Electronic Word of Mouth: Challenges for Consumers and Companies
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DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

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, 20078; 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 (Basuroy, Chatterjee, & Ravid, 2003; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Sen & Lerman,

2007). This negativity bias can be explained according to category diagnosticity theory (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989), which asserts that negative product attributes are considered more characteristic of poor-quality products than positive attributes are for high-quality products. In addition to valence, persuasion theories predict that consumers are more likely to value messages when they are substantiated by balanced argumentation (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 to 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, 20078; 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 & Khammash, 2010; Metzger, Flanagin, & 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; Otterbacher, 2011). Offline persuasion theories predict that consumers tend to perceive experts as more credible than they perceive non-experts to be (e.g., Hovland, 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., Rezabakhsh, 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 (Rezabakhsh 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., Chiou & 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., Basuroy et al., 2003; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Sen & Lerman, 2007).

Because of the a 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, Khammash, & 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

successful, companies manage to restore customer satisfaction after an unsatisfactory experience with a product or service, in addition to protecting or even improving their reputation among those who read about these unsatisfactory experiences. By engaging in webcare, companies can demonstrate that they take the complaints and needs of consumers seriously, which could lead to more positive brand evaluations. Moreover, if a company addresses consumer complaints adequately, these consumers may stop posting negative eWOM, or even start posting positive eWOM about their positive webcare encounters with the company.

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 Ruyter, 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 effectivess, 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 (Blumler & 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 chacteristics 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 Cuilenburg, 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 location disclosure. Beyond these general characteristics, argumentation is positively related to and explains the most variation in the perceived usefulness of reviews. The higher the argumentation density and diversity, the more useful a review is perceived to be. Review valence is also significantly related to the perceived usefulness of reviews, although this relationship is qualified by an interaction effect with product type. For experience products (i.e., products dominated by intangible attributes that cannot be known until purchase, for example, running shoes; see Xia & Bechwati, 2008), negatively valenced reviews are perceived as more useful than are positively valenced reviews. For search products (i.e., products dominated by tangible attributes for which complete information can be acquired prior to purchase or use, for example, digital cameras; see Xia & Bechwati, 2008), positively valenced reviews are perceived as more useful than are negatively valenced reviews. Finally, expertise claims are positively but only weakly related to perceived usefulness. The higher the claimed expertise of the reviewer, therefore, the more useful a review is perceived to be.

CHAPTER 3 HOW CONSUMERS EVALUATE THE CREDIBILITY OF EWOM SENDERS

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 these identification cues. 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 first 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 COMPANIES' 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 COMPANIES' 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 demonstrate 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 demonstrate 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 (the company behind) webcare, and if so, can these evaluations be explained by differences in the chacteristics 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 a layperson, a self-proclaimed expert is perceived as having greater expert 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 knowledge 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 cred-

ibility 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, and experts credentialed by peers), and they vary their responses according to these identifications. This finding may also explain the absence of evidence that perceived similarity serves as a psychological process underlying consumer evaluations regarding the trustworthiness of senders. Although eWOM senders can be categorized as peers, the findings indicate that their perceived similarity did not lead eWOM readers to perceive them as more or less trustworthy. In fact, the eWOM senders addressed in this study tended to score low on perceived similarity. The lack of a significant effect can be explained by the notion that peers exhibit "optimal heterophily" (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971): like readers of eWOM, they can be categorized as ordinary consumers. Nevertheless, senders differ from readers in one important aspect: Senders have experience with the product that is being discussed in the eWOM message (Walther, Carr, Choi, DeAndrea, Kim, Tong, & Van Der Heide, 2010). When eWOM messages contain identification cues that allow readers to learn whether the sender has expert or lay experience with the product, more dissimilarities with readers may become apparent (Norton et al., 2007).

One question that warrants further research concerns whether the effects of inferred sender characteristics differ for different types of platforms. It is important 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 clarify 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 conversatonal 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 results 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 receptive 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 succesful 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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