
The Influence of Negative Consumer Reviews in Social Networks

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Abstract

The social networking revolution allows people to share their opinions with their surrounding society, enabling the ability to influence others. Large amounts of consumer reviews are posted on social networks, expressing experiences, either positive or negative, regarding products/services. These reviews are instantly distributed within a huge network of consumers, challenging the firms' managers who need to cope with that. This research study examines the phenomenon of consumers' reviews posted on social networks to measure the influence of negative reviews on the reader's buying decisions and on the firms' attitudes. This research study examines if there are differences between active users, who post and share reviews, and passive users who only read what others posted. This research study was performed merging three sources of information: (1) monitoring consumer posts on three Facebook pages during six months; (2) performing a relevant questionnaire among 201 respondents, and (3) checking the related firms' reaction to those posts. The findings revealed that potential consumers base their decisions on posted reviews; they are exposed to negative reviews that affect their purchase decisions, incoherently to the manner they use the social network (active or passive users), while the firms mostly react, in order to diminish their influence.

Keywords: Social network, consumers' reviews, negative posts, negative consumer reviews, eWOM, electronic word of mouth.

Introduction

Social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Pinterest, have become an integral part of modern society. They provide the ability to share photos, videos, status updates and posts, by personal or business networks, creating groups, having the same ideology, sharing ideas and trying to influence society. This study attempts to scrutinize the affection of consumers' reviews about services or products, published on social networks as consumers' posts, on the readers and firms involved.

Social media allow dynamic interaction in real time, changing the traditional balance of power between the firm and the consumers. The concept of Customer Relationship Management (CRM), where the firm has significant information about its clients, is challenged, because consumers receive access to big amounts of information through the social media (Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege, & Zhang, 2013). Consumers engage with firms and other consumers in social networks in more interactive ways than ever. Thereby, enabling firms with the ability to

establish relationships with consumers. Companies use social media for digital advertising, handling customer services, mining innovation ideas, and creating engaged brand communities. Posts of customers' reviews dominate the marketing communication over social media, including the pages of the companies themselves, discussion forums, blogs, and others (Enginkaya & Yilmaz, 2014). These reviews' intention is to express the evaluations and opinions about products or services purchased by the customers, and have become a source of reliable information, particularly regarding to product quality and consumer service (Zhang, Zhao, Cheung, & Lee, 2014). The social networks support the democratization of knowledge, and transform individuals from mere content consumers into content producers (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012), impacting firm's reputation (Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley, 2013), although they are outside the control of the companies (Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege, & Zhang, 2013). Consumers have become, actually, the "brand managers", who can share their opinions about the firm's products and services widely and easily over the social networks, which the real brand managers can no longer afford to ignore (Bao & Chang, 2014).

Because of the changing role of the user of the social network, the same "user" may have different tasks. For example, the user is the consumer of a product or service. Second, the user is the reviewer, who generates posts regarding the experiences from the product/service. Third, the user is a reader of reviews, of same or different products/services, who may propagate those reviews. Last, the user could also be a potential customer. Thus, in the text of this paper, the user may be called also consumer, reviewer, customer, potential customer, or reader. The main goal of this study is to examine the impact of posting and sharing negative consumer reviews in the social networks on readers' intention to purchase and on the firm's reaction.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: A theoretical background about posts of customers' reviews, which is sometimes referred to as "electronic word of mouth" (eWOM), especially the negative ones, and their effect on readers and the firm itself, is presented in the next section. Then, the research questions and hypotheses are introduced. Next, the methodology used in this research study is explained, followed by the results. Finally the discussion and conclusions are presented.

Theoretical Background

The consumers' reviews, posted and spread through the social networks, are a relatively quick, informal way of sharing opinions and experiences, related to products or services, with other consumers and potential customers, who do not need to be geographically together. These new global marketing environments shift the power away from the firm toward individuals and communities (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012).

Before purchasing, potential customers do significant online research and information sharing via social media (Decker & Trusov, 2010). Product's online reviews posted by consumers have become a major information source for potential customers and marketers regarding product quality. They can be a good proxy for overall WOM and have a strong influence on the decision-making processes of other potential buyers. Potential customers are more likely to rely on recommendations from a real consumer, rather than a marketing message (Enginkaya & Yilmaz, 2014). The opinions can be either positive or negative, implying encouraging or discouraging of

the consumption of the related product or service (Verhagen, Nauta & Feldberg, 2013). Studies suggested that the negative opinions are more honest, because of the anonymity of the Internet that prevents consumers from facing any social consequences (Yun & Park, 2011). Before the rise of the social networks, the vast majority of unsatisfied customers failed to complain after a bad experience, because the costs of complaining were perceived as exceeding any potential benefits. Social networks make complaining much easier and more effective than before (Gregorie, Salle & Tripp, 2015). Van Noort and Willemsen (2012) claimed that due to the adoption of social networks, complaints and dissatisfied experiences can be communicated and distributed almost instantly within a huge network of others, referred as "firestorms" (Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley, 2013), which can cause substantial damage to the company and the brand. Van Noort and Willemsen (2012) found that negative eWOM may have strong effects on consumer behavior, on all phases of their decision-making process, including brand evaluation, brand choice, purchase behavior and brand loyalty; causing companies to use teams who monitor and check the Internet after those posts, with reactive and proactive strategies, in order to reduce their spread. Stich, