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Customer Engagement in Tourism Marketing: Current Issues and Challenges

Negative Customer Engagement Behavior in Online Social Networks: Understanding the Nuance

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Abstract

Customer Engagement Behavior (CEB) impacts customers' perceptions and experiences, and the performance of organizations. As hospitality and tourism offerings are particularly difficult to evaluate before actual consumption, customers depend on online reviews as the main source of information about a firm's offerings. In this context, negative CEB is especially contagious in online networks, with financial and reputational repercussions for organizations. This chapter outlines six forms of negative CEB identified in online reviewing platforms and insight into the interplay between the intensity of forms and valence of reviews. Theoretically, this chapter reveals empirical research on negative CEB and provides a nuanced view of its forms with additional insights about its intensity levels. Practically, this chapter addresses a key challenge for tourism and hospitality service providers in managing negative CEB when it occurs and offering recommendations to manage different forms of negative CEB.

Keywords: Customer Engagement Behavior, Online reviews, Services, TripAdvisor, Tourism, valence

Introduction

Compared to goods, services, including hospitality and tourism, are difficult to evaluate before actual consumption (Christodoulides et al., 2012; Rather et al., 2019; Voyer & Ranaweera, 2015). In contemporary markets, therefore, customers depend on online reviews as the main information source about a firm's offerings (Ranaweera & Jayawardhena, 2014; Rather, 2020). Recent market research reveals that 77% of customers read online reviews before making a purchase decision, while 35% adjust entire plans based on online reviews (Azer & Alexander, 2020a; Mathwick & Mosteller, 2017; Statista.com, 2020). Reviews are a form of customer engagement that mainly manifests online through customer engagement behavior (CEB) (Alexander et al., 2018; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). CEB thus extends customer/firm relationships beyond transactions to broader networked relationships with multiple stakeholders (Brodie et al., 2019). Hospitality and tourism customers, therefore, increasingly rely on each other to get authoritative information (Beckers et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and are influenced by the choices and opinions of other customers about goods and services (Alexander & Jaakkola, 2016; Azer & Alexander, 2020b).

CEBs capture the enhanced role customers play in networks and which impact on customer experiences, values and organizational performance (Azer & Alexander, 2018; Beckers et al., 2017; Harrigan et al., 2018). CEB has been extensively researched in marketing and service research, and firms increasingly devote strategic efforts to foster CEB that can positively contribute to the focal organization (Alexander et al., 2018; Harmeling et al., 2017; Van Doorn et al., 2010). However, a challenge for service providers is developing strategies to manage negative CEB when it occurs, and understanding the heterogeneity of its forms and levels of intensity (Azer & Alexander, 2018; Dolan et al., 2019b; Juric et al., 2016). Research reveals service providers require specific interventions to avoid negative impacts on perceptions of a firm which can differ for each negative CEB form based on the relative strength of its negative impact (Dolan et al., 2019a; Veloutsou et al., 2020).

According to recent studies, the impact of negative reviews will differ, with some messages having a stronger negative impact than others (Dolan et al., 2019b; King et al., 2014; Sparks & Bradley, 2014). Nevertheless, existing research on online reviews predominantly captures what customers say about service providers in their reviews, mainly positive or negative, rather than how they say it, which is a significant limitation in extant e-WOM literature and means findings regarding the impact of positive and negative reviews are, to varying degrees, inconclusive (Azer & Alexander, 2018; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; King et al., 2014).

This chapter outlines six forms of negative CEB identified in online reviewing platforms and insight into the interplay with the intensity of these forms and the valence of reviews. Theoretically, this chapter introduces empirical research on a more nuanced view of negative CEB, thus extending our understanding beyond simply what customers say in reviews to understanding the impact of how they say it, thereby broadening the scope of online review literature. Practically, this chapter offers recommendations for managing different forms of negative CEB, addressing a key challenge for tourism and hospitality service providers.

Customer Engagement Behavior (CEB)

Customer engagement (CE) goes beyond mere participation and involvement, encompassing an interactive relationship or disposition towards an engagement object which involves discretionary resource investments (Alexander et al., 2018; Brodie et al., 2019). Firms and service providers recognize the need to foster CE and devote resources to strategically influence CE (Harmeling et al., 2017; Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Firms are keen to avoid lost opportunities as a result of ignoring CE (Venkatesan, 2017; Verhoef et al., 2010), such as improved connection and emotional bonding, improved trust and loyalty (Brodie et al., 2013; Van Doorn et al., 2010), product recognition, favourable word-of-mouth (WOM), referrals (Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014), undervaluation of customers (Kumar et al., 2010), and misallocation of resources across customers (Verhoef et al., 2010).

