0 = not at all; 5 = fully), respondents indicated the extent to which these statements were applicable to them (venting: α = .80, M = 1.92, SD = 1.35; altruism: α = .77, M = 3.74, SD = .88; empowerment: α = .67, M = 3.10, SD = 1.28).

RESULTS

We performed a MANOVA with venting, altruism, and empowerment as dependent variables, and eWOM valence (positive/negative) as a between-subjects factor. The results reveal significant differences in the importance of venting, altruism, and empowerment for positive as compared to negative eWOM, F(3, 312) = 92.77, p < .001. As shown in Table 1, empowerment and venting were judged as significantly more important drivers of negative eWOM than of positive eWOM. Altruism did not differ between positive and negative eWOM. The results thus confirm that altruism is a driver of both positive eWOM (i.e., helping others with the purchase-decision process) and negative eWOM (i.e., warning others about unsatisfactory consumption experiences), whereas venting and empowerment are primarily drivers of negative eWOM. In summary, altruism, venting, and empowerment all serve as motives for negative eWOM.

Table 1.

Empowerment, Venting, and Altruism as Motives for Positive vs. Negative eWOM.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>Negative eWOM</th>
<th>Positive eWOM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>3.31 (.81)</td>
<td>2.87 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venting</td>
<td>2.94 (.97)</td>
<td>1.46 (.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>3.46 (.80)</td>
<td>3.79 (.45)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Mean scores on a five-point scale (with standard deviations). *p < .01
STUDY 2

The aim of Study 2 was to examine the relative importance of altruism, venting and empowerment as motives for negative eWOM, along with their relationship to webcare receptiveness. To address this aim, Study 2 relies on survey panel data collected in The Netherlands through CASI by the market research company TNS-NIPO. The survey was intended to tap consumers' negative eWOM activity. To be included in the study, therefore, panel members had to have engaged in negative eWOM. To this end, panel members were asked whether they had posted one or more negative comments, ratings, or messages about a product or service on the internet in the past six months. Internet was specified as review or other websites, social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), blogs, micro-blogs, internet forums, and online communities. This filter question was administered for eight industries, including internet, mobile telephony, insurance, banking, automotive, energy, gas stations, and supermarkets. In all, 4810 panel members had posted negative eWOM, divided over 71 brands from these eight industries.

Of those who had engaged in negative eWOM, a stratified sample was randomly drawn using brand names as a stratum to ensure that the dataset would cover a variety of brands from different industries (n = 1592). Panel members within this sample were invited to complete an online survey with questions pertaining to the eWOM and any webcare that may have been posted in reply to the eWOM. A total of 1132 valid surveys were received, which translates to a response rate of 71%.

MEASURES

Motives for negative eWOM

Statements similar to those used in Study 1 were used in order to examine venting, altruism, and empowerment as motives for negative eWOM. Given space constraints, the statements were measured dichotomously. Respondents were asked to indicate whether the statements were applicable to them (no = 0, yes = 1). Multiple motives were allowed to apply to the negative eWOM postings of respondents.

Webcare desirability/response

To measure webcare desirability, we asked consumers to indicate whether they had desired to receive a webcare response from the company in reaction to negative eWOM (0 = no, 1 = yes). As a measure for webcare response, we also asked whether they had received such a response (0 = no, 1 = yes).

Webcare satisfaction

Consumers who had received webcare in response to negative eWOM were asked to indicate their satisfaction with the webcare encounter with a rating from 1 (not satisfied at all) to 10 (very satisfied) in terms of tone, content (i.e., solution to the problem), and service (i.e., responsiveness) (α = .91, M = 5.13, SD = 2.12, cf. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1998).

Post-webcare eWOM

To measure post-webcare eWOM, we asked respondents whether they recommended the company more, less, or equally to other consumers on the internet after having received webcare (cf. Danaher & Rust, 1996). Answers varied from 1 (much less) to 5 (much more), M = 3.02, SD = .81.

Controls

We controlled for social demographics, including age, gender, and education, as well as for the presence of double-deviation situations (i.e., whether consumers had filed their complaints through traditional customer care channels before voicing them online).

RESULTS

Descriptive results

Most of the consumers who had engaged in negative eWOM within the six months preceding the survey were males (male: 72%; M_age = 50, SD_age = 14.90) who had completed vocational or higher education (72%). The majority of these consumers had filed their complaints through traditional customer care channels (68%) before posting their complaints on the internet as eWOM. Webcare was desired by 57% of the respondents, and webcare was received by 26% of the respondents. Consumers who desired webcare were more likely to receive webcare (42%) than were those who did not desire webcare (4%).

Motives for negative eWOM

The first research question (RQ1) aimed to gain more insight into the relative importance of venting, altruism and empowerment as motives for negative eWOM. The results demonstrate that venting, altruism, and empowerment are almost equally important as drivers of negative eWOM. Of the consumers who had engaged in negative eWOM, 34% had been motivated by empowerment, 38% had been motivated by venting, and 38% had been motivated by altruism. A Cochran’s Q test, which tests for differences between three or more related-sample proportions, revealed no significant differences in the importance of these motives (Q = 4.99, df = 2, p = .08).

Table 2.

Unstandardized Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Likelihood to Desire Webcare

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covariates</th>
<th>Model 0</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female)</td>
<td>.11***</td>
<td>.18***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.04 (.01)</td>
<td>.03 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.13*** (.05)</td>
<td>-.17*** (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC history</td>
<td>1.82*** (14)</td>
<td>1.72*** (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>2.66*** (.23)</td>
<td>14.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venting</td>
<td>-.24 (.17)</td>
<td>.079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>.03 (.17)</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R²</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model χ²</td>
<td>247.73***</td>
<td>484.05***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Webcare receptiveness

The second research question (RQ2) is intended to investigate how the motives that consumers have for engaging in negative eWOM activity are related to webcare receptiveness in terms of (a) webcare desirability, (b) webcare satisfaction, and (c) post-webcare eWOM activity. Given the binary nature of webcare desirability, we ran a logistic regression analysis in order to answer RQ2a. As shown in Table 2, empowerment emerges as a significant predictor of webcare desirability. Consumers driven by empowerment were 14 times more likely to desire webcare than consumers who were not driven by this motive (b = 2.66, p < .001, OR = 14.26). Venting and altruism emerge as non-significant predictors of webcare desirability.

Linear regression analyses were run to answer RQ2b and RQ2c. As demonstrated by the results presented in Table 3, empowerment is positively related to webcare satisfaction (β = 1.77, p < .05), whereas venting (β = -.14, p < .001) and altruism (β = -.17, p < .001) are negatively related to webcare satisfaction. According to these findings, consumers driven by empowerment were inclined to evaluate webcare favorably, whereas the opposite applied for consumers who were driven by venting and altruism.

Although consumers who are driven by empowerment are inclined to be satisfied with webcare, they are unlikely to voice such satisfaction to fellow consumers: Empowerment is unrelated to post-webcare eWOM. Venting and altruism are negatively related to eWOM (venting: β = -.21, p < .001; altruism: β = -.23, p < .001). Consumers driven by these motives evaluated webcare negatively and engaged in even more negative eWOM after having received webcare.

Table 3. Relation between Motives for Negative eWOM Posting, Webcare Satisfaction, and Post-webcare eWOM (n = 289)

![Table 3](image)

Webcare response

The third research question (RQ3) is intended to investigate whether consumers differ in their likelihood to receive webcare depending upon their motives (altruism, venting, and empowerment) for engaging in negative eWOM. Results of logistic regression analysis reveal that altruism, venting, and empowerment are all significantly related to the likelihood of receiving a webcare response, albeit in different directions (see Table 4). Consumers driven by empowerment were three times more likely to receive webcare compared to consumers who are not driven by this motive (b = 1.31, p < .001, OR = 3.38). In contrast, consumers driven by venting (b = -.52, p < .001, OR = 0.59) and altruism (b = -.36, p < .001, OR = 0.70) were 41% and 30% less likely (respectively) to receive webcare in response to negative eWOM.

Table 4. Unstandardized Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Likelihood to Receive Webcare

![Table 4](image)

**DISCUSSION**

Consumers are increasingly sharing their complaints with companies through negative eWOM. In response to this development, more and more companies are engaging in webcare in order to limit the potential damage of negative eWOM. Two surveys were conducted in order to enhance existing knowledge concerning negative eWOM activity, webcare activity, and the manner in which webcare is received by those engaging in negative eWOM activity. More specifically, we examined the motives that consumers have for engaging in negative eWOM (RQ1), and whether these motives play an important role in determining consumers’ receptiveness to webcare (RQ2). We also assessed whether consumers’ motives for negative eWOM determine the likelihood that they will receive webcare (RQ3).

The results demonstrate that consumers express their complaints with companies through negative eWOM for reasons of altruism (i.e., to warn other consumers about unsatisfactory consumption experiences), venting (i.e., to unburden negative emotions resulting from unsatisfactory consumption experiences), and empowerment (i.e., to strengthen consumers’ redress power after unsatisfactory consumption experiences). Interestingly, altruism, venting, and empowerment were mentioned equally often as motives for negative eWOM activity.

Although equally important, the various motives underlying negative eWOM
activity have varying effects on webcare receptiveness in terms of webcare desirability, webcare satisfaction, and post-webcare eWOM activity. Venting and altruism are unrelated to webcare desirability, although they are negatively related to webcare satisfaction and subsequent positive eWOM. This means that consumers who are driven by these motives are inclined to evaluate webcare negatively and to engage in even more negative eWOM after receiving webcare. In contrast, empowerment is positively related to webcare desirability and webcare satisfaction. Consumers driven by empowerment (as opposed to other motives) are more likely to desire webcare and to be satisfied with webcare. Although empowerment-driven consumers are appreciative of webcare, they do not tend to voice such positive sentiments to other consumers, as demonstrated by a non-significant relationship between empowerment and post-webcare eWOM activity.

Finally, the results demonstrate that, depending upon the motives that consumers have for engaging in negative eWOM, consumers differ in their likelihood of receiving webcare. Consumers who are appreciative of webcare (i.e., consumers who are driven by empowerment) are far more likely to receive webcare than are those who are not appreciative of webcare (i.e., consumers who are driven by venting and altruism). Nevertheless, many consumers remain unnoticed. More than half of the consumers who desired webcare in response to their articulations of eWOM did not receive webcare (see descriptive results).

**THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

These results provide useful insight into negative eWOM activity and the opportunities and challenges that companies face when dealing with negative eWOM. With regard to negative eWOM activity, this study complements previous research that identifies venting, empowerment, and altruism as potential motives for negative eWOM, but which has thus far been unable to substantiate only the value of altruism (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). As noted in this chapter, previous studies have focused largely on the motives for general eWOM activity and did not include separate investigations into the motives for positive and negative eWOM. It is likely that venting and empowerment emerged as less important in these studies because these motives are typical only of negative eWOM. By conceptualizing motives as content gratifications (Cutler & Danowski, 1980), and examining negative eWOM independently of positive eWOM, this study demonstrates that altruism, venting, and empowerment all play a role as motives underlying negative eWOM activity. As such, our results support the claim made by Sundaram and colleagues (1998) that motives for engaging in negative eWOM differ from motives for engaging in positive eWOM and that they should therefore be studied individually.

