

The use of Webcare for Negative eWOM and its Relationship with the Commencement of a Dialogue

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Abstract

Despite its relevance to companies, the topic of webcare use by companies as a prevention tool for reputation damage from negative eWOM in tweets remains relatively under-researched. This study focuses on the extent to which companies use webcare to assist in customer engagement and problem address, and as a prevention tool for potential reputational damage caused by publicly complaining customers. To gain insight into this matter, primary research was conducted through a corpus analysis of negative electronic word-of-mouth tweets, comparing the use/non use of human voice, the amount of followers a complainant has and if a dialogue commenced with the complaining customer after whether the use of the @name/#name led to a dialogue with the complaining customer. The use of human voice in response posts led to more dialogues with the complainants than responses without human voice. The amount of followers a complainant has and the use and position of the @name and #name did not have a significant relationship with the commencement of a dialogue. Although companies already utilise webcare, additional improvements are recommended for handling customers' complaints.

1. Introduction

A single online complaint from a customer can negatively impact upon the way another customer views and evaluates that particular brand (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). The emergence of Web 2.0 provides everyone with the opportunity to put forward their opinions on a brand, company, product or person in a public manner. According to Kimmel and Kitchen (2014, p.5) word-of-mouth is “as old as the oral tradition, it has gained new prominence today, in marketing and other areas, as a result of the greater connectedness of people via social media and the considerable speed with which interpersonal messages can spread.” As social media continues to have a greater presence in individuals’ lives, an increasing number of consumers use social media platforms such as Twitter to complain about their negative experiences with brands and products, often in an instantaneous manner (Kerkhof, 2010).

The occurrence of negative eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) is a crucial reason for concern from a company’s point of view. Van Laer and De Ruyter (2010) highlight that in the contemporary social media context, consumers have the opportunity to publicly blame a company, potentially leading to severe damage to a company’s reputation. They also present the findings that companies’ reputations have suffered immensely due to negative eWOM; however, research reveals that companies can reestablish their integrity by handling the negative messages, which can lead to potential damage, with the right reaction (Lee & Song, 2010). Many companies have recognized social media platforms as an opportunity to promote their brand and to prevent reputational damage (Kerkhof, 2010). Moreover, microblogging in social media on sites such as Twitter is a new promising matter for eWOM marketing (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel & Chowdury, 2009).

Twitter stands out as the ‘fastest’ social media platform for communication (Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley, 2014). Any individual, who has access to an Internet connection, has the opportunity to distribute their thoughts online via instant messages, which can be read publicly almost instantaneously (Jansen et al., 2009). Founded in 2006, Twitter has become one of the biggest and most popular social media platforms in the world. In its nine years of existence, the website states that they have now grown their user base to 316 million users per month and sees 500 million tweets sent per day. They describe their mission as “to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers” (Twitter, 2015). In an analysis of 150,000 tweets, it was found that 35% contained negative comments about a brand (Jansen et al., 2009). According to Huibers and Verhoeven (2014), a

complaint on Twitter has the potential to spread to a massive extent of awareness, which is accessible by a large public audience. Hence, it can lead to serious reputational damages (Pfeffer et al., 2014).

In 2015, a research study conducted in the Netherlands found that an increasing number of companies chose to have their own webcare account as a way to monitor their presence online and to interact with consumers (Derksen, Kelders & Keuning, 2015). Van Noort and Willemsen (2011, p. 133) define webcare as “the act of engaging in online interactions with (complaining) customers, by actively searching the web to address consumer feedback (e.g. questions, concerns and complaints). Webcare is performed by one or more company representatives (i.e. webcare teams) and serves as a tool in support of customer relationship, reputation and brand management. Central to these efforts is the aim to restore or improve the brand evaluations of complaining customers and/or of those who have been exposed to NWOM of complaining customers.” Findings showed that missing webcare is the biggest mistake a company can make and the key to protect the good reputation is to individually take care of complaints (Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014).

As reported by Derksen et al. (2015), webcare has grown in importance on a big scale. Their survey revealed that in 2015, 20% of companies had their own webcare account, which is separate to that of their official company social media account; the company uses it to take care of questions or complaints their customers might have and to offer better service. A survey from the same study showed that 81% of the companies believe that webcare leads to satisfied clients, and 92% believe that webcare improves the online reputation of a company. Good customer service and successful webcare can be a great benefit for a company. A study conducted by Lee and Song (2010) showed that any form of compensation, corrective action and/or apology in the online context may be valued by the customer; it results in a desirable outcome for a customer who in turn may remain loyal. Furthermore, satisfied customers may talk to other customers about their beneficial experience, which could result in a transformation of negative eWOM into positive.

According to Kerkhof (2010) it is becoming increasingly important for companies to participate in social media, especially when exposed to negative eWOM. Kerkhof (2010) reported a research conducted by UPC from 2006, who started the first webcare in the Netherlands. Findings showed that three quarters of the customers were satisfied by the webcare they received, and almost 50% stated that they perceived UPC more positively since its occurrence in the social media. These findings go in line with an experiment examined by van Noort and Willemsen (2012), which found that consumers are more likely to rate a brand

more favorably when it responds to negative WOM than when it does not respond at all. Thus, webcare certainly influences the way consumers think about a brand. Another study (Pfeffer et al., 2014) conducted within this field of research, recommends to increase social media activities and to be proactive to create a supportive network of customers. A question that should be taken into consideration is in which way webcare can be offered that would both satisfy customers and prevent reputational damages?

Kerkhof (2010) emphasizes that it is crucial in the current business climate for companies not to hide behind the brand but to show themselves as human beings and make their company more personal. A way to do this is to make use of human voice. Kelleher (2009, p.177) defines human voice as “an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization’s publics based on interactions between individuals in the organization and individuals in public.” The necessity of human voice in webcare is supported by other studies in this field of research, which highlight that personal interaction with consumers via social media resulted in customers perceiving the company as more trustworthy (Kerkhof, 2010). Literature claims that the human voice of a company is one of the most important aspects in online communication. According to Searls and Weinberger (2000, in Kelleher, 2009) having a human voice while communicating with customers gives a company the opportunity to better act on the customers’ needs. In that way a more effective and sufficient solution for customer service is possible (Kelleher, 2009). Van Noort and Willemsen (2011) further this notion to suggest that webcare responses should lay their focus on personalizing the message containing a human voice to increase the chances to be positively accepted by the complainant. The aforementioned studies have been carried out in this field of research; however, these studies predominately focus on blogs, online sites and Facebook. It would be interesting to examine how webcare is in the social media platform Twitter.

Research questions

Use of human voice

According to Le Pair (2015b) webcare mostly focuses on reputation that may be jeopardized by customer’s complaints. The aforementioned use of human voice in social media interactions increases customer’s involvement and can ultimately lead to a positive brand evaluation. Willemsen (2014) supports this assertion by emphasizing that the human voice is crucial for successful webcare, especially because it can strengthen a company’s reputation, credibility and image. Customers greatly appreciate when companies utilize human voice.

Personalized human voice in the current study is evident in the use of a personal pronoun in first person singular (I, me, my, mine) and the use of the name or initials of the webcare sender. Hence, the following research question is:

- RQ1: To what extent is there a relationship between the use of human voice and the commencement of a dialogue between the organization and the customer?

To answer the first research question a number of sub-questions will be examined:

- SRQ1a: To what extent is there a relationship between personalized human voice using a personal pronoun in first person singular and the commencement of a dialogue?
- SRQ1b: To what extent is there a relationship between personalized Human Voice using the sender's name or his/her initials and the commencement of a dialogue?

Amount of followers

Pfeffer et al. (2014) claim that it is impossible to be a trusted source of information for a company. Therefore, it is crucial to have intermediaries (e.g. a company's fan or supporter) between a company and their customers. Other findings showed that complaints were often driven by self-affirmation, the need for social comparison and the intention to help others (Alexandrov, Lilly & Babakus, 2013). Jansen et al. (2009) claim that WOM is based on trust and the social network, human beings confide on their families, friends and other social groups; people listen to one's peers opinions and value them. Someone with a large amount of followers could severely damage a company's reputation when participating in negative eWOM. Another study showed that complainants who were driven by altruism seemed to receive webcare in a negative light and were likely to continue with negative eWOM (Willemsen, Neijens & Bronner, 2013). These findings are a clear indication of the importance of executing a good strategy when handling complaints, and to prevent complaints on a large scale. Therefore it would be interesting to investigate if companies consider the amount of followers a complainer has. This leads to the following research question:

- RQ2: To what extent is there a relationship between the amount of followers a writer of negative eWOM has and the commencement of a dialogue?

