Let's Talk About This in Public: Consumer Expectations for Online Review Response

Abstract

Online consumer reviews are becoming one of the key drivers of hospitality firm performance. Although research has investigated different aspects of online reviews such as their volume and length, issues regarding the effectiveness of review response demand for further investigation. Drawing on theories of expectancy value and communication, we develop and test a framework of consumer expectations regarding company responses. Results from two experiments show that consumer preferences for responses to their online reviews depend on the factors of valence (positive vs. negative), explanation type (explained action vs. explained reaction), and response channel (private vs. public). Perceived usefulness is found to be the underlying mechanism that explains these effects. The study's theoretical contributions and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: Online reviews, explanation type, review valence, response channel, perceived usefulness

1. Introduction

In recent years, many consumers have turned to the Internet and social media to share their experiences, either positive or negative, regarding products and services (Dens, De Pelsmacker, & Purnawirawan, 2015). Since the launch of Yelp in 2004, consumers posted more than 135 million restaurant reviews on this platform (Hanley, 2017). TripAdvisor, another review site, has amassed 435 million reviews and more than 280 traveler reviews/opinions are submitted to the site every minute (TripAdvisor, 2017). What used to be a private communication between one customer and a firm (such as a complaint) can now easily be published on social media, and such messages can influence the choices of thousands of potential customers (Xia, 2013). Published customer reviews have been shown to have significant impacts on the brand perceptions, choices, and loyalty behaviors of potential customers (Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). According to a BrightLocal survey, more than 90% of consumers said that they read reviews before making purchasing decisions (Forbes, 2019). When customers post reviews online, they expect responses (Wang & Chaudhry, 2017). As companies increasingly recognize the power of online reviews for influencing customers' purchasing behaviors, managers have started to actively engage in responding to their customers' comments. Many firms monitor and respond to online reviews by means of "webcare," which is a process of engaging in online interactions with consumers and actively searching the Web to address consumer feedback (Dens et al., 2015; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017).

Several studies have examined the effects of webcare on customers' perceptions and product evaluations. For example, Istanbulluoglu (2017) investigated the impact of multiple response times on consumer satisfaction. The results indicated that quicker first responses and

quicker conclusive responses led to higher customer satisfaction. In the hospitality area, Sparks et al. (2016) explored the effects of four variables associated with responses: the source of the response (general manager vs. guest service agent), the voice of the responder (professional voice vs. conversational voice), the speed of response (fast, moderate, or slow), and the action frame (past action vs. future action). The findings of that study showed that using a conversational voice and giving a timely response resulted in more favorable customer inferences. Wei et al. (2013) examined the effectiveness of hotel firms' responses to customers' online reviews. They found that when reviews were positive, the levels of trust and perceived quality of communication in a hotel's responses did not vary according to the type of management response (generic vs. specific). However, when reviews were negative, the levels of trust and the perceived communication quality of the responses were greater for specific (vs. generic) management responses. Furthermore, the recent tourism and hospitality literature concerning online reviews suggests that a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the textual and semantic characteristics of online reviews, and thus understanding the factual and objective aspects of online reviews has become more crucial (Shin et al., 2018).

Although these studies have shown that webcare has a mainly positive impact on customer perceptions, some experts have questioned the effectiveness of this strategy. For instance, Lee and Song (2010) indicated that interventions after negative eWOM resulted in stronger attributions of responsibility for a negative event, which then produced more negative evaluations. Wang and Chaudhry (2017) found that hotel manager responses to negative reviews signaled a high quality of complaint management and thus had positive effects on subsequent reviews, whereas manager responses to positive reviews negatively impacted subsequent ratings because customers perceived such responses as marketing promotions. Noting the risks

associated with webcare, both practitioners and academics have called for more research on effective strategies for responding to online customer reviews (e.g., Dens et al., 2015; Reichelt et al., 2014; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). This study seeks to answer this call by exploring how the factors of explanation type (explained reaction vs. explained action), review valence (positive vs. negative) and the channel through which managers respond to online reviews (public vs. private) jointly affect the focal customers' attitudes toward companies. Built on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), previous research on hotel online review suggests that travelers' behavioral beliefs and subjective norms determine their hotel booking attitude and intention (Casalo et al., 2015; Njite & Parsa, 2005). TRA also suggests external variables such as characteristics or types of the task also influence individual's attitude and behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Therefore, this research takes into account these contextual factors (i.e. explanation type, review valence and response channel) that lead to customers' attitude towards the company, in order to provide more insights regarding the boundary conditions that influence customers' perceptions. We also seek to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms for these effects.

By examining the joint effect of explanation type, review valence, and response channels, the current research addresses two critical research questions:(1) Is webcare an effective strategy for hospitality managers, and (2) what are some boundary conditions of the effect of webcare? The importance of manager response has been well established in the literature (see Kwok et al., 2017 for a review). By responding to online customer reviews, managers can improve review ratings, increase customer satisfaction, and improve the overall performance of a hotel (e.g., Kim et al., 2015; Min et al., 2015; Pantelidis, 2010; Xie et al., 2014). Yet, the efficiency of managers' different response strategies is identified as an important topic that deserves more research

attention (Schuckert et al., 2015). As such, our findings pertaining to the first research question could contribute to the literature and the industry by providing new insights to the interaction between consumers and managers. In addition, prior research has identified how managers may strategically respond to certain types of reviews as another important topic that should be studied further (Kwok et al., 2017). To address this issue, we identified explanation type and review valence as two factors that could potentially influence the effectiveness of managers' responses. Our findings would shed light on how certain types of reviews may call for the employment of a specific response strategy from the managers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Reviews

Online reviews have been defined as "all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers" (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014, p. 41). They are written contents created by consumers on the Internet, and such reviews have become a popular form of electronic word-of-mouth (WOM). Research has suggested that online reviews usually involve three components, which need to work together seamlessly: WOM generation (a system for sending the information), WOM consumption (a decision-making process), and WOM content (the messages themselves) (Yang et al., 2012).

Concerning WOM generation, research has mainly focused on the question of how to generate effective content in online reviews. For example, Söderlund and Mattsson (2015) proposed that managers should take advantage of question-behavior effects and signaling effects because consumers are more likely to engage in WOM activity by being asked to do so. A simple question such as "Would you like to leave a review for us on TripAdvisor?" increases the

likelihood that the customer will write a review. As for WOM consumption, prior research has

shown that online reviews benefit receivers in various ways. Such reviews help to reduce

consumer uncertainty, decrease research costs, build trust in products, and facilitate the decision-

making process (King et al., 2014). As for WOM content, researchers have examined factors

such as language style (e.g., Wu et al., 2017), valence (e.g., Wei et al., 2013), and information

load (e.g., Zhang et al., 2016). For example, Schellekens et al. (2010) examined the impact of

language abstractness (vs. concreteness). They found that abstract language in positive WOM led

to higher purchase intentions toward the products under consideration.

2.2 Manager Response

Manager response, also called "Organizational response", refers to the initial action that a

company takes in response to its consumer's post-purchase behaviors, and especially in response

to service complaints (Davidow, 2003). The strategies that firms use to resolve service failures

and reestablish relationships with dissatisfied consumers are called "complaint handling" (Tax et

al., 1998). Davidow (2003) suggested that to handle complaints successfully, companies needed

to pay attention to factors such as timeliness, facilitation, redress, apology, credibility, and

attentiveness. Successful complaint handling can positively affect consumer loyalty, retention,

and positive WOM (Gelbrich & Roschk, 2011).

Once a customer provides an online review, the firm can choose to address the concerns

or sentiments expressed by responding either in private (by e-mailing the customer directly) or in

public (by posting a response on the third party's website) (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). According

to Jameson (2014), private communications involve situations in which "the communicator has

the power to control to whom a communication is distributed and [can] choose to do so by

limiting who comprises the audience." In contrast, public communication involves situations in

which "the communicator either lacks the power to control distribution or chooses not to limit the audience" (2014, p. 8). Schmidt (2011) argued that communicators made decisions about which channel to use based on their considerations of different types of audiences they want to reach. Communicators determine both the audience with which they intend to share information and the audience with which they intend to interact. A public response can reach both types of audience, whereas a private correspondence reaches only the audience directly involved.

In the online review context, a private response resembles a traditional one-to-one interaction between a customer and a firm. Many companies promote the idea that private communications are more effective, as private messages can heighten the social presence of the conversation partners (Lee & Jang, 2013). The term "social presence" refers to the psychological distance between the interactants. A high degree of social presence means that a person feels as though he or she is "with" the communication partner in a given situation (e.g., Lee & Nass, 2005; Skalski & Tamborini, 2007; Walther & Bazarova, 2008). Although private and public messages may contain the same content, a private message makes it easier for both the customer and the company representative to vividly imagine a human connection (Lee & Jang, 2013). As a result, direct private communications can positively influence customers' evaluations of a firm and its actions (Aggarwal, 2004), which can further lead to heightened customer satisfaction, better loyalty, and less price susceptibility (Chang & Chieng, 2006).

On contrary, many hospitality firms choose to make their responses to customer reviews public. Such responses usually take the form of open-ended pieces of text, which are publicly displayed beneath the consumer review being addressed. This approach allows a company to reach all of its potential customers, who may search for this information in the course of making decisions in the near or distant future (Jameson, 2014). Research has shown that a manager's

response can prevent readers from drawing negative, potentially erroneous inferences regarding a hotel's concerns for its customers (Sparks et al., 2016). Managerial responses can also engage potential customers and nurture trust (Xie et al., 2017b), which in turn can have positive effects on a hotel's financial performance (Xie et al., 2017a, 2017b). Prior research has called for further investigation on how managers could effectively respond to certain types of online reviews (e.g., Kwok et al., 2017). In the current research, we introduce the explanation type of online reviews and discuss how it may inform different types of responding strategies.

2.3 Explained Action vs. Explained Reaction

One of the most common and effective ways for individuals to express their consumption-related experiences is to use "explaining language" (Malle, 2004; Moore, 2011). This kind of communication involves generating explanations for why experiences happened, or why they were liked or disliked (Malle, 2004). Research has suggested that there are two types of explanations. *Reason explanations* express intentional behavior and describe people's reasons for acting the way they do. *Cause explanations* concern unintentional behavior and describe the external causes that lead people to behave the way they do (Malle, 1999). In this study, we focus on *Reason* explanations rather than Cause explanations because we hypothesize that customers using different types of reason explanations have different motivations behind writing such a review, which further interact with response channels. Reasons can be categorized as beliefs, valuations, or desires. Belief reasons include a broad range of understandings or assessments that an agent may have about an outcome, an action, or the causal relations involved. Valuation reasons indicate positive or negative affects toward a representational object. Desire reasons reveal an actor's goals, aims, or purposes (Malle, 2001). This study concentrates on belief and valuation reasons, as these two types of explanations are particularly relevant to the context of

online reviews. Individuals frequently use these types of explanations to report what they have purchased, why they purchased it (beliefs), and how they felt about it (valuations) (Moore, 2015).

Moore (2011, 2015) described these two types of explanations as "explained action" (EA) and "explained reaction" (ER). EA aims to represent reality, and it pertains to people's behaviors, choices, or acts regarding their consumption (e.g., "I would recommend this hotel because ..."). Such explanations include any set of related actions, such as purchasing, choosing, or disposing. In contrast, ER indicates people's evaluative attitudes toward their consumption experiences. ER pertains to feelings, assessments, or responses to an act of consumption (e.g., "I loved this hotel because ...") (Moore, 2015). In the context of online reviews, Moore (2015) found that both EA and ER reviews were helpful to readers, but EA reviews were more helpful for utilitarian products, and ER reviews were more helpful for hedonic products. This difference in effects arises because EA reviews focus on specifying the reasons for choosing certain products, and thus they are primarily cognitive. Malle et al. (2000) also indicated that when people explained their own behavior, they tended to use EA as a way to present themselves as rational. ER reviews, however, are primarily emotional, focusing on the feelings that result from using a product.

There are various factors that motivate consumers to write online reviews. Berger (2014) suggested five major factors: impression management, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding, and persuading others. We argue that impression management is the main motivator behind an EA type of review whereas emotion regulation is what motivates people to write an ER type of review. Berger (2014) indicated that one of the main reasons people post online reviews is to shape the impressions others have of them. People like to be perceived positively, and consequently they are more likely to share information or post reviews that make them look good rather than bad (e.g., Chung & Darke, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al.,

2004). People who share EA type of reviews typically focus on the cognitive reasoning behind their behaviors, which tends to be perceived as useful information and makes sharer seem smart and helpful. On the other hand, the motivation behind sharing ER type of reviews, which are primarily emotional, is emotion regulation. Emotion regulation refers to the ways people manage which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they express them (Gross, 2008). One way online reviews could facilitate emotion regulation is by generating social support (Berger, 2014). When people have had a negative experience, sharing it with others can provide comfort and consolation (Rime, 2009). Such a sharing can also confirm their own judgment, which helps reduce dissonance (Berger, 2014).

Due to the distinct motivations behind writing an EA or ER type of review, we argue that managers' responses should be tailored to fit with the types of explanations that consumers use in their online reviews such that a public response should be provided to an ER review, and a private response should be offered in responding to an EA review. Additionally, we argue that the interaction effect between explanation types and manager response is further moderated by review valence.

2.4 Review Valance

Review valence refers to the tone or preference involved in the comments (e.g., positive/negative/neutral) (You, Vadakkepatt, & Joshi, 2015). It is considered as one of the key characteristics of online review content (e.g., Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). Several methods can be used to measure valence. Some studies have measured valence by averaging the numerical ratings according to the review scales. Other studies have measured the ratio of positive to negative reviews. Still other studies have used dummy coding to indicate the presence of negative reviews (Blal & Sturman, 2014; Wang & Chaudhry, 2017). However, despite the large

body of literature on review valence, findings on this subject have been contradictory and inconclusive.

Some scholars believe that positive online reviews have less power than negative reviews because of the psychological effect known as "negativity bias" (Min, Lim, & Magnini, 2015; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). For example, Zhao et al. (2015) studied review valence as one of the six features of review content that could impact consumers' hotel booking intentions. The study's results showed that negative reviews reduced online booking intentions significantly, but positive reviews had little impact on boosting booking intentions. Moreover, Lee, Jeong, and Lee (2017) found that negative reviews were perceived as more helpful among potential consumers seeking information for their future hotel stays. However, the effect of negativity bias diminished when the majority of the reviews were negative. On the other hand, other researchers have demonstrated the power of positive online reviews (e.g., Chan, Lam, Chow, Fong, & Law, 2017). For instance, Blal and Sturman (2014) found that positive reviews had a stronger effect on consumers' purchase intentions toward higher-tier hotels, whereas review volume had a more positive effect on lower-tier hotels. Similarly, Ladhari and Michaud (2015) showed that positive reviews on hotel websites led to a higher level of booking intention, more trust, and better evaluations or perceptions. Last but not least, Mauri and Minazzi (2013) found that online reviews served as a double-edge sword. Although positive reviews significantly increased consumers' purchase intentions, such reviews also amplified the expectations of upcoming hotel guests, which could depress their level of satisfaction.

2.5 The Interaction Effect

While prior research has established the importance of manager response, how managers could effectively respond to certain types of online reviews deserve further investigation (Kwok

et al., 2017). In this study, we argue that explanation type is one of the variables that demand for

different types of manager responses. For *negative* reviews, some researchers have suggested

that the main objective of using *ER* is to publicize personal feelings regarding an experience

(Moore, 2015). When consumers engage in public complaining, they expect to see that the

company is responsive to their complaints and is taking initiatives to solve their problems (e.g.,

van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Therefore, review writers typically prefer a public response, as

they believe that such interactions can help all readers in making their decisions and reducing

their uncertainty (Wei et al., 2013). Review writers who receive a public response commonly

feel that their reviews have been heard by the company, and that their reviews may help other

customers to evaluate the product or service. In other words, ER combined with a public

response is generally perceived as more useful by review writers (Moore, 2015). However, as

indicated above, impression management (i.e., self-enhancement, identity-signaling, and filling

conversational space) is the main driving force behind sharing *negative EA* reviews (Berger,

2014; Lampel & Bhalla, 2007). According to this view, people who write such reviews are

usually trying to present themselves in ways that convey an impression of being "with it," being

an expert or an insider, or as being intelligent and competent in writing critiques (Amabile, 1983;

Chung & Darke, 2006). For these customers, the main purpose of sharing WOM is to shape the

impressions that others have of them (and that they have of themselves), rather than to seek a

response from the firm. In that case, these writers may feel that the channel through which a firm

uses to respond to their reviews is irrelevant.

      To investigate these kinds of interaction further, we propose the following set of

hypotheses.

H1. For negative reviews, there is an interaction effect between the response channel and explanation type, such that:

> *H1a. If the review is ER, the review writer usually expects a public response rather than a private response from the management.*
>
> *H1b. If the review is EA, the review writer is indifferent as to whether the response from management is public or private.*

Further, we argue that such an effect is moderated by review valence such that the interaction effect is only significant for negative reviews. For *positive* reviews, prior research has shown that consumers are motivated to post positive online reviews when they have good experiences with a firm's products or services (Babin, Lee, Kim, & Griffin, 2005; Liang et al., 2013). Liang et al. (2013) suggested that consumers' behavioral intentions in posting positive online reviews could be explained by focus-related utility theory. This theory suggests that consumers experience benefits when adding value to the community through their positive contributions (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001). The desires that motivate consumers to post positive online reviews include desire to help a firm by recommending its services, desire to gain social benefits by creating a public identity for themselves, desire to gain better social integration into online communities, and desire to shift the power from firms to consumers, in the belief that online reviews can influence public perceptions regarding a firm's corporate image (Liang et al., 2013). In the context of hospitality and tourism, research has indicated that people simply enjoy sharing their positive travel experiences (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Yen & Tang, 2015). Post-trip sharing is often considered as part of the enjoyment of travel (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). As indicated above, customers who use different types of explanations expect certain response from the managers because the motivations behind EA and ER are different in the context of

negative reviews. Therefore, given that customers who write positive reviews tend to have the same motivations, we argue that their expectations of manager responses would be similar regardless of explanation types.

Taken together, we propose that the interaction effect between explanation type and response channel is attenuated in the context of positive reviews.

H2. For positive reviews, the interaction effect is attenuated, such that consumer expectations for public vs. private responses from the management are similar regardless of explanation type.

2.6 Perceived Usefulness of Response

In eWOM, perceived usefulness is defined as the extent to which a posted review can facilitate its readers' purchase decision process (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Liu & Park, 2015; Sen & Lerman, 2007; Yin et al., 2014). Research has suggested that a consumer's engagement in WOM is motivated by the desire to help others (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010; Moore, 2015). Studies have also found various factors that can influence the customer-perceived usefulness of online reviews. These factors include the reviewer's characteristics, the review content, and the review ratings (Liu & Park, 2015; Xiang, Du, Ma, & Fan, 2017). However, rather than focusing on the reviewer and review characteristics, in this study we argue that the effect of perceived usefulness is most salient when the response channel is public. In general, review writers tend to perceive that management responses are more informative and helpful for all customers when they are made publicly (as opposed to privately) (Jameson, 2014).

Therefore, we further propose the following hypothesis.

H3. For negative reviews, when the response channel is public (vs. private), the perceived usefulness of the review mediates the effect of explanation type on disconfirmation.

14

We conducted two experiments to test these hypotheses. Study 1 examined the three-way interaction effect. Study 2 further examined the mediating effect of perceived usefulness.

3. Method and Results

3.1 Study 1

Design and stimuli. We used a 2 (explanation type: EA vs. ER) x 2 (response channel: public vs. private) x 2 (review valence: positive vs. negative) between-subjects experimental design. The participants were randomly assigned to one of eight experimental conditions. In the positive valence condition (n=131), participants were told that "*Imagine that you just came back from vacation with a few family members. The trip went well and you had a pleasant experience with Hotel X, where you stayed for two nights. After you came back, you wrote an online review on TripAdvisor.*" In the negative review valence condition (n=119), participants were told that they had an unpleasant experience with Hotel X. Participants were then shown an online review describing the reason why they "would (positive) / would not (negative) recommend the hotel …" (EA), versus a review that they "are feeling so pleased (positive) / disappointed (negative) regarding this hotel, because …" (ER) (Moore, 2015). EA and ER were further manipulated by asking the participants to write their reviews as coherent sentences, using the words "because, think, insight, and realize" (for EA statements) (n=128), or using the words "intense, feel, relive, and describe" (for ER statements) (n=122) (Moore, 2011). Afterwards, they read a scenario in which "*A few days later, you were notified that the manager of Hotel X has responded to your review on TripAdvisor*" (public, n=122), versus "*A few days later, you received an e-mail from the manager of Hotel X in response to your online review*" (private, n=128).

Participants. Two hundred and fifty U.S. adult participants were recruited from a Qualtrics commercial panel. Their average age was 40 years. About 50% of the participants were male, and approximately 70% were Caucasian. Around 47% of the participants held a Bachelor's degree, and about 30% had a household income over $60,000 (See Table 1).

