

BRAND RESPONSES TO NEGATIVE TWITTER COMMENTS

by

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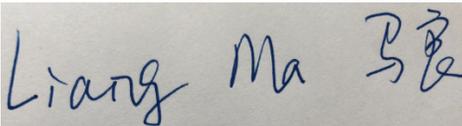
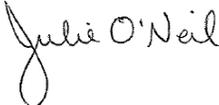
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Brand Responses to Negative Twitter Comments

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Introduction

The rise of new media technologies has certainly changed the modern communication landscape and how people interact with one another. Social networking sites (SNS) are one of the primary platforms that enable users to publicly post and communicate with a vast community of other users. SNS have provided a digital space for users and consumers to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences about specific brands (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). The asynchronous nature of SNS allows these messages or posts to be accessed and viewed at any time, regardless of when the original content was posted. As a result, virtual communities and potential brand users are able to read comments made by other consumers, and form judgements about a brand based on the way the brand responds to the comments, positive or negative. While prior literature has examined electronic negative word-of-mouth (e-NWOM) and how a brand manages public criticism online (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010), there is a lack of research concerning the role of customized responses in an e-NWOM context, and how those responses affect consumers' attitudes and future purchase intentions. Likewise, there is a lack of research on the effects of apologies within customized brand responses to e-NWOM and how that might affect consumers' attitudes and future purchase intentions.

The present experimental study seeks to contribute valuable insights for brands to better understand their consumers by adding to the body of literature on e-NWOM, which has typically focused on why consumers complain. Using the concepts of customization and apologizing, 224 evaluations of brand responses to e-NWOM messages on SNS were examined through an online experiment. This study seeks to identify factors that can make brand responses to e-NWOM more effective.

Literature Review

A review of the current literature will be explored to help explain some of the factors that affect the way brand responses to e-NWOM affect other consumers' judgements and evaluations of the brand. In the relationship marketing and customer relationship management discipline, some progress has been made toward better understanding what influences consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions. For example, researchers have identified justice, commitment, trust, and apologies as variables that affect consumers in an e-NWOM situation. This literature review will discuss those concepts while offering a new perspective through which to view brand responses to e-NWOM.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM)

Social psychology and consumer behavior research have long studied the impact of traditional word-of-mouth communication (WOM) on brand attitudes and purchase intentions. With the development of new media technologies such as social networking sites (SNS), WOM conversations between consumers and brands have moved online. Not only do brand websites and blog spaces allow consumers to post information in regard to their experiences with products and services, but social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have enabled users to engage in "real-time information exchange" with other consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010, p. 311). SNS have given consumers immeasurable opportunities to articulate their opinions.

This type of communication exchange is known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), eWOM communication "refers to any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (p. 39).

Specifically, on SNS, eWOM is illustrated by the commenting, liking, and sharing of digital content related to a brand (Ekran, 2015). Consumers are using digital platforms as areas for self-expression regarding their opinions of brands, which are then publicly shared to a vast network of other consumers from all around the world. Communication technology allows e-WOM to spread “exponentially and at low cost” (Lis, 2013, p. 129).

Consumers and other SNS users are able to easily participate in and view e-WOM as a result of algorithms on SNS which filter and curate content for similar users. Algorithmically filtered feeds are defined as systems that post content to the timelines of individual social media users that “are automatically selected and presented,” “typically with reference to ‘relevance’ to the user and/or to the relative ‘importance’ of each post” (“Algorithmically Filtered Feed,” 2016, para. 1). For instance, if one user follows and interacts with Brand A online and another user also follows and interacts with Brand A online, each user’s content will be made available to the other user since the algorithm calculates that content as relevant to both users. Berkovsky and Freyne (2015) describe this action as transpiring between social media connections, which can include “friends, followers, contacts, articulated connections, and so on” (para. 1). Digital feed curation plays an important role in how virtual brand communities and networks are formed and sustained.

Virtual communities. These networks and virtual communities are composed of consumers and brand followers who play important roles in the digital presence and reputation of brands online. Rheingold (1993) explained that virtual communities are groups of people who participate in computer-mediated social discourse as a way to create interpersonal relationships. The goal of these communities is simply to interact with one another regardless of geographic location. According to Shang et al. (2006) “consumers join communities in order to learn from

others' experiences or acquire information" (p. 399). That is to say, virtual communities exist on SNS to endorse or support particular brands, as well as to share valuable information with as many other consumers as possible.

Consumer networks include both posters and viewers of e-WOM messages. Posters of e-WOM messages are the consumers who actually compose digital messages and publicly post them to their individual social media pages by tagging or mentioning the brand within the content. Viewers or observers of e-WOM messages are third-party users and followers of the brand who read the content since it appears on their personal timelines and digital feeds. It is important to note that observers of e-WOM messages may also see the content because they are interested in making a purchase and are seeking out others' opinions.

Kim et al. (2016) explored the concept of posters and viewers of eWOM communication in the context of negative electronic word-of-mouth (e-NWOM). E-NWOM is any customer engagement with a brand that results in the online spreading of an unfavorable image of the brand, product, or service. These messages "are found to have detrimental effects on all phases of the consumer decision-making process, including brand evaluation, brand choice, purchase behaviors, and brand loyalty" (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012, p. 131). Kim et al. (2016) explained that simply viewing e-NWOM messages online has a negative influence on the consumers' purchase decisions. This fact draws attention to the role virtual brand communities play in developing consumers' perceptions, regardless of whether those consumers participate in the posting process of e-NWOM or not.

The exposure of online users to such a vast array of consumer posts in virtual brand communities has the ability to generate more social influence over one's purchase decisions. Specifically, Cheung et al. (2012) explained that "the greater amount of time these consumers

spend within a brand community has afforded them greater exposure to others' opinions and behaviors and consequently more opportunities to be influenced by others" (p. 3235). The explanation for this process is rooted in social influence reference group theories (Cheung et al., 2012). Individuals have the ability to learn by accepting information from others as evidence about reality. This process enables consumers and users of SNS to consider the opinions and experiences of other consumers as true, thus affecting consumer purchase behavior.

User-generated content and credibility. E-WOM content has been described by Chen and Xie (2008) as "consumer-created information" and by Cheung and Thadani (2012) as "user-generated content" (UGC). This content, both created and distributed by the individual consumers, is important to the longevity of consumer-to-brand relationships because it reveals how much consumers are willing to share information with others, as a means to inform and potentially influence their purchasing behaviors. For instance, Cheung and Thadani (2012) stated that online customer reviews, a type of UGC, were "found to significantly influence consumer purchasing decisions," since they are a type of informational exchange between consumers who share similar needs and/or interests in a particular product category (p. 461). As a result, consumers are attributing more source credibility and trustworthiness to consumer reviews and other forms of UGC that are available online. In particular, researchers have posited that UGC elicits stronger influence over consumer choice, as compared to traditional advertisements, because UGC is perceived as more authentic in nature since the brands have not paid for or sponsored the content.

As UGC has gained more popularity and has become a recognizable trend in our social society, users and followers on SNS are exposed to a multiplicity of opinions and experiences, both positive and negative. Posts that contain negative information about a particular brand or

product are referred to as electronic negative word-of-mouth (e-NWOM). E-NWOM exposes brands to certain vulnerabilities surrounding their reputation and image due to the impact of the unfavorable or damaging information that is shared about the brand.

Electronic negative word-of-mouth (e-NWOM). As mentioned previously, electronic negative word-of-mouth (e-NWOM) is the posting of any negative comment about a brand on SNS by consumers. E-NWOM is also identified in consumer behavior literature as online complaint messages or consumer complaint behavior (CCB). Crie (2003) defines CCB as “responses to perceived dissatisfaction in the post-purchase phase” (p. 60). With digital platforms giving consumers more opportunities to share e-NWOM, there is a heightened need for brands to understand the power that these messages hold. “Being aware of the great number of potential NWOM receivers, online complaining often serves as a deliberate action to harm focal companies” (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012, p. 132). Furthermore, Crie (2003) argues that CCB is a “public behavioral response to dissatisfaction” that has the potential to reach a large number of brand users (p. 63).

Consumers have different motives and reasons for using SNS as channels to spread e-NWOM about brands. According to the uses and gratifications theory, consumers use specific media to satisfy individual needs or desires (Ruggiero, 2000). This can include sharing e-NWOM messages. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) introduced the *homeostase utility* as a way to help explain why some consumers have a desire to engage in e-NWOM. This utility is rooted in one’s “desire for balance,” and how that desire is fulfilled (or not) from a dissatisfying consumption experience (p. 44). Balance, in this context, “can be restored by writing a comment on an opinion platform,” as a way to vent negative feelings (p. 44). Venting negative emotion is one possible explanation for why consumers post e-NWOM. By posting a comment on a digital

platform as a means to vent, consumers have the opportunity to reduce their frustration or irritation with the brand, which resulted from their dissatisfying experience.

Since negative information is “known to be more attention getting” than positive information, it is important to note the ways in which a brand manages and/or diffuses the negative information (Ahluwalia et al., 2000, p. 203). Van Noort and Willemsen (2012) have described this framework of evaluating a brand’s response strategies to e-NWOM, as *webcare*. “Webcare— whether reactive or proactive— is believed to provide an effective means to mitigate the effects of NWOM” (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012, p. 131). Webcare is a tool for online complaint management. Specifically, it addresses how brands can interact with complaining consumers in a manner that is both organic and candid. Van Noort and Willemsen (2012) additionally suggest that brands should “humanize the corporate voice,” as part of their webcare interventions, through open dialogue that focuses on strengthening the interpersonal relationships between the brand and its consumers (p. 134). By employing a conversational voice as a webcare strategy in response to e-NWOM, brands can be viewed more positively by other consumers, who are observing the messages through virtual communities or brand social media pages.