With respect to the challenges associated with negative eWOM, this study highlights the changing power relationships between marketers and consumers (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Social media provide consumers with a more active role in their communications about and with companies. Marketers are thus advised to be cautious when intervening in consumer-to-consumer interactions (e.g., negative eWOM), as such interventions may be interpreted as a token of disrespect for consumers and their opinions (cf. Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Dellarocas, 2006; Fourier & Avery, 2011). This indeed seems to hold for consumers engaging in negative eWOM for reasons of venting and altruism. These consumers have no constructive goals for negative eWOM, and they do not appreciate webcare in response to their eWOM. Companies that push webcare upon these consumers in order to counter negative eWOM risk becoming the subject of even more negative eWOM. Companies should therefore reserve their efforts to address negative eWOM that is voiced by consumers who are driven by empowerment. The goals that these consumers pursue through negative eWOM (e.g., increasing their redress power) are more constructive, thus making them more likely to desire webcare and to be satisfied with the efforts of companies that do respond with webcare.

Although empowerment-driven consumers are likely to be satisfied with webcare, they are not likely to voice such satisfaction through post-webcare eWOM. The lack of a significant relationship between empowerment and post-webcare eWOM may be explained by the finding that consumers prefer to appear consistent in their communications, especially when observed by many others (Salancik, 1977). The more publicly one declares a position, the more one becomes committed to and locked into that position (Hollenbeck, Williams, & Klein, 1989). Thus, when consumers engage in the relatively public act of negative eWOM (Neyer & Gopinath, 2005, p. 939) they may be less likely to engage in positive WOM after having received a satisfactory webcare response, as this would make them appear inconsistent in their communications to others. Further research is needed in order to validate this explanation.

The finding that webcare cannot transform negative eWOM into positive eWOM, implies that webcare should focus on customer relationship management and, to a lesser degree, on reputation management. On the other hand, the results do not rule out the possibility that a company’s reputation could benefit from webcare. Given that a company’s webcare reactions are observed by many other consumers in addition to the complainant, webcare is not necessarily dependent on positive WOM to signal positive associations to a broader audience. As a publicly available message, webcare alone can give the impression that the company is empathetic to the needs of its customers and that it provides good service (Kerkhof et al., 2010).

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Opportunities for future research emerge from several limitations associated with this research, as well as with survey research in general. First, this study reports the results of a cross-sectional survey of consumers who had engaged in online complaining through negative eWOM. Hence, we need to use caution in interpreting these results as implying causal relationships.

Second, the results of this study are based on self-reported measures. We were therefore unable to capture variables related to the content of negative eWOM messages and webcare responses to negative eWOM messages. As proposed by Wetzer and colleagues (2007), consumers may communicate differently in their eWOM depending upon the goals that they are pursuing. For example, a consumer who aims to vent may express more anger in the eWOM message than would a consumer seeking redress. Future research is needed in order to examine whether the motives for engaging in negative eWOM are reflected in the content of negative eWOM. Such insight could help companies to identify consumers who are more or less receptive to webcare.

Examining the content of webcare messages, in addition to the content of
eWOM messages, may further enhance our understanding of the relationships between eWOM motivations and webcare receptiveness. Different types of negative eWOM content may prompt different types of webcare responses. For example, negative eWOM messages that convey more anger may elicit defensive webcare (i.e., denial), whereas negative eWOM messages with less anger may elicit accommodative webcare (i.e., apology and/or compensation) or vice versa. Depending on the types of webcare responses that consumers receive in reply to their eWOM messages, consumers may vary in their receptiveness to webcare. Prior research has shown that different types of webcare have different effects on the evaluations of observing consumers (Lee & Song, 2010; Kerkhof et al., 2010; Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2011). This may also hold for complaining consumers. Future research should therefore combine content analysis with survey data in order to explain the relationship between eWOM motivations and webcare receptiveness, as found in the present study.

Finally, this study was conducted amongst Dutch consumers, who appear very assertive in their complaints and reporting behavior (Nardo, Loi, Rosati, & Manca, 2011). Therefore, it may not be possible to generalize the results to other countries, especially those in which residents are less assertive. This suggests that future research should replicate our study by exploring consumers’ eWOM responses to webcare in different cultural contexts.

Despite these limitations, this study provides an initial step towards a better understanding of the dynamics between negative eWOM and webcare. This study demonstrates that consumers differ in their motives for voicing complaints in the form of negative eWOM, and that for webcare to be successful, it is important to recognize and act upon these motives. Only when webcare caters to the goals and motives of senders of negative eWOM will companies be able to satisfy the unsatisfied and to prevent online complaint situations from escalating any further.

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This study is published as: Van Noort, G., & L. M. Willemsen (2012). Online damage control: The effects of proactive versus reactive webcare interventions in consumer-generated and brand-generated platforms. Journal of Interactive Marketing, 26, 131–140. Authors contributed equally to this article and are mentioned in alphabetical order.


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ABSTRACT

Web 2.0 has empowered consumers to voice complaints with reduced costs (physical and psychological), and to share these with a multitude of other consumers on the Internet. As a public phenomenon, online complaints have a negative impact on consumers’ evaluations of brands that are under attack in online complaints. By means of an experiment, we study the most effective means for companies to counter complaints as expressed in negative electronic word of mouth (negative eWOM). The results show that negative brand evaluations engendered by negative eWOM can be attenuated by webcare interventions dependent on type of strategy (proactive vs. reactive) and platform used (consumer-generated vs. brand-generated blog). This effect appeared to be mediated by conversational human voice. The findings are discussed in the light of practical implications for online complaint management.
INTRODUCTION

The advent of consumer-empowering technologies has provided consumers with a plethora of online venues to exchange negative experiences with products and brands with a multitude of other consumers. Complaints, heretofore expressed in one-to-one communication, are now publicly shared on social network sites, (anti) brand communities, review sites and (micro)blogs (Ward & Ostrom, 2006).

The opportunity for consumers to voice their complaints to a broader public poses new challenges for brands (Berry et al., 2010; Bolton & Saxena-Iyer, 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Brands—once predominantly steered by positively-framed top-down mass communication—are increasingly shaped by the brands’ ability to circumvent or mitigate negative online interactions between consumers (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Negative online interactions between consumers, also referred to as negative electronic word-of-mouth are found to have detrimental effects on all phases of the consumer decision-making process, including brand evaluation, brand choice, purchase behavior and brand loyalty (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Chiu & Cheng, 2003; Veureullen & Seegers, 2009).

In light of these developments, companies have started to monitor and intervene in negative eWOM (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Shankar & Malthouse, 2007). These interventions, also referred to as webcare (Kerkhof, Beukeboom, & Utz, 2010), are either a reaction to specific requests from consumers to respond to their complaint (i.e., reactive webcare) or posted proactively (i.e., proactive webcare) in response to negative eWOM, without a request from the complainant to respond. Webcare—whether reactive or proactive—is believed to provide an effective means to mitigate the effects of negative eWOM (Hong & Lee, 2005; Lee & Song, 2010; Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010; Weinberg, Davis, & Berger, 2011). A timely response to online complaints can not only resolve the issue with the complainant and as such put a stop to unnecessary follow-up attacks from other consumers exposed to the publicly communicated complaint, but also can increase consumer loyalty, satisfaction and positive electronic word of mouth (Hong & Lee, 2005), when an online complaint is adequately resolved by webcare. Hence, webcare may not only be helpful in improving customer retention, but also in leveraging the power of the collective to build brand equity (Breitsohl, Khammassi, & Griffiths, 2010; Lee & Song, 2010; Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010).

Although webcare seems to be a promising tool for brand communication in the era of consumer-empowering media, it can also backfire on a company, and undermine its intended effects (Lee & Song, 2010). A step in the wrong direction may engender a spiral of negative effects, wherein a response to negative eWOM is followed by even more negative eWOM. This recently happened to T-Mobile when a famous Dutch comedian reported negative experiences with T-Mobile’s customer service on his Twitter account. The telecommunications provider apologized via Twitter, which was considered to be an inappropriate response by the comedian. Consequently, he used social media to ventilate his negative sentiments regarding the telecommunications provider and invited consumers to do so as well, thereby creating a vicious circle of negative eWOM.

Because of the risk of backfiring effects, both the managerial and the academic literature call for research on appropriate response strategies to counter negative eWOM effects (Berry et al., 2010; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Lee & Song, 2010). Up till now, little attention has been directed at examining effective webcare strategies in response to negative eWOM (Lee & Song, 2010; Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010). This study seeks to address this void by examining how, and under what conditions, webcare helps brands to counter negative eWOM effects. We suggest that intervening with webcare is more effective in engendering positive brand evaluations, than not intervening in negative eWOM. Also, we propose that proactive webcare is able to initiate favorable brand evaluations dependent on the platform in which the webcare is embedded (consumer-generated vs. brand-generated), whereas reactive webcare is proposed to be effective independent of the platform. Moreover, we suggest that consumers’ brand evaluations are positively influenced when webcare is perceived as a natural communication style, that is, when webcare conveys a conversational human voice (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006). We further argue that the perceived conversational human voice is contingent on both the platform in which the webcare is embedded (consumer-generated vs. brand-generated blogs) and the type of strategy used (reactive vs. proactive webcare).

In the remainder of the article, we review relevant literature and provide an overview of research in the areas of electronic word-of-mouth, (online) complaint management, and the role of conversational human voice in computer-mediated communication. Based on this research we formulate a set of hypotheses. Next, we detail our methodology for testing the hypotheses, followed by the results and associated discussion. We conclude with suggestions for future research and for management implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ONLINE COMPLAINTS

Web 2.0 has empowered consumers to voice their complaints with reduced physical and mental costs, and to share these with a multitude of other consumers (Hong & Lee, 2005). With just one click, consumers can post their complaints in the form of negative eWOM to the Internet. Consumers do so as a way to vent negative feelings resulting from dissatisfying experiences with products and services. Moreover, as the anonymity of the Internet relaxes social constraints of complaining, consumers unhesitatingly promote these negative sentiments among a broad audience of Internet users (Gelb & Sundaram, 2002). Being aware of the great number of potential negative eWOM receivers, online complaining often serves as a deliberate action to harm focal companies (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004; Hong & Lee, 2005; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Consumers post and spread negative eWOM to warn other consumers for dissatisfying consumer experiences, and to collectively retaliate against a company responsible for negative consumption experiences (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). As such, negative eWOM can be understood as a trigger event, that is, something that happens during customer’s lifecycles and indicates a (negative) change in the relationship with the brand for a substantial number of (potential) consumers (Malthouse, 2007). Given this persuasive intent of negative eWOM, and the extent to which electronic networks are enabling consumers to rapidly disseminate negative eWOM effects (Berry et al., 2010; Bolton & Saxena-Iyer, 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010), brands—once predominantly steered by positively-framed top-down mass communication—are increasingly shaped by the brands’ ability to circumvent or mitigate negative online interactions between consumers (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Negative online interactions between consumers, also referred to as negative electronic word-of-mouth are found to have detrimental effects on all phases of the consumer decision-making process, including brand evaluation, brand choice, purchase behavior and brand loyalty (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Chiu & Cheng, 2003; Veureullen & Seegers, 2009).

