Leaving the Home Turf: How Brands Can Use Webcare on Consumer-generated Platforms to Increase Positive Consumer Engagement

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Abstract

The level of brand-related consumer engagement is considered to be a key determinant of successful social media activities. However, due to the commonly high levels of consumers who merely consume instead of being actively engaged, companies seek strategies to increase consumer engagement. Additionally, a large part of consumers' engagement does not occur on platforms controlled by the brand, but on consumer-generated platforms. Based on social learning theory we propose webcare as a reaction to positive engagement to be an effective marketing tool for reinforcing observing consumers' engagement intentions, especially on consumer-generated platforms. In an experimental online study we reveal that webcare can be used to increase engagement intentions on consumer-generated platforms, and that consumers' surprise explains this reinforcing effect. Moreover, we show that in these consumer-dominated spaces, personal webcare is more effective in driving consumer engagement intentions than impersonal webcare, and that this effect is explained by consumers' perceptions of a brand's conversational communication style. The results indicate that brand managers should leave their home turf and use webcare on consumer-generated social media platforms outside of their direct control.
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Introduction

The emergence of social media—interactive Internet platforms and applications that enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010)—has enabled consumers to engage more with brands and other consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Hoffman and Novak 2011). Sharing information, experiences, and brand stories, recommending and evaluating brands, co-developing products and services together with brands and other consumers, and providing feedback to brands have become common consumer behavior (e.g., Gensler et al. 2013; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010). Such non-transactional interactions are commonly referred to as active consumer engagement, through which consumers actively contribute to or even create brand content instead of merely consuming brand-related information (Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit 2011).

For brand managers, the advent of social media has resulted in a loss of control, since consumers are now more empowered to voice their ideas and to find a broad audience (Gensler et al. 2013). As consumer engagement can be both positive (e.g., recommendations) and negative (e.g., complaints or negative word of mouth), monitoring and managing consumer interactions has become a pivotal part of brand management. On the one hand, companies try to keep a certain level of control by offering consumers to use brand-generated platforms, such as a brand's official Facebook page or Twitter channel. On the other hand, however, a great part of consumers' engagement occurs outside a brand's home turf, on consumer-generated platforms, such as Facebook groups created by individual users or independent brand communities (e.g., Volkswagen car owners club)

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(Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005; Van Noort and Willemsen 2012). While it is common for companies to try to influence consumers' engagement on brand-generated platforms, many brands take on the role of a casual bystander on consumer-generated platforms, who, at the most, merely monitors these environments for brand-related contents. Recent studies, however, revealed that companies can use webcare interventions to address negative consumer engagement even outside brand-generated platforms (Van Noort and Willemsen 2012).

Despite lower levels of control, consumer engagement is generally regarded as something positive, since high levels of positive engagement were found to improve attitudes and lead to favorable behavior (Brodie et al. 2013; Gummerus et al. 2012; Seraj 2012). Because interactions on social media platforms are publicly visible, consumer engagement can influence attitudes and behavior, and ultimately the engagement, of a broad audience (e.g., Kumar et al. 2010; Sridhar and Srinivasan 2012). However, many companies face the challenge of just a minority of their customers being actively engaged, while the majority only passively consumes content (Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit 2011). Therefore, companies seek ways to increase the level of positive consumer engagement (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan 2012).

In the present paper, we investigate webcare, a company's intervention with and response to online consumer engagement (Van Noort and Willemsen 2012), as a potentially useful tool for companies to increase the active engagement of observing consumers. Webcare was found to be effective in the context of negative consumer engagement, by mitigating the deleterious effects of negative word-of-mouth and complaints on observing consumers (Lee and Song 2010; Puzakova, Kwak, and Rocereto 2013; Van Noort and Willemsen 2012). To date, however, webcare has not been considered as a reaction to positive consumer engagement in order to increase engagement levels. This focus on negative forms of consumer engagement is on the one hand understandable, as negative online interactions "are found to have detrimental effects on all phases of the consumer decision-making process" (Van Noort and Willemsen 2012, p 131). On the other hand, however, online consumer engagement was found to be more likely positive than negative (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006). A recent study of the Keller Fay Group (2014) found that 89% of consumer engagement is actually positively framed. Consumers appear to use social media more for proudly posting photos and videos of their loved brands, giving positive feedback, praising products and services, and giving positive brand reviews and recommendations to other consumers than for negative engagement (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Hoffman and Novak 2011; Wirtz et al. 2013).

This paper is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to investigate webcare as a tool for increasing positive consumer engagement of the observing audience on consumer-generated social media platforms, thereby extending the existing focus on webcare as a reaction to consumer complaints (Van Noort and Willemsen 2012). Based on social learning theory (Bandura 1977) and reinforcement theory (Kelley and Thibaut 1978; Skinner 1969), we propose that webcare can be considered a

form of social reward that enhances observing consumers' willingness to become engaged as well. Moreover, in an experimental study, we establish boundary conditions for the effectiveness of webcare and investigate the underlying process of these webcare effects. The results of our research provide companies with guidelines about where and how to employ webcare in order to reinforce positive consumer engagement.

Conceptual Background & Hypotheses

Consumer Engagement

The expansion of social media, and with it brands' increased use of interactive platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and user communities, has facilitated interactions among consumers as well as between consumers and brands. On social media platforms consumers share information and experiences, discuss products and opinions, evaluate and recommend brands, and provide new product ideas or feedback (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Sashi 2012; Seraj 2012). At the same time, consumers use the publicly visible space of social media to voice and share complaints and critiques that are visible to millions of other consumers (Ward and Ostrom 2006). All of the described online activities are commonly referred to as consumer engagement, defined as *consumers non-transactional interactions with a brand or with other consumers in a brand context* (Van Doorn et al. 2010; Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan 2012). This consumer engagement can be passive, when brand-related content is merely consumed, or active, when consumers contribute to or create brand-related content (Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit 2011). Active consumer engagement, both positive and negative, was found to strongly influence the attitudes and behavior of those who observe the created content: While positive consumer engagement can be beneficial for brands (Brodie et al. 2013; Christodoulides, Jevons, and Bonhomme 2012; Wang, Yu, and Wei 2012), negative consumer engagement was found to have detrimental effects (Chakravarty, Liu, and Mazumdar 2010; Chiou and Cheng 2003; Dekay 2012; Van Noort and Willemsen 2012; Ward and Ostrom 2006). In addition to mitigating the consequences of negative consumer engagement, companies therefore intend to foster and actively reinforce positive engagement.

Webcare for Reinforcing Positive Consumer Engagement

To date, companies' reactions to consumer engagement have predominantly been considered for the cases of complaints or negative engagement (Lee and Song 2010; Shankar and Malthouse 2007; Van Noort and Willemsen 2012; Willemsen, Neijens, and Bronner 2013). As publicly visible consumer complaints and criticism can lead to dissatisfaction, negative brand evaluations, deteriorated brand reputation, and the spreading of negative information (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Verhagen, Nauta, and Feldberg 2013; Willemsen et al. 2011), many companies focus on intervening with such negative consumer engagement (Coombs 2004; Hong and Lee 2005; Lee and Song 2010). Specifically, webcare—defined as "the act of