Typically, CE is multidimensional, capturing customers' cognitive, behavioral, and emotional investment in specific firm/brand interactions (Brodie et al., 2011). However, this chapter focuses on the behavioral manifestations of CE through which customers make voluntary resource contributions that have a brand or firm focus but go beyond what is fundamental to transactions, occur in interactions between the focal object and/or other actors (Azer et al., 2021; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014).

CEB is evident in a range of communications, including e-WOM, online reviews, referrals, recommendations, and blogging (Beckers et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2010; Van Doorn et al., 2010). CEB affects the perception and performance of firms in different ways depending on its valence (Heinonen, 2017; Naumann et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2013). Specifically, within online contexts, negative CEB is contagious and viral in nature, with implications that may involve short and long-term financial and reputational detrimental outcomes for firms, brands, and service providers (Bowden et al., 2017; Heinonen, 2017; Kumar et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2016). Substantial efforts have been made in recent years to understand CEB in online contexts and provide conceptualizations of the broader engagement construct (e.g., Azer & Alexander, 2018; Azer et al., 2021; Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020; Bowden et al., 2017; Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Naumann et al., 2020) and identify different antecedents and outcomes (e.g., Argyris et al., 2020; Azer & Alexander, 2020b; Dolan et al., 2019b; Fehrer et al., 2018; Harrigan et al., 2017; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). However, despite the potentially detrimental impacts of negative engagement, a more nuanced view of its forms is only recently becoming apparent (Azer & Alexander, 2018; Azer et al., 2021; Brodie et al., 2013). For example, existing e-WOM literature mainly focusses solely on what customers say about service providers in their reviews, and the impact of negative versus positive reviews (Book et al., 2016; Craciun & Moore, 2019; Zhao et al., 2015).

Direct and Indirect Forms of Negative CEB

Prior e-WOM and CE research capture direct engagement behaviour encompassing explicit advice to transact or not to transact with a service provider, brand, or product customers' manifestations, such as recommending, referring, and warning others (Azer et al., 2021; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014). However, Azer and Alexander (2018) formalize negative CEB by defining as '*Customer contributions of resources such as knowledge, skills, experience, and time to negatively affect other actors' knowledge, expectations, and perception about a focal service provider.*' In the paper the authors utilize Netnography to study negatively valenced online reviews posted on TripAdvisor to hotels, restaurants, and 'things to do' in twelve different destinations worldwide, thematically analyzing 954 reviews. The authors introduce a typology of six forms of negative CEB that customers utilize in online reviews classified into direct (explicitly addressing other actors) and indirect (without addressing other actors). These six forms are, *Discrediting, Regretting, Deriding, Dissuading, Warning, and Endorsing competitors*. Table 1 illustrates the forms, definitions, and exemplars.

Forms	Definitions	Exemplars from TripAdvisor
Indirect Negative CEB		
Discrediting	Customer contributions of resources to discredit a service provider without explicitly addressing other actors in online networks	<i>'Unfortunately, the facilities haven't been updated. Peeling paint, noisy, food was awful. None of the staff was able to do anything without the manager's approval who conveniently was never available. A truly horrible place'</i>
Regretting	Customer contribution of resources to express regret for choosing a service provider without explicitly addressing other actors in online networks	<i>'When I spent my night in this hotel it was my worst experience. I regretted my decision and I will not stay there again'</i>
Deriding Behavior	Customer contributions of resources to deride a service provider without explicitly addressing other actors in online networks	<i>'TV seemed to be an Internet stream as it kept buffering and played more like a slide show. Shaving light cover is lying next to bare bulb. This is what I can recall before my brain started to subliminally bury the horror to protect my sanity'</i>
Direct Negative CEB		
Dissuading	Customer contributions of resources to persuade other actors in online networks not to transact with a focal provider	<i>'The waiter was way too busy to listen to us and brought us vegetarian food we didn't want or order. The food was greasy and expensive. No one cared that it wasn't what we ordered. Do not eat here'</i>
Endorsing Competitors	Customer contributions of resources to explicitly promote competitors to other actors in online networks, over service providers	<i>'If you are up for all you can eat in Port Madero, go to Gourmet Porteno better than this restaurant by far'</i>
Warning	Customer contributions of resources to warn other actors in online networks, of a probable risk in a perilous service experience.	<i>'WARNING!! BEWARE! Absolutely HORRIFYING!! We originally planned to stay for 2 nights, ended up staying for one only. As we ran away the receptionist then picked up a heavy glass ashtray to throw at us'</i>

Table 1: Forms of Negative CEB in online reviews – definitions and exemplars (Azer and Alexander, 2018, pp. 477-479).