Mentioning of company

As previously mentioned above, social media provides consumers with the opportunity to deliver their anger or questions immediately towards the company concerned. By using the company's @name, consumers are able to address the company directly. Le Pair's (2015a) research identifies that companies can be influenced by the way in which consumers make use of the @name. Using the @name in the very beginning of the tweet, appears to be more insistent than the use of the @name in a different position. His research shows that it is more likely for the tweet with the @name in first position to have a dialogue. It would be interesting to see the difference between the use of the @name and the use of a #name. Complaints that include hashtags are most likely not focusing on speaking directly to the company but as a means to voice their frustration. It could be crucial for a company to prevent even the negative hashtags with their webcare. Hence, the following research question arises:

- RQ3: To what extent is there a relationship between the explicit mentioning of a company and a commencement of a dialogue?

To answer the third research question a number of sub-questions will be investigated:

- SRQ3a: To what extent is there a relationship between the use/not use of the @name and the commencement of a dialog?
- SRQ3b: To what extent is there a relationship between the position of the @name and the commencement of a dialogue?
- SRQ3c: To what extent is there a relationship between the use of the #name and the commencement of a dialogue?

In the following section, after having reviewed the literature and presented the research questions, the method that was used will be addressed.

2. Method

Materials

In order to test the prior research questions, a corpus analysis was conducted to analyze negative eWOM. The corpus consisted of Dutch complaint tweets retrieved from www.twitter.com, meaning that the primary origin of the analyzed tweets were the

Netherlands or Belgium. The corpus was gathered in the period from 23-08-2015 to 22-09-2015 through a data crawler. Simple random sampling was used by collecting half of all the tweets that were gathered. The tweets were collected with the requirement that it contained the hashtag #faal, #fail, #zucht, #pff, #slecht and/or #jammer. For the tweets to be coded as complaint tweets they had to fulfill the following conditions:

- A webcare-reaction by the company, organization or person that represents the company or organization had to be conceivable.
- It had to be clear which company or organization the sender was approaching.
- The tweet still had to exist.
- The tweet was not a retweet.

Procedure

Firstly, the selected 11629 tweets, were coded individually in an Excel table by 13 coders, of which all were bachelor students from Radboud University each completing their thesis. All students were trained beforehand to ensure the elimination of any subjective biases. Each student examined 895 tweets to determine whether they were in fact true complaint tweets using the aforementioned conditions, as described in the materials section. Approximately one third (3796) of the data remained as negative eWOM tweets that met the criteria. The second step was to code all the remaining tweets, which were coded individually by the same 13 coders. The tweets were sorted into 12 variables in an Excel table. After the tweets were coded into the variables, it was checked again to determine whether they had fulfilled the condition of negative eWOM. On the basis of this, some tweets were excluded leaving a final corpus of 3290 complainant tweets. The variables that were necessary for this study were operationalized as followed:

- The use/non use of human voice using the first personal pronoun (ik/me/mijn)
- The use/non use of human voice using the name and/or the initials
- The amount of followers the complainant has, which was divided into four groups (“follower group 1” had 0-300 follower, “follower group 2” had 301-700 follower, “follower group 3” had 701- 1500 follower and “follower group 4” had 1501-40000 follower) to make the results more distinct
- The addressing of the company by the use/non use of the @name

- The place of the @name, thus whether the @name was in the initial position, elsewhere or not used at all
- The mentioning of the company, i.e. whether it was mentioned with the #name, with the @name or just the name
- The commencement of a dialogue, i.e. the complainant answers to the company's webcare reaction to their initial complaint tweet

To answer the aforementioned research question, the 1110 negative eWOM tweets that did get a webcare reaction, were selected for the current study.

Statistical Treatment

To investigate the aforementioned research questions, Chi Square tests were conducted to test the differences between the observed and expected values.

3. Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which companies use webcare in the prevention of damage from negative eWOM. Primary research was conducted through the collection and analysis of 3290 Tweets. For the purpose of this study, a total of 1110 tweets that received webcare reactions from companies were examined to investigate whether it led to a dialogue between the company and the complainant. The human voice a company uses, the amount of followers a writer of negative eWOM has and the explicit mentioning of a company were all factors that were taken into account when answering the research questions. Results of the frequency analysis demonstrated that 66% of respondents did not receive any reaction from the company. In addition, 63% out of the 34% who did get a webcare reaction from the company, led to a dialogue.

Use of human voice

Results of the frequency analysis revealed that 57% did not make use of the human voice using ik/me/mijn, whereas 43% did make use of it. Table 1 shows the relationship between the use of human voice using ik/me/mijn and the commencement of a dialogue. A Chi-Square

test showed a significant relation between the use of human voice using ik/me/mijn and a commencement of a dialogue ($\chi^2 (1) = 16.41, p < .001$). Results clearly indicated that the more often human voice (ik/me/mijn) was used by the company the more commencing dialogues occurred.