Because e-NWOM can be viewed by other potential consumers on SNS, it is important for brands to understand the elements of their response, from the perspective of other consumers or third-party observers on the platforms. Specifically, the roles that interactional justice, trust, and commitment play in observers’ evaluations of brands as it relates to their attitudes and future purchase intentions.

Interactional Justice

Justice theory has long explored the drivers of customer satisfaction with complaint handling from the perspective of perceived fairness. Martínez-Tur et al. (2006) explained that “justice perceptions are always present in consumption experiences, beyond the very small percentage of customers who complain,” and that those perceptions impact the ways in which consumers evaluate their relationships with brands (p. 101). Martínez-Tur et al. (2006) explained that third-party observers on SNS are in critical positions to form perceptions about brands, since they are able to view the ways in which the brand responded to complaining consumers. Therefore, it is important to better understand the role that justice plays in an e-NWOM situation.

There are three types of justice on which consumers base their perceptions of fairness: distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. Distributive justice is defined as the “the perceived fairness of the redress offered to the customer to resolve the complaint,” through refunds, exchanges, or future discounts (Orsingher et al., 2010, p. 17). Overall, this dimension of justice is concerned with outcomes. Conversely, procedural and interactional justice are “more relationship oriented” (Martínez-Tur et al., 2006, p. 102). Procedural justice is the “perceived fairness of means (i.e., policies, procedures, criteria) used by decision makers in arriving at a dispute resolution” (Orsingher et al., 2010, p. 171). Lastly, interactional justice, the most significant dimension of justice related to e-NWOM communication, is defined as “the quality of the interpersonal treatment people receive” (Orsingher et al., 2010, p. 171). Interactional justice takes interest in the level of honesty, empathy, and politeness with which brands treat their consumers. Ultimately, it is about the humane treatment of consumers who have made complaints or posted e-NWOM messages.

Interactional justice will be the only dimension of justice that is explored in this study because it is the most relevant to an e-NWOM experience. Interactional justice is concerned with the interpersonal treatment and humanness of a brand's response. It is a key dimension of justice theory to explore in relation to e-NWOM because it offers a rationale for why consumers may feel satisfied or dissatisfied with a company's response after a service failure. For instance, Orsingher et al. (2010) discussed return intent as a major variable for consumers after their negative consumption experience with a particular brand. Orsingher et al. (2010) defined return intent as "the likelihood of making future purchases from a specific retailer" (p. 171). "Return intent is extremely important after service failure has occurred, because complainants who feel satisfied with the way the company has handled their problem are likely to repurchase from that specific company" (Orsingher et al., 2010, p. 171). Brands that are effective with consumer complaint management have the potential to improve consumer retention and long-term positive relationships.

Commitment and Trust

Cultivating and maintaining long-term relationships with consumers as a way to better manage consumer complaints or the frequency of e-NWOM experiences can be a difficult task. The two fundamental components of successful relationships are commitment and trust. Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined commitment in social exchanges as when "the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely" (p. 23). Commitment is concerned with long-term cohesion between all parties—in this case, brands and their consumers. Amine (1998) explained that commitment is helpful to better understand "the mental processes underlying the repeat purchasing of a brand" (p. 309). Moreover, Hon and Grunig (1999) defined commitment as "the extent to which each party believes and feels that the

relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote” (p. 3). Overall, commitment focuses on the value and worth of the relationship between the brand and consumer.

The second component of successful long-term relationships with consumers is trust. Trust is defined by Morgan and Hunt (1994) as “when one party has confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” (p. 23). In the context of a service failure or negative consumption experience, a consumer’s trust is either strengthened or diminished as a result of how the brand responds to them. “If a complainant receives a poor response from an organization, the customer is likely to perceive that organization as untrustworthy” (Dewitt et al., 2008, p. 272).

Commitment and trust are important variables that certainly mediate and affect the attitude formation and purchase intentions of consumers—both actual consumers and third-party observers of brands on SNS. For e-NWOM, brand responses are crucial in building customer relationships for repeat business. As DeWitt et al. (2008) stated, “it is not only transactions— it is building long-term relationships,” that account for positive attitudes of brands, as well as the determination to re-purchase (p. 113).

Specific elements of a brand’s response to e-NWOM are likely to contribute to a stronger sense of interactional justice, trust, and commitment experienced by consumers. Two of these elements, apologies and customization, are reviewed next.

Apologies

Apologies are defined by Roschk and Kaiser (2013) as “messages containing acknowledgements of blameworthiness for negative events” (p. 295). Moreover, Lee and Atkinson (2019) described apologies as “an organization’s acceptance of responsibility for a crisis and asking for forgiveness” (p. 179). Often, apologies are explored in connection to

organizational crises and crisis management; however, the fundamental principles of corporate apologia can be applied to other instances of negative experiences and errors. According to Lee and Atkinson (2019), e-NWOM “constitutes as a secondary crisis,” meaning that the strategy behind the apologies and how they are perceived by consumers, is different than traditional crises (p. 179).

Although companies may offer apologies to mitigate strong emotions felt by consumers who have negative brand experiences, it is the ways in which those apologies are perceived by consumers that play a significant role in the brand’s image restoration (Bentley, 2018). For e-NWOM, not only is the complaining consumer receiving an apology from the brand, but that apology is being publicly viewed by third-party observers on SNS who consider the elements of empathy, intensity, and timing to assess the brand’s response and/or apology. Roschk and Kaiser (2013) explained that a customer will “feel less aggressive when she/he is acknowledged by the organization” (p. 295). Likewise, other or potential consumers should have a less negative perception of a company if it acknowledges a mistake and apologizes.

One explanation for this, as noted by Bolkan and Daly (2009) is rooted in Burgoon et al.’s (2002) analysis of the expectancy violations theory (EVT). These authors stated, “people develop expectations about the communicative behavior of others based on their relationships and the context of their interactions” (Bolkan & Daly, 2009, p. 22). When it comes to e-NWOM, the third-party observers consciously use the information they receive on social media, such as an apology to a consumer, to arrive at a conceptualization about the brand. In a study to test the effects of excuses, justifications, and apologies. Bolkan and Daly (2009) discovered that believability, appropriateness, and consideration were the top factors that mattered to consumers who experienced a service failure and posted a complaint or e-NWOM message, evaluated the

brand on. Similar to the tenets of interactional justice, commitment, and trust, consumers want to know that their complaints are being taken seriously by the brand.

Most notably, Bolkan and Daly's (2009) finding of *consideration* is relevant to a better understanding of e-NWOM, because it focuses on interpersonal fairness. Consideration was defined by Bolkan and Daly (2009) as "a notion of acknowledgement and understanding of customers' negative experiences" (p. 25). If consumers evaluate a brand's response and apology based on the idea of consideration, they are focusing on the ways in which the brand satisfied a need for cognizance and respect amidst the service failure. Consideration is similar to interactional justice; consumers are attentive to how a brand treats them, and their attitudes and future purchase behaviors are influenced by their perceptions of a brand's consideration. Treating people well has always been essential to customer service. In the world of e-NWOM, one way to show consideration of consumers is by customizing a brand's response to their complaints.

Customization and Interactivity

Customized messages or media have indisputably expanded since the inception of the Internet and SNS. Customized content has gained popularity among consumers because it has been personalized to target their interests. Kang & Sundar (2011) stated that "tailored content is highly appreciated by [consumers], as evidenced by their positive attitudes toward the interface" (p. 572). Customized digital content provides individually catered experiences to each user depending on their interests and needs. Moreover, this content is contingent upon the brands or accounts users follow. The idea is that the more customized a message is, the more the consumer or user will value it.

The idea of customized or personalized content has been referred to as a “communication strategy in which information about the receiver is used in order to refer to his or her self” (Crijns et al., 2017, p. 621). Personalized messages are perceived to be more “meaningful and persuasive” (p. 621). Based on a study conducted to better understand how consumers process and interpret personalized organizational responses, Crijns et al. (2017) found that the most important components of a personalized response are that the organization “addresses consumers by his or her name, uses personal pronouns and mentions the name of the person who is responding” (p. 620).

Furthermore, Kalyanaraman and Sundar (2003) explained that interactivity is an important element of customization that plays a role in the way that consumers process messages. Interactivity is defined in many different ways by a variety of scholars and researchers. According to Ariel and Avidar (2015), interactivity is typically defined in terms of being a perception-related variable, a process-related variable, and/or a medium characteristic. Perception-related variables are concerned with a user’s experiences and self-reports, process-related variables are focused on the exchange between users, while medium characteristics are concerned with the features of the actual platform (Ariel & Avidar, 2015).

Overall, interactivity is concerned with participatory platforms and users who join the conversations. Researchers have discussed the relevance of interactivity as it relates to SNS use. In particular, Kalyanaraman and Sundar (2003) found that interactivity is reinforced by the use of personalized messages because it facilitates more discussion that is viewed more favorably by users. As a result, it is important for brands to understand how e-NWOM conversations on SNS impact consumers’ ability to view and potentially participate with the interface, thus contributing to the attitudes and future purchase intentions of prospective and actual customers.

Another important element to consider is whether the brand has provided the consumer with a generic response or no response at all. For the purpose of this thesis, a generic brand response is identified as a response that shares most if not all of the same content for every user. For instance, when brands only offer a phone number or email address for consumers, without using their names or personalizing the message in any way, those responses are generic. Such responses appear to have been copied and pasted, which can be detrimental to brands because they demonstrate that the brand does not value or care about the individuality of their consumers (Buryan, 2018). Research has suggested that brands are viewed more favorably when they make some sort of a response to a consumer instead of remaining silent and taking no action (Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). Evidence suggests that “observers appreciate the brand’s willingness to interact with consumers, which indicates respect and professionalism” (Johnen & Schnittka, 2019, p. 859). This raises the question of whether some consumers might be offended if the response they receive is generic and not personalized in any way. The potential for consumers to react negatively to a generic response will be explored below.