Measures. Two screening questions were placed at the beginning of the survey: "How often do you read online reviews" and "How often do you write online reviews" on a 5-point Liker scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = always). Participants who answered "Never" or "Rare" were screened out. We assessed the participants' disconfirmation by having them respond to the item "This hotel's overall response to my problem was ...," with responses chosen from a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "much worse than expected (1)" to "much better than expected (7)" (Smith et al., 1999). In addition, we measured failure severity as a covariate with three items. The first item was "If this problem were really happening to me, I would consider it to be …" (with answers ranging between "1- Not Severe" and "7- Very Severe"). The second item was "It would make me feel …" (with responses ranging between "1- Not Angry" and "7- Very Angry"). The third item was "It would be unpleasant to me" (with answers ranging between "1- Strongly Disagree" and "7- Strongly Agree") (adapted from Weun, Beatty, & Jones (2004); Cronbach's α = 0.784). Additionally, we employed two attention check questions, which asked participants to select "Neither disagree nor agree" and "Strongly disagree", respectively. Participants who failed attention checks were dropped from the analyses. We then collected demographic information from the participants, such as their gender, age, ethnicity, income, and education.

Our realism checks indicated that the participants perceived our stimuli as "realistic." They indicated their assessments of the stimuli by responding to the following two items: "The

situation described in the scenario is very likely to be real," and "The situation described in the scenario could happen, or has happened, to me or someone I know." The responses were given on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1- Strongly Disagree" to "7- Strongly Agree" (Mean = 5.37, SD = 1.25).

Manipulation checks. The manipulation for explanation type was checked by asking the participants the following questions: "In my review, I was explaining THE REASONS WHY I wouldn't choose this hotel again," or "In my review, I was explaining HOW I FELT about this hotel" (χ^2 (1, $N = 250$) = 4.152, p-value < 0.05). The manipulation for the response channel was checked via having the participants choose between two statements: "The manager responded to my review on TripAdvisor" or "The manager responded to my review by e-mailing me directly" (χ^2 (1, $N = 250$) = 25.968, p-value = 0.000). The manipulation for valence was checked by asking the participants the following questions: "Please evaluate your experience with Hotel X: 1- Bad and 7 - Good; 1- Negative and 7- Positive" ($M_{negative}$=1.81; $M_{positivie}$= 6.74, $F_{(1, 248)}$ = 1416.138, p-value = 0.000).

Hypothesis testing. To test H1 and H2, we first conducted a 2 (explanation type: EA vs. ER) x 2 (response channel: public vs. private) x 2 (review valence: positive vs. negative) ANOVA on disconfirmation. The results indicated a main effect of valence ($F_{(1, 242)}$ = 90.535, p-value = 0.000). However, this main effect was qualified by a significant three-way interaction between explanation type, response channel, and valence ($F_{(1, 242)}$ = 4.420, p-value = 0.037). The ANOVA table is shown in Table 2, and the three-way interaction is illustrated in Figure 1.

To better interpret this three-way interaction, the dataset was split by "valence," and a separate ANOVA test was run for each dataset. For negative reviews, there was a significant interaction between "explanation type" and "channel" ($F_{(1,115)}$ = 4.107, p-value = 0.045). Simple

main effect analysis further revealed that when the review was ER, the participants expected a public response (M_{public} = 4.21) more than a private response ($M_{private}$ = 3.30) ($F_{(1,57)}$ = 4.901, p-value = 0.031). Conversely, when the review was EA, the participants showed no preference regarding the response channel (M_{public} = 3.86; $M_{private}$ = 4.10; $F_{(1,58)}$ = 0.368, p-value = 0.547). H1 was therefore supported. For positive reviews, the two-way interaction between "explanation type" and "channel" failed to reach statistical levels of significance ($F_{(1,127)}$ = 0.679, p-value = 0.411). This finding supported H2.

3.2 Study 2

Design and stimuli. We used a 2 (explanation type: EA vs. ER) x 2 (response channel: public vs. private) between-subjects experimental design. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions involving a negative experience with a hotel. They were exposed to the same stimuli used in Study 1 to manipulate explanation type (n_{ER} = 82; n_{EA} = 93) and response channel ($n_{private}$ = 86; n_{public} = 89).

Participants. One hundred and seventy-five U.S. adult participants were hired from a Qualtrics commercial panel. Their average age was 39 years. About 50% of the participants were male, and approximately 75% were Caucasian. Around 41% of the participants held a Bachelor's degree, and about 31% had a household income over $60,000 (See Table 3).

Measures. We assessed the participants' disconfirmation by their responses to the item "This hotel's overall response to my problem was ..." on a 7-point Likert scale ranging between "1-Much worse than expected" and "2- Much better than expected" (Smith et al., 1999). We measured perceived usefulness using three items from Sen and Lerman (2007) and Yin et al. (2014) (e.g., "Please indicate to what extent you think the review you wrote is Helpful/Useful/Informative"; Cronbach's α = 0.895). In addition, we measured failure severity

by using the same three item scale in Study 1(adapted from Weun et al., 2004; Cronbach's α = 0.784). Same as in Study 1, screening questions and attention checks were employed. Finally, we collected the participants' demographic information.

Manipulation checks. The manipulation for explanation type was checked with the following question: "In my review, I was explaining THE REASONS WHY I wouldn't choose this hotel again," or "In my review, I was explaining HOW I FELT about this hotel" (χ^2 (1, $N = 175$) = 6.518, p-value = 0.011). The manipulation for response channel was checked via the items "The manager responded to my review on TripAdvisor" or "The manager responded to my review by e-mailing me directly" (χ^2 (1, $N = 175$) = 75.691, p-value = 0.000). Additionally, our realism checks indicated that the participants perceived our stimuli as "realistic" using the same measurement scale in Study 1 (Mean = 5.25, SD = 1.28).