Although webcare seems to be a promising tool for brand communication in the era of consumer-empowering media, it can also backfire on a company, and undermine its intended effects (Lee & Song, 2010). A step in the wrong direction may engender a spiral of negative effects, wherein a response to negative eWOM is followed by even more negative eWOM. This recently happened to T-Mobile when a famous Dutch comedian reported negative experiences with T-Mobile’s customer service on his Twitter account. The telecommunications provider apologized via Twitter, which was considered to be an inappropriate response by the comedian. Consequently, he used social media to ventilate his negative sentiments regarding the telecommunications provider and invited consumers to do so as well, thereby creating a vicious circle of negative eWOM.

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In the remainder of the article, we review relevant literature and provide an overview of research in the areas of electronic word-of-mouth, (online) complaint management, and the role of conversational human voice in computer-mediated communication. Based on this research we formulate a set of hypotheses. Next, we detail our methodology for testing the hypotheses, followed by the results and associated discussion. We conclude with suggestions for future research and for management implications.
to a broader audience, negative eWOM poses a severe threat to marketers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Especially since negative eWOM, as a form of consumer-generated content, is found to be more credible and more useful than marketer-generated information (Bickart & Schindler 2001), and hence, a very persuasive source of consumer information.

The negative effects of negative eWOM have been repeatedly demonstrated in past research (Basuroy, Chatterjee, & Ravid, 2003; Chakravarty, Liu, & Mazumdar, 2010; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Sen & Lerman, 2007; Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & De Ridder, 2011). For example, in their study of online message boards, Chiou and Cheng (2003) demonstrated negative eWOM to have a strong impact on brand evaluations, even more so than positive word of mouth. This asymmetric effect of negative eWOM, also referred to as “negativity bias” (Ahluwalia, 2002), has been explained by the diagnostic value of negative product information. Negative product attributes are believed to be more characteristic of a poor quality product, than positive attributes are for a high quality product. Consumers therefore pay more attention to negative eWOM than to positive WOM, and find it more useful in their evaluations of products and brands (Sen & Lerman, 2007). As a result, negative eWOM has stronger effects than positive WOM in terms of reach and impact (e.g., Arndt, 1967; Godes & Mayzlin 2004; Hart, Heskett, & Sasser, 1990; Sen & Lerman, 2007). Hence, companies call for appropriate strategies to control negative eWOM and its potential damage.

**WEBCARE AS ONLINE COMPLAINT MANAGEMENT**

Due to the rise of web 2.0, complaining has changed from a private phenomenon into a public phenomenon (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Before the era of participatory media, complaints were expressed in one-to-one communication which gave marketers some level of control in terms of recovery strategies (Hong & Lee, 2005). This has changed now as complaints are diffused over the Internet and prompt many other consumers than just the complainant to spread complaints in the form of negative eWOM (Ward & Ostrom, 2006).

Because negative eWOM, as a trigger event, may negatively affect a substantial number of (potential) customers, negative eWOM requires detection and intervention (Malthouse, 2007) to control negative eWOM and its potential damage. However, since negative eWOM is a persuasive source of consumer information with a force of unprecedented speed and reach, negative eWOM is difficult to control. As asserted by Deighton and Kornfeld (2009, p. 4): “today marketing is less a matter of domination and control, and more a matter of fitting in.” To fit in, brands need to relinquish control, and participate in conversations about their brands (cf. Fournier & Avery, 2011).

As a precondition for dialogical communication, companies need to monitor the online platforms where their brands are likely to be discussed. Various services enable companies to monitor online conversations about brands across multiple social media platforms (e.g., Nielsen blog pulse). This is important, because negative eWOM takes place not only in branded platforms such as brand-sponsored message boards and brand-generated blogs (Chiou & Cheng, 2003; Yang, Kang, & Johnson, 2010), but also in consumer-generated platforms such as review sites, consumer blogs, social network sites, recommendation sites, (micro) blogs and (anti) brand communities (Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010; Vásquez, 2011).

According to a recent report by TNS NIPO (2011), 30% of the consumers post their complaints in branded environments. The remaining 70% of the online complaints are lodged on consumer-generated platforms.

When companies monitor negative eWOM on the Internet they are also in a position to take remedial action by means of webcare. Although webcare is gaining in popularity as a brand communications tool, the concept has not been defined so far. In line with Harrison-Walker (2001) and Hong and Lee (2005) we define webcare as: The act of engaging in online interactions with (complaining) consumers, by actively searching the web to address consumer feedback (e.g., questions, concerns and complaints). Webcare is performed by one or more company representatives (i.e., webcare teams) and serves as a tool in support of customer relationship, reputation and brand management. Central to these efforts is the aim to restore or improve the brand evaluations of complaining customers and/or of those who have been exposed to the negative eWOM of complaining customers. Although research on the effects of webcare is still in its infancy, both anecdotal and empirical evidence suggest that webcare can engender positive responses in consumers after encountering negative eWOM. For example, Lee and Song (2010) exposed participants to negative eWOM that was either followed or not followed by an accommodative response in which the company tried to redress the complaint expressed in the negative eWOM. Their findings show that an accommodative response has a more favorable effect on how individuals evaluate the company than no response at all. In a similar vein, Kerkhof and colleagues (2010) demonstrated that any form of accommodative response (i.e., apology or financial compensation) to negative eWOM evokes positive cognitive responses in consumers. In line with these studies, we hypothesize:

**H1. Webcare interventions in negative eWOM (vs. no webcare interventions), engender more positive brand evaluations among visitors of a consumer-generated or brand-generated platform.**

**PROACTIVE VERSUS REACTIVE WEBCARE**

Companies not only have to decide whether to offer webcare or not, they also have to decide upon a strategy for when to offer webcare. In this study we distinguish between a reactive and a proactive webcare strategy. With a proactive webcare strategy, the company takes on a proactive approach and responds unsolicitedly to negative eWOM. With a reactive webcare strategy, a company responds to negative eWOM only when it is explicitly asked to do so by the customer. Malthouse (2007, p. 384) discusses that both proactive and reactive contacts may be important in reaching marketing objectives and asserts that the effectiveness of such contacts should be tested by companies. An empirical study by Köhler, Rohm, De Ruyter, and Wetzel (2011) compared the effectiveness of proactive and reactive communication styles of online agents, and demonstrated that these styles are important in explaining firm–customer relationships within a service context.

For negative eWOM this distinction is also relevant, as consumers are increasingly aware of the possibility that a company will read online complaints and respond accordingly. Hence, consumers not only post complaints on the web to vent negative feelings (Hong & Lee, 2005), but also as a way to attract the attention of companies, and as such, to find redress for their grievances. For this reason,
negative eWOM often not only addresses an audience of fellow consumers, but also the company that is under attack in the negative eWOM (Vásquez, 2011) as shown in this example:

“I just got a new Dell laptop and paid a fortune for the four year, in-home service. The machine is a lemon and the service is a lie. I’m having all kinds of trouble with the hardware: overheats, network doesn’t work, maxes out on CPU usage. It’s a lemon. But what really irks me is that they say if they sent someone to my home—which I paid for—he wouldn’t have the parts, so I might as well just send the machine in and lose it for 7–10 days—plus the time going through this crap. So I have this new machine and paid for them to FIX IT IN MY HOUSE and they don’t and I lose it for two weeks. DELL SUCKS. DELL LIES. Put that in your Google and smoke it, Dell.”

Not only do customers construct negative eWOM with a dual audience in mind, they also explicitly invite companies to respond to negative eWOM (Lee & Song, 2010), as is demonstrated by the following comment:

“I don’t notice anything of the high speed internet service. We have a KPN internet subscription with a download speed up to 16 Mbps. However, we have only been able to get 6.8 MBps max. The modern allows a download speed of 20 Mbps. It’s a Speedtouch TF789. […] KPN webcare, can you please help us? We have been loyal customers for years, but we don’t understand any of this…”

The finding that consumers are inviting companies to respond to negative eWOM is also reflected in a recent study by TNS NIPO (2011). In this study it was demonstrated that almost 60% of online complainers desire a response from the company when posting negative eWOM on the internet. When they do so in a timely manner, brands may expect that consumers sympathize with the brand because it shows that they are sensitive to the concerns of consumers, and take their issues and problems seriously (Hong & Lee, 2005; Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010). Hence, reactive webcare, posted in response to negative eWOM in which the consumer requests a reply, is likely to yield favorable brand evaluations, irrespective of the platform (i.e., consumer-generated or brand-generated).

The question is whether proactive webcare also engenders positive brand evaluations, as scholars warn that companies should be careful in proactively intervening in negative eWOM (Chiou & Cheng, 2003; Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009), especially if negative eWOM takes place in consumer-generated platforms. Pushing messages at consumers may not be considered to be appropriate in a context that is made for consumers and their conversations. As observed by Fournier and Avery (2013, p. 1): “Among the cultural conversation, most brands seem inauthentic: their presence intrusive and out of place. Brands, as much as we might wish otherwise, are uninvited crashers of the Web 2.0 party.” As proactive webcare interventions in consumer-generated platforms are posted unsolicitedly in response to negative eWOM, it is likely that the brand will be perceived as intrusive. Consequently, webcare interventions may not result in positive brand evaluations, or even worse, might lead to negative brand evaluations in these contexts. This might be differ-

ent for proactive webcare in brand-generated platforms. Consumers who post negative eWOM on a brand-generated platform inherently accept that the platform is being monitored by the company, and that there is a fair chance that the brand will proactively respond to concerns and complaints expressed on the brand-generated platform. Thus we may expect that when a brand responds to negative eWOM with a proactive webcare strategy in a brand-generated platform, it is not considered to be intrusive or out of place by the observing public, but instead, as a sign that the company is responsive to the opinions and needs of consumers. Following this line of argument, we hypothesize the following:

H2. The effect of webcare strategy on brand evaluations is moderated by platform type, such that (a) a proactive webcare intervention in negative eWOM engenders more positive brand evaluations in a brand-generated than in a consumer-generated platform, whereas (b) a reactive webcare intervention engenders positive brand evaluations, irrespective of the platform.

CONVERSATIONAL HUMAN VOICE

We propose that the moderation effect as proposed by H2 can be explained by the extent to which the audience perceives webcare to demonstrate a ‘conversational human voice,’ which is found to be important in creating favorable brand responses in computer-mediated communications (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Conversational human voice (Kelleher, 2009, p. 177) is defined as: “an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization’s publics based on interactions between individuals in the organization and individuals in publics.”

