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## **Negative word of mouth and recovery strategies in online brand communities: a commitment-trust theory perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*Online brand communities are important avenues for interaction between brands and customers. In situations when customers spread negative word of mouth (nWOM) in the community, brands should utilize recovery strategies that address the nWOM and lead to customer satisfaction. Existing literature on online brand communities provides limited insight into optimal recovery strategies and nWOM in online communities. Based on studies of online brand communities and recovery strategies, and utilizing commitment-trust theory, the present study explores customer engagement in online nWOM in online brand communities. The present study reveals three groups of members of online brand communities, namely passive & persistent, recurrent & recurrent, and persistent & passive customers. Each group has different levels of engagement in nWOM and recovery strategy expectations. The study proposes two mediators of customers' recovery strategy expectations: (1) customers' engagement with a brand, and trust in and commitment to the brand; and (2) customers' engagement with community members, and trust in and commitment to community members.*

## **1. Introduction**

A growing number of customers want to explore other individuals' thoughts and experiences of brands prior to making their purchasing decisions. These customers often utilize online brand communities as a source of such information. An online brand community "is an aggregation of individuals who interact online, focusing on a particular brand as their shared interest" (Mousavi et al., 2017, p. 376). Scholars have explored online brand communities across two main streams. The first stream of research investigates the benefits of online brand communities, such as the spreading of positive word of mouth, customer loyalty and purchasing (Ozuem et al., 2021b; Mills et al., 2022). Generally, the aim of this stream of research was to conceptualize customer

engagement with an online brand community as a mediator of the benefits that brands receive from online brand communities. In this context, Baldus et al. (2015) explored the motivations of customers to engage in online brand communities and reported that customer engagement with online brand communities was multidimensional rather than unidimensional. Later, Chapman and Dilmeri (2022) suggested that the greatest engagement in online brand communities comes from “pleasurable/experiential content” that members of the community share (p. 908).

The second stream of research investigated the risk that online brand communities pose for brands in situations when members of the community spread negative word of mouth (nWOM) (Zhou et al., 2020; Chandrasapth et

al., 2022). The risk could be so high as to influence customers' involvement in brand communities that go against specific brands. Brandão and Popoli (2022) proposed that customers involved in anti-brand communities primarily act as "protagonists in the relationships between market and consumption" and as the "co-producers of the meanings of consumption" (p. 641). Later, a study by Dineva and Daunt (2023) provided multiple perspectives of conflicts among members of online brand communities. More specifically, they presented three groups of conflicts/customers who engage in conflict, namely intra-group (i.e., customers who support the brand get involved in the conflict), inter-group (i.e., customers who support and customers who do not support the brand get involved in the conflict), and out-group (i.e., customers

who do not support the brand get involved in the conflict). These studies have successfully explained the consequences and the risks of online brand communities in situations of customer dissatisfaction and nWOM.

The literature on service failure-recovery strategy implies that brands should provide recovery strategies to address customer dissatisfaction (Patterson et al., 2006; Azemi et al., 2020; Ozuem et al., 2021a). Recovery strategies take many forms, such as the delivery of an apology, explanation about the origin of the incident and/or the process of recovery, refund and compensation. To ensure that customer dissatisfaction (i.e., nWOM) in an online brand community is addressed, brands should provide a recovery strategy that meets customer expectations. Research on nWOM in online brand

communities and recovery strategies is underdeveloped; therefore, there is a lack of insight into the selection of the most effective recovery strategy to be utilized among members who spread online nWOM in online brand communities. A recent study by Yuan et al. (2020) partially closed the gap through an investigation of the effect of super-recovery strategies, which they identified with product “replacement” (p. 41). However, existing studies in recovery strategies propose recovery portfolios that include multiple recovery strategies (e.g., Azemi et al., 2019). Additional research that explores the pluralistic recovery expectations of customers who spread nWOM in online brand communities is necessary. In addition, Yuan et al. (2020) compared the effect of (a) recovery strategies and (b) engagement in an online brand community on repurchase intent and customer

forgiveness. Their findings suggested that engagement with an online brand community “has a direct effect on consumer forgiveness and repurchase intention” whereas “the brand’s super-recovery effort has no significant direct effect on repurchase intention, and it has only an indirect effect through consumer forgiveness” (p. 43).

