

## **The Effect of Humorous Webcare on Brand Trust**

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## Abstract

Companies have devised strategies to respond to online reviews, specifically negative online reviews. Responding to negative reviews could be key to several outcomes such as online popularity, customer engagement and eventually customer patronage. For digital bystanders (i.e. online word of mouth observers) unfavorable customer comments and subsequent reactions are valuable information sources that influence their buying behavior.

Past research has shown that the hotel industry is particularly vulnerable to negative online reviews because a large percentage of bookings are made online. Hotels are increasingly shifting their online review strategy from passive listening to proactive engagement through management responses and providing a response or webcare is one method which hotels frequently adopt to mitigate the negative effects of online reviews. Consumers voice their perceptions about various aspects of a service like a hotel. Companies have recently started to monitor and intervene in negative word of mouth, a practice commonly referred to as *Webcare*. Webcare has been defined as “the act of engaging in online interactions with complaining consumers by actively searching the web to address consumer feedback (e.g., questions, concerns and complaints)” .

Little is known about how to respond and how to do so effectively. Research emphasis on webcare characteristics is sparse. Drawing on Consumer Inference theory and Cue Summation theory this study adds to research on webcare and management responses by studying the effect of webcare characteristics like humour and level of detail effect bystanders perception of brand trust in a hotel booking situation.

Keywords: Webcare, Positive online reviews, Humor.

## INTRODUCTION

Managers increasingly address customer feedback online (Lopes et al., 2023). Dealing with feedback which is in the form of negative reviews is challenging because, unlike offline word of mouth, they persist online and firms can neither selectively delete them, nor risk opting out of being reviewed (Proserpio & Zervas, 2017). For digital bystanders (i.e. online word of mouth observers) unfavorable customer comments and subsequent reactions are valuable information sources that influence their buying behavior (Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). Marketers need to protect their reputation by effectively controlling the detrimental effects of negative word of mouth (Hennig Thureau et al., 2010; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012) and provide some sort of service recovery to the complaining consumers. Since this exchange of words can be seen by thousands digital bystanders who visit the website, influencing bystanders behavior also becomes crucial for companies. This is of more importance if customers are posting negative reviews about the sustainability aspects of the service firm.

Electronic word of mouth specifically online reviews appears to be particularly important for experience products like hotels. The hotel industry is particularly vulnerable to negative online reviews because a large percentage of bookings are made online (Min et al., 2015). Hotels are increasingly shifting their online review strategy from passive listening to proactive engagement through management responses (Xie et al., 2017) and providing a response or webcare is one method which hotels frequently adopt to mitigate the negative effects of online reviews.

Organizations like hotels and restaurants have begun to devote a higher share of consideration and resources to engaging in online interactions with a higher level of perceived threat namely negative consumer feedback.

Management responses to a specific online reviews or a complaint, shows that hotel managers take their customers seriously, with the potential of improving customer reviews, customer satisfaction and, ultimately hotel profitability (Sun & Kim, 2013; Chi and Gursoy, 2009). While some managers are responding to these reviews, there is a lack of knowledge on how to respond to these reviews effectively (Sparks & Bradley, 2017). Research emphasis on webcare characteristics is sparse (Ghosh, 2017). Drawing on Consumer Inference theory and Cue Summation theory this study adds to research on webcare and management responses by studying the effect of webcare characteristics on bystanders perception of brand trust.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Role of Humor in Building Trust**

Romero and Cruthirds (2006) define humor as "amusing communications that promote good emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organization." Humor and its role in marketing has been studied for over a decade now. Recently in the domain of marketing communications humor has been studied in the context of meme marketing (Razzaq et al., 2024; S Dutta and P Kumar, 2024 ), brand to brand communication (Saavedra Torres et al., 2023). Advertisers may benefit from using humor to help businesses achieve its goals (Saavedra Torres et al., 2023). In the past studies humor has been shown to enhance attention, attitudes toward advertisements and brands and purchase intention (Weinberger and Gulas, 2019). However, humor does not always favorably benefit companies. For example, depending on the type of product and how relevant the humor is to that product, the impact of humor on memory and persuasion might differ significantly (Strick et al., 2012). Humorous attempts can fail with the audience or even become offensive (Beard, 2008). Therefore, using humor as a marketing strategy can be risky. Ads that fail in their attempt at humor receive no appreciation from the audience and are disliked much more than those that do. Webcare providers should be careful while using a certain kind of humor while addressing consumer complaints. Therefore in this study we use a certain form of humor to study the effect on bystanders perception of brand trust.