Hypothesis testing. We first conducted a 2 (explanation type: EA vs. ER) x 2 (response channel: public vs. private) ANOVA on disconfirmation. The results indicated a significant interaction between explanation type and response channel ($F_{(1, 171)}$ = 5.333, p-value = 0.022). The ANOVA results are shown in Table 4, and the interaction is illustrated in Figure 2. Simple main effect analyses further revealed that when a review was ER, the participants expected a public response (M_{public} = 4.22) more than a private response ($M_{private}$ = 3.59) ($F_{(1,80)}$ = 3.998, p-value = 0.049). Conversely, when the review was EA, the response channel did not matter ($F_{(1,91)}$ = 1.657, p-value = 0.21).

Next, to test the proposed underlying psychological mechanism, we followed Hayes' (2013) PROCESS procedure (Model 7), using the recommended bias-corrected bootstrapping technique (number of bootstrap samples = 10,000). When the response channel was public, the perceived usefulness of the review mediated the effect of explanation type on disconfirmation (*b*

= 0.1073; 95% bootstrap CI = [0.0030, .3205]). When the response channel was private, the

mediation effect via perceived usefulness was attenuated (b = 0.0097; 95% bootstrap CI = [-

0.0925, 0.1427]). Thus, H3 was supported.

4. Discussion

Consumers often rely on external information rather than their own knowledge and

expertise when they evaluate choices or make decisions (Shoham, Moldovan, & Steinhart, 2017;

van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Other customers' opinions shape people's choices in everything

from everyday products they consume to important decisions regarding medical or financial

matters (Ho-Dac, Carson, & Moore, 2014; Iyengar, Van den Bulte, & Valente, 2011; Packard &

Berger, 2017). Although many companies have started to realize the importance of monitoring

online reviews, some firms refrain from responding to reviews because the effects on bystanders

seem unclear (Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). Both practitioners and academics have called for

further research on appropriate specific response strategies (e.g., Dens et al., 2015; Reichelt et al.,

2014; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012).

This study sets out to address this issue by examining the interaction effects of

explanation type, review valence, and response channels on disconfirmation. Two studies were

conducted. Study 1 showed that for negative reviews focusing on ER, consumers expected a

public response more than a private response. For negative EA reviews, the consumers'

disconfirmations of expectation did not differ. For positive reviews, the interaction between

explanation type and response channel was not significant. Our research lends support to

previous research in the area of online review by demonstrating that factors related to review

content can effectively shape consumers' behaviors (e.g., Babin et al., 2005; Liang et al.,

2013;Moore, 2015; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; Wei et al., 2013). This study also extends prior research by examining unique factors such as explanation type and response channels.

Study 2 further examined the interaction effect between explanation type and response channel by focusing on the negative reviews. Previous research suggests that negative reviews are perceived as more useful than positive reviews, also known as the negativity bias (e.g., Ito et al., 1998; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). We found that when the response channel was public, perceived usefulness of the review mediated the effect of explanation type on disconfirmation. When the response channel was private, the mediating effect was attenuated. Our findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating the effect of perceived usefulness on consumers (e.g., Cheema & Kaikati, 2010; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Moore, 2015; Sen & Lerman, 2007; Yin et al., 2014). This study extends the literature by considering perceived usefulness from a review writer's perspective and how it impacts his or her evaluations, rather than a review reader's perspective.

4.1 Theoretical Implications

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the literature. First, we contribute to the literature regarding online reviews by examining the unique effect of explanation type and its interactions with valence and response channel. Previous research on online reviews has mainly focused on the effects of WOM on consumer behavior, and such research has involved examining factors such as numerical ratings, review timing, review volume, and reviewer characteristics (e.g., Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Yin, Mitra, & Zhang, 2016; Zhang et al., 2016). More recently, an emerging stream of research has begun to explore how such opinions are conveyed and what types of language are used in the reviews. For example, Yin et al. (2017) examined how expressed emotional arousal in an online review affected readers' perceptions of

the review's helpfulness. Their study revealed a pattern of diminishing returns. In this study, we focus on another factor that is related to language—explanation types. Our results indicate that individuals using different types of explanations expect firms to respond in different ways. Specifically, given that negative ER describes consumers' bad feelings about their experiences, a public response is desired since it can show that company is responsive and it can help others in making their decisions and reducing their uncertainty (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; Wei et al., 2013).

Second, this study extends the literature on firms' responses to online reviews by examining the effects of response channels. Sparks et al. (2016) suggested that research could investigate the possible differential effects associated with posting the response publicly versus privately. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that answers this call by comparing private vs. public correspondence between firms and customers. Researchers have generally considered private responses to be more passive (i.e., they prevent public discourse by dealing with complaints through private response channels) and to be less effective than public responses (e.g., Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Istanbulluoglu, 2017; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). However, our results suggest that although this pattern applies for ER types of negative reviews, customers see little or no difference between public and private responses to EA types of online reviews.

Third, this study informs the emerging stream of research on customer experience management, especially on the after-sales experience management. In the hospitality industry, each customer journey involves multiple touch points that enable smooth or difficult interactions between customers and firms (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Online interactions are just as critical as offline interactions, if not more important. As this research indicates, contents and channels of interactions can impact customer's reactions. Our findings contribute to the literature on

customer experience management by focusing on online interactions and by exploring the

psychological mechanisms for expecting different types of review responses. We find that

consumers perceive management responses more useful when the responses are made publicly

(vs. privately). We identify proper strategies for handling different kinds of guest complaints,

and we examine the effects of these contextual variables on disconfirmation.