Forms of Negative CEB

As a dimension of CEB, valence has been mainly studied as positive or negative, which limits understanding of the nuance of valence and, hence, different intensity levels (Azer & Alexander, 2020b; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Discrete forms of negative CEB classified into direct and indirect categories, extend our understanding of CEB valence, provide greater clarity on customer influence on other customers and establish new routes for addressing negative CEB – specifically on different impacts of its forms.

Generally, people differ in the way they express their views and therefore, within tourism and hospitality consumer reviews, users may utilize distinct negative forms even when engaging negatively about a service provider. (Fileri et al., 2018; Liu & Zhang, 2010;

Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991). Accordingly, one size rarely fits all and limiting negative engagement to an aggregate negative category misses nuance in both form and impact leading to a danger of inconclusive findings in broader e-WOM studies (Azer & Alexander, 2020a; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; King et al., 2014).

Firstly, as introduced above, customers share negative experiences without addressing other actors in their reviews, this is the indirect form, and here there is additional variation. For example, customers may **discredit** the service provider by reporting substandard service provided. In other instances, they may express their **feelings of regret** for choosing that one provider over another. Customers may increase the intensity of the review through sarcasm by **deriding** the focal provider. Therefore, even when customers are using an indirect approach, they may utilise a range of forms which are functional (discrediting), emotional (regretting), or sarcastic (deriding).

Secondly, customers share experiences by directly addressing other actors in reviews, specifically advising them not to transact with focal service providers in three different ways. The first way sees customers **dissuading** other actors against focal providers is by stressing opposition to a focal provider based on a specific negative experience. The second form sees customers present their opposition by **endorsing** competitors over those providers. Finally, customers may increase the level of intensity in reviews by using capital letters and alarming words to **warn** others about potentially perilous service experiences. Therefore, in the direct approach, customers engage by stressing opposition (dissuading), offering more attractive alternatives (endorsing competitors), or identifying specific risk from a service (warning).

Beyond identification of these discrete forms of negative behavior, it is important to understand how they differ in terms of impact. The heterogeneity and intensity of the forms implies variation in impact, this would further extends our understanding of negative valence, beyond aggregate impacts (Azer & Alexander, 2020b).

Differing Intensities of Negative CEB forms

Regarding the impacts of the indirect negative CEB articulated in the previous section, recent research, using a series of factorial experimental studies, suggests stronger negative impact of deriding behavior on other actors' attitudes and behavioral intentions toward service providers compared to both discrediting and regretting behaviors (Azer & Alexander, 2020b). To illustrate, discrediting is more functional, incorporating detailed evaluation of tangible aspects of a firm or service provider (Azer & Alexander, 2018). The form is similar to deriding; however, it differs through the use of sarcasm to augment the evaluation of services. Sarcasm is specifically known to be more potent, retainable, memorable and perceived as more condemning than literal comments (Bowes & Katz, 2011; Colston, 1997; Giora, 2002). On the other hand, regretting differs from discrediting and deriding as customers focus mainly on communicating emotions of regret for choosing a specific provider. Emotional expressions are common in the context of tourism and hospitality (Brummette & Sisco, 2015; Jiang et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2017). However, prior research suggests that negative emotional reviews decrease the degree of the helpfulness of these reviews (Ladhari, 2007; Ostbo, 2016; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Importantly, negative emotional reviews provide less diagnostic information and, thus, do not assist the readers in evaluating service quality (Bigné et al., 2008; Kim & Gupta, 2012; Lee et al., 2017); thus, regretting had the weakest negative impact compared to deriding and discrediting on other actors within a network (Azer & Alexander, 2020b).

Customers engage in direct negative CEB using three forms, dissuading, endorsing competitors, and warning. A recent study suggests a stronger impact of endorsing competitors than dissuading, while the strongest negative impact comes from warning behavior (Azer & Alexander, 2020b). To illustrate, dissuading entails detailing negative service experiences, explicitly advising other actors not to transact with focal service providers (Azer & Alexander, 2020a). However, endorsing competitors sees customers not just limiting their review to literal opposition but also explicitly endorsing competitors (Azer & Alexander, 2018). Prior marketing research shows that providing customers with alternatives

(competitors) can decrease post-purchase evaluations, such as satisfaction toward the chosen brand and the decision to continue a service relationship (Jones et al., 2000; Lemon et al., 2002). When experiences are more perilous, customers can warn others using capital letters, stress warnings, and alarming words (Azer & Alexander, 2018). According to prior research, this kind of emphasis plays a central role in how others perceive reviews (Godfrey et al., 1983; Meloy et al., 2012; Schimmack & Derryberry, 2005) and, therefore, succeed in shifting the behavior of the receivers of these messages (Hammond et al., 2004; Stacy et al., 1993). Hence, its strongest negative impact on other actors' within an online network, compared to the other direct forms (Azer & Alexander, 2020b).

Figure 1 illustrates the intensity levels of both indirect and direct forms of negative CEB and the strongest and weakest negative impact on other actors' attitudinal and behavioral outcomes towards services providers.

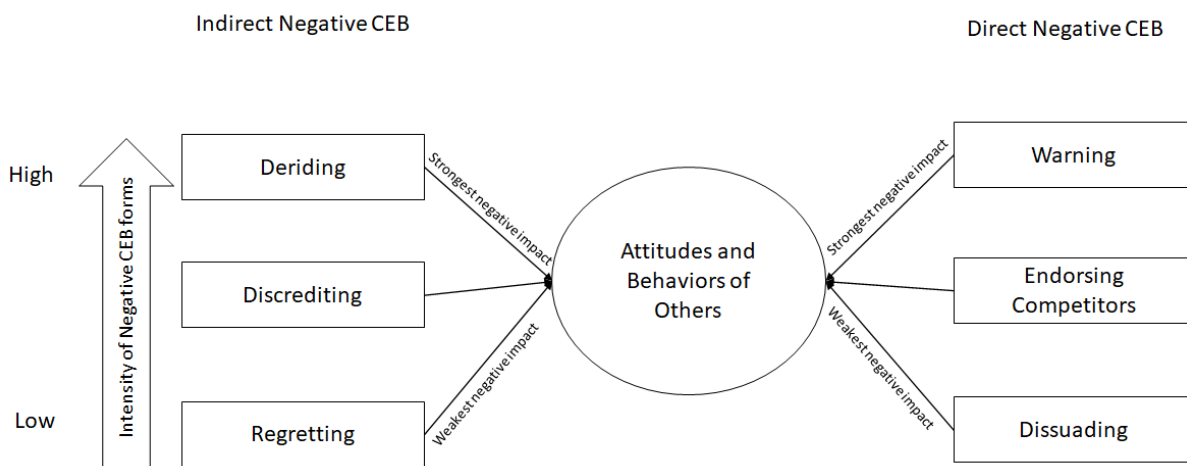


Figure 1: Intensity levels of Indirect and Direct Negative CEB Forms and impacts on attitudes and behaviours of others

Conclusions & Theoretical Implications

This chapter introduces distinct forms of direct and indirect negative CEB identified in online reviewing platforms and provides new insight into their impact. The typology and classification of direct and indirect negative CEB forms advance the empirical research on negative CEB through a more nuanced view of how, rather than what, customers say about

service providers in their online reviews. Additionally, classification of direct and indirect forms provides a new way to understand CEB valence, hitherto studied as either negative or positive.

As indicated earlier, the existing literature is limited to direct recommendations or warnings (Blazevic et al., 2013; Kumar et al., 2010; Van Doorn et al., 2010). This chapter introduced new insights about six discrete forms of negative CEB classified as three indirect (discrediting, regretting, and deriding) and three direct (dissuading, endorsing competitors, and warning) behaviors. Here, understanding is extended beyond a simple, aggregate, understanding of 'negative' reviews, addressing previous inconclusive results, with authors contrasting the relative power of negative messages (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Heitmann et al., 2007; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014) or positive messages (Adjei et al., 2010; Cheung et al., 2009; Kim & Gupta, 2012) for having the stronger impact. Furthermore, the chapter extends the extant knowledge of 'what customers say' to capture how they say it, consequently revealing differences in the impact of heterogeneous forms of engagement behavior and responding to recent research calls in several e-WOM studies (e.g., Balaji et al., 2016; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; King et al., 2014).

Importantly, this chapter establishes a new direction for studying the valence of CEB; even minimal differences in the way customers engage in direct and indirect negative CEB have a significant effect on other actors' evaluations. For instance, all direct forms identified dissuade others from transacting with a service provider, but by endorsing a competitor or warning through additional emphasis, differences in impact are observed. Accordingly, measuring the valence of engagement as merely positive versus negative is likely to increase the likelihood of inconclusive results. Furthermore, the chapter reveals that even within the same classification, forms differ in their intensity and impact. For example, within the indirect forms, all customers share negative experiences (discrediting), but intensity can be added through sarcasm (deriding) or emotion (regretting).

