Electronic word of mouth: Challenges for consumers and companies

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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.

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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 consumers, webcare can therefore involve 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 (Cheveilei & Mayzlin, 2006; Krishnamurthi & 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 conceding 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.
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., 1999; Berkowitz, 1970). Accordingly, the communication of complaints to sympathetic others through social media may help consumers to obtain emotional relief from the dissatisfaction they have experienced (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Consumers may seek such emotional relief, especially when they experience a “double deviation” situation (Bittner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). That is, 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).

WEB CARE 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 (Bitsohl 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, Heislett, & 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 (Chevelier & 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 for 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; Hennig-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).
CHAPTER 4 - HOW EWOM SENDERS EVALUATE COMPANIES’ WEBCARE RESPONSES

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 wecare 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 wecare, to be satisfied with wecare, and to engage in positive eWOM after receiving wecare. To test whether different motivations underlying negative eWOM activity have different effects on consumers’ receptiveness, we formulate the following research question:

RQ3. Is the likelihood of receiving a wecare 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%, Mage = 47, SDage = 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) = 927.73, 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></th>
<th>Negative eWOM</th>
<th>Positive eWOM</th>
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<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). * * Row entries with different superscripts differ significantly at p < .01.
CHAPTER 4 - HOW EWOM SENDERS EVALUATE COMPANIES’ WEBCARE RESPONSES

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%; Mage = 50, SDage = 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 venting, 35% had been motivated by altruism, and 35% had been motivated by empowerment. 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></th>
<th>Model 0</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b (SE) Odds (CS)</td>
<td>b (SE) Odds (CS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covariates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female)</td>
<td>.11 *** (.15) 1.11</td>
<td>.18 *** (.18) 1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.04 (.01) 1.04</td>
<td>.03 (.01) 1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-1.3 *** (.05) 0.88</td>
<td>-1.7 *** (.05) 0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC history</td>
<td>1.82 *** (14) 6.17</td>
<td>1.72 *** (17) 5.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>2.66 *** (.23) 14.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venting</td>
<td>-.24 (.17) 0.79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>.03 (.17) 0.97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerk 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 ($\beta = .17, p < .05$), whereas venting ($\beta = -.14, p < .001$) and altruism ($\beta = -.17, p < .001$) 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 (vent: $\beta = -.21, p < .001$; altruism: $\beta = -.23, p < .001$). 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Webcare satisfaction</th>
<th>Post-webcare eWOM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covariates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female)</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.17 **</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC history</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.15 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>.16 **</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venting</td>
<td>-.14 **</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>-.17 **</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.11 ***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Odds (CS)</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Odds (CS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Covariates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female)</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>(.16)</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>(.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.02 ***</td>
<td>(.01)</td>
<td>.01 **</td>
<td>(.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>(.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC history</td>
<td>1.29 ***</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
<td>1.20 ***</td>
<td>(.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.31 ***</td>
<td>(.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venting</td>
<td>-.52 **</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>-.36 *</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke $R^2$</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td></td>
<td>.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model $\chi^2$</td>
<td>95.53 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td>195.73 ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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, webcare activity, and the manner in which webcare is received 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.
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 negative 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 failed to substantiate 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 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 the perceived positivity of the eWOM to which it is reacted. 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 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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