Last but not least, we integrate the boundary conditions of explanation type, review

valence and response channel into the TRA framework and demonstrate the interaction effect. It

expands the literature on how the boundary conditions of TRA influence customers' perceptions

in the online hospitality product purchase and review context (Njite & Parsa, 2005; Wen, 2009).

4.2 Managerial Implications

The findings of this study have several valuable implications for practitioners seeking to

better manage eWOM. First, the study reconfirms the widely accepted reality that consumers'

online reviews require attention from managers (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). An effective response

can improve customer relationships and prevent defection (Orsingher, Valentini, & de Angelis,

2010), whereas poor handling can have harmful effects on the brand and the company's

reputation (Istanbulluoglu, 2017). This study provides guidelines on how to address customers'

online reviews from the perspective of appropriate response channels. We suggest that different

channels should be used according to the content of the reviews.

In particular, this study's findings suggest that managers should respond to negative ER

reviews publicly instead of privately. When managers see negative online reviews containing

emotional language that expresses a consumer's feelings, they should respond publicly, for

example by posting replies on the third party's webpage. Such replies should be made promptly

and should indicate steps to redress the issue. As public responses can increase the perceived usefulness of reviews, this kind of response fits the expectations of consumers who write ER reviews. On the other hand, for negative EA reviews, our results indicate that practitioners can choose either a private or public channel to respond depending on the main goal of the managers. For example, if the manager intends to strengthen customer relationship, a private response would be more effective. If the main goal is to influence other potential customers' purchasing intentions, a public response is recommended. Operators should also develop customer-focused programs that facilitate such communication. Companies can empower customer service departments to offer public vs. private responses as appropriate, when their employees encounter different types of reviews. Marketers may use the suggested strategies to better interpret their customers' needs, according to the different types of reviews they post. Such insights can allow marketers to better manage the relationship between online eWOM and offline sales (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004).

Lastly, although researchers generally agree about the effects that negative reviews have on consumers; their findings on the influence of positive reviews have remained inconclusive. Therefore, practitioners need more guidance on whether or how they should respond to positive reviews. Based on the findings of this study, we suggest that response channels are less critical in the context of positive online reviews. Consumers do not have any specific expectations of a public or a private response to positive reviews. Therefore, managers may consider responding to all positive online reviews through public channels (e.g., on TripAdvisor), without undue concern over the impact that such public communications may have on bystanders.

 5. Limitations

Several limitations of this study need to be addressed. First, this study focuses on the explanation type of online reviews, and it ignores other aspects of language styles that might impact the writers' expectations regarding the responses they receive. Research has identified several language-related factors such as boasting (Packard, Gershoff, & Wooten, 2016), figurative language (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013), emotional words (Berger & Milkman, 2012), and linguistic mimicry (Moore & McFerran, 2017). Future research should examine these factors to determine how they influence the effectiveness of different response strategies. Additionally, the current research only examines the situation when the reviews are either ER or EA. A mixed condition is not included in the design. Future research should investigate what strategies are appropriate facing a mixed situation.

Moreover, the main purpose of this study is to explore the relationships between explanation types and the expectations of review writers. However, it is also possible that explanation types have different effects on the persuasiveness of a review. For example, Packard and Berger (2017) found that explicit endorsements (e.g., "I recommend it") are more persuasive than implicit endorsements (e.g., "I liked it" or "I enjoyed it") because explicit endorsers are perceived to appreciate the product more and to have more expertise. As implicit endorsements share certain similarities with ERs, future research should examine whether explanation types have the same effects on persuasiveness. Last but not least, this study examines the impact of managers' responses on review writers only. Future research is needed to explore the joint effects that valence, explanation type, and management response have on the wider audiences of review readers.

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Table 1. Demographic information for Study 1

Source		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	124	49.6
	Female	125	50
	Transgendered	1	0.4
Ethnicity	African American	32	12.8
	Asian	11	4.4
	Caucasian	175	70
	Hispanic/Latino	23	9.2
	Native American	1	0.4
	Other	8	3.2
Education	Some high school	6	2.4
	High school degree	54	21.6
	Some college	71	28.4
	College degree (Bachelor's/associate's)	94	37.6
	Master's degree	24	9.6
	PhD, MD, JD, or other professional degree	1	0.4
Income	0-19999	37	14.8
	20k to 39999	70	28
	40k to 59999	69	27.6
	60k to 79999	29	11.6
	80k to 99999	16	6.4
	100k to 119999	11	4.4
	120k to 139999	5	2
	140k to 159999	6	2.4
	160k or more	7	2.8
Marital Status	Single	109	43.6
	Married	104	41.6
	Divorced	33	13.2
	Widowed	4	1.6

Table 2. ANOVA results for Study 1

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	208.072a	7	29.725	14.580	.000
Intercept	5549.903	1	5549.903	2722.171	.000
Channel	3.861	1	3.861	1.894	.170
Explanation Type	4.238	1	4.238	2.079	.151
Valence	184.582	1	184.582	90.535	.000
Channel * Explanation Type	2.233	1	2.233	1.095	.296
Channel * Valence	.466	1	.466	.228	.633
Explanation Type * Valence	.078	1	.078	.038	.845
Channel * Explanation Type * Valence	9.011	1	9.011	4.420	.037
Error	493.384	242	2.039		
Total	6404.000	250			
Corrected Total	701.456	249			

a. R Squared = .297 (Adjusted R Squared = .276)