Since the concept of customization has been conventionally associated with consumers’ content consumption, it has yet to be viewed from the perspective of a brand’s response to e-NWOM. If customized and personalized content is such a significant element of a user’s SNS experience, then it should be studied in relation to a brand’s response strategy and how that response can influence other third-party observers or members of online communities. This thesis tests the proposition that brands should respond to e-NWOM with customized messages.

Hypotheses and Research Question

The current literature on e-NWOM has emphasized the importance of a brand’s response to e-NWOM messages and how consumers both process and evaluate those responses. Some

variables that have emerged from the research include interactional justice, commitment, and trust, which all play instrumental roles in consumers' attitudes toward brands and future purchase intentions. Although the current literature has identified these variables as significant to attitudes and intentions, there has yet to be research available that investigates the customization of a brand's response to e-NWOM and how its effect compares to the effects of other factors, such as the presence of apologies. In this study, the effects of customization are tested and compared to the effects of apologizing to determine the relative importance of both variables (customization and apologizing) in a brand's response to e-NWOM.

RQ1: How do consumers' (a) attitudes and (b) purchase intentions vary depending on whether brands give no response, a generic response, or a customized response to e-NWOM messages?

H1: Customized brand responses will have more positive effects on consumer (a) attitudes and (b) purchase intentions than generic responses.

H2: The presence of an apology in a brand response will have more positive effects on consumer (a) attitudes and (b) purchase intentions than the absence of an apology.

RQ2: Is there an interaction effect between customization and apology in brand responses on consumer (a) attitudes or (b) purchase intentions?

H3: The effect of customization on consumer attitudes will be mediated by consumers' perceptions of (a) interactional justice, (b) trust, and (c) commitment.

H4: The effect of customization on consumer purchase intentions will be mediated by consumers' perceptions of (a) interactional justice, (b) trust, and (c) commitment.

H5: The effect of an apology on consumer attitudes will be mediated by consumers' perceptions of (a) interactional justice, (b) trust, and (c) commitment.

H6: The effect of an apology on consumer purchase intentions will be mediated by consumers' perceptions of (a) interactional justice, (b) trust, and (c) commitment.

Methodology

The methodology for this thesis was a 2x2 between-subjects experimental design with a control group. The experiment was conducted online using a sample from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The independent variables were customization (generic vs. customized response) and apology (present vs. absent) in a brand's response to e-NWOM messages. The control group featured e-NWOM messages with no brand response.

Prior to completing the main study through MTurk, a pre-test was conducted using a sample of undergraduate students ($n=64$) from a private university located in Texas. The student participants were invited to complete the pre-test as a way to earn extra class credit. Each student participant was presented with all five possible versions of the stimulus (i.e., a within subjects design), so they could offer feedback to improve the overall design prior to distributing the main study.

Pre-Test

Measures

Reliability statistics were calculated to ensure that the scales were dependable. Interactional justice was measured with an eight-item scale developed by Tax et al. (1998). The items in the scale were related to honesty, explanation, politeness, and effort. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.501 to 0.906 across the five conditions. Commitment was measured with a three-item scale from Morgan Hunt (1984). Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.623 to 0.702. Trust was measured using a three-item scale developed by Morgan and Hunt (1994). These items included questions about effort, reliability, and integrity. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.845 to 0.949.

Attitudes were measured using a three-item scale adapted from Muehling (1987). Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.948 to 0.969. Purchase intentions were measured using a three-item scale adapted from Hsu, Yu, and Chang (2017). Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.682 to 0.796.

Customization was measured with a four-item scale adapted from Kang and Sundar (2016). Cronbach's alpha for customization ranged from 0.297 to 0.533. Lastly, three items were used to measure apologies. These items were adapted from Choi and Lin (2009). Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.674 to 0.942. Please see Table 1 for the pre-test reliability statistics.

Based on the pre-test reliability scores, it was determined that the scales be adjusted for the main study to strengthen the overall quality of the measures. The adjustments to the scales are outlined below in the *main study*.

Table 1
Pre -Test Scale Reliability Scores Across Five Conditions

Scale	α
Customization	0.297 - 0.533
Apology	0.674 - 0.942
Interactional Justice	0.501 - 0.906
Trust	0.845 - 0.949
Commitment	0.623 - 0.702
Attitudes	0.948 - 0.969
Future Purchase Intentions	0.682 - 0.796

Manipulation Check

Since the pre-test was a within-subjects design where participants were presented with all possible conditions, paired samples *t*-tests were computed to determine if there were any statistically significant differences between the groups who saw customized responses and responses with apologies. Based on the paired samples *t*-test, there was a statistically significant difference between the apology groups and their perceptions of an apology when the brand response was customized ($M = 0.545$, $SD = 1.369$); $t(54) = 2.955$, $p = .005$. Likewise, there was a statistically significant difference between the apology groups and their perceptions of an apology when the brand response was not customized ($M = 1.582$, $SD = 1.526$); $t(58) = 7.964$, $p = .000$. For the customized groups, their perceptions of customization differed significantly when an apology was present in the brand's response ($M = 1.161$, $SD = 1.766$); $t(54) = 4.873$, $p = .000$ and when the brand's response did not contain an apology ($M = 2.464$, $SD = 1.621$); $t(55) = 11.373$, $p = .000$.

The pre-test also included the experimental manipulation checks for customization and apology. Two *t*-tests found that there was a statically significant difference between the groups who were presented with a customized brand response ($M = 4.625$, $SD = 1.143$) and groups who were presented with a generic response ($M = 3.145$, $SD = 1.457$); $t(222) = -8.126$, $p = .001$. For apology, there was also a statistically significant difference between groups who were presented with a response that contained an apology ($M = 4.560$, $SD = 1.424$) and those that did not ($M = 3.553$, $SD = 1.741$); $t(222) = -4.572$, $p = .002$. Although both of the manipulation checks were successful, it was determined that three additional items were to be added to the customization scale as a way to strengthen the reliability for the main study. The items were developed by Crijns et al. (2017) to measure for elements of personalization. The new scale for customization,

which was used in the main study, had a total of seven items. However, after testing for scale reliability, it was observed that one of the items (*HamptonByHilton's response to the consumer was generic*) hurt the overall reliability score, so it was removed. For apology, it was determined that one additional item be added to the scale in order to strengthen the reliability for the main study. The additional item was adapted from the same Choi and Lin (2009) scale. Please see Appendix A for all questionnaire items.

Main Study

The main online experiment was conducted via MTurk as a 2 (generic or customized) x 2 (apology or no apology) between-subjects design with a true control group (no brand response) for five conditions total. There were approximately 45 participants per cell. The group sizes ranged from 41 to 47 participants. Typically, it is recommended that 30 participants be assigned to each experimental group, however the decision to assign 45 participants per cell was made as a way to increase statistical power and to maximize the budget since the effect sizes were unknown (Roscoe, 1969). The means and standard deviations for all five experimental groups are reported in Table 2. An internal university research grant funded this study. The size of the grant allowed for 225 participants to be recruited from MTurk. Each condition presented a set of three e-NWOM posts and three positive e-WOM posts with a brand's response (or no response), to the negative posts, followed by a multi-item questionnaire.

Table 2

Cells Means and Standard Deviations (N = 224)

Variable	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
	<i>M (SD)</i>				
Customization	4.92 (1.25)	4.86 (1.19)	3.11 (1.69)	3.07 (1.57)	3.57 (1.75)
Apology	4.76 (1.27)	4.04 (1.59)	4.36 (1.55)	3.05 (1.73)	3.59 (1.80)
IJ	4.90 (0.82)	4.79 (0.82)	4.25 (0.99)	3.84 (1.13)	4.03 (1.17)
Commitment	4.90 (1.09)	4.80 (1.13)	4.35 (1.44)	4.13 (1.46)	3.80 (1.71)
Trust	4.51 (1.30)	4.41 (1.26)	4.17 (1.37)	4.09 (1.45)	3.98 (1.58)
Attitudes	4.68 (1.31)	4.33 (1.53)	4.09 (1.54)	4.00 (1.55)	3.85 (1.66)
FPI	3.95 (1.46)	3.93 (1.63)	3.90 (1.63)	3.77 (1.80)	3.85 (1.70)
<i>N cases</i>	46	45	45	47	41

Note: IJ=interactional justice and FPI=future purchase intentions.

The questionnaire for the main study consisted of the same measures from the pre-test with the exception of customization which was modified to include three new items from Crjins et al. (2017), apology which added an additional item from Choi and Lin (2009), and commitment which added three new items from Hon and Grunig (1999). Please see Table 3 for the reliability statistics for the main study. Please see Appendix A for the questionnaire items and Appendix B for the complaint/e-NWOM Twitter scenarios.

Table 3

Main Study Scale Reliability Statistics

Scale	<i>N of Items</i>	α	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Customization	6	.915	3.91	1.708
Apology	4	.899	3.96	1.691
Interactional Justice	8	.797	4.36	1.072
Commitment	6	.914	4.41	1.425
Trust	3	.856	4.24	1.394
Attitudes	3	.919	4.20	1.533
Future Purchase Intentions	3	.941	3.88	1.634

After updating and verifying the reliability of each scale for the main study, the items were then averaged together to create single variables. SPSS 26 was used to run a one-way ANOVA, followed by factorial ANOVAs, and regression analyses. Stata 16 was used for path analysis. According to Kline (2011), many scholars recommend a sample size of 200 or more for path analysis, and a case to parameter ratio of 20:1 is desirable. However, Kline (2011) states that a ratio of 10:1 is still acceptable. In this study, the path model had a total of 16 parameters and a sample size of 183, so the 10:1 ratio was satisfied.