For webcare to be perceived as engaging and natural and thus as demonstrating human voice, it should be based on “candid dialogue” (Lee, Hwang, & Lee 2006). Whereas communications with a corporate voice are perceived as profit-driven and persuasive (Locke, Weinberger, & Sears, 2004), communication with a human voice invites the audience to communicate in a non-persuasive manner. Following Kelleher (2009) and Kelleher and Miller (2006), a company demonstrates a high level of conversational human voice in its communications if it is open to dialog, welcomes conversational communication, and provides prompt feedback addressing criticism with a direct, but uncritical, manner. Through this communication style, brands ‘mimic one-to-one communication’ and “humanize” the corporate voice (Kuhn, 2005).

Empirical research in other domains than online complaint management (e.g., computer science, communication studies, public relations), confirmed that conversational human voice is important for effective online communication. According to these studies, conversational human voice positively affects a variety of responses concerning relational maintenance, including trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Beldad, De Jong, & Steehouder, 2010; Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Also, in the study by Yang, Kang, and Johnson (2010), conversation-driven human voice appeared to be a key factor in enhancing positive attitudes toward a company that used a corporate blog to communicate with its audience. These and other studies as well focused on the effects of conversational human voice in communications that are initiated by the company (e.g., Kelleher, 2009; Schultz, Utz, & Goritz, 2011; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Yang et al., 2010). In this study, we assert that companies can also demonstrate a conversational human voice if it
responds to communications that have been initiated by the consumer and, consequently, that the perceived human voice carries on to brand evaluations. However, we propose that reactive and proactive webcare strategies are likely to engender different perceptions of conversational human voice.

Reactive webcare is expected to score high on conversational human voice when a consumer requests the brand to respond to negative eWOM. Then a consumer invites the company to engage in a conversation. If a brand is subsequently responsive to this request, and partakes in the conversation that has been initiated by the consumer, the emerging consumer-brand dialog is not considered to be driven by commercial interests, but instead, by a willingness to be engaged with its consumers through dialogic communication.

Proactive webcare can also demonstrate a conversational human voice, but we expect this only to occur in the context of brand-generated platforms. Brand-generated platforms are often set up and administered by a brand to realize “markets-as-conversations”: conversational environments where brands aim to build collaborative relationships with its publics rather than treating them as targets (Grunig & Huang, 2000). Hence, by its very nature, brand-generated platforms such as corporate blogs and brand-sponsored message boards enable the company to proactively engage in a dialog with consumers (Kellerle, 2009). By posting negative eWOM on a brand-generated platform, the consumer enters the domain of the brand and thereby inherently accepts the fundamentals on which it has been built. Thus, in the context of a brand-generated blog, proactive webcare is considered to be a manifestation of its willingness to engage in conversational communication. Hence, a proactive webcare in the context of a brand-generated platform will be perceived as high in conversational human voice. However, this is expected to be different for proactive webcare in the context of consumer-generated platforms.

In these contexts, proactive webcare does not adhere to the norms of “markets as conversations” inherent in social media. Proactive webcare is posted unsolicitedly in response to negative eWOM, and hence, may be perceived to derive from a profit-driven machinery whose aim is to control online conversations, rather than to engage in conversational communication with its consumers. We henceforth expect a proactive webcare strategy in consumer-generated platforms to be perceived as lower in human voice.

In sum, we expect that reactive webcare scores high on conversational human voice. This is also expected for proactive webcare, but not in the context of a consumer-generated platform. Moreover, given its positive impact on brand evaluations (Yang et al., 2010), we expect conversational human voice to mediate the differential effects of reactive and proactive webcare on brand evaluations across platforms. Hence, we propose the following hypotheses (see Fig. 1):

H3. The effect of webcare strategy on perceived conversational human voice is moderated by platform type, such that (a) a proactive webcare intervention in negative eWOM is perceived as higher in conversational human voice in a brand-generated than in a consumer-generated platform, whereas (b) a reactive webcare intervention is perceived as high in human voice, irrespective of the platform.

H4. Perceived human voice will mediate the moderation effect of platform type on the effect of webcare strategy on consumers’ brand evaluations (proposed in H2a/b).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN
To test our hypotheses, which are summarized in Figure 1, we conducted an experiment with a 3 (Webcare Strategy: proactive vs. reactive vs. control) x 2 (Platform: brand-generated blog vs. consumer-generated blog) between-subjects design. In total 163 participants (70% female) participated in this experiment (Age: M=32.76, SD = 15.21).

STIMULUS MATERIALS
The experimental material constituted a fictitious blogpost. Blogs were used as a research context because blogs can be initiated by both consumers and companies and therefore enable us to distinguish between consumer-generated and brand-generated platforms and to test the hypotheses. The blog post began with a car recall announcement from a well-known automotive brand. The announcement was placed on the top half of the blog and explains that cars are recalled because of a defect in the gas pedal of eight specific car models, constructed in the year 2005 until 2010.

To stress the negativity of the post, the customer stated that he was very dissatisfied with the way the brand handled the recall operation, and as a consequence, that he lost all trust in the brand. Also, the customer asserted that he will certainly no buy his next car from the brand. In the remainder of the post, the customer stated that he is unclear to him how the recall operation would proceed further. The customer invites the company to respond to this request, and partakes in the conversation that has been initiated by the customer, the emerging consumer-brand dialog is not considered to be driven by commercial interests, but instead, by a willingness to be engaged with its consumers through dialogic communication.

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In the reactive webcare strategy condition, this negative eWOM post was followed (reactive and proactive conditions) or not (control condition) by a post from a spokesperson of the automotive brand. For the manipulation of platform type, the announcement and posts were embedded in two different platforms, that is, a consumer-generated or brand-generated blog. All posts were originally collected from real blogs to increase external validity, and modified to maximize differences in webcare strategy, and platform type.

FIGURE 1. Conceptual model of webcare effects.
Webcare strategy
For the manipulation of webcare strategy, the negative eWOM post was followed by either no response (i.e., control condition), or a response that was posted reactively or proactively by a spokesperson of the automotive brand. In the reactive webcare condition, the spokesperson’s response was modified to lead the participants to believe that the response was posted upon the customer’s request. In the webcare post it was stated that the spokesperson thanked the customer for his question, after which the spokesperson replied with an explanation of the recall procedure.

In the proactive webcare condition the spokesperson’s response was posted unsolicitedly. To further stress the proactive nature of the webcare response, the first line of the spokesperson’s post stated that the spokesperson actively searches the web to address questions, suggestions and complaints from customers. The spokesperson then continued with the same explanation of the recall procedure as given in the reactive webcare condition.

Platform type
The platform manipulation was created by embedding the posts in a website that was supposedly retrieved from an automobile blog (i.e., consumer-generated blog), or from a blog that was initiated and administered by the brand (i.e., brand-generated blog). The platform was cued by the name and logo in the header and url of the blog.

PRETEST
A pretest among 24 participants (67% female, \(M_{\text{age}} = 28\)) was conducted to ensure that the experimental materials had intended effects. First, the participants were exposed to the two platform manipulations and asked to identify the source of the blog. Cross-tabulations revealed that 71% of the respondents correctly recognized the brand-generated platform, and 96% correctly recognized the consumer-generated platform, \(\chi^2 = 22.76, p < .001\). Thus, pretest results suggested that the website manipulation was effective.

Second, participants were exposed to the negative eWOM post. To check whether the negative eWOM post was indeed perceived to be negative, participants were asked to evaluate the tone of voice of the post on a 7-point semantic scale (1 = negative, 7 = positive). As intended, the post was considered to convey a negative tone-of-voice (\(M = 1.63, SD = 0.65\)).

Finally, respondents were exposed to the two webcare posts that differed in strategy (i.e., reactive vs. proactive). Respondents were subsequently asked to evaluate the posts on a 7-point semantic scale (1 = reactive, 7 = proactive). The proactive post was evaluated more proactive than the reactive post (\(M_{\text{proactive}} = 4.75, SD = 1.68; M_{\text{reactive}} = 4.21, SD = 1.67\)). However, this difference was only marginally significant, \(t(23) = 1.70, p < .10\). Therefore, the two posts were slightly adjusted. In the final materials it was more explicitly stated that the car brand is actively searching the web to address questions, concerns and complaints from consumers.

PROCEDURE
Participants were approached with a notification on the university website and on several social networks (such as Facebook), with a request to participate in an online study on ‘brands and blogs’. Participation was stimulated by raffling bookstore vouchers. By opening a link in the notification, participants were redirected to the experiment, which was administered online to let the stimulus material look as realistic as possible. Participants were randomly assigned to the stimulus material related to one of the six experimental conditions and were instructed to carefully inspect the blog. After exposure to the stimulus material, respondents answered a series of questions to tap their evaluation of the automotive brand, and dependent of the exposed experimental condition, their evaluation of the webcare response in terms of conversational human voice. Next, questions were asked to check the effectiveness of the stimulus materials. Finally, all participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

MEASURES
Brand evaluation
Participants were asked to give their general impression of the brand on a series of five 7-point Likert-type items (1 = Not at all agree; 7 = Completely agree): “The brand is good, trustworthy, respectable, favorable, and of high quality (Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Raney, Arpan, Pashupati, & Brill, 2003). The items proved to constitute a reliable scale and were averaged to form a composite score (\(M = 4.33, SD = 1.23, \alpha = .92\)).

Conversational human voice
For those exposed to the webcare strategy conditions, participants indicated the perceived human voice conveyed in the webcare strategy. The level of perceived human voice was measured by seven 7-point Likert-scale items (1 = Not at all agree; 7 = Completely agree), which were adopted from Kelleher and Miller (2006). The scale included items such as: “The brand is open to dialogue”; “The brand provides prompt feedback addressing criticism with a direct, but uncritical manner”; “The brand treats the customer and others as human”; and “The brand uses conversation-style communication”. As in previous research, the scale proved reliable, and, hence, the items were averaged to form an index measure (\(M = 4.96, SD = 0.73, \alpha = .76\)).

COVARIATES
Differences in brand ownership, product involvement, and frequency of blog usage were measured for exploratory reasons to assess their impact on conversational human voice and brand evaluation. To measure brand ownership, we asked respondents whether they owned a car from the automotive brand as used in the present study (dummy-coded: 0 = no, 1 = yes). Product involvement was measured by asking respondents to what degree they “were interested in” and “felt involved with” automobiles. Both items were significantly correlated (\(r = .86, p < .001\)) and averaged to form a single measure. Finally, we asked respondents to indicate how often they read blogs on the web. Answer categories were: (1) daily, (2) weekly, (3) monthly, (4) less than monthly, and (5) never.
RESULTS

MANIPULATION AND CONFUND CHECKS

Checks similar to those reported in the pretest were carried out to ensure that respondents processed the material properly (see pretest for manipulation check items). As intended, respondents considered the proactive post significantly more proactive (M = 4.46, SD = 1.78), than the reactive post (M = 3.69, SD = 1.15). t(78) = -1.96, p < .05. Also, cross-tabulations revealed that the majority of the respondents correctly recognized the platform, χ² = 65.12, p < .001. Cross-tabulations revealed that 71% of the respondents correctly recognized the brand-generated platform, and 91% correctly recognized the consumer-generated platform.

Confound checks revealed that product involvement was significantly related to human voice (β = .19, p < .05) whereas brand ownership was significantly related to brand evaluation (β = .28, p < .01). Both variables were therefore included as covariates in subsequent analyses. Blog readership was not related to either human voice or brand evaluation, and was dropped as a covariate.

EFFECTIVENESS OF WEBCARE

We proposed that webcare interventions, versus no interventions, in response to negative eWOM, engender more positive brand evaluations among visitors of a consumer-generated or brand-generated platform (H1). To test this hypothesis, we performed an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) with type of webcare strategy and platform type as the independent variables, brand evaluation as the dependent variable and product involvement and brand ownership as covariates. The results demonstrated a main effect for webcare strategy that approached significance, F(1, 157) = 2.65, p = .07, η² = .03. Follow-up planned comparisons showed that people who were exposed to the reactive webcare posts—reactive or proactive—significantly evaluated the brand more positively (M_proactive = 4.55 vs. M Reactive = 4.54), than those in the control group who read no webcare post (M_control = 4.13). F(1, 155) = 4.50, p < .03. In support of H1, the results confirmed that webcare is able to induce favorable brand evaluations after exposure to negative eWOM.

The follow-up comparisons showed no significant differences in brand evaluation between the reactive and proactive webcare conditions, F < 1, ns. However, the two webcare conditions did show differential effects across platform types as indicated by a significant interaction effect between webcare strategy and platform type, F(1, 157) = 3.57, p = .01, η² = .03. In support of H2a, simple effects analyses revealed a significant difference in brand evaluation for proactive webcare across platforms, F(1, 152) = 6.24, p = .01. A proactive webcare intervention engendered more positive brand evaluations in the context of a brand-generated versus consumer-generated platform (M_proactive_generated = 5.20 vs. M_proactive_consumer = 4.10). The results also supported H2b, as brand evaluation did not significantly vary for reactive webcare across platforms (F < 1, ns). Respondents who read a reactive webcare post on a consumer-generated and a brand-generated platform showed equally favorable brand evaluations (M_reactive_generated = 4.39 vs. M_reactive_consumer = 4.67).

EFFECT OF HUMAN VOICE ON BRAND EVALUATIONS

We proposed that the effect of webcare strategy on perceived human voice would be contingent on the platform in which the webcare is embedded (H3a-b). To test this hypothesis, human voice was submitted to an ANCOVA with type of webcare strategy and platform type as the independent variables and brand ownership serving as covariates. Conform expectations, the results demonstrated a two-way interaction between platform type and webcare strategy, F(1, 77) = 4.14, p = .048. η² = .06. For proactive webcare, perceptions of human voice differed across platforms, F(1, 44) = 5.05, p = .03, η² = .11. As predicted by H3a, people who read a proactive webcare post in the context of a brand-generated blog perceived the brand as demonstrating more of a human voice than in the context of a consumer-generated blog (M_proactive_generated = 4.15 vs. M_proactive_consumer = 4.59). For reactive webcare, conversational human voice did not significantly vary across the platforms (F < 1, ns), which provides support for H3b. Reactive webcare was believed to convey equally high conversational human voice in the context of a brand-generated and a consumer-generated platform (M_reactive_generated = 4.99 vs. M_reactive_consumer = 5.11). No other effects approached significance (Fs < 1).

EFFECTIVENESS OF WEBCARE EXPLAINED BY HUMAN VOICE

H4 stated that conversational human voice will mediate the moderation effect of platform type on the effect of webcare strategy on consumers' brand evaluations. To test this hypothesis, we dummy-coded both platform type (0 = brand-generated blog, 1 = consumer-generated blog) and webcare strategy (0 = reactive webcare, 1 = proactive webcare) and performed a formal test of mediated moderation through a series of hierarchical regression analyses following the procedure recommended by Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt (2005). According to this procedure, mediated moderation is present when (1) there is a significant interaction effect between platform type and webcare strategy on the dependent variable brand evaluation; (2) there is a significant interaction effect between platform type and webcare strategy on the mediator human voice; (3) the mediator human voice is significantly related to the dependent variable brand evaluation; and (4) the interaction between platform type and webcare strategy on the dependent variable brand evaluation is reduced in magnitude when the mediator is included in the model.

In line with the ANCOVAs, the interaction between platform type and webcare strategy was significant for both brand evaluation (β = -.32, t(72) = -2.41, p = .018) and human voice (β = -1.7, t(72) = -2.04, p < .046). Furthermore, human voice predicted brand evaluation (β = .32, t(72) = 2.87, p < .01). Finally, in a simultaneous regression analysis treating the interaction, human voice, and the community type and webcare strategy effect terms as predictors of brand evaluation, human voice continued to be a predictor (β = .30, t(72) = 2.80, p < .01), whereas the effect of the interaction was reduced (β = -.24, t(72) ∼1.80, p = .08). A Sobel test indicated that the mediating pathway from the webcare strategy × platform type interaction to brand evaluation through human voice was significant, z = -1.7, p < .05, one-sided. Thus, the results support the role of conversational human voice as an underlying mechanism for the interaction between platform type and webcare strategy on brand evaluation.
CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the most effective means for companies to counter complaints as expressed in negative electronic word of mouth (negative eWOM). The results of an experimental study show that consumers evaluate a brand more favorably in a situation where the focal brand responds to negative eWOM than in a situation in which the brand remains silent. Thus, confirming H1, the results show that webcare positively influences the brand evaluations of consumers who have been exposed to negative eWOM. Confirming expectations, this study demonstrated that consumers’ brand evaluations are positively influenced when webcare demonstrates a conversational human voice (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006). In line with H3, however, conversational human voice appeared to be contingent on both the platform in which webcare is embedded (consumer-generated vs. brand-generated) and the type of strategy used (reactive vs. proactive webcare). In both consumer-generated and brand-generated platforms, a company was perceived to demonstrate a human voice when it offered reactive webcare in response to negative eWOM. By responding to negative eWOM when it is explicitly asked to do so by the customer, a company apparently signals a willingness to engage in conversational communication in a natural way, which prompts conversational human voice. A proactive webcare strategy also instigated perceptions of conversational human voice, but this effect was not found to hold in the context of consumer-generated platforms. Apparently, in a context that is made for consumers and their conversations, a brand’s proactive presence dehumanizes the nature of its communications.

As predicted by H2, similar patterns were found for brand evaluation. In both consumer-generated and brand-generated platforms, a company was evaluated more positively when it offered reactive webcare in response to negative eWOM. By responding to negative eWOM upon the customer’s request, a company evokes sympathy, and hence, a more favorable brand evaluation. Positive brand evaluations are also engendered by proactive webcare, but this effect was less prevalent in the context of consumer-generated platforms. A proactive webcare response to negative eWOM is unsolicited in the context of a consumer-generated platform, thereby resulting in less positive brand evaluations.

Finally, the results provided support for the mediating role of conversational human voice for the moderation of platform type on the relationship between webcare strategy on brand evaluation. Thus confirming H4, conversational human voice serves as an underlying mechanism for the differential effects of webcare strategy on brand evaluations across brand-generated and consumer-generated platforms.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

In recent years, the online media landscape has changed drastically, empowering consumers to share negative experiences with brands among a broad audience of fellow consumers. Online complaints, as expressed in negative word of mouth (negative eWOM), pose a severe threat for companies: One online complaint from a single consumer can negatively affect the brand evaluations of many other consumers. Although both academics and practitioners stress that negative eWOM is a force to be reckoned with in the consumer market place, little is known about how, if at all, companies should respond to complaints expressed in negative eWOM to counter its undesired effects (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Hong & Lee, 2005; Kerkhof et al., 2010; Lee & Song, 2010). This study extends the literature by examining webcare—i.e., the act of engaging in online interactions with (complaining) consumers—as a brand communication tool to counter the effects of negative eWOM.

This study indeed finds that webcare can be an effective means to counter negative negative eWOM effects among those who are exposed to complaints in the online environment. This finding provides support for the work of a small but growing group of companies that already engage in webcare. By providing a timely response to online complaints expressed in negative eWOM, these pioneers try to put a stop to the negative effects that negative eWOM can have on other consumers than just the complainant, and, if possible, to improve brand evaluations by showing that they take the issues and problems of consumers seriously. To guide these efforts, many social media platforms (e.g., amazon.com, epinions.com, TripAdvisor.com) are offering services that allow companies to respond, overtly or covertly, to negative eWOM. Unfortunately, the majority of the companies are not taking advantage of these services as much as they could be (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Vásquez, 2011). Companies are hesitant to respond to online complaints through webcare, given a lack of evidence that webcare indeed garners positive outcomes for companies. This study provides initial support for the beneficial effects of webcare in response to negative eWOM and provides important implications for scholars and marketers alike.

First, this study demonstrates that webcare requires a strategic approach to be truly successful. This study was the first to distinguish between reactive and proactive webcare strategies for online complaint management, and to demonstrate that this distinction is useful in explaining consumer responses to (the company responsible for) online complaint management. Prior studies that studied online complaint management distinguished between accommodative (i.e., any form of apology, compensation, and/or corrective action) and defensive responses (i.e., any form of denial, attack or shifting blame to others); a categorization that originates from the traditional complaint literature that was mainly focused on one-to-one communication (Coombs, 1999; Marcus & Goodman, 1991). As companies’ responses to complaints are now observed by many other consumers than the complainant in the online environment, it is not only important for companies to determine how to respond, but also when to respond to such complaints (Lee & Song, 2010). This study draws upon a new distinction that is based upon the interaction dynamics of the response, instead of the content of the response. As this reactive–proactive distinction proved to be important in explaining webcare effectiveness and priorly in explaining consumer responses in online service contexts (Köhler et al., 2011), we suggest taking this distinction into account in future studies. For example, future research could focus on the question whether reactive webcare in the context of a user-generated platform still engenders positive brand evaluations among consumers when confronted with a discussion thread of negative eWOM. And if so, whether a marketer should reply to all negative comments separately or reply with a general comment in response to all negative comments at once. This study exposed consumers to only one negative eWOM message and hence future research is needed to gain more insight in the effects of webcare strategies in response to clusters of negative eWOM.
Second, in line with what McLuhan (1964) argued, this study demonstrates that the medium in which webcare is embedded is important in shaping recipients’ responses to (the company responsible for) the webcare. Specifically, this study shows that the effectiveness of webcare interventions appeared to be highly contingent on the type of platform in which the webcare was employed. Although context effects have been well-demonstrated in a substantial number of studies for traditional media vehicles such as television programs (Moorman, Neijens, & Smit 2007), and magazines (Malthouse & Calder, 2010), little research has been directed to context effects for social media. An exception is the study of Schultz and colleagues (2011) who addressed the relative importance of online and traditional media, and demonstrated that the medium deemed important in shaping consumer responses to companies’ online communications. In a similar vein, the current study established an interaction effect between the online platform and webcare strategy. A managerial implication of this finding is that the context in which complaints are posted should be taken into consideration when deciding upon a strategy for when to post webcare in response to negative eWOM. The current data indicate that proactive webcare interventions on consumer-generated platforms seem to be less effective than on marketer-generated platforms, although the latter did not instigate negative consumer reactions. Thus, instead of trying to respond to all negative eWOM, companies should save their efforts and respond only when the platform is likely to engender positive context effects.