Table 1. The percentages of the use of the human voice (HV) using ik/me/mijn and the commencement of a dialogue and (Adjusted Residual)

	- Dialogue		+ Dialogue	
	%		%	
- HV Ik/me/mijn	65	(4.1)	53	(-4.1)
+ HV Ik/me/mijn	35	(-4.1)	48	(4.1)
Total	100		100	

Furthermore, results of the frequency analysis showed that 31% did not make use of the human voice using name or initials. However, 52% did make use of the human voice using the initials and 16% did make use of the human voice using the name. Table 2 presents the relationship between the use of human voice using the name and/or initial and the commencement of a dialogue. A Chi-Square test showed a significant relation between the use of human voice using the name or initials and a commencement of a dialogue ($\chi^2 (2) = 7.13, p = .028$). Results showed that the more often human voice (name) was used by the company, the more dialogues commenced. The use of human voice (initial) seemed to not have an effect on the commencement of a dialogue.

Table 2. The percentages of the use of human voice (HV) using the name/initials and the commencement of a dialogue and (Adjusted Residual)

	- Dialogue		+ Dialogue	
	%		%	
- HV name/initial	35	(2.1)	29	(-2.1)
+ HV name	13	(-2.2)	18	(2.2)
+ HV initial	52	(-0.3)	53	(0.3)
Total	100		100	

Amount of followers

The frequency analysis found that 69% of respondents belonged to “follower group 1” (0-300 follower), 17% belonged to “follower group 2” (301-700 followers), 9% belonged to “follower group 3” (701 - 1500 followers) and 5% belonged to “follower group 4” (1501 – 40000 followers). Table 3 shows the relationship between the amount of followers and the commencement of a dialogue. A Chi-Square test showed no significant relation between the amount of followers and a commencement of a dialogue ($\chi^2 (3) = 0.85, p = .838$).

Table 3. The percentages of the amount of followers and the commencement of a dialogue and (Adjusted Residuals)

	- Dialogue		+ Dialogue	
	%		%	
Follower group 1	69	(-0.3)	69	(0.3)
Follower group 2	18	(0.8)	16	(-0.8)
Follower group 3	8	(-0.4)	9	(0.4)
Follower group 4	5	(-0.3)	6	(0.3)
Total	100		100	

Mentioning of a company

The frequency analysis indicated that 91% used the @name of the company to address the company, while 10% did not use the @name of the company. Table 4 demonstrates the relationship between the use of the @name and the commencement of a dialogue. A Chi-Square test showed no significant relation between the use of the @name and a commencement of a dialogue ($\chi^2 (1) = 2.69, p = .101$).

Table 4. The percentages of the use of the @name and the commencement of a dialogue and (Adjusted Residual)

	- Dialogue		+ Dialogue	
	%		%	
- @name	11	(1.6)	8	(-1.6)
+ @name	89	(-1.6)	92	(1.6)
Total	100		100	

The frequency analysis indicated that 48% used the @name in the initial position when addressing the company, while 42% used the @name somewhere else and 10% did not use the @name at all. Table 6 presents the relationship between the position of the @name and the commencement of a dialogue. A Chi-Square test showed no significant relation between the position of the @name and a commencement of a dialogue ($\chi^2 (2) = 4.18, p = .124$)

Table 5. The percentages of the position of the @name and the commencement of a dialogue and (Adjusted Residual)

	- Dialogue		+ Dialogue	
	%		%	
Initial Position	45	(-1.7)	50	(1.7)
Elsewhere	44	(0.7)	41	(-0.7)
No @name	11	(1.6)	8	(-1.6)
Total	100		100	

The frequency analysis found that 11% used the #name to address the company, while 1% just used the name and 88% made use of the @name. Table 6 shows the relationship between the use of the #name and the commencement of a dialogue. A Chi-Square test showed no significant relation between the use of #name and a commencement of a dialogue ($\chi^2 (2) = 2.50, p = .286$).

Table 6. The percentages of the use of the #name and commencement of a dialogue and (Adjusted Residual)

	Dialogue -		Dialogue +	
	%		%	
#Name	13	(1.4)	10	(-1.4)
Just Name	1	(-0.7)	1	(0.7)
@Name	87	(-1.2)	89	(1.2)
Total	100		100	

4. Conclusion & Discussion

This study was conducted to examine the extent to which companies use webcare to address potential reputational damage as a result of negative eWOM from unsatisfied customers. To determine this, the human voice a company uses, the amount of followers a writer of negative eWOM has and the use of the explicit mentioning of a company was taken into account. The first research question concerning the use of human voice was the only one that deemed to be significant. The other two research questions appeared to be non-significant.