### **Online Reviews**

Academicians and companies have come to place great importance on online reviews (2023) in the recent past

Consumer generated messages are more effective in marketing than company generated messages (Clark et al., 2017) in influencing behavior. One such popular consumer generated message is, online review, defined as "peer-generated product evaluations posted on company or third party website" (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Customers prefer online reviews, because these

reviews are largely conveyed through feedback platforms and websites which are independent from official or corporate content (Forman et al., 2008).

Many authors have investigated the role of various review characteristics in influencing consumer related outcomes. For example, review volume (Hoskins and Brown, 2018) review valence (Chong et al., 2017; Tsao et al., 2018; Kim & Lee, 2015), review rating (Zhou & Guo, 2015; Hong et al., 2017), review depth (Cheng & Ho 2015), review readability (Liu & Park, 2015) review source credibility (Filiari et al., 2018; Shan 2016; Ayeh et. al, 2013; Zhang et al., 2014) etc. Several reviewer related characteristics like, reviewer profile image (Karimi and Wang, 2017), reviewer identity disclosure and expertise (Filiari et. al, 2018; Liu and Park, 2015; Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009), reviewer trustworthiness (Banerjee et al, 2017), reviewer's expertise (Vermeulen and Seegers 2009), and source credibility (Ayeh, et al., 2013; Zhang, et al., 2014) and purchase outcome attribution (Jacobsen, 2018) have been studied in the literature.

Negative online consumer reviews or negative word of mouth (NWOM) has been found to directly impact organizational performance (Hoskins & Brown, 2018). In order to maintain a positive image on social media, hoteliers are seeking effective strategies for responding to online reviews. One such important move has been to publicly respond to online reviews, i.e., webcare.

## **Webcare**

Although webcare as a marketing concept was formally coined by Van Noort & Willemsen (2012), few authors investigated this concept before this without using the term Webcare. For example, Hong & Lee (2005) explored that timely response by companies to negative reviews helped to resolve consumers issues, stop unnecessary follow-up attacks from other consumers, and increases consumer loyalty and positive word of mouth. Williams & Buttle, (2014) studied three organizations and found that suppressing negative word of mouth was significantly more important than promoting positive word of mouth. Waiguny et al., (2014), also studied the effect of response in the context of hotels and found that the worst strategy for a hotel would be not responding to the negative reviews. Schamari & Scheffers, (2015) studied the effect of personal and impersonal Webcare on consumers' engagement intentions in brand generated and user generated platforms. Sparks et al., (2016), further showed that it not only important for organizations to respond but it is essential for them to respond in a timely manner to negative reviews. Sparks & Bradley (2017), also stressed on the importance of responding and further implied that defensive responses to online reviews should be avoided. Weitzl et al., (2018) revealed that webcare's potential to positively influence complainants' failure attributions is essential for customers's post-webcare satisfaction. Tathagata & Amar, (2018) showed in service failure situation how webcare can be useful in garnering forgiveness and consumer satisfaction. A recent study by Casado-Diaz et al, (2018) reveled that there was a significant attitude change towards a hotel, regardless of the type of response.

As mentioned earlier, every individual is a bystander while viewing a review and the response to the review (i.e., webcare) on a website. Although the response is specific to this complaining consumer; however the response is posted publicly anyone can read both the review and the response. Just like the review the webcare too becomes a crucial piece of information for bystanders for consideration while arriving at purchase decisions.

## **The role of Humour**

Prior studies have found that positive reviews influences hotel growth (Deng et al., 2022), favorably influence consumers' destination trust (Su et al., 2022), attitudes and purchase intention (Park et 2007, booking intention and trust (Sparks and Browning, 2011). Research in the recent years have tried to unearth different ways of responding to PORs. For example, recently Liao et al , 2022 found Humorous response to positive reviews had a more positive effect on brand attitude and purchase Intention than humourless response. Wu et al.,2020 found that an active constructive response in friendly communication style increases repurchase intention. As it was established in the introduction section that companies sort of prioritize responses to NORs, meanwhile neglecting PORs, in this study we wish to emphasize the importance of acknowledging PORs through a managerial response.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

This study draws on the Consumer Inference Theory (Kardes et al., 2004) and Cue Summation Theory (Severin 1967), to understand the effect of webcare and review characteristics on bystanders perception of webcare diagnosticity and booking intention. Kardes's theory points out that consumer decisions are often based on incomplete or limited knowledge of the relevant information and a wide variety of cues (e.g., attributes) are used to go beyond the information given (Kardes et al., 2004). Kardes' theory highlights that multiple cues are likely to be present in organizational communications and addresses the way in which new consumers are likely to make use of those cues to draw inferences about the nature of the organization (Kardes 1993). Consumers in order to take a well informed decision and understand several product/service features that may be essential to the purchase decision must go beyond the information available in assessing as many informational cues as possible (Kardes et al., 2004).

Cue-summation theory (Severin, 1967) deals with humans' information-processing capability and their learning. Garner (1974) posited that the individual's nervous system is capable of simultaneously processing information from multiple cues. According to the theory, a cue refers to the information provided that facilitates decision making in solving a problem. Summation refers to the importance of utilizing multiple cues of information in solving a problem. Cue-summation theory posits that learning becomes more effective when the number and relevance of cues that exist in a source of information increase ( Jiang and Benbasat, 2007). More number of cues leads to a higher understanding of the medium's core message among its audience (Xu & Sundar 2016). Relevant information from several cues would broaden an individual's perceptual bandwidth and allow him/her to process information (Xu, 2010).

Now bystanders on online platforms may go through this new piece of information i.e., webcare and form linkages between available information and take purchase decisions. Individuals today read a review and a response against the review posted by the company. So, being a bystander and witnessing this service failure and recovery as a third person would affect future purchase decisions. Bystanders may draw inferences from a combination of a review and response as against only review related cues. Understanding the importance of these informational cues marketers have begun to publicly address the concerns of consumers vented out through online reviews. Further, webcare, a brand related communication may lead to positive or negative

consumer inferences should of utmost concern for both researchers and marketing managers (Lude, 2018) especially if the concerns are raised against the sustainability aspects of the brand.

## **HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT**

Researchers have shown that word-of-mouth that disseminate details about product specifications or consumer experiences are more persuasive than broad reviews because the recommendation becomes more diagnostic in making purchase decisions (Roy & Sternthal, 1977; Herr et al., 1991; Sternthal et al., 1978). Jimenez and Mendoza (2013) showed that for search products, consumers considered online reviews to be more credible when the reviews contain detailed information about the product. The helpfulness of reviews, by and large, is closely related to the detailed text information contained in the reviews, that is, whether the information itself is helpful for the viewers to make purchase decisions (Cao et al., 2011).

Hence a negative review with more information about a hotel would need the hotel management to provide webcare that addresses those claims in order to nullify the derogatory effect of the review. Hence the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Detailed webcare leads to higher bystander perception of brand trust towards the hotel brand as compared to general webcare.

H2: A webcare with humour leads to higher bystander perception of brand trust towards the hotel brand as compared to non humorous webcare.

As mentioned earlier Cue summation theory suggests that individuals are capable of processing multiple cues. So credibility of the source of the webcare and the level of detail in a webcare may be considered together by a potential consumer. Once a bystander assess all the multiple cues associated with the webcare the bystander may infer or form if then linkages to assess the diagnosticity of the webcare. The more online retailers provide signals that help consumers overcome the barrier arising from the lack of physical inspection of products on the Internet (Kirmani & Rao, 2000), the more that the information provided will be perceived as diagnostic because of its ability to enable an adequate evaluation of the true quality of the products sold (Jiang & Benbasat, 2004). Further as it is difficult to control, how people perceive humour, and using humour can backfire, we propose that in the case where the hotel is not responding to the consumer comments in detailed manner, using humor can actually backfire, so humor should be used along with proper details. Therefore the following set of hypotheses is proposed.

H3: A detailed and humorous webcare results in higher brand trust perceptions as compared to a) detailed and non humorous, b) general and humorous, and c) general and non humorous webcare.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Experimental Design and Participants**

An experimental design was used to investigate the effects of webcare characteristics on webcare brand sustainability. More specifically, the study employed a 2 (webcare level of detail: Detailed



vs. General)  $\times$  2 (Webcare Type: Humorous and Non-Humorous) full factorial between subjects design with 4 experimental conditions.