Third, this study is consistent with and also extends previous findings on the role of conversational human voice in computer-mediated communication. Whereas prior studies focused on conversational human voice in communications initiated by the company, such as corporate blogs (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Yang et al., 2010), the current study focused on the human voice in companies’ reactions to online communications that have been initiated by a complainant. It was demonstrated that perceived human voice is also important in such brand-to-consumer interactions initiated by the consumer. Thus, the conversational human voice as perceived by the consumer does not only seem to explain the effects of communications that have been initiated by the brand, but also explains the effects of webcare interventions in response to communications that have been initiated by the consumer.

A practical implication that derives from the effects of the perceived conversational human voice in webcare responses is that human voice should receive focal attention when developing effective online communication strategies. Besides deciding whether to engage in reactive and proactive communication dynamics across different platforms, companies could also consider other webcare strategies that are likely to engender this human voice. An example could be the degree of personalization in webcare responses. In webcare interventions, companies adopt multiple strategies in showing their identity with different levels of personalization, for example by representing employees as individuals or as official customer representatives. As demonstrated by Kerkhof and colleagues (2010), accommodative webcare responses are more likely to be effective when accompanied with a personalized message. It is, however, unclear how webcare strategies relate to each other in influencing conversational human voice. For example, can personalization compensate for the relatively low conversational human voice of proactive webcare in the context of a consumer-generated platform? Subsequent research is warranted to shed more light on the individual and combined effects of the content (i.e., personalization) and communication dynamics of webcare (i.e., proactive vs. reactive webcare).

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NEDERLANDSE
SAMENVATTING

INLEIDING


Het belang van WOM-communicatie is nog verder toegenomen nadat sociale media zich aandienden. Door middel van elektronische communicatie kunnen consumenten namelijk op een veel grotere schaal WOM verspreiden (Dellarocas, 2003; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Waar WOM voorheen bestond uit gesproken boodschappen die werden geuit in de richting van een, voor de afzender meestal bekend persoon, bestaat WOM nu ook uit digitale boodschappen die voor onbepaalde tijd beschikbaar zijn voor iedereen met een internetaansluiting, dus ook onbekenden. In tegenstelling tot gesproken WOM, is elektronische WOM (hierna: eWOM) dus ook buiten de directe sociale kringen van individuele consumenten beschikbaar (Chatterjee, 2001; Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

De grote beschikbaarheid van eWOM maakt het in combinatie met zijn waarneemden geloofwaardigheid en nut een waardevol keuzehulpmiddel voor consumenten. Dit blijkt onder andere uit onderzoeken die aantonen dat consumenten eWOM op de eerste plaats gebruiken om meer weloverwogen aankoopbeslissingen te nemen (Burton & Khammash, 2010; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004; Hicks, Comp, Horovitz, Hovarter, Miki, & Bevan, 2012). Door hun vertrouwen in eWOM tekenen consumenten erop dat de productinformatie die ze krijgen bijdraagt aan een meer bevredigende keuze. Daarom gebruiken ze eWOM graag
als input voor hun aankoopbeslissingen (Nielsen, 2012).

Aangezien consumenten eWOM veelvuldig gebruiken als keuzehulpmiddel, wordt het beschouwd als een belangrijke markfactor (Keller, 2007). Een groot aantal studies toont aan dat eWOM een aanzienlijke invloed heeft op de consumentenbeslissingen van producten, diensten en merken, en ook op de latere aankoopbeslissingen van consumenten (o.a. Chakravarty, Liu, & Mazumdar, 2006; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). De valentie van het eWOM bericht is leidend in dit verband. eWOM berichten waarin consumenten zich negatief uitlaten over een product of dienst ontmoedigen anderen om deze producten of diensten te kopen, terwijl berichten waarin consumenten zich positief uitlaten over een product of dienst anderen juist aanzetten tot dergelijke aankopen. Het verkrijgen van positieve eWOM (en het voorkomen van negatieve eWOM) is dus in het voordeel van bedrijven (Keller, 2007). Het is zelfs genoemd als de beste voorspeller van marktomzet (Keller, 2007).

**DIT PROEFSCHRIJT**

Als keuzehulpmiddel biedt eWOM mogelijkheden voor zowel consumenten als bedrijven. Wel zijn er verschillende uitdagingen die consumenten moeten overwinnen om optimaal te kunnen profiteren van deze mogelijkheden. Daarnaast staan bedrijven voor uitdagingen om eWOM te managen, vooral als ze negatief worden beoordeeld in dergelijke boodschappen. Hoewel deze uitdagingen zowel consumenten als bedrijven raken, missen ze een sterk wetenschappelijk fundament. Vandaar dit proefschrift, dat deze uitdagingen hieronder nader onderzoekt.

**UITDAGINGEN VOOR CONSUMENTEN**

Over het algemeen kan eWOM nuttige productinformatie van geloofwaardige bronnen overbrengen. Het zou echter verkeerd zijn om deze uitspraken te negeren, omdat de informatie die wordt geleverd door deze bronnen – van dezelfde aard en dus even waardevol – worden gebruikt door consumenten niet altijd over voldoende kennis of expertise beschikken om de relevante informatie te analyseren en te gebruiken voor hun aankoopbeslissingen.
Verschillen consumenten in hun beoordelingen van eWOM (afzenders), en zo ja, kunnen deze beoordelingen worden verklaard door verschillen in de eigenschappen van inhoud en afzender?
Het eerste deel van dit proefschrift beschrijft hoe en waarom negatieve eWOM berichten en feedback kunnen worden gebruikt door afzenders om huls effect te hebben op het bedrijf en ook om de concurrentie te ondersteunen (Bronner & De Hoog, 2011). De resultaten in dit hoofdstuk laten namelijk zien dat als consumenten een mening vormen over de waarde van eWOM, zij niet uitsluitend letten op sterwaardering, maar ook op kenmerken die meer centraal staan in de tekstuele inhoud van eWOM, zoals argumentatie en valentie. Consumenten hebben eerder de neiging om eWOM-berichten als nuttig te beoordelen als deze berichten meer argumenten bevatten, en bij deze argumenten zowel de positieve als de negatieve kenmerken van de betreffende producten aan bod komen. De algehele valentie van deze productbeoordelingen draagt ook bij aan meningen over het nut van eWOM. De effecten van valentie blijken echter wel afhankelijk te zijn van het type product dat in het eWOM-bericht wordt besproken. In het onderzoek wordt onderscheid gemaakt tussen ‘experience producten’ en ‘search producten’. Search producten zijn producten die voor een belangrijk deel objectieve eigenschappen hebben waarover volledige informatie verkregen kan worden voorafgaand aan de aankoop of het gebruik (bijv. Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Als bedrijven daarentegen ongevaar reageren op afzenders van negatieve eWOM, beschouwt het meelezende publiek dergelijke acties mogelijk als een poging om negatieve eWOM onder controle te houden, in plaats van een poging om de dialoog aan te gaan.

Zoals deze bespreking van de literatuur aangeeft, is het van belang om de effecten op zowel de afzenders als de ontvangers van webcare te onderzoeken. En dat is niet alleen omdat dit een beter begrip oplevert van de effectiviteit van webcare bij alle consumenten aan wie het is gericht. Een ander belangrijk argument om de aandacht op beide consumentengroepen te richten is dat lezers van negatieve eWOM de wenselijkheid van afzenders om webcare te ontvangen mogelijk in overweging nemen bij het beoordelen van webcare. Het tweede deel van dit proefschrift wil daarom de bestaande kennis uitbreiden en uitdiepen over hoe afzenders (hoofdstuk 4) en lezers van negatieve eWOM webcare en de bedrijven die daar verantwoordelijk voor zijn (hoofdstuk 5) beoordelen. Meer in het bijzonder is het tweede deel van dit proefschrift gebaseerd op de literatuur over de ‘uses en gratifications’-theorie en over waargenomen menselijk geluid om de volgende onderzoeksvraag te beantwoorden:

Belangrijkste bevindingen

Dit proefschrift bestaat uit meerder onderzoeken die worden gepresenteerd in vier opeenvolgende hoofdstukken. Alle hoofdstukken zijn gepubliceerd als individuele artikelen of zijn geaccepteerd voor publicatie. Ieder hoofdstuk staat op zichzelf en bevat een eigen samenvatting, introductie, discussie en referentielijst. In dit onderdeel komen daarom alleen de belangrijkste bevindingen van deze hoofdstukken aan bod.
resultaten een negatieveitsbias, waarbij eWOM met een negatieve valentie als nuttiger wordt beschouwd dan eWOM met een positieve valentie. Een tegenovergesteld patroon is te zien bij de resultaten voor search producten: hoewel negatieve eWOM ook in deze context als nuttig wordt gezien, wordt positieve eWOM nog nuttiger gevonden. Deze bevindingen wijzen op een positiviteitsbias.

De hypothese was dat verschillen in de eigenschappen van de zender ook verschillen in de waargenomen nut van eWOM-berichten tot gevolg zou hebben. Volgens de resultaten hebben zedereigenschappen die afgeleid kunnen worden van expertiseclaims maar weinig invloed op de manier waarop consumenten eWOM beoordelen. Hoofdstuk 3 laat zelfs zien dat expertiseclaims niet significant gerelateerd zijn aan de houding van consumenten ten opzichte van eWOM-berichten. Het ontbreken van duidelijke en significante effecten van expertiseclaims impliceert niet dat consumenten geen oordeel hebben aan de kenmerken van afzenders wanneer zij een beeld vormen over eWOM-berichten. Bij het beoordelen van eWOM lijken consumenten te letten op expertiseclaims, maar deze beoordelingen zijn gebaseerd op percepties van deskundigheid (vertrouwen in de bekwaamheid van de bron om valide beweringen te doen) en betrouwbaarheid (vertrouwen in de intentie van de bron om valide beweringen te verkondigen), die niet altijd in overeenstemming zijn met elkaar. In vergelijking met een leek wordt een zelfverklaarde expert gezien als iemand met meer deskundigheid, maar ook als iemand die minder betrouwbaar is, en vice versa. Omdat deskundigheid en betrouwbaarheid tezamen de geloofwaardigheid van een bron bepalen, ondermijnen deze tegengestelde meningen de effecten van expertiseclaims op de houding van consumenten ten opzichte van eWOM-berichten.

