



The effects of marketer- and advocate-initiated online service recovery responses on silent bystanders

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ABSTRACT

Dissatisfied customers increasingly voice their complaints on social media. These negative comments and subsequent responses are an important information source for potential customers. In a consumer-empowered era, these responses not only originate from marketers, but are often articulated by engaged brand advocates. In this study we investigate the effect of both marketers' and advocates' responses to service failures on bystanders' favorable and unfavorable brand-related reactions. Specifically, two scenario-based experiments ($n_1 = 731$; $n_2 = 361$) were conducted in which specific webcare response types and sources were systematically manipulated. Results show that companies are particularly effective in enhancing bystander-brand relationships by means of credible and accommodative responses and sometimes even with credible, defensive responses. Most importantly, however, brand advocates can help the company to increase favorable brand-related outcomes with accommodative responses and mitigate unfavorable outcomes with web-specific defensive responses.

1. Introduction

In the era of digital communication, many consumers who are dissatisfied with a service experience increasingly turn to social media to articulate their opinions about products, brands or companies through public online complaints. Consumers are motivated to post these negative comments as a deliberate action intended to either harm the company (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009; Hong & Lee, 2005), to obtain emotional relief or to warn the company's potential customers (Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & de Ridder, 2011). For bystanders (i.e. online response observers), unfavorable customer comments and subsequent reactions are valuable information sources that influence their buying behavior. Prior research has clearly demonstrated that negative electronic word-of-mouth (NeWOM) has detrimental effects on observers' brand perceptions, choice and loyalty behaviors (e.g. Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Sen & Lerman, 2007; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009).

Because of these effects, companies have started to monitor and intervene in online complaints by means of 'webcare', which is '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)' (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012, p. 133). The aim of these interventions is to restore or even improve the

brand evaluations of dissatisfied customers (i.e. complainants) and/or of silent bystanders who are exposed to NeWOM. Research has shown that proper webcare can lead to positive brand-related reactions among complainants, including favorable brand evaluations, increased customer loyalty and satisfaction (see van Noort, Willemsen, Kerkhof, & Verhoeven, 2015 for a recent review).

However, companies often refrain from responding to online complaints because of the unknown effects on bystanders. Both scholars and practitioners have called for further research on appropriate *specific* response strategies to counteract NeWOM effects (e.g. Fournier & Avery, 2011). However, literature on this topic is still scarce (see Lee & Song, 2010; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; and Schamari & Schaefer, 2015 for notable exceptions). Nevertheless, no existing research acknowledges the multifaceted nature of webcare responses in terms of content and source. This study recognizes that company representatives might not always be the best people to intervene in online complaints. Rather, complaint responses can also come from 'brand advocates' reacting to accusations on behalf of the brand (Colliander & Wien, 2013). Literature on eWOM provides strong evidence that individuals who are not affiliated with the company (due to their increased credibility) can exert a strong influence on other consumers (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008). This implies that advocate complaint responses can be an effective strategy. According to the

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current state of literature, our study is the first to investigate the effects of specific marketer- and advocate-initiated webcare responses on stimulating favorable and mitigating unfavorable brand-related outcomes with regard to bystanders at the same time.

This article is structured as follows. In this research we conducted two experiments consecutively. We first discuss the conceptual background of study 1 before we derive our first set of hypotheses. This section also includes a description of the study's methodology and results. Next, the second experiment is discussed in a similar manner. We conclude this article with a general discussion of the findings, theoretical and practical implications, as well as limitations and future research.

2. Impact of webcare source and type on bystander reactions (study 1)

2.1. Conceptual background and hypotheses

2.1.1. Webcare response sources

The detrimental outcomes of NeWOM, such as negative brand evaluations, disseminating negative brand information and deteriorated brand reputation, have been repeatedly shown in past research (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Sen & Lerman, 2007). Consequently, many companies try to mitigate these negative effects by means of *marketer-initiated webcare* (MIW) (Hong & Lee, 2005; Lee & Song, 2010). Such interventions are either a reaction to a specific request from a dissatisfied customer or aim to proactively anticipate NeWOM. Prior research suggests that both forms can positively stimulate brand-consumer relationships but reactive strategies can be particularly influential (e.g. Köhler, Rohm, de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 2011). Recent research, however, demonstrates that marketers are not the only response source. The expansion of social media has facilitated interactions between consumers and brands but also among consumers. On social media platforms (e.g., Facebook), consumers share information, experiences and opinions about brands (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Consumers use this public forum to voice and share complaints and critiques that are visible to millions of others (Ward & Ostrom, 2006), but also engage in pro-brand activities such as defending beloved brands against criticism (Colliander & Wien, 2013). Basically, these *advocate-initiated webcare* (AIW) responses are a kind of positive electronic word-of-mouth (PeWOM) which occurs as a direct reaction to NeWOM. Earlier research has revealed that PeWOM has strong persuasive effects on its observers. Doh and Hwang (2009), for example, show that positive reviews enhance observers' favorable attitudes and purchase intentions. Some researchers even claim that PeWOM which highlights the strengths of a brand leads to even stronger effects than NeWOM (see Purnawirawan, Eisend, de Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2015 for a review).