Sample

The target population for this study was U.S. adults who were 18 years of age or older. A total of 225 participants were recruited for this online study through MTurk. However, only 224 responses were used in the data analysis as one participant's data was excluded due to

incomplete information. Amazon Mechanical Turk is a crowdsourcing website where volunteers complete human intelligence tasks for small monetary compensations. The use of MTurk provided data that was more representative of the entire U.S. population than a student sample would have been. While MTurk has many benefits, some drawbacks of using such sample could include the age range and socioeconomic background of MTurk users. It has also been noted that a majority of MTurk users live in the United States and India (Goodman et al., 2013; Paolacci et al., 2014); however, this study specifically targeted U.S. consumers, therefore this aspect of MTurk was not a problem. Each participant was compensated \$1.50 for completing the task.

Procedure

Qualtrics was used to administer the online questionnaire. Participants were directed from MTurk to Qualtrics via a link on the recruitment page. The link was accessible from computers and mobile devices. Once the participants were recruited through MTurk and agreed to participate in the study, they were directed to the Qualtrics link. The participants first read an introduction about the purpose of the study as well as information concerning the product category that the types of questions that would be asked. Next, the participants were randomly assigned to one of five groups, where they read six hypothetical tweets from consumers. After the participants read the tweets, they were presented with a series of 34 questionnaire items about the tweets they had seen. The items measured perceptions of the following variables: interactional justice, commitment, trust, customization, apologizing, attitudes, and future purchase intentions (see Appendix B).

Upon completion of the questions, participants received a unique participation code from Qualtrics which they were instructed to enter into MTurk to validate their participation in the

study. Once the researcher verified their participation codes, the monetary compensation of \$1.50 was approved and distributed.

Results

Respondent Profile

A total of 225 surveys were completed through Amazon MTurk but only 224 responses could be used for data analysis (one was excluded due to significant incomplete data). Participants in the study were 61% male ($n = 136$) and 39% female ($n = 87$), as shown in Table 4, whose ages ranged from 19 to 69 ($M = 36.6$, $SD = 10.2$). Most participants were White/Caucasian (72%, $n = 162$) as shown in Table 5. Nearly half of respondents had a bachelor's degree ($n = 108$) as shown in Table 6. The majority of participants' ($n = 133$) reported an annual household income between \$20,001 and \$60,000 as shown in Table 7.

Table 4

Participants' sex statistics (n = 224)

Sex	<i>n</i>	%
Male	136	60.7
Female	87	38.8
Prefer not to answer	1	0.4

Table 5

Participants' racial statistics (n = 224)

Race	<i>n</i>	%
Asian/Pacific Islander	9	4.0
Black/African American	31	13.8
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	18	8.0
Native American	2	0.9
White/Caucasian	162	72.3
Prefer not to answer	2	0.9

Table 6

Participants' completed education levels (n = 224)

Completed Education	<i>n</i>	%
High school diploma or GED	61	27.2
Associate's degree	32	14.3
Bachelor's degree	108	48.2
Master's or doctorate degree	23	10.3

Table 7

Participants' annual household income levels (n = 224)

Annual Household Income	<i>n</i>	%
0 to \$20,000	16	7.1
\$20,001 to \$40,000	67	29.9
\$40,001 to \$60,000	66	29.5
\$60,001 to \$80,000	37	16.5
\$80,001 to \$100,000	20	8.9
\$100,001 to \$120,000	12	5.4
\$120,001 and above	6	2.7

Data Screening

Outliers

The data set was screened for outliers. Four outliers were identified, but it was determined that these cases did not significantly change the results. Therefore, the outliers were included in the data analysis.

Cronbach's Alpha

To ensure that all of the scales were reliable and internally consistent, the Cronbach's alpha scores were reported. The alphas indicated that the scales were reliable (see Table 3).

Correlations

To better understand the correlations, Pearson's correlation test was computed to identify any linear correlations between the variables as displayed in Table 8.

Table 8

Correlation Matrix

Scale	IJ	COM	TRST	ATT	FPI	CUS	APL
IJ	1.00						
COM	.861**	1.00					
TRST	.750**	.815**	1.00				
ATT	.734**	.796**	.838**	1.00			
FPI	.596**	.697**	.757**	.833**	1.00		
CUS	.739**	.764**	.656**	.656**	.578**	1.00	
APL	.733**	.743**	.653**	.659**	.601**	.672**	1.00

Note: ** = statistically significant at 0.01 level. The abbreviated variables are as follows:

IJ=interactional justice, COM=commitment, TRST=trust, ATT=attitudes, FPI=future purchase intentions, CUS=customization, APL=apology.

Multicollinearity

According to Field (2013), multicollinearity poses a potential problem or challenge with regression. Multicollinearity occurs when more than one variable is measuring the same thing. Because of several high correlations between variables, multicollinearity checks (VIF and tolerance) were performed prior to regression analysis. Common guidelines state that if VIF is “greater than 10 then there is cause for concern,” as well as “tolerance below 0.2 indicates a potential problem” (Field, 2013, p.325). The collinearity tolerance values ranged from .197 to .463. The VIF values ranged from 2.159 to 5.078. Based on these results, multicollinearity was determined not to be a significant concern.

Assumption of Normality

The acceptable kurtosis and skewness range for a normal distribution should be less than +/- 2 (George & Mallory, 2009). As shown in Table 9, the assumption of normality was satisfied for each scale.

Table 9

Skewness and kurtosis values

Scale	Skewness	Kurtosis
Customization	-.148	-1.069
Apology	-.265	-1.077
Interactional Justice	-.691	.338
Commitment	-.637	-.241
Trust	-.414	-.405
Attitudes	-.294	-.840
Future Purchase Intentions	-.120	-1.006

Manipulation Check

The customization and apology scales were once again used as manipulation checks in the main study. Two independent samples *t*-tests were computed for each of the manipulation variables. For customization, there was a significant difference in perceived customization between participants presented with a customized brand response ($M = 4.893$, $SD = 1.217$) and those presented with a generic response ($M = 3.091$, $SD = 1.621$); $t(181) = -8.498$, $p = .004$. For apology, there was a significant difference in the perception that the company had apologized between participants presented with a brand response that contained an apology ($M = 4.560$, SD

= 1.424) and those that did not contain an apology ($M = 3.535$, $SD = 1.726$); $t(181) = -4.380$, $p = .011$. Therefore, the manipulations of customization and apology were successful. Please see Appendix A for scales and items.

RQ1 Results (ANOVA)

A one-way ANOVA was conducted using SPSS 26 to test for statistically significant differences between the groups who were presented with a customized response, generic response, or no response at all. For this test, the independent variables were the nominal/categorical groups. The results of the one-way ANOVA serve to address RQ1:

RQ1: How do consumers' (a) attitudes and (b) purchase intentions vary depending on whether brands give no response, a generic response, or a customized response to e-NWOM messages?

To answer RQ1, an ANOVA was computed to explore the differences between response type (customized, generic, no response) on the dependent variables. There were no statistically differences between response type on attitudes, $F(2,130) = 1.086$, $p = .341$, or purchase intentions, $F(2, 130) = .092$, $p = .912$ (see Table 10).

Table 10

One-way ANOVA results using customization as the criterion (n = 132)

Predictor	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Attitudes	5.392	2	2.696	1.086	.341
Future Purchase Intentions	.538	2	.269	.092	.912

As seen in Figure 1, there was some difference between the three groups, indicating that the type of response a consumer receives (customized, generic, no response), has a slight effect on their attitudes and purchase intentions. There is evidence that a customized brand response generates somewhat more positive effects on attitudes and future purchase intentions than a generic response or no response at all. However, the difference between response types is not statistically significant as outlined in Table 10. A statistically significant effect may not have been produced due to the smaller sample size ($n = 224$) as well as the relevance of customization to the respondents in comparison to other elements that influence attitudinal and behavioral changes.