Uit deze laatste bevindingen kan ook de tweede conclusie worden getrokken: consumenten verschillen in de manier waarop zij eWOM-afzenders beoordelen wat betreft expertiseclaims en onderscheidingskwaliteiten. Zichzelfzegende experts kunnen verklaren worden door verschillen in de eigenschappen van afzenders, die duidelijk worden door signalen die worden overgebracht via eWOM. Zoals hierboven opgemerkt spelen expertiseclaims een rol bij de beoordeling van de geloofwaardigheid van de bron wat betreft de waargenomen deskundigheid en betrouwbaarheid, maar niet in dezelfde richting. Een opvallende bevinding is dat de beoordelingen van de geloofwaardigheid van de bron met elkaar in overeenstemming lijken te zijn als de expertise status van de eWOM-afzender wordt bepaald door peer-ratings in plaats van door eigen claims. Door peers beoordeelde experts scoren namelijk hoog op beide aspecten van geloofwaardigheid. Meer in het bijzonder wordt aan hen net zo veel deskundigheid toegerekend als aan zelfverklaarde experts en vindt men hen net zo betrouwbaar als leken.

De resultaten uit hoofdstuk 3 tonen verder aan dat waargenomen gelijkheid van de eigenschappen van afzenders wanneer zij een beeld vormen over eWOM verschillen in hun beoordelingen van (het bedrijf achter) webcare, en dat deze verschillen ook verklaard kunnen worden door de eigenschappen van de afzenders van eWOM. De resultaten van het onderzoek dat wordt beschreven in hoofdstuk 5, laten zien dat lezers van negatieve eWOM in het algemeen positief reageren op bedrijven die webcare plaatsen in reactie op negatieve eWOM. Lezers van negatieve eWOM nemen de wenselijkheid van afzenders om webcare te ontvangen wel in overweging bij het beoordelen van webcare en het merk dat daar verantwoordelijk voor is. Deze beoordelingen worden mede bepaald door de context waarin negatieve eWOM is geplaatst. Webcare die gewenst is en is aangevraagd door eWOM-afzonders (reactieve webcare) leidt tot positieve merkwaardigheden, zowel op doordat consumenten geïnitieerde platformen (bijv. consumentenblogs) als op door merken geïnitieerde platformen (bijv. corporate blogs). Webcare reakties waar niet specifiek om is gevraagd (proactieve webcare) kunnen ook tot positieve merkwaardigheden leiden, maar alleen in de context van een platform dat is opgezet door het merk. Op een consumenten platform wordt ongevraagde webcare reacties namelijk tot minder positieve merkwaardigheden verklaren.

De resultaten van hoofdstuk 5 verklaren ook waarom webcare uiteenlopende reacties ontlokt aan het meelezende publiek. Volgens deze resultaten spreekt waargenomen menselijk geluid een belangrijker rol bij het verbeteren van de merkbeoordeling na het lezen van negatieve eWOM en de daaropvolgende webcare-reactie. Webcare waaruit blijkt dat er een echte bereidheid is om de dialoog aan te gaan met de consument slaagt er minder goed in om een menselijk geluid te laten
overtuigingstheorieën hebben consumenten meer aandacht voor argumenten van de eigenschappen van lezers, zoals betrokkenheid bij het product of de dienst. Het is dus raadzaam om deze theorieën te betrekken bij toekomstig onderzoek met betrekking tot eWOM. De uitgangspunten van deze theorieën worden bevestigd door de schrift draagt bij aan deze kennis door de toepasbaarheid van traditionele overtui
gingen tegenover positieve eWOM (zie: Ahluwalia, 2002). Er is aanvullend onderzoek nodig om deze bewering verder te staven.

Ten tweede: hoewel algemeen wordt erkend dat het waargenomen nut van eWOM een belangrijke rol speelt bij het beïnvloeden van het koopgedrag van consumenten, is theoretische kennis over de factoren die het waargenomen nut van eWOM bepalen (behalve in het geval van de sterwaarderingen) nog nauwelijks ont
dik (zie voor een kritische beschouwing Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Dit proef
schrift draagt bij aan deze kennis door de toepasbaarheid van traditionele overtui
gingstheorieën te onderzoeken om zo meer inzicht te krijgen in het waargenomen nut van eWOM. De uitgangspunten van deze theorieën worden bevestigd door de resultaten in dit proefschrift, waaruit blijkt dat (evenwichtige) argumentatie bij
plegen en lezen vanwege een zekere mate van betrokkenheid bij het onderwerp (vgl. Ruggiero, 2000), is het mogelijk dat de effecten zoals die zijn aangetoond in dit proefschrift slechts betrekking hebben op een deel van de eWOM-lezers (de zeer betrokken lezers).

Ten derde geeft dit proefschrift ook meer inzicht in de toepasbaarheid van traditionele overtuigingstheorieën voor een beter begrip van de geloofwaardigheid van eWOM-bronnen. In overeenstemming met traditionele overtuigings
theorieën, toont dit proefschrift aan dat waargenomen deskundigheid en be
trouwbaarheid van de bron (twee aspecten van de geloofwaardigheid van de bron) belangrijke voorspellers zijn van de manier waarop consumenten het eWOM
bericht van de bron beoordelen. Dergelijke theorieën slagen echter minder goed in het voorspellen van de basis waarop waargenomen deskundigheid en betrouwbaarheid zich ontwikkelen. De in dit proefschrift vermelde resultaten stroken niet met de veronderstelling die ten grondslag ligt aan traditionele overtuigings
theorieën, waarbij de identificatie van een bron als expert positieve effecten heeft op zowel waargenomen deskundigheid als betrouwbaarheid (zie voor een kritische beschouwing Pornpitakpan, 2004). Volgens de huidige bevindingen is dit alleen het geval wanneer de identificatie van een bron als expert is gebaseerd op de waar
deringen van peers en niet op eigen claims. Deze bevinding komt overeen met de ‘warranty-theorie’ (Walther, Van der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009), die voorspelt dat waarderingen van anderen meer gewicht in de schaal leggen dan eigen claims. Dit komt doordat waarderingen van anderen – in tegenstelling tot eigen claims – niet gemanipuleerd kunnen worden door de bron zelf (bijv. impres
siemanagement met het doel om anderen te overtuigen). Lezers hebben daardoor vertroost in de identiteit van zulke bronnen als experts en in hun intentie om valide beweringen te verkondigen. Deze bevindingen nopen tot een meer genuan
cerde visie op de toepasselijkheid van traditionele overtuigingstheorieën op het voorspellen van de waargenomen geloofwaardigheid van eWOM-afzenders en mo
gelijk zelfs van afzenders van online informatie in het algemeen. De geloofwaardigheid van een bron wordt bij consumenten niet bepaald door identificatie van de bron als expert, maar de argumenten waarop deze identificatie is gebaseerd (dus wie de identificatie verleent en hoe dit tot stand komt). Toekomstig onder
zoek zou zich moeten richten op het verder valideren van deze visie.

Ten slotte draagt dit proefschrift bewijs aan tegen de stelling dat eWOM (en online berichten in het algemeen) de expressie en herkenning van zondereigen
schappen beperkt als eWOM-bronnen visueel anoniem blijven. Volgens de resulta
ten in dit proefschrift identificeren lezers diverse subcategorieën van peers (bijv. leken, zelfverklaarde experts en door peers beoordeelde experts) en zijn hun re
acties afhankelijk van deze categorisaties. Deze bevinding verklaart mogelijk ook waarom er geen bewijs is gevonden voor de stelling dat waargenomen geloof...

ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH - CHALLENGES FOR CONSUMERS AND COMPANIES
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IMPlicatIES VooR ONderZOEK MeT BeTrekKING TOt WebCaRERE

This proefschrift draagt op drie manieren bij aan theorievorming over de effectiviteit van webcare. Ten eerste houdt het huidige onderzoek bij aan de literatuur die tot nu toe geen onderzoek heeft gedaan naar de effecten van webcare op afzenders van eWOM. Hierdoor is weinig theoretische kennis over de effecten van webcare op afzenders van eWOM en de factoren die hier invloed op hebben. Hoewel recensie websites de voorkeur hebben als bron voor online product- en service-informatie, zijn deze bronnen ook andere platformen (bijv. sociale netwerken, blogs en microblogs) als bron fungeren. Dergelijke platformen zouden interessant onderzoeksmateriaal zijn, omdat ze in meer of andere signalen bevatten waaraan de eigen schappen van afzenders kunnen worden afgeleid (bijv. foto’s, gebruikersprofielen etc.).

EEN LAATSTE VRAG IS of webcare uneffectief middel zou zijn om de merkbeoordelingen van lezers te verbeteren nadat deze zijn geconfronteerd met positieve eWOM. Merken kunnen niet alleen door op negatieve eWOM te reageren zichzelf een menselijke toon aanmeten, maar ook door te reageren op positieve eWOM, wat een positief effect zou hebben op de merkbeoordelingen door consumenten. Hoewel webcare voornamelijk wordt gebruikt als een middel om de effecten van het verspreiden van negatieve eWOM tot verschillende soorten eWOM-berichten leiden. Mensen die negatieve eWOM-berichten verspreiden uit frustratie, zouden bijvoorbeeld meer woede kunnen uiten in de inhoud van deze berichten. Verschillende eWOM-berichten kunnen op hun beurt weer leiden tot verschillende webcare-reacties (bijv. grotere kans op ontwrichte en proactieve webcare als afzender veel woede uit in het eWOM-bericht) en vervolgens weer tot verschillende reacties van eWOM-afzenders. Voor toekomstig onderzoek is een inhoudsanalyse in combinatie met een survey aan te bevelen om relaties tussen motieven en webcare waardering nader te bestuderen.

Ten tweede is het onderzoek in dit proefschrift het eerste dat reactieve webcare (dus webcare die door de eWOM-afzender gewenst en dus aangevraagd is) en proactieve webcare (webcare die niet aangevraagd is door de eWOM-afzender) benoemt als twee mogelijke strategieën voor het tegengaan van negatieve eWOM. Het is ook het eerste dat aantoont dat deze strategieën tot andere merkevaluaties leiden, afhankelijk van het platform waarop deze strategieën worden gebruikt (door consumenten geïnitieerd dan wel door merken geïnitieerd). Deze bevinding impliceert dat eigenschappen van eWOM-afzenders (bijvoorbeeld de wenselijkheid van webcare) de context (bijvoorbeeld het type platform) belangrijke factoren zijn voor het voorspellen van de effectiviteit van webcare op lezers van negatieve eWOM. Vervolgonderzoek is echter noodzakelijk om de werking van reactieve en proactieve webcare verder te belichten. Sociale netwerken en microblogs (zoals Twitter) zouden relevante locaties voor onderzoek kunnen zijn, omdat consumenten deze platformen vaak gebruiken om negatieve eWOM te spuimen.