Two hundred and ninety graduate and post-graduate students (167men, 123 women; mean age=22.3 years) of the university participated in the experiment and were randomly assigned to one of the eight treatment conditions. The participants read the designated review and the webcare at their own pace and then filled out the questionnaire. A student sample is suitable for this study as millennials (i.e., those born during 1980 and 2000) are known to be the avid users of social media (Nusair et al., 2013). They also rely heavily on online media to seek information and make purchase, such as arranging travel plans and booking hotels (Chan et al., 2017). Student samples have been commonly used in research pertaining to online shopping (Kim & Forsythe 2007; Ashraf et al., 2014). This is justifiable as students face less obstacles in using new technology and are computer literate (Ashraf et al., 2014).

### Stimuli Materials

The development of the experimental stimuli was spread across two stages. First, a negative review was developed about a ostensible hotel brand (i.e., Prestige Inn). The review stressed on the bad experience of a traveler at the hotel. The negative review had information on customer making some claims about the hotel not meeting customer expectation in its day to day operations. Further information in the form of a star rating system, was provided along with the review to emphasize on the negativity aspect of the review. These cues represented the reviewers past contributions (Ghose & Ipeiritis, 2011). Once the results of the pretest revealed a successful manipulation of the review then webcare responses were developed.

In the second stage, webcare in response to the negative review was developed to showcase conditions of level of detail and humour. In the detailed webcare condition, the text in the webcare, apologized to the customer and the reasons for the customer issues and further explained the actions taken by the hotel in order to be error free in the future. Further the webcare acknowledged each and every complaint raised by the reviewer. In the general webcare condition the webcare lacked detail and did not acknowledge customers' specific complaints.

Humour was manipulated by adding a line in the webcare which was the last sentence used in the webcare. The line was, "we would like to apologize to you and anyone, who we have not yet offended". So, the treatment material had two parts, the negative online review which participants would read first and the webcare which participants read after they went through the review.

### Pretests

A pretest was conducted to test for the manipulations of webcare characteristics. A sample of 34 post-graduate students read review first and then the webcare responses and rated, two items on webcare level of detail, "the webcare was too broad", the webcare detailed the situation in the hotel" (Jimenez and Mendoza, 2013) on a 7-point Likert scale. Significant differences were revealed between treatment conditions for content type ( $M_{Detailed}=5.18$  vs.  $M_{General}=3.12$ ,  $t(32)=4.22$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Perceived humor was measured using a four-item, 7-point semantic differential scale (not funny/funny, not amusing/amusing, entertaining/entertaining, not

humorous/humorous) (Nabi et al., 2007). Significant difference were observed in the pretest ( $M_{\text{Humorous}} = 2.64$  vs.  $M_{\text{Non-Humorous}} = 4.81$ ,  $t(32) = 5.26$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

## Measures

Brand Trust Brand trust was measured by three items taken from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), and by four items taken from Hess (1995). I trust this hotel, this hotel is trustworthy, this hotel is honest, this hotel works for my happiness, this hotel works hard to satisfy me, this hotel's promises are real, it is clear what to expect from this hotel.

## *Procedure*

All students enrolled in various graduate and undergraduate courses in a large Indian University were approached with a notification on the intranet with a request to participate in the experiment on "hotel responses". They were stimulated by allowing them to win gift vouchers worth INR 1500 through a lucky draw. Some eligibility criteria's were listed in the notification, namely the individual must have in the last six months booked a hotel by going through a online review site also the individual must be ready devote some time and full concentration in following instructions during the study. Interested students and the students who met the criteria's were asked to register and provide email ids and phone numbers. Later, they were contacted by the researchers and invited to participate on specific dates in groups of 30-40 students. The experiment took place in the computer laboratory of the university where subjects arrived and were randomly assigned to the treatment conditions. First, they filled out an introductory form with demographic information and read detailed instructions about the steps involved in the experiment. Following this, they read the reviews and the following webcare responses which appeared on their computer screens on a fictitious website, which was developed for the study. Then they filled out an online questionnaire with scale items on all variables including manipulation check questions. At the end of the experiment, subjects were asked to guess the original agenda of the present research which none could do correctly. They were finally thanked and debriefed by the researchers.