Table 3. Demographic information for Study 2

Source		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	86	49.1
	Female	87	49.7
	Transgendered	1	0.6
	Other	1	0.6
Ethnicity	African American	19	10.9
	Asian	11	6.3
	Caucasian	132	75.4
	Hispanic/Latino	9	5.1
	Native American	3	1.7
	Other	1	0.6
Education	Some high school	10	5.7
	High school degree	40	22.9
	Some college	53	30.3
	College degree (bachelor's/associate's)	55	31.4
	Master	15	8.6
	PhD, MD, JD or other professional degree	2	1.1
Income	0-19999	27	15.4
	20k-39999	55	31.4
	40k-59999	38	21.7
	60k-79999	24	13.7
	80k-99999	15	8.6
	100k-119999	8	4.6
	120k-139999	3	1.7
	140k-159999	1	0.6
	160k or more	4	2.3
Marital Status	Single	72	41.1
	Married	83	47.4
	Divorced	16	9.1
	Widowed/Widower	4	2.3

Table 4. ANOVA results for Study 2

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	13.524a	3	4.508	2.010	.114
Intercept	2776.704	1	2776.704	1238.210	.000
Explanation Type	1.403	1	1.403	.626	.430
Valence	.528	1	.528	.236	.628
Explanation Type * Valence	11.960	1	11.960	5.333	.022
Error	383.470	171	2.243		
Total	3189.000	175			
Corrected Total	396.994	174			

a. R Squared = .034 (Adjusted R Squared = .017)

Figure 1. The interaction effects of Channel and explanation type on Disconfirmation (Top: negative; Down: positive)
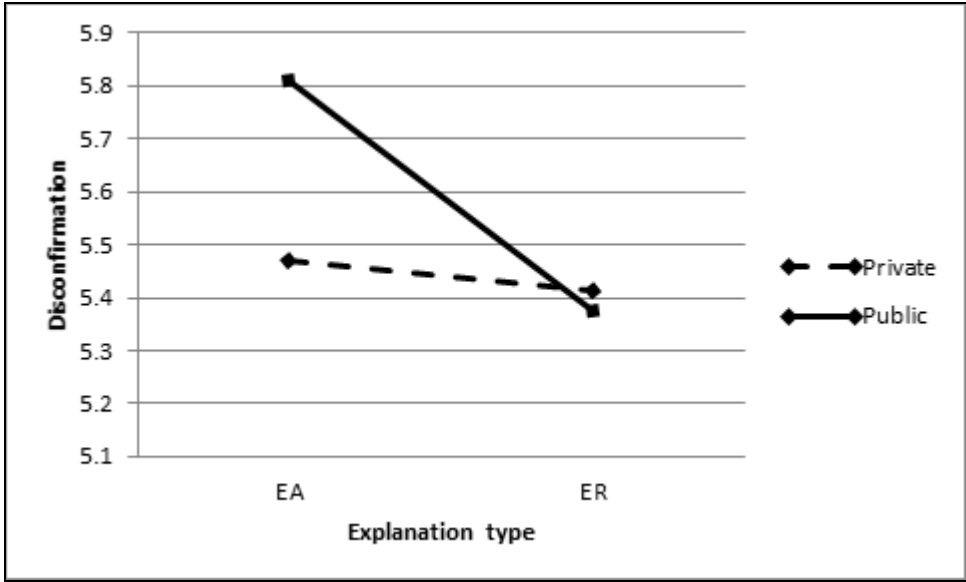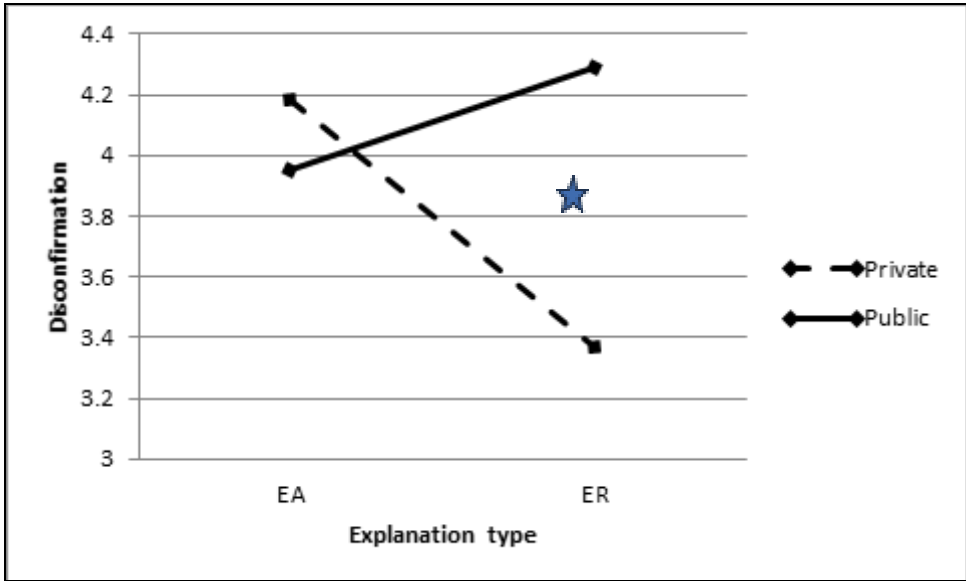
a. The star denotes statistical significance between the groups.

Figure 2. The interaction effect of Channel and Explanation type on Disconfirmation in the condition of negative reviews