Ten derde wijzen de resultaten van dit onderzoek erop dat waargenomen menselijk geluid als onderliggend mechanisme fungeert voor de vastgestelde verschillen in merkevaluaties bij reactieve en proactieve webcare. Onderzoek in dit proefschrift heeft een soortgelijke dynamiek gevonden waarin gespreksevenementen een belangrijke rol speelden. Mensen die negatieve eWOM-berichten verspreiden menselijk geluid en in webcare reacties gebruiken. Dit proefschrift bezorgde het belang van dit concept voor webcare-interacties. Verder onderzoek moet uitwijzen welke andere strategieën bijdragen aan een waargenomen menselijk geluid in webcare reacties. Dit proefschrift behandelt slechts één mogelijke strategie om een menselijk geluid te laten horen, namelijk het gebruik van proactieve versus reactieve webcare. Zoals werd aangetoond door Kerkhof en zijn collega’s (2010) is de kans groter dat consumenten eerder een menselijk geluid herkennen in webcare reacties als dergelijke reacties persoonlijk worden gemaakt. Omdat onderzoek naar webcare nog in de kinderschoenen staat, is het nog niet bekend of, en zo ja op welke wijze, deze twee strategieën op elkaar inwerken en wat de invloed daarvan is op waargenomen menselijk geluid. Aanvullende inzichten op dit gebied zouden relevant zijn, met name binnen de context van door consumenten geïnitieerde platformen, waar proactieve webcare laag scoort op menselijk geluid.
negatieve eWOM te bestrijden, verdienen de mogelijkheden van webcare om de effecten van positieve eWOM te versterken ook de aandacht (Bronner & De Hoog, ter perse).

**PRAKTISCHE IMPlicATIES**

Dit proefschrift heeft belangrijke implicaties voor het huidige debat over eWOM als keuzehulpmiddel voor de consument. Zoals eerder gesteld is de waarde van eWOM als keuzehulpmiddel een onderwerp dat zowel voor de maatschappij als voor bedrijven van belang is. De maatschappelijke belangen betreffen de uitdagingen waarvoor consumenten worden gesteld bij het selecteren van de meest nuttige en geloofwaardige informatie in de overweldigende hoeveelheid eWOM. De bedrijfsbelangen hangen samen met de uitdagingen voor bedrijven om eWOM te managen, vooral als ze in dergelijke communicatie-uitingen negatief worden afgeschilderd. In dit onderdeel komen deze belangen aan bod.

**MAATSCAPPELIJKE BELANGEN**

De resultaten van dit onderzoek kunnen een deel van de zorgen wegnemen die zijn geniet met betrekking tot de functie van eWOM als keuzehulpmiddel. Eén van deze zorgen is dat consumenten de inhoud van eWOM-berichten aannemen zonder de moeite te nemen om het nut van eWOM en de geloofwaardigheid van de afzenders kritisch te beoordelen. De bevinding dat consumenten verschillende inhoudskennmerken en afzenderkenmerken gebruiken om het nut van eWOM en de geloofwaardigheid van de bron te evalueren, impliceert dat consumenten wel degelijk moeite doen om eWOM-berichten en hun afzenders te beoordelen. Toch zijn ze niet altijd in staat om consumenten nuttig en geloofwaardige eWOM-afzenders. Hoewel consumenten expertiseclaims gebruiken om op basis daarvan de geloofwaardigheid van eWOM-afzenders te beoordelen, is de interpretatie van deze claims duidelijk noch gemakkelijk te onderscheiden binnen de context van eWOM. Dit wordt aangetoond door het naast elkaar bestaan van tegengestelde beoordelingen met betrekking tot twee aspecten van de bron: geloofwaardigheid: waargenomen deskundigheid en betrouwbaarheid.

De conclusie dat expertiseclaims tegengestelde beoordelingen van geloofwaardigheid tot gevolg hebben, onderschrijft de aanwezigheid van het ‘authenticiteitsdilemma’ dat zou bestaan in de context van online communicatie (Metzger et al., 2010). In een visueel anonieme omgeving, waarin consumenten niet kunnen vertrouwen op de ware identiteit van bronnen en/of hun motieven voor het delen van informatie, gebruiken ze verschillende signalen om de geloofwaardigheid van de bron zo goed mogelijk te beoordelen. Omdat veel van deze signalen gevoelig zijn voor manipulatie, kunnen ze leiden tot dubbelzinnige beoordelingen van de bron. Hierdoor is het voor consumenten een uitdaging om de geloofwaardigheid van eWOM-bronnen op waarde te schatten. Platformen waarop eWOM wordt gedeeld kunnen consumenten helpen om beter om te gaan met het authenticiteitsdilemma door het invoeren van een ratingssysteem voor peers. Zoals aangetoond in dit proefschrift zijn peer-ratings een effectief middel om consumenten te helpen bij het beoordelen van de geloofwaardigheid van de bron. De beschikbaarheid van peer-ratings is echter grotendeels afhankelijk van de input van de online community. Daarom gaan niet alle eWOM-berichten vergezeld van onderscheidstekens op basis van peer-ratings. Als er geen peer-ratings beschikbaar zijn, blijft het moeilijk om de geloofwaardigheid van een bron te beoordelen. Voor eWOM-platformen onderstrept dit hoe belangrijk het is om consumenten te stimuleren om elkaars WOB-berichten te beoordelen. Verder kunnen eWOM-platformen afzenders van eWOM aanmoedigen om hun argumenten bij hun product- en dienstenbeoordelingen toe te lichten en te vermelden wat hun relatie is met de bedrijven die in hun eWOM-berichten worden besproken. Op die manier wordt het voor eWOM-platformen wellicht mogelijk om de kwaliteit van eWOM-berichten en de geloofwaardigheid van de afzenders te verbeteren. Dat is niet alleen in het voordeel van de consumenten, maar ook in het voordeel van eWOM-platformen. Consumenten zijn meer geneigd om eWOM-platformen te gebruiken als informatiebron, als deze platformen informatie bieden die consumenten nuttig en geloofwaardig vinden.

Ten slotte spelen ook beleidsbepalers een rol bij het beschermen von consumenten tegen ongeloofwaardige eWOM. Dit wordt steeds meer erkend in westerse samenlevingen, waarin beleid en regels op dit gebied in toenemende mate voorkomen. Zo berispt de Britse Advertising Standards Authority de recensie website Tripadvisor begin 2012 voor het promoten van de site met claims die ze niet waar kunnen maken, namelijk dat de site “eerlijke, echte en betrouwbare recensies” publiceert van “echte reizigers”. Het feit dat steeds meer afzenders van eWOM worden gemotiveerd door financiële beloningen (Chatterjee, 2001; Dellarocas, 2006; Mayzlin, 2006; Mayzlin et al., 2012; Resnick et al., 2000; Sher & Lee, 2009), rechtvaardigt de implementatie van dit soort regels en beleid, ook gezien de huidige bevinding dat consumenten vaak achterdochtig zijn over de aanwezigheid van dergelijke motieven.

**BELANGEN VOOR BEDRIJVEN**

door frustraties en altruïsme, en consumenten die worden geleid door empower-
ment, omdat alleen de laatste groep consumenten webcare verlangen en tevr-
den zijn met de aangeboden webcare. Consumenten die geen webcare verlangen
(bijvoorbeeld consumenten die worden geleid door frustraties of altruïsme) zijn
niet tevreden met webcare en reageren daarop door nog meer negatieve eWOM af
te geven.

Bovenstaande bevindingen impliceren dat bedrijven van ontevreden consu-
menten weer tevreden consumenten kunnen maken en verdere escalatie van on-
line klachten kunnen voorkomen door uitsluitend webcare te leveren die aansluit
bij de motieven en wensen van consumenten. De resultaten van dit proefschrift
wijzen erop dat bedrijven nu al onderscheid lijken te maken tussen consumenten
die webcare verlangen en degenen die dat niet willen. Volgens de resultaten van
dit proefschrift is de kans dat de eerste groep consumenten webcare ontvangt veel
groter dan bij de tweede groep consumenten. Daar staat tegenover dat niet ieder-
een die webcare verlangt deze ook krijgt. Het is voor een bedrijf namelijk moei-
lijk om uit de inhoud van negatieve eWOM af te leiden of een consument al dan
niet webcare verlangt. Zoals dit proefschrift aantoont, vragen of eisen sommige
consumenten – maar zeker niet alle – om een webcare-reactie. Bedrijven moeten
nu dus de mogelijke voordelen van reageren afwegen tegen het risico dat iemand
ongevraagd webcare krijgt, en in reactie daarop nog meer negatieve eWOM levert.

Bedrijven moeten ook afwegen of het niet beter is om alleen webcare te sturen aan
degenen die er uitdrukkelijk om vragen, waarmee zij dus het risico accepteren
dat enkele klanten worden genegeerd die webcare willen maar daar niet expliciet
om vragen. Het negeren van deze laatste consumenten is een gemiste kans, omdat
dit proefschrift aantoont dat webcare de klanttevredenheid kan verbeteren onder
mensen die webcare wenselijk achten. Er is dan ook verder onderzoek nodig om
inzicht te krijgen in de indicatoren die gebruikt kunnen worden voor het identifi-
ceren van consumenten die webcare wensen.

Het is bemoedigend dat lezers van negatieve eWOM in het algemeen posi-
tiever staan tegenover merken die webcare-berichten plaatsen als reactie op ne-
gatieve eWOM. Dat wil echter niet zeggen dat een ‘one size fits all’ strategie af-
doende is. Bedrijven moeten een strategische aanpak kiezen waarin de behoeften
en de wensen van de eWOM-afzender centraal staan. Dit zal niet alleen leiden tot
positieve reacties van consumenten die negatieve eWOM-berichten verzenden,
maar ook van consumenten die negatieve eWOM-berichten lezen. Zoals blijkt uit
de resultaten van dit onderzoek is het verlangen van webcare bij eWOM-afzenders
leidend voor de manieren waarop eWOM-lezers webcare (en de bedrijven die er
verantwoordelijk voor zijn) beoordelen. Deze bevinding impliceert dat bedrijven
terughoudend moeten zijn met webcare als reactie op negatieve eWOM als de af-
zender er niet om vraagt of het niet verlangt. In de context van door consumenten
geïnitieerde platformen duiden dergelijke webcare-reacties op een gebrek aan
oprecht interesse om de dialoog aan te gaan met klagerende consumenten. In
dergelijke gevallen herkennen consumenten geen menselijk geluid in de web-
care-reacties en slagen deze reacties er waarschijnlijk minder goed in om de ef-
fecten van negatieve eWOM op het meelezende publiek positief te beïnvloeden.

In plaats van ongevraagde webcare te leveren op door consumenten geïniti-
eerde platformen kunnen bedrijven er ook voor kiezen om zelf een platform op
tezetten voor hun merk, waar consumenten hun klachten over het bedrijf kwijt
cunnen in de vorm van negatieve eWOM. Door consumenten uit te nodigen om
deze platformen hun zorgen en klachten te uiten, laat het bedrijf zien dat het
bereid is om de dialoog met zijn klanten aan te gaan. Consumenten die negatieve
eWOM, en daaropvolgende webcare-reacties lezen in de context van door merk
geïnitieerde platformen beoordelen deze webcare-reacties als zeer menselijk van
toon, ongeacht of de afzender van de negatieve eWOM-boodschap om een reac-
tie heeft gevraagd of niet. Bovendien kan de mogelijkheid om klachten te uiten
op een merk platform voorkomen dat consumenten hun klachten elders uiten,
bijvoorbeeld op consumenten platformen. Dit kan een voordeel zijn, omdat nega-
tieve eWOM op consumenten platformen een veel groter publiek kan bereiken.

In plaats van ongevraagde webcare te leveren op door consumenten geïniti-
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