Figure 1. One-way ANOVA Graph

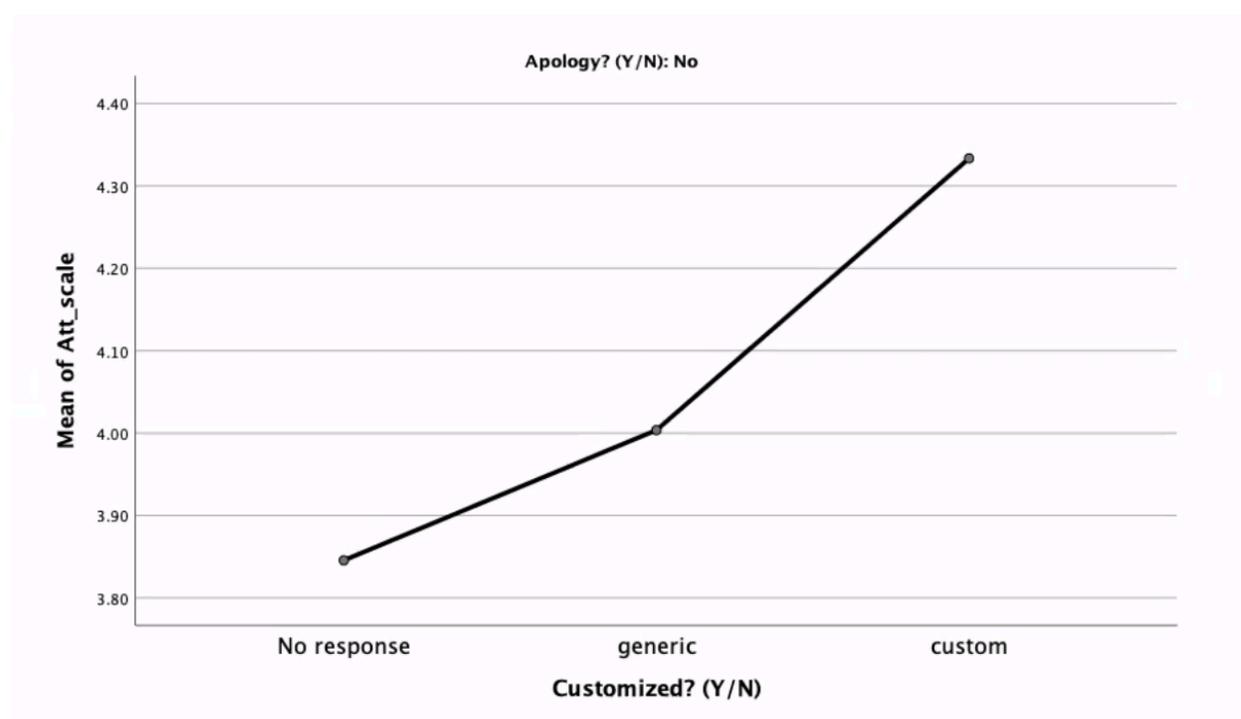


Figure 1. The displayed graph shows the results of the one-way ANOVA for the dependent variable of attitudes. Customized responses suggest stronger effects on attitudes although the effects are not statistically significant.

H1 – RQ2 Results (Factorial ANOVA and Regression)

H1: Customized brand responses will have more positive effects on consumer (a) attitudes and (b) purchase intentions than generic responses.

H2: The presence of an apology in a brand response will have more positive effects on consumer (a) attitudes and (b) purchase intentions than the absence of an apology.

RQ2: Is there an interaction effect between customization and apology in brand responses on consumer (a) attitudes or (b) purchase intentions?

To address H1 through RQ2, factorial ANOVAs and regression analyses were computed. Firstly, a factorial ANOVA was conducted using the experimental groups as the independent variables to explore the separate effects of customization and apologies. Only the four experimental groups who received a response ($n = 183$) were included in the factorial ANOVA. The results indicated that customized brand responses have slightly more positive effects ($F(1) = 4.404, p = .037, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .024$) on consumer attitudes than generic responses. The effect of customized brand responses on future purchase intentions was not statistically significant ($p = .671$). Therefore, H1 was partially supported (see Table 11). For H2, the results indicated that the presence of an apology in a brand response did not have a significant effect on consumer attitudes ($p = .326$) or purchase intentions ($p = .762$). Therefore, H2 was not supported (see Table 12).

Table 11

Brand Attitude ANOVA (n = 183)

Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Corrected Model	12.76	3	4.25	1.93	.127	.031
Intercept	3346.06	1	3346.06	1515.91	<.001	.894
Customization (Y or N)	9.72	1	9.72	4.40	.037	.024
Apology (Y or N)	2.15	1	2.15	.97	.326	.005
Customization X Apology	.79	1	.79	.36	.551	.002
Error	395.11	179	2.21			
Total	3753.81	183				
Corrected Total	407.87	182				

Note: $R^2 = .031$ (Adjusted $R^2 = .015$)

Table 12

Future Purchase Intention ANOVA (n = 183)

Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Partial η^2
Corrected Model	.860	3	2.87	.11	.956	.002
Intercept	2762.78	1	2762.78	1033.74	<.001	.852
Customization (Y or N)	.485	1	.485	.18	.671	.001
Apology (Y or N)	.246	1	.246	.09	.762	.005
Customization X Apology	.114	1	.114	.04	.837	<.001
Error	478.40	179	2.67			
Total	3241.67	183				
Corrected Total	479.26	182				

Note: $R^2 = .002$ (Adjusted $R^2 = -.015$)

According to the findings from the factorial ANOVA, the interaction effect of customization and apology on attitudes was not statistically significant ($p = .551$), nor was the same interaction effect significant for future purchase intentions ($p = .837$). Because of these findings, it was decided that a regression model be computed to compare the results when perceived customization and apology were used as independent variables rather than actual customization and apology. The regression would help to determine whether perceptions of the independent variables have stronger effects on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. The ANOVA used the experimental groups as independent variables, whereas the regression model used perceived customization, perceived apology, and their interaction term as predictors. The model used mean centering for the manipulation checks and multiplied those values to calculate the interaction term. Based on the regression model for the dependent variable of attitudes,

customization and apologies explained a significant proportion of variance in the results, $F(3,179) = 47.22, p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .432$. As seen in Table 13, perceived customization ($\beta = .372, p < .001$) and perceived apology ($\beta = .376, p < .001$) were statistically significant as separate predictors; however, the interaction effect of both variables was not ($p = .457$).

The regression model for the dependent variable of future purchase intentions, showed that customization and apologies explained a proportion of variance, $F(3,179) = 31.57, p < .001$, Adjusted $R^2 = .335$. As seen in Table 14, perceived customization ($\beta = .293, p < .001$) and perceived apology ($\beta = .371, p < .001$) were statistically significant as separate predictors; however, the interaction effect of both variables was not statistically significant ($p = .188$).

Therefore, perceptions that a brand response is customized as well as perceptions that a brand has apologized have statistically significant effects on the dependent variables. However, in answer to RQ2, there is no interaction effect between the two.

Table 13

Regression analysis predicting attitudes (n = 183)

Predictors	B	SE	β	95% CI	t	p
Constant	4.238	.098		4.05-4.43	43.33	<.001
Customization	.329	.062	.372	.206-.451	5.31	<.001
Apology	.339	.064	.376	.21-.466	5.29	<.001
Customization x Apology	.023	.030	.042	-.03-.083	.745	.457

Note: $R^2 = .442$ (Adjusted $R^2 = .432$)

Table 14

Regression analysis predicting future purchase intentions (n= 183)

Predictors	B	SE	β	95% CI	t	p
Constant	3.806	.115		3.58-4.03	33.17	<.001
Customization	.281	.073	.293	.137-.424	3.86	<.001
Apology	.362	.075	.371	.214-.511	4.82	<.001
Customization x Apology	.047	.036	.081	-.023-.118	1.32	.188

Note: $R^2 = .346$ (Adjusted $R^2 = .335$)

H3 – H6 Results (Path Analysis)

Next, path analysis using STATA 16 was conducted to test the remaining hypotheses below. For path modeling, the perceptions of customization and apologies were the independent variables. Maximum likelihood estimation with 2,000 bootstrapped samples was used to generate 95% confidence intervals.

H3: The effect of customization on consumer attitudes will be mediated by consumers' perceptions of (a) interactional justice, (b) trust, and (c) commitment.

H4: The effect of customization on consumer purchase intentions will be mediated by consumers' perceptions of (a) interactional justice, (b) trust, and (c) commitment.

H5: The effect of an apology on consumer attitudes will be mediated by consumers' perceptions of (a) interactional justice, (b) trust, and (c) commitment.

H6: The effect of an apology on consumer purchase intentions will be mediated by consumers' perceptions of (a) interactional justice, (b) trust, and (c) commitment.

Figure 2. Path Analysis with Standardized Values

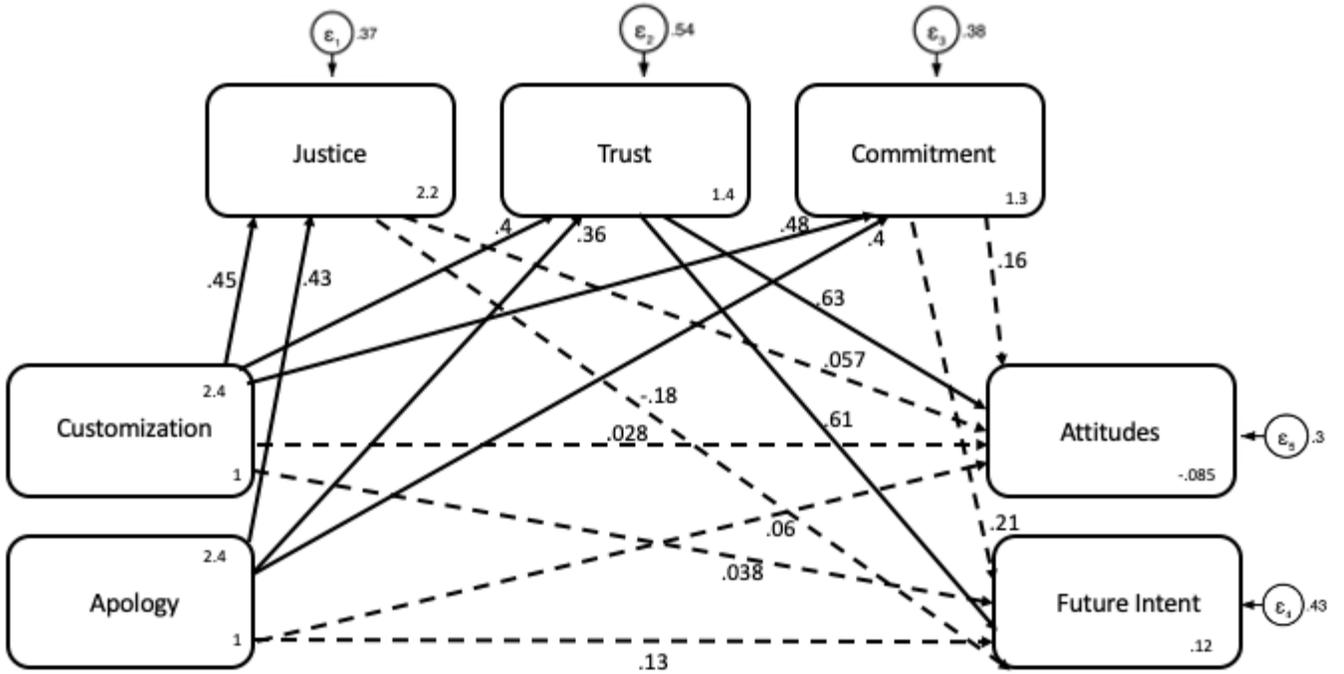


Figure 2. Path model showing mediation effects of interactional justice, trust, and commitment between customization and apology (IVs) and attitude and future purchase intention (DVs). Path coefficients are standardized. Statistically significant paths are reported using solid lines. Non-significant paths are reported using dotted lines.