Use of human voice

The commencement of a dialogue was more likely to occur when the company made use of the human voice through the use of the first personal pronoun (ik/me/mijn) or the name than when it did not make use of it. The use of the human voice while using the initial did not have a significant impact. Although findings showed developing dialogues where no form of human voice was involved, it did become apparent that there were more dialogues commencing when human voice was used. These findings are aligned with those of Kerkhof (2010) and Van Noort and Willemsen (2011), whose research showed that using human voice while interacting with customers resulted in a customer perceiving the company as more trustworthy and positively accepted. Findings from Willemsen (2014) showed that customers strongly appreciate when companies use human voice, and therefore is integral to

strengthening a company's reputation, credibility and image. This could be an explanation for the current results. Customers who perceive the company as more trustworthy felt more confident commencing a dialogue via Twitter. These results demonstrate the importance of the use of human voice when trying to prevent negative eWOM. However, the findings also illustrate that companies are not using webcare to its full benefit (i.e. not using human voice consistently), therefore are encouraged to be more insistent with the use of human voice to maximize the impact of webcare. Results found less than half of the investigated companies made use of human voice using first person singular and still one third are not making use of the human voice using the name and/or initials. Because the current study showed that more dialogues were commencing when a form of human voice was used, it stresses the importance of proper used active webcare. Hence, it is strongly advised to improve the use of human voice in webcare. For further research it could be interesting to conduct qualitative analysis to examine whether the customers were more and/or faster satisfied after ending the dialogues when human voice was used in comparison to dialogues with no use of human voice.

Amount of followers

The aforementioned literature points out that it is crucial for companies to have an established following with people who will support the company in general and in time of crisis (Pfeffer et al, 2014; Jansen et al, 2009). The research question aimed to investigate whether there was a relationship between the amount followers a complainant has and the commencement of a dialogue. The findings from this study appeared to be non-significant, and were found to be inconsistent with those from earlier studies. This could mean that companies do not make a distinction between customers with a large amount of followers and customers with a small follower group, potentially signifying that they take every complaint tweet seriously and treat them the same. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that the different follower groups are quite disproportional. To investigate these findings further, additional research should be conducted to examine even sized follower groups and determine whether the lack of difference is still apparent. For further research it is also advised to take more tweets into account to see whether the results still are non-significant. Implications for the theory are for companies to be more alert in terms of the amount of followers that the person complaining has, since they can reach and influence a bigger public.

Mentioning of a company

The current study was not able to support previous findings (Le Pair, 2015a), which indicated that having the @name in the initial position is more insistent than placing the @name somewhere else in the tweet; since there was no significant relation between the use or the position of the @name and the use of the #name and the commencement of a dialogue. An explanation for these findings might be that the sample was too small, since this study focused on dialogues as engagement between company and customer on numerous occasions, rather than simply just a one-way response by the company to an issue. If this occurred it was listed as ‘no dialogue’. Therefore it is crucial to mention that it might be possible that companies reacted to a complaint tweet and immediately satisfied the client with its answer so that there was no need for a commencing dialogue. Furthermore, it might be possible that the addressed company and the complainant had a private conversation after the initial complaint that took place via private messages, and is thus not visible to the public eye on Twitter.

It should also be noted however that there is a slight irregularity in the coded data from the variables ‘Aanspreken_noemen_@name’ and ‘Aanspreken_noemen_#name’. There is a small difference between the amount of used @names and used #names in both variables. A reason for this occurrence could be that some tweets where both the @name and the #name was used, were coded twice. Although, the difference is small, this also could have had little impact on the current results. When conducting further research it should be made apparent that this error does not happen again, and that coders be more thorough in their analysis to avoid further inconsistency in the research.

In summary, it was found that there are more commencing dialogues than non-commencing dialogues after the company had its first reaction to the negative eWOM tweet. However, it is noticeable that more than half of the complaint tweets did not get any reaction by the company. Moreover, in the current context it is recommended that companies should be more efficient and responsive in replying to customer complaints providing comfort and assurance to their customers and subsequently build rapport amongst their clientele base. Further research should be conducted through an experiment to examine the reasons behind the lack of responses, and should concentrate on the post-interaction dialogue as well as analyzing the level of satisfaction by the customer. Further studies should also explore different occupational areas such as the media and government, and examine across multiple platforms to examine any variations across the sectors.

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