Managerial Implications

Negative CEB in online reviews can have detrimental impacts on service providers; therefore, understanding and responding to differing forms is critical. However, the challenge for service providers lies in developing appropriate strategies to manage negative CEB when it occurs (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Developing strategies requires adjusting approaches as forms of negative CEB differ. Thus we recommend specific and targeted responses instead of generic statements to negative reviews (Azer & Alexander, 2020a). The following strategies are recommended:

- Deriding – this form is more retainable and due to its use of sarcasm. Responses could use simple, friendly humor to counter its negative effects.
- Discrediting – this form tends to simply report negative experiences; therefore, responses should be literal and functional.
- Regretting – given the role of emotion in this form, empathy is likely to be needed in any responses.
- Dissuading – here, providers should acknowledge any causes of dissatisfaction, apologize, attempt an explanation of measures taken to improve service.
- Endorsing Competitors – in addition to the dissuading form, firms should attempt to highlight aspects of the offering that compare favorably with competitors
- Warning – this form is likely to elicit the most serious responses, and in addition to a dissuading response, service providers are recommended to evidence of future security and satisfaction to reduce potential anxiety.

This chapter also provides a nuanced view of the relative intensity of negative CEB forms, from less intense (regretting, discrediting, and dissuading) to more intense (warning, deriding, and endorsing competitors). Tourism and hospitality manager now have an enhanced understanding of the impacts of the specific intensity of these forms of negative reviews. Detecting these different intensity levels on review sites using semantic tools early

is critical in any attempts to ameliorate their effect. For example, alarming words and capital letters indicate warning behavior, nonliteral language and sarcasm may indicate deriding behavior or endorsing competitors. The mention of competitors' names could be detected by text-link or social mention tools. Importantly, to prevent other actors from drawing their own negative inferences about this service provider, responses to warning, deriding and endorsing competitors' behaviors are likely to be critical, given their higher intensity levels.

Avenues for Future Research

This chapter offers a refreshed view of negative CEB that researchers can use to make sense of changes affecting customer-service providers' relationships. With stronger conceptual foundations, future research on customer engagement can further explore the impacts of negative CEB on a more systemic level. We encourage research on the different industries, sectors, contexts, and platforms for CEB. For instance, the key differences between online and offline negative CEBs and specific forms of online negative CEB are not captured by extant research. Future research may also investigate whether the nature of the forum (public/private online community) affects customers' inclinations to engage in negative CEB using specific forms.

The specific forms of negative CEB offered in this chapter could be further studied given the empirically driven definitions and the clear explanation provided on how customers engage in each form. We encourage future research on underlying selection reasons to engage in specific forms. For example, are there circumstances that make customers more likely to engage in particular forms of negative CEB, how might these affect CEB outcomes? Does the selection of specific forms relate to personality traits? Could engaging in a specific negative CEB form help customers enhance their impression management, expertise, or emotion regulation? It would also be valuable to capture the mechanism of impact of each form (e.g., mediators, moderators, cultural &/or contextual difference...etc.). This will lead to an exciting body of literature providing greater clarity and insight into the nature of engagement. This chapter mainly captures reviews that are directed towards other

customers. It would be valuable to examine how such negative CEB forms may differ if the customers explicitly direct their message to the service providers.

Importantly, our view on the range of negative CEB forms indicates that we know more about the negative than positive forms of CEB. Therefore, more research is needed to provide nuances of positive CEB and the implications that these nuances may have on service ecosystems. This would likely help understand the conditions needed for firms to make engagement marketing successful and more predictable.

This chapter discussed forms of textual negative CEB within online reviews; however, online reviews and other platforms such as social media sites offer customers the opportunity to engage via text and visual content, such as videos and images (Azer & Blasco-Arcas, 2020). According to recent market research, visual engagement receives 200% more attention and interaction than textual posts (Statista.com, 2020). Nevertheless, research investigating other forms of communication beyond text and numerical ratings is scarce (Babić Rosario et al., 2020). Therefore, we encourage future research on visual manifestations in online contexts (Berger et al., 2020; King et al., 2014; Nanne et al., 2020). How do customers engage in positive and negative CEB using visual juxtapose textual content? What are their motives to do so? How do such motives differ from engaging in CEB using only textual content? What are the implications for service providers, other actors in the network, and the customers, of using visual and textual content while engaging in negative and positive CEB in online contexts?

Finally, more scrutiny must be applied to the current mindset about the valence of engagement beyond overly simplistic 'negative or positive' views. Therefore, both engagement and the broad e-WOM researchers are encouraged to seek out nuances in CEB to enrich these research streams and contribute to different strategies for service providers to engage with their customers more effectively and with greater relevance.

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