Table 15

Path Coefficients and Confidence Intervals (2,000 Bootstrap samples)

Path	B	SE	β	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Customization → Interactional Justice	.28	.06	.45	<.001	.33 - .58
Customization → Trust	.32	.07	.40	<.001	.27 - .54
Customization → Commitment	.40	.06	.48	<.001	.36 - .61
Customization → Purchase Intentions	.06	.08	.04	.618	-.11 - .19
Customization → Attitudes	.04	.06	.03	.659	-.10 - .15
Apology → Interactional Justice	.27	.06	.43	<.001	.30 - .56
Apology → Trust	.31	.08	.39	<.001	.20 - .51
Apology → Commitment	.35	.07	.40	<.001	.27 - .53
Apology → Purchase Intentions	.15	.08	.13	.089	-.02 - .28
Apology → Attitudes	.07	.07	.06	.339	-.07 - .19
Interactional Justice → Purchase Intentions	-.29	.10	-.18	.060	-.37 - .01
Interactional Justice → Attitudes	.06	.08	.06	.467	-.10 - .21
Trust → Purchase Intentions	.66	.09	.61	<.001	.44 - .78
Trust → Attitudes	.60	.08	.63	<.001	.47 - .79
Commitment → Purchase Intentions	.28	.13	.21	.112	-.05 - .47
Commitment → Attitudes	.24	.11	.16	.148	-.06 - .39

According to Keith (2006), standardized coefficients from path analyses are considered to have a small effect when the coefficient lies between 0.05 and 0.10, a moderate effect when the coefficient lies between 0.10 and 0.25, and a large effect when the coefficient is 0.25 or greater.

Based on the path analysis, customization does have a large effect on interactional justice ($\beta = .45, p < .001$), trust ($\beta = .40, p < .001$), and commitment ($\beta = .48, p < .001$), but not on attitudes ($\beta = .03, p = .659$), or future purchase intentions ($\beta = .04, p = .618$). Apology has a large effect on interactional justice ($\beta = .43, p < .001$), trust ($\beta = .39, p < .001$), and commitment ($\beta = .40, p < .001$), but not on attitudes ($\beta = .06, p = .339$) or future purchase intentions ($\beta = .13, p = .089$). The effects of customization and apology on attitudes and future purchase intentions are not statistically significant because they are being fully mediated by interactional justice, commitment, and trust. Based on the mediation paths, interactional justice had no significant effect on attitudes ($p = .467$) or future purchase intentions ($p = .060$). Although commitment had moderate effect sizes for both attitudes ($\beta = .16$) and purchase intentions ($\beta = .21$), it was not a significant predictor of attitudes ($p = .148$) or purchase intentions ($p = .112$) either. However, trust had large effects on both attitudes ($\beta = .63$) and purchase intentions ($\beta = .61$) and was a significant predictor of attitudes ($p < .001$) and purchase intentions ($p < .001$). Therefore, H1a – H6a and H1c – H6c are not supported. However, H3b – H6b are supported.

Discussion

This thesis tested the effects of customized brand responses to e-NWOM on consumer attitudes and future purchase intentions, while using apologies as a comparison. The study demonstrated that customization does matter to the participants who perceived it, but this study failed to specifically address how to implement customization and what are the elements of customization that consumers are looking for. Although participants were able to identify the brand responses that were customized, the effects of that customization on attitudes and purchase intentions were not statistically significant. However, consumers who perceived brand responses to be customized did have more positive attitudes and intentions towards the brand. As

customized and personalized content becomes a more popular area of study in public relations, marketing, and advertising, this study explored the ways in which brands respond to e-NWOM and what implications their response strategies have on prospective consumers.

Implications

Based on the results, there is evidence that customization does influence consumers' attitudes and future purchase intentions, but the evidence does not reveal the specific elements of customization that make a brand's response customized and effective. The ways in which the study operationalized the term customization (i.e., what makes a response customized), may have impacted the outcome and thus the overall effect. Prior literature suggests that consumers perceive customized messages to be more meaningful and compelling, thus they prefer brands to respond to them by including some personal information (i.e., name, re-statement of problem, etc.) to facilitate productive dialogue. However, third-party onlookers may feel differently about what types of customization are important to them rather than the original poster of the e-NWOM message. For instance, it may be possible that third-party onlookers do not care if the brand uses complainants' names in their response since it does not directly affect or impact the third-party onlooker as it could the poster. Other elements of customization may exist that are more important to consumers and more effective at influencing their attitudes and behaviors. Such elements may include offering a specific solution to the consumers' complaint or issue, steps to prevent future failures, mentioning the name of the employee who is responding, etc. This experimental study laid the foundation for future research on customization by offering an exploration of customized brand responses to consumers who posted e-NWOM on Twitter and how the response type influenced their attitudes and purchase intentions.

For brands and organizations who have an active presence on social media, the findings indicate that they need to think carefully about how they respond to e-NWOM because consumer perceptions of the responses can influence current and prospective customers' (third-party observers) attitudes and intentions. As well, brands should work towards implementing response strategies that are customized and personally tailored to the online complainant as much as possible. It may be worthwhile to have social media strategists or digital content managers who oversee the social media pages for brands take additional time to respond to e-NWOM in a personalized way. This study determined that when there is opportunity for a brand to customize or personalize their responses to consumers, it is an advantageous choice because it can enhance trust which enhances attitudes and purchase intentions.

The basic elements of customization that this experiment utilized in the stimuli were using the consumer's name and re-stating the consumer's problem using similar language in the brand response. Based on the findings, it seems that brands should incorporate more customized elements into their response than just the consumer's name and problem. Perhaps more detailed elements will have stronger effects on consumer perceptions by offering specific solutions tailored to each customer, step-by-step guidance for how to resolve the issue and prevent future failures, and relevant contact information. In addition, it is important for brands to understand that the elements of customization that a third-party observer regards as customized may be different than the elements of customization that the complainant desires. For example, those who post a complaint may appreciate having their names used more than onlookers, for whom the original poster's name is not important. Future research could address such questions by testing what it actually takes to generate a customized response and how that response is perceived by both the online complainant and third-party observers on social media.

For apologies, it was determined that the presence of an apology in a brand's response to e-NWOM did not affect consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions more positively than a response that contained no apology. Although prior literature has suggested that consumers feel less negatively about a brand if it apologizes and acknowledges its mistake, the reason for this finding may be the result of how the study operationalized and implemented the brand apology. For example, the stimulus that included a brand apology only contained a sentence that read, "we apologize for not living up to your expectations." Perhaps that statement was not perceived as a strong apology, thus impacting participants' answer selections. Future research could incorporate more detailed apologies or include additional elements that meet the requirements of a formal apology.

In comparison to customization, the regression analysis showed that apology had a stronger effect on attitudes ($\beta = .376$) and future purchase intentions ($\beta = .371$) suggesting that third-party onlookers want to see an apology slightly more than a customized response when viewing a customer's e-NWOM message. Perhaps this is due to apologies indicating to consumers that the brand is committed to solving their problems. As well, perhaps the severity of the service failure influences the level of apology or customization that is needed on the consumers' behalf to fix the issue. However, it is important to note that the study did not find any interaction effect between customization and apology. Therefore, the presence of both elements in a brand response to e-NWOM were statistically significant, however the presence of an apology did not affect the way customization was perceived and customization did not affect the way an apology was perceived. Due to no interaction effect between customization and apology, it may be that customers do prefer both elements in a brand's response, but the presence of one element does not necessarily influence the presence of the other.

The mediation findings from the path analysis determined that trust was the only significant predictor of attitudes and future purchase intentions in comparison to interactional justice and commitment. This may be the result of consumers or third-party onlookers perceiving a brand to be trustworthy when they have responded to an e-NWOM message in a personalized way. By responding in a personalized way, the consumers may interpret the response as a reflection of how reliable and dependable the brand is when it comes to managing the customer experience. Because the mediation findings from the path analysis indicated that trust had a large effect on attitudes and purchase intentions, brands should look for ways to build consumer trust when they respond to e-NWOM online.

It is difficult to say with certainty why interactional justice and commitment were not significant predictors of attitudes or purchase intentions. As discussed below, it may be a result of the measures or perhaps it was unreasonable to ask a third-party observer to evaluate the commitment levels of a brand after only viewing their responses to three negative tweets from consumers.

Lastly, the results indicated that a generic brand response to an e-NWOM message is not worse than no brand response at all. This may be due to third-party onlookers considering a brand's response to a consumer as adequate enough, whether it was customized or personalized in any way. The findings indicate that brands who may not have the time or resources to consistently personalize their responses, should at least respond in a generic way since it will still be more beneficial than not responding to the consumer at all.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that affect the interpretations of the data. First, the study was conducted using a sample of American adults on MTurk. The findings may be difficult

to generalize because there is potential that MTurk workers are financially motivated and do not pay full attention to the study at hand, there is no face-to-face interaction, and they are typically more educated than the average person (Goodman et al., 2013; Paolacci et al., 2014).