## **ANALYSIS**

First, manipulation checks similar to those reported in the pretests were carried out to ensure that subjects processed the stimuli properly. The results confirmed that the manipulations had their intended effect on the subjects and also provided evidence for construct validity of the manipulation (Cozby, 2009).

Next, scale reliability using Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was calculated to measure psychometric properties of the indicators. The results suggested that all indicators were highly reliable and met Nunnally's (1978) criteria of  $\alpha > 0.60$ , hence could be averaged to form composite scores. Next, all measurement items together were subjected to a principal component analysis in SPSS 20.0 with varimax rotation and factor extraction criteria of Eigen value greater than one. Two distinct factors with original structures were extracted. These results were reconfirmed by factor loadings where each of these first order factors met Nunnally's (1978) item-loading criteria. Table I summarizes the reliability statistics.

The hypotheses postulating the effects of webcare characteristics on brand trust were examined using an ANOVA. The results demonstrated a significant main effect of webcare detail on brand



sustainability ( $F(1,282)=122.72$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) where subjects reading a detailed webcare which addressed sustainability issue, showed higher brand trust than those reading general webcare ( $M_{Detailed}=5.05$ ,  $M_{General}=3.50$ ). Accordingly, H1 was supported. Also the results showed a significant main effect of webcare type on the dependent variable ( $F(1,282)=32.53$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) where subjects reading a humorous webcare showed higher brand trust than those reading a non humorous webcare ( $M_{Humorous}=4.66$ ,  $M_{Non-Humorous}=3.87$ ). Accordingly H2 was supported. The interaction effect between webcare detail and webcare type was also found significant ( $F(1,282)=4.34$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), where subjects reading a webcare which was detailed and with humour showed higher brand trust ( $M= 5.29$ ) as compared to a webcare which was detailed and non-humorous ( $M=4.79$ ), general with humour ( $M=4.04$ ), and general and non-humorous ( $M=2.96$ ). Hence H3a, H3b and H3c were also supported.

## DISCUSSION

The present study adds to the limited research on webcare and management responses on brand trust from the perspective of webcare characteristics. As most of the past research in the webcare and management responses literature has focused on response strategies like accommodative and defensive etc.. this research examined the effect of webcare characteristics namely webcare detail and webcare type on perceptions of brand trust. This study was distinctive in focusing on perceptions of brand trust from the perspective of bystanders present in the online environment.

These results of the present research are consistent with the findings Sparks et al., 2016 and van Noort and Willemsen (2012) in these studies and recently Tathagata & Amar, (2018) people who went through a response to online complaints evaluated the company more positively. Findings are also consistent with the service recovery literature that highlights the need to respond to guest complaints (Bradley & Sparks, 2009).

## THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The present research contributes to literature in several ways. First, this is one of the very few studies to investigate the effect of of webcare attributes i.e., webcare level of detail and webcare type (humour). Studying the effects of these attributes in the domain of online responses and webcare is still in its nascent stage and this contributes to this emerging literature. Till now a majority of the studies have focused only on response strategies like accommodative and defensive. The research shows that academicians can now look into investigating webcare from a new and emerging perspective of attributes. Second, most of the literature in service recovery and online responses stresses on consumers' justice perceptions or uses justice theory as a theoretical foundation. This research deviates from this path and tries to answer a very basic question, whether webcare is useful to bystanders. Such dimensions have critical implications and it is necessary that academicians start investigating real, pragmatic outcomes rather than just understanding perceptions of justice and fairness.

## MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

As providing webcare to a review becomes a trend and more and more people collecting information through reviews becomes a norm, this study has many implications for the manager. As companies have started to understand the importance and implications of online reviews and

in turn responding to these online reviews, this study provides managers with knowledge on making this response useful for not only complaining consumers but also bystanders. First, the information that marketers provide and the source of the webcare, are all important elements in determining trust in the brand. Companies like hotels should focus on addressing specific issues of customers regarding essential aspects of the hotel with a hint of humour.

## LIMITATIONS

The research has its own limitations. First, the research context was confined in the hospitality industry with a hotel. Though the propensity to post webcares was relatively high for these firms, future research should be conducted to seek insights about the persuasive impacts of webcares in other product and service contexts in order to increase generalizability. Second, the present research explores the role of level of detail and webcare type on brand trust, future studies may look at other essential attributes of webcare.

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