Yuan et al.’s (2020) study did not account for the diverse levels of engagement that customers have with an online brand community. Recovery strategies that align with customer engagement with the online brand community and the recovery expectations could lead to a greater positive effect and customer satisfaction.

Driven by these gaps in the literature and the necessity for further understanding, the present study explores the phenomenon of nWOM in online brand communities



and recovery strategies holistically. More specifically, the overall aim of the present study is to explore customers' engagement in online nWOM in brand communities and their recovery strategy expectations. The present study utilizes the social constructivist paradigm and Morgan and Hunt's (1994) commitment-trust theory. This theoretical and methodological approach can be used in an investigation of customers' reasons to engage in nWOM and recovery strategy expectations. Customers who are members of online brand communities and the Gen Z age cohort were interviewed. Gen Z are individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Statista Research Department, 2023). Gen Z were the focus of the study for two main reasons. First, existing literature on online marketing and recovery strategies in general have millennials as the research

focus (Ozuem et al., 2021a; Ozuem et al., 2023). Gen Z is the upcoming key customer group; therefore, brands' must direct some of their marketing efforts toward Gen Z (Statista Research Department, 2023). Second, Gen Z customers were born in the era of digital marketing and are familiar with technology (Statista Research Department, 2023); hence, recovery strategies should be aligned with their unique expectations and evaluations of online brand communities.

The present study reveals three groups of members of online brand communities, namely passive & persistent, recurrent & recurrent, and persistent & passive customers. Each group's level of engagement in nWOM and recovery strategy expectations differ. The study proposes two mediators of customers' recovery strategy

expectations: (1) customers' engagement with a brand, and trust in and commitment to the brand; and (2) customers' engagement with community members, and trust in and commitment to community members. This holistic explanation advances the existing literature and provides guidelines for brands' successful monitoring of customers' involvement in nWOM in online brand communities and recovery strategies.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the literature review on online brand communities and the research gap, and justifies the utilization of commitment-trust theory. The methodology and research design are outlined in Section 3. Section 4 presents the data analysis and findings; Section 5 discusses the findings and presents a conclusion. The

paper concludes with theoretical contributions (Section 6) and limitations and topics for future research (Section 7).

## **2. Literature review**

### ***2.1. Online brand communities: Benefits and risks (online nWOM)***

There are two main streams of research on online brand communities. The first research stream investigates the benefits that online brand communities have for the brands, such as spread of positive word of mouth, customer engagement with the community/brand, customer loyalty and purchase intention (Zheng et al., 2015; Hanson et al., 2019; Kumar and Kumar, 2020).

This stream of studies also investigates factors that could lead to customer behavior in favor of the brand. In this

context, Kumar (2019) suggested that members of an online brand community spread positive word of mouth about the brand community regardless of whether they are passive or active members in the community. In general, customers appear to be more active and engage in the online community when they perceive benefits from such an act (Zheng et al., 2015).

Ozuem et al. (2021c) categorized four different types of customers who engage with online brand communities, namely judgmentalists (i.e., customers who do not associate themselves with a brand and have a tendency “to question the content”) (p. 810), sugar-coaters (i.e., customers who do not frequently purchase from a brand), bias situators (i.e., customers who are frequent purchasers and whose decision making is not influenced

by others), and rationalizers (i.e., customers who get involved in communities to learn and share knowledge about brand experiences). In addition, Mills et al. (2022) suggested that when customers identify themselves with a brand, they are more loyal toward the brand.

The second stream of studies on online brand communities explores the risks that online brand communities pose to companies in situations when customers have undergone dissatisfactory experiences (Zhou et al., 2020; Chandrasapth et al., 2022). A majority of these studies suggest that online nWOM could initiate complaints against the brand among customer members of online brand communities. In this context, Zhou et al. (2020) considered the impact of nWOM on members of an online brand community in relation to the length of

time that an individual who spreads online nWOM had been a member of the online brand community. They found that new members to the community who share nWOM receive support from other members in the community (Zhou et al., 2020). Later, Chandrasapth et al. (2022) presented three different types of customers who get involved in online communities, namely devotee customers, realist customers and adversary customers. Devotee customers “not only expresses their passion and dedication to the brand, but also protect and defend it from existing community members who do not share the same brand ideology” (Chandrasapth et al., 2022, p. 1108). Realist customers seek to support conflict resolution from a “pragmatic perspective” (Chandrasapth et al., 2022, p. 1108). Whereas adversary customers “contribute with their opposing views in keeping

consumers engaged in the conflict” (Chandrasapth et al., 2022, p. 1109). This could mean that online brand communities that consist of adversary customer groups have a greater risk of online nWOM, especially in situations when devotee customers are not present to unconditionally support the brand regardless of the origin of the complaint.

In general, these studies reveal differences in behavior among members of online brand communities; this is in line with contemporary literature on customer behavior that proposes that customers are divergent and that each customer group has unique expectations and evaluations of brands (Azemi et al., 2020; Ozuem et al., 2021a).

However, the current literature is unclear about the recovery expectations that customers have of the brand



to address their nWOM. Also, the studies do not provide insight into the recovery strategies that brands should utilize to address the nWOM. The failure-recovery literature has traditionally suggested that successful recovery strategies are those which inform customers of the origin of the failure (Azemi and Kini, 2022). A study by Yuan et al. (2020) explored the impact of “super-recovery” on customer forgiveness of a brand for the incident and their repurchase intent. They suggested that super-recovery efforts lead to customer forgiveness and repurchase intention, and they proposed that the forgiveness was linked with customers’ engagement with the brand. This could imply that previous experience with the brand is more important than the recovery strategy. Therefore, a holistic exploration of customers’ engagement in online nWOM on online brand

communities and customers' expectations of recovery strategy will address a gap in the existing literature.

## ***2.2. Commitment-trust theory***

We suggest that the commitment-trust theory of Morgan and Hunt (1994) facilitates the evaluation of customers' engagement in online nWOM in online brand communities. Scholars of online branding and recovery have recognized commitment-trust theory as a theory that helps to decipher customers' recovery strategy expectations and evaluations (Ozuem et al., 2023).

Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined commitment "as an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it" (p. 23) and trust as "confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity" (p. 23).

In the context of the present study, this helps to understand a customer's engagement in online nWOM, while considering that customer's existing engagement with the brand and community members, the relationship with and trust in the community and brand, and the actual incident and recovery strategies that the brand or the member considers.

### **3. Methodology**

The present study is qualitative in nature and follows the social constructivist paradigm, which is commonly used in research projects that seek in-depth exploration and explore phenomena that consist of multiple factors and subjects (Azemi et al., 2019). In the present study, social constructivism supports understanding of customer engagement in nWOM and preferred recovery strategies,

which are influenced by the customer themselves, the brand and community members.

Data were collected using in-depth interviews that consisted of eight open-ended questions. The selection of in-depth interviews as a means of data collection was informed by the exploratory nature of the study. The questions were organized into three main groups. The first group of questions aimed to understand customers' perceptions of and engagement with online brand communities (an example of a group 1 interview question is, *How involved are you with online brand communities?*). The second group of questions focused on conceptualizing customers' engagement in online nWOM (an example of a group 2 interview question is, *How did you share information about the dissatisfactory*

*experience with members of the online brand*

*community?*). The third group of interview questions aimed at understanding the recovery strategy delivered by the brand or other community members in response to the nWOM (an example of a group 3 interview question is, *What did the members of the community and the brand do to address your dissatisfactory experience?*).

Data were collected from 25 participants. The sample size was informed by qualitative studies and supported by the data saturation point (Sarmiento et al., 2019).

Participants are members of online brand communities and they were selected based on three criteria. The three criteria were that participants: (1) were within the Gen Z age cohort, (2) had been engaged in online nWOM due to an incident with the brand, and (3) had experienced a

recovery action/support either from the brand, member(s) of the community or both. To collect the data, each of the participants was interviewed by one of the authors either face to face or through a virtual platform. The interview length was on average 30 minutes. At the end of the interviews, all the interviews were transcribed, which led to 132 pages of text.

#### **4. Data analysis and findings**

The present study utilized a thematic analysis approach to analyze the data. This is a common data analytical approach for qualitative research projects that aim for in-depth and holistic understanding (Naeem, 2021). Once the interviews were transcribed, the authors read through the data multiple times to make sense of the information. Following the traditional guidelines of thematic analysis,

the authors first identified the keywords that participants utilized to explain their engagement with online nWOM in online brand communities and the recovery strategies that they expected. Then the keywords were organized into sub-groups (i.e., sub-themes) based on their meanings and then they were finally organized into three groups. Each group represented a theme: (1) level of engagement, (2) recovery strategies, and (3) level of trust and commitment (see Table 1). Numerous discussions among the authors took place before the final list of themes was generated (Baldus et al., 2015; Chapman and Dilmperi, 2022).

#### ***4.1. The emerging themes: Level of engagement, recovery strategies, and level of trust and commitment***

**The level of engagement.** The level of engagement refers to the engagement of customers with the brand and with nWOM. Existing literature links customers' level of engagement with their loyalty to the brand and/or community and their tendency to become involved in nWOM (Azemi et al., 2020; Ozuem et al., 2021b). In terms of engagement with the brand/community, the data showed three levels of engagement. First, some community members engaged with the community through one source, namely through reviews. This is presented in the following statement by a male participant:

*"I like to read reviews by other people to gain people's perspectives on different products."*

**Table 1: Emerging themes: level of engagement, level of trust and commitment, and recovery strategies**



<b>THEMES</b>	<b>SUB-THEMES</b>	<b>KEYWORDS</b>
<b>Level of engagement</b>	Engagement with the online brand community	Read, reviews, perspectives, product reviews, see the product, product hauls, product details, see the video, describe the product, product in action.
	Engagement in negative word of mouth	Post reviews, share bad experiences, share dissatisfactory experiences, communicate the poor experience, put my dissatisfaction to the group
<b>Level of trust and commitment</b>	Level of trust in the brand versus online brand community members	Mob mentality, opinion of many, drowned out by the community, I believed in the [company], sense of community, common identity, being honest
	Level of commitment to the brand versus the	I believed in the [company], limited community reaction

online brand  
community

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<b>Recovery strategies</b>	Not applicable	Apology, sorry, overpaid, received points (i.e., compensation), own the mistake, I fixed the problem, quick response, pleasantly surprised
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Second, other members were engaged through multiple sources, such as reviews, videos of the products, and visual presentations of the brand. The following statement of a female participant highlighted this:

*“Oftentimes people do product reviews or shopping hauls which allow you to see the product in action. Something I like about online brand communities on*

*social media is that rather than seeing a written review, you often get to see a much more detailed video.”*

Third, another group engaged with the online brand community through multiple sources but their engagement was more active, for example, these customers sought detailed information, as expressed in the following statement by a female participant:

*“They will do a ‘haul’ of different clothes that they buy and then describe the fit, feel and overall quality of the product.”*

Also, data showed three levels of engagement in nWOM by the members of online brand communities (Herhausen et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2020). The first

level of engagement consists of customers who constantly post online nWOM as implied by the following female participant:

*“Yes, I do share bad/dissatisfactory brand experiences with members of an online brand community.”*

The second level of engagement with nWOM refers to customers who often post nWOM as revealed by the following female participant:

*“I often post reviews on a product that I am using.”*

The last level of customer engagement with nWOM refers to the engagement of customers who rarely post

nWOM. This is revealed in the statement by the following male participant:

*“I usually do not share bad experiences with the members of online brand communities. However, if I were to have a bad experience with a brand, I would write a review to communicate the poor experience I had.”*

These customers seem to be willing to make their bad experience with the brand known to the members of online brand communities in situations when the incident did have a large negative impact.

**Recovery strategies.** Data revealed four recovery strategies that customers who engage in nWOM within

the online brand community expect, namely brand's instruction on how to fix the incident, apology, compensation and prompt replacement (Azemi and Kini, 2022). Companies should provide recovery strategies that meet customers' expectation (Patterson et al., 2006; Abney et al., 2017).

An example of a female participant's expectation of compensation as a recovery strategy, which is expected in situations when customers lose money due to an incident with brand, is revealed in the following:

*“The headquarters responded to this negative experience by giving points that we could use toward our next purchase. Unfortunately, we had overpaid, but,*

*thankfully, we were able to receive points for the negative experience.”*

An apology seems to be an expected recovery strategy specifically in situations when customers experience financial losses. This is emphasized by the following statement of a female participant:

*“I always think that the way a brand handles their mistakes says a lot about them, and if they are able to own up to mistakes or poor service that they provide, and offer an apology, then my experience with this brand is always better than if they don't.”*

In other instances, customers seem to seek prompt replacement or even instruction on how to fix the

incident. The latter strategy is emphasized by the following statement made by a male online brand community member.

*“Another online brand experience that I shared was when I had bought [a product] from the seller. The online brand community was able to answer my questions on how to change the battery of the product and allowed me to fix the product.”*

Data showed that customers who are happy with instruction as a recovery strategy are knowledgeable about the product and brand and are confident that they can manage the recovery process.



**Level of trust and commitment.** An overview of the keywords and statements utilized by the participants in the interviews showed that customers' level of engagement with the community and with nWOM can be explained by their commitment to and trust in members of the community or the brand. That is, customers either had an unquestionable level of trust in and commitment to the brand or to online brand community members, or they had moderate trust in and commitment to both. The following statement by a male participant implies a lack of trust in community members:

*“Online brand communities can often have a mob mentality. Some people who have a positive insight into*

*the brand and product can be drowned out by the opinion of many.”*

Whereas other customers appreciated the community and made decisions based on the information shared by the other members, as stated by the following female participant:

*“I will actively research into certain products or brands that I am especially unfamiliar with and am interested in purchasing. I will look into a variety of online communities to get variety of opinions and views on a product or brand.”*

These customers seem to make decisions based on other members' thoughts and experiences about brands expressed in online brand communities.

#### ***4.2. A reflection on the emerging themes and three customer groups***

Reflection on the emerging themes revealed three different customer groups that are part of online brand communities, engage in nWOM and expect recovery strategies (see Fig 1). This is in line with existing literature on online marketing that perceive customers as diverse in their expectations and evaluations of brands and experiences (Patten et al., 2020). The authors named these customers as: (1) passive & persistent customers, (2) recurrent & recurrent customers, and (3) persistent & passive customers.

Passive & persistent customers are customers who engage with the online brand community through one source of information and actively share nWOM with the brand community. These customers trust the brand more than community members, and they are committed to the brand rather than the brand community itself. The following statement by a male participant is an example of this view:

*“I put the dissatisfaction in a post. The post was downvoted by the community and had limited community reaction. This was due to the mob mentality present in the community.”*

Due to these customers' knowledge of the brand, their preferred recovery strategy seems to be the brand's delivery of instructions on how to fix the problem.

Recurrent & recurrent customers engage with the online brand community through multiple sources but do not seem to seek to receive very detailed information from community members about the brand. These customers often spread nWOM, but not as actively as passive & persistent customers. Their preferred recovery strategies seem to be apology and compensation. They seem to expect a higher level of compensation than what other customer groups expect. The level of compensation expected by this customer group is revealed by the following statement by a male participant:

*“I also filed an online complaint with the company explaining my situation and as a result I received 50% compensation. I was pleasantly surprised by the brand’s response to my complaint and believe that such a response will encourage me to purchase from the brand again.”*

Finally, persistent & passive customers trust community members and are committed to the brand community primarily because of the other members in the community. These customers trust the information that members of the community share and make brand purchasing decisions based on this shared information. These customers use multiple sources to engage with the community and rarely are involved in sharing nWOM. Their sense of commitment to and trust in the

community is revealed by the following female participants:

*“There is a sense of community at the virtual location, and people can come together with a common identity.”*

*“When there are virtual communities, people are being honest about how they like or dislike a product.”*

This customer group seems to value prompt replacement as a recovery strategy more than the recovery strategies preferred by recurrent & recurrent customers (apology and compensation) and passive & persistent customers (instructions on how to fix the problem).