Second, a real brand – HamptonByHilton – was used for the stimuli in the experimental design. Because a real brand was used, participants may have answered the questions differently as a result of their preconceived attitudes and beliefs about the brand from personal experience. Although the tweets themselves were fictitious, they were presented from a HamptonByHilton Twitter account. While participants were randomly assigned to one of five groups as a way to reduce the effects of pre-existing attitudes, there was still opportunity for the effects to influence the participants' answer selections. Future research could test a variety of product categories beyond the hotel/lodging industry to identify any similarities or differences. For instance, future research could specifically explore the differences in brand responses from higher involvement industries such as the airline industry, travel and tourism, or food and beverage sector versus lower involvement industries where consumers are not giving up as much of their power and control to the brand.

Third, the path analysis found that interactional justice and commitment did not have significant effects on attitudes and future purchase intentions. The only significant predictor was trust. This may be the result of the scales that were used in the study, which included reversed items. The wording may have been confusing to participants. Additionally, the scale that was used for interactional justice was adapted from Tax et al. (1998), so it could be that the scale is dated and not suitable to test for a modern-day social media experiment. Further research could use different scales to measure interactional justice and commitment which may alter the results and garner a positive coefficient value.

Another possible explanation for the path analysis results is due to the ways in which a third-party onlooker perceives a brand's response to another consumer. For instance, perhaps third-party onlookers do not perceive a brand to be showing high levels of commitment or interactional justice towards a consumer by simply responding to their tweet. Rather, they may feel that it is their job or responsibility to respond to the e-NWOM message because social media platforms have become a new avenue for customer service. Traditionally, consumers with any issues or complaints would make a phone call to the customer service line. However, modern-day consumers take to social media as a way to get a response from a brand.

Fourth, the study utilized only one social media platform in the experimental design – Twitter. With multiple social media platforms out there such as Facebook, Instagram, Snap Chat, Tik Tok, etc., it is difficult to say with certainty that the experiment would produce the same results if the stimuli used a variety of social media platforms to deliver the e-NWOM content. Consumers use a variety of social media platforms for different reasons. Therefore, it could be that consumers use Twitter differently than other social channels to communicate with brands and express a complaint or concern. Twitter is designed for users to post a tweet that contains primarily text, whereas Instagram or Snap Chat is used primarily for photo sharing. Perhaps these differences in social media platforms have the potential to generate a variety of effects on consumers' attitudinal and behavioral perceptions of a brand.

Lastly, the experiment was conducted with American adults. The findings may be difficult to generalize to a global audience due to differences in culture or social media usage in other countries. Future research could examine this study from a non-Western perspective to identify any similarities or differences in the ways that consumers perceive customized brand responses on social media.

Conclusion

This experimental study tested the effects of customized brand responses and apologies on consumers' attitudes and future purchase intentions. Although the findings from this research are limited to one product category, they help us begin to understand the relevance of customization in relation to a brand's response strategy to e-NWOM. The findings indicate that consumers' perceptions of customization and apology in a brand's response positively affects their attitudes than purchase intentions. Overall, this study determined that both customization and apology are important elements of a brand's response strategy when a consumer has complained online. Customization and apology have the potential to make positive impressions on third-party onlookers. Future research should develop and test other elements of customization and personalization to compare results. As more conversations move online between brands and stakeholders, brands should carefully consider how they respond to e-NWOM, the language they use, and how current and prospective customers will interpret their responses.

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Appendix 1

Survey Questionnaire

Unless otherwise noted, all items are measured on a 7-point Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree)

Introduction

Welcome and thank you for taking this survey! This study will measure how brands respond to consumer comments online. For the purposes of this study, the product category will be the *hotel industry* and all questions will be based on the provided complaint scenarios on Twitter.

When answering the questions, please imagine that you have just read these tweets in real life.

At the end of the survey, you will be presented with a participation code. Please copy and paste the code into MTurk to verify your participation. Please leave your MTurk window open so you are able to copy and paste the code on the proper page.

Consent Document

Participation Agreement

If you agree to participate in this survey, please select “Yes I agree to participate.” The study is expected to take less than 15 minutes to complete. Remember that no personal information will be shared.

1. Yes I agree to participate
2. No I do not agree to participate

Complaint Scenarios

Please look at the following 6 tweets from consumers who stayed at HamptonByHilton hotels. Then answer the series of questions.

[Note: the following items are measured on 7-point Likert-type scales; 1=Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree]

Interactional justice (adapted from Tax, Brown, and Chandrahekar, 1998)

1. HamptonByHilton did not appear to be telling the consumer the truth (reversed)
2. The consumer was given a reasonable account as to why the original problem occurred.
3. HamptonByHilton seemed very concerned about the consumer’s problem.
4. I felt the consumer was treated rudely. (reversed)
5. HamptonByHilton put a lot of positive energy into handling the consumer’s problem.
6. HamptonByHilton’s response was respectful.
7. HamptonByHilton’s response was polite.

8. HamptonByHilton's response was courteous.

Commitment (adapted from Hon and Grunig, 1999)

1. I feel that HamptonByHilton is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to its customers.
2. I can see that HamptonByHilton wants to maintain a relationship with its customers.
3. There is a long-lasting bond between HamptonByHilton and its customers.

(adapted from Morgan and Hunt, 1994)

1. The relationship between HamptonByHilton and its consumer is something the brand is committed to.
2. The relationship between HamptonByHilton and its consumer is something the brand intends to maintain indefinitely.
3. The relationship between HamptonByHilton and its consumer deserves the brand's maximum effort to maintain.

Trust (adapted from Morgan and Hunt, 1994)

1. HamptonByHilton can be trusted.
2. HamptonByHilton can be counted on to do what is right.
3. HamptonByHilton has high integrity.

Attitudes: (adapted from Muehling, 1987)

1. My attitude toward HamptonByHilton is good.
2. My attitude toward HamptonByHilton is favorable.
3. My attitude toward HamptonByHilton is positive.

Purchase Intent: (adapted from Hsu, Yu & Chang, 2017)

1. I plan to stay at a HamptonByHilton hotel in the future.
2. I intend to stay at a HamptonByHilton hotel in the future.
3. I predict that I would stay at a HamptonByHilton hotel in the future.

Customization (Manipulation Check): (adapted from Crijns, Cauberghe, Hudders & Claeys, 2017)

1. The response of HamptonByHilton is personally addressed to the consumer.
2. The response of HamptonByHilton is specially created for the consumer.
3. HamptonByHilton talks to the consumer in a personal way.

(adapted from Kang and Sundar, 2016)

1. HamptonByHilton's response to the consumer was personalized.
2. HamptonByHilton's response to the consumer was generic. (reversed)
3. HamptonByHilton addressed the consumer by name.
4. HamptonByHilton addressed the *specific* concerns of the consumer

Apologies (Manipulation Check): (adapted from Choi and Lin, 2009)

1. HamptonByHilton admitted its fault.
2. HamptonByHilton accepted responsibility for the service failure.
3. HamptonByHilton apologized.
4. HamptonByHilton expressed regret over the situation.

Demographics

1. What is your sex?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male

- c. Other
 - d. Prefer not to answer
2. What is your race?
- a. Asian/Pacific Islander
 - b. Black/African American
 - c. Hispanic/Latino/Latina
 - d. Native American
 - e. White/Caucasian
 - f. Prefer not to answer
3. What is your age? (please type a whole number) _____
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- a. No high school diploma
 - b. High school diploma or GED
 - c. Associate's degree
 - d. Bachelor's degree
 - e. Master's or doctorate degree
5. What is your annual household income?
- a. 0 to \$20,000
 - b. \$20,001 to \$40,000
 - c. \$40,001 to \$60,000
 - d. \$60,001 to \$80,000
 - e. \$80,001 to \$100,000
 - f. \$100,001 to \$120,000
 - g. \$120,001 and above
 - h. Prefer not to say

Debriefing Message

Now that you have answered all of the questions in the survey, please be advised that the tweets you read were fictional, but they were based on real-life consumer complaints made by consumers about brands. You are advised to seek credible information and additional sources about the brand for accurate information.

Thank you for participating in the survey!

End of Survey

Appendix 2

Complaint/e-NWOM Twitter Scenarios

Group 1: Customized with Apology

The image displays three screenshots of tweets from the account @HamptonByHilton, each showing a customer complaint and a subsequent response from the brand. Each tweet includes a profile picture, the user's name and handle, a 'Following' button, the tweet text, a timestamp, and interaction icons (reply, retweet, like). A small watermark 'Profile icon designed by Emank from Flatiron' is visible at the bottom right of each tweet.

Tweet 1:
User: **Charmaine** (@Charmaine_Smith)
Text: @HamptonByHilton currently a line waiting to check in at your Holly Springs location we have called the phones and no one is around....not a great experience at all.
Response: @HamptonByHilton Charmaine, we understand that you were unhappy with the check-in experience at our Holly Springs Hampton. We apologize for not living up to your expectations. We would like to find out more about the long check in lines. Please DM us.
Timestamp: 11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Tweet 2:
User: **Irene Prap** (@Irene_P)
Text: @HamptonByHilton @HiltonHotels thanks for continuing to improve your breakfasts – more healthy choices like the oatmeal and smoothies. #hotels
Timestamp: 11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Tweet 3:
User: **Rachel Joy** (@joyful_Rachel)
Text: the @HamptonByHilton in Traverse City has no business calling itself a Hampton. Dirty and old, with prices through the roof.
Response: @HamptonByHilton Rachel, we understand that you were not satisfied with the quality or price of the Traverse City Hampton. We apologize for not living up to your expectations. We would like to find out more about the hotel conditions. Please DM us.
Timestamp: 11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Home Moments Notifications Messages Tweet

 **Michael Johnson**
@Michael_83 Following

@HamptonByHilton loving the evening cookies in the lobby area! #latenightssnack #cravings

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Ezrauk from Flatiron](#)

Home Moments Notifications Messages Tweet

 **LewisDangerField**
@LewisDangerField Following

The wifi @HamptonByHilton Newcastle is truly terrible – not suitable for doing any work!
@HamptonByHilton
Lewis, we understand that you were unhappy with the wifi service at the Newcastle Hampton. We apologize for not living up to your expectations. We would like to find out more about your wifi issues. Please DM us.