2.1.2. Webcare response types

Webcare responses can be described as communicative reactions after an online complaint aimed at influencing complainants' and bystanders' perceptions of the service failure and/or the brand itself. Typically, these responses vary in the degree of responsibility taken by the sender (Coombs, 2007). Webcare responses entailing a high degree of responsibility are using accommodative signals, while responses communicating a rather low degree of responsibility are using defensive signals (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). *Accommodative signals* refer to the acknowledgement and acceptance of the existence of a dissatisfying event caused by the company. These responses range from lowly/moderately accommodative actions (e.g. apology, acknowledgement of the problem) to a 'highly accommodative response', which includes redress (or other corrective actions such as price reductions) plus an apology and a causal 'internal' explanation (i.e. accepting full responsibility for the problem; Lee & Cranage, 2014). *Defensive signals* typically include the denial of the company's responsibility, an attack on the

complainant, or a shift of blame to the complainant or third parties (e.g. Lee & Song, 2010). Lee and Cranage (2014) refer to such responses as 'external' explanations. Recently, *passive responses* have been shown to be a popular reaction of companies on social media (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). When using such a strategy, the company either (i) remains silent and takes no action (i.e. no response) or (ii) prevents public discourse by redirecting the complainant to private complaint channels (e.g. requesting a direct contact).

We assume that specific forms of MIW or AIW trigger favorable brand-related outcomes among bystanders and help to mitigate negative outcomes. This is particularly true when the company itself demonstrates responsiveness and empathy by (highly) accommodative signals (e.g. Chang, Tsai, Wong, & Cho, 2015; Lee & Song, 2010). Earlier research shows that companies can not only enhance consumer perceptions, purchase intentions and PWOM intentions, but also mitigate negative behavioral intentions of complainants (e.g. van Laer & de Ruyter, 2010). Our assumption about a positive reinforcement effect of webcare on silent bystanders' reactions is based on a joint effect explained by social learning theory and reinforcement theory. Specifically, social learning theory postulates that individuals predominantly quickly learn through observing others' behaviors and/or their consequences (Bandura, 1977). Reinforcement theory (Skinner, 1969), in contrast, argues that people learn more quickly and perform a certain behavior when they are rewarded for it. In line with Schamari and Schaefers (2015), we argue that webcare responses represent such a reward. Consequently, we assume that bystanders' observation of how others get rewarded for their complaint (or not) is likely to trigger brand-related reactions as they anticipate these rewards as potential customers. We further argue that, in terms of the reward offered, webcare responses range from low ('no-responses'), via mid (i.e. defensive responses), to high rewards (i.e. accommodative responses). We assume that along this continuum, there is an increase in the perceived justice (Adams, 1963) of the webcare response which has the potential to trigger positive reactions and mitigate negative reactions of bystanders. Consequently, 'highly accommodative responses' from marketers should be most effective in eliciting positive bystander reactions, as they convey the highest level of anticipated 'distributive justice' (i.e. the bystander's perception that the company offers an adequate monetary compensation in the form of refunds to counter-balance relationship inequalities; Mattila, 2001), 'procedural justice' (i.e. the bystander's perception of the company's appropriate process in solving the service problem; Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999) and 'interactional justice' (i.e. the bystander's perceived fairness of interpersonal treatment; Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998). This reward-dependence of webcare effectiveness is supported by earlier research on complainant reactions (e.g. del Río-Lanza, Vázquez-Casielles, & Díaz-Martín, 2009). Therefore, we provide the following hypotheses (Fig. 1 summarizes our research model):

H1. *Accommodative* marketer-initiated webcare (MIW) as compared to 'no-responses' (a) increases favorable brand-related outcomes and (b) mitigates unfavorable brand-related outcomes.

H2. *Defensive* marketer-initiated webcare (MIW) as compared to 'no-responses' (a) increases favorable brand-related outcomes and (b) mitigates unfavorable brand-related outcomes.

H3. *Accommodative* marketer-initiated webcare (MIW) as compared to *defensive* MIW (a) increases favorable brand-related outcomes and (b) mitigates unfavorable brand-related outcomes.

H4. *Highly accommodative* marketer-initiated webcare as compared to *lowly accommodative* webcare from marketers (MIW) and from advocates (AIW) (a) increases favorable brand-related outcomes and (b) mitigates unfavorable brand-related outcomes.

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