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

The present study suggests that members of online brand communities can be categorized into three customer groups, namely passive & persistent customers, recurrent & recurrent customers, and persistent & passive customers. The finding of diverse groups of customers in online brand communities is in line with the existing literature on online brand communities, and recovery strategies (Azemi and Kini, 2022; Ozuem et al., 2021b). Some customers are less tolerant of service failure than others and a greater recovery effort by companies is required, whereas other customers are more understanding (Abney et al., 2017; Azemi et al., 2019). Passive & persistent customers, recurrent & recurrent customers, and persistent & passive customers seem to value one recovery strategy the most; however, they also



seem to be happy with multiple recovery strategies. This is in line with existing recovery strategy literature, which invites companies to develop recovery programs that consist of multiple recovery strategies, such as apology, compensation and explanation (Azemi et al., 2019). The three customer groups seem to expect personalized responses from companies.

***Insert Figure 1 here***

While the findings on personalization of recovery strategies are limited in the present study, it can be assumed that a personalized recovery strategy could be important for persistent & passive customers. The level of trust in and commitment to the brand of this customer group is lower than that for other members of the online brand community.

The present study also revealed that customers' levels of engagement with the online brand community and with nWOM in instances of their dissatisfaction with the brand differed. The data shows that passive & persistent customers spread nWOM the most out of the three customer groups but utilize a single source of engagement with the brand (i.e., online reviews). Given that these customers have the highest level of trust in and commitment to the brand, they seem to have a low level of tolerance toward incidents with the brand. In contrast, persistent & passive customers engage with the brand the most out of all the three customer groups but engage in nWOM the least. Given that they have a higher level of trust in and are more committed to members of the online brand community than to the brand itself, these

customers seem to gather information from the online brand community and do not have to engage in nWOM to be able to learn something new or receive recovery strategies from the brand.

## **6. Theoretical contributions**

The main focus of existing studies on online brand communities is on the risks that communities can pose to brands in situations when members of the community spread nWOM (Zhou et al., 2020; Brandão and Popoli, 2022; Dineva and Daunt, 2023). The present study advances knowledge of the antecedents of nWOM (i.e., level of engagement with the brand, and trust in and commitment to the brand in comparison to level of engagement with members of the community, and trust in and commitment to members of the community) to

explain customers engagement in nWOM. This helped to identify recovery strategies that brands should utilize to address customers' dissatisfaction and manage the spread of online nWOM in the community. Also, the present study reveals three different types of customers of online brand communities. The findings of the present study of different customer groups is an important contribution to the literature.

The conceptual framework in the present study supports brands along two fronts: digital marketing and communications. A communications manager should utilize customers' engagement level with the brand to support and manage communications in online brand communities that would satisfy customers across the different customer groups. Communications and digital

marketing managers should develop marketing messages and campaigns that enhance customer trust specifically among passive & persistent customers who seem to have a lower level of trust in the brand. In addition, given that persistent & passive customers trust online brand community members and are committed to them more than to the brand itself, digital marketing managers should approach the active members of the online brand community as influencers. Digital marketing managers should utilize engagement, and trust and commitment levels, to identify the customer group (as identified in this study) of customers who spread nWOM and utilize recovery strategies accordingly. That is, the brand should provide instructions on how to fix the incident to passive & persistent customers, apology and compensation to

recurrent & recurrent customers, and prompt replacement to persistent & passive customers.

## **7. Limitations and future research**

The emerging conceptual framework opens two important avenues for future research that would address the limitations of the present study and support the science on the topic of online brand communities. The present study explores the phenomenon holistically, leading to a conceptual framework that is inclusive of different brands across industries. To understand the level of generalizability, it is important that future research tests the conceptual framework across different industries. In addition, the present study collects data from the Gen Z age cohort. Given the limited existing insight into online nWOM in brand communities and

recovery strategies, future research could utilize the research design of the present study to explore the phenomenon among other age cohorts.

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Fig 1: Customer Groups of Online Brand Community