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Ezrauk from Flatiron](#)

Home Moments Notifications Messages Tweet

 **Dominicthesoccerlover**
@Dominicthesoccerlover Following

Had a great experience with the @HamptonByHilton staff this morning- very friendly!

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Ezrauk from Flatiron](#)

Group 2: Customized with No Apology

Charmaine
@Charmaine_Smith Following

@HamptonByHilton currently a line waiting to check in at your Holly Springs location we have called the phones and no one is around....not a great experience at all.

@HamptonByHilton
Charmaine, we understand that you were unhappy with the check-in experience at our Holly Springs Hampton. We would like to find out more about the long check in lines. Please DM us.

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Irene Prap
@Irene_P Following

@HamptonByHilton @HiltonHotels thanks for continuing to improve your breakfasts – more healthy choices like the oatmeal and smoothies. #hotels

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Rachel Joy
@joyful_Rachel Following

the @HamptonByHilton in Traverse City has no business calling itself a Hampton. Dirty and old, with prices through the roof.

@HamptonByHilton
Rachel, we understand that you were not satisfied with the quality or price of the Traverse City Hampton. We would like to find out more about the hotel conditions. Please DM us.

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Home Moments Notifications Messages Tweet

 **Michael Johnson**
@Michael_83 Following

@HamptonByHilton loving the evening cookies in the lobby area! #latenightssnack #cravings

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Eusebio from Flatiron](#)

Home Moments Notifications Messages Tweet

 **LewisDangerField**
@LewisDangerField Following

The wifi @HamptonByHilton Newcastle is truly terrible – not suitable for doing any work!

@HamptonByHilton
Lewis, we understand that you were unhappy with the wifi service at the Newcastle Hampton. We would like to find out more about your wifi issues. Please DM us.

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Eusebio from Flatiron](#)

Home Moments Notifications Messages Tweet

 **Dominicthesoccerlover**
@Dominicthesoccerlover Following

Had a great experience with the @HamptonByHilton staff this morning- very friendly!

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Eusebio from Flatiron](#)

Group 3: Generic with Apology

The image shows three screenshots of tweets from Twitter, each with a navigation bar at the top containing icons for Home, Moments, Notifications, Messages, and a Tweet button. The tweets are from users Charmaine, Irene Prap, and Rachel Joy, all of whom are following HamptonByHilton. Each tweet includes a complaint, a response from HamptonByHilton, and a timestamp of 11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019.

Charmaine (@Charmaine_Smith) **Following**
@HamptonByHilton currently a line waiting to check in at your Holly Springs location we have called the phones and no one is around....not a great experience at all.
@HamptonByHilton
We apologize for not living up to your expectations. We would like to find out more about the situation. Please DM us.
11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Irene Prap (@Irene_P) **Following**
@HamptonByHilton @HiltonHotels thanks for continuing to improve your breakfasts – more healthy choices like the oatmeal and smoothies. #hotels
11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Rachel Joy (@joyful_Rachel) **Following**
the @HamptonByHilton in Traverse City has no business calling itself a Hampton. Dirty and old, with prices through the roof.
@HamptonByHilton
We apologize for not living up to your expectations. We would like to find out more about the situation. Please DM us.
11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Home Moments Notifications Messages Tweet

 **Michael Johnson**
@Michael_83 Following

@HamptonByHilton loving the evening cookies in the lobby area! #latenightssnack
#cravings

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Ezrauk from Flatiron](#)

Home Moments Notifications Messages Tweet

 **LewisDangerField**
@LewisDangerField Following

The wifi @HamptonByHilton Newcastle is truly terrible – not suitable for doing any work!

@HamptonByHilton
We apologize for not living up to your expectations. We would like to find out more about the situation. Please DM us.

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Ezrauk from Flatiron](#)

Home Moments Notifications Messages Tweet

 **Dominicthesoccerlover**
@Dominicthesoccerlover Following

Had a great experience with the @HamptonByHilton staff this morning- very friendly!

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Ezrauk from Flatiron](#)

Group 4: Generic with No Apology

The image shows three screenshots of tweets from Twitter, each from a different user. Each tweet is a reply to @HamptonByHilton. The top tweet is from Charmaine (@Charmaine_Smith), the middle from Irene Prap (@Irene_P), and the bottom from Rachel Joy (@joyful_Rachel). All tweets are dated 11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019. Each tweet includes a profile picture, name, handle, and a 'Following' button. The tweets contain complaints about the service at HamptonByHilton's Holly Springs location, specifically mentioning long wait times and poor breakfast options. Each tweet also includes a reply icon, a retweet icon, and a heart icon. At the bottom of each tweet, there is a small text credit: 'Profile icon designed by Eneslik from Flatiron'.

Charmaine
@Charmaine_Smith Following

@HamptonByHilton currently a line waiting to check in at your Holly Springs location we have called the phones and no one is around....not a great experience at all.

@HamptonByHilton
We would like to find out more about this situation. Please DM us.

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Irene Prap
@Irene_P Following

@HamptonByHilton @HiltonHotels thanks for continuing to improve your breakfasts – more healthy choices like the oatmeal and smoothies. #hotels

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Rachel Joy
@joyful_Rachel Following

the @HamptonByHilton in Traverse City has no business calling itself a Hampton. Dirty and old, with prices through the roof.

@HamptonByHilton
We would like to find out more about this situation. Please DM us.

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Home Moments Notifications Messages Tweet

 **Michael Johnson**
@Michael_83 Following

@HamptonByHilton loving the evening cookies in the lobby area! #latenightssnack #cravings

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Eusebio from Flatiron](#)

Home Moments Notifications Messages Tweet

 **LewisDangerField**
@LewisDangerField Following

The wifi @HamptonByHilton Newcastle is truly terrible – not suitable for doing any work!

@HamptonByHilton
We would like to find out more about this situation. Please DM us.

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Eusebio from Flatiron](#)

Home Moments Notifications Messages Tweet

 **Dominicthesoccerlover**
@Dominicthesoccerlover Following

Had a great experience with the @HamptonByHilton staff this morning- very friendly!

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Eusebio from Flatiron](#)

Group 5: No Response and No Apology (Control Group)

The image shows three screenshots of tweets from Twitter, each from a different user expressing dissatisfaction with HamptonByHilton. Each tweet is from February 28, 2019, at 11:32 AM.

Charmaine (@Charmaine_Smith) is following. The tweet reads: "@HamptonByHilton currently a line waiting to check in at your Holly Springs location we have called the phones and no one is around....not a great experience at all."

Irene Prap (@Irene_P) is following. The tweet reads: "@HamptonByHilton @HiltonHotels thanks for continuing to improve your breakfasts – more healthy choices like the oatmeal and smoothies. #hotels"

Rachel Joy (@joyful_Rachel) is following. The tweet reads: "the @HamptonByHilton in Traverse City has no business calling itself a Hampton. Dirty and old, with prices through the roof."

Twitter navigation bar: Home, Moments, Notifications, Messages, Tweet

Michael Johnson @Michael_83 Following

@HamptonByHilton loving the evening cookies in the lobby area! #latenightssnack #cravings

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Ezraik from Flatiron](#)

Twitter navigation bar: Home, Moments, Notifications, Messages, Tweet

LewisDangerField @LewisDangerField Following

The wifi @HamptonByHilton Newcastle is truly terrible – not suitable for doing any work!

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

Profile icon designed by [Ezraik from Flatiron](#)

Twitter navigation bar: Home, Moments, Notifications, Messages, Tweet

Dominicthesoccerlover @Dominicthesoccerlover Following

Had a great experience with the @HamptonByHilton staff this morning- very friendly!

11:32 AM - 28 Feb 2019

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VITA

Tanya Lariviere was born September 6, 1996, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. She is the daughter of Timothy and Ruzica Lariviere. A 2014 graduate of Christ the King Catholic Secondary School in Georgetown, Ontario, Canada, she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication from the University of Louisiana Monroe, Monroe, LA, in 2018 where she competed in the Sun Belt Conference for NCAA Division I women's soccer.

In August 2018, she enrolled in graduate study at Texas Christian University, where she received her Master of Science degree in Strategic Communication in May 2020. While working on her master's degree, she held a Teaching Assistantship from January 2019 to May 2020.

She is engaged to Benjamin Lockett of Palestine, Texas.

ABSTRACT

BRAND RESPONSES TO NEGATIVE TWITTER COMMENTS

by Tanya Lariviere, M.S., 2020
Department of Strategic Communication
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Liang (Lindsay) Ma, Professor of Strategic Communication

A growing trend in relationship marketing concerns personalized and tailored content for consumers. Academic and industry research has recently focused on the importance of delivering customized content to consumers through their social networks. Today's consumers demand more customization and personalization because it allows consumers to feel "recognized and cared for by a brand" (Buryan, 2018, para. 13). Another trend in consumer behavior is the use of social networking sites (SNS) to post negative comments about brands. These messages are defined as electronic negative-word-of-mouth (e-NWOM) and they have the potential to harm a brand's reputation. This experimental study considers the effect of customization in the context of brand responses to e-NWOM, as compared to the effect of apologies— two possible response strategies. These strategies are studied to determine their effects on brand attitudes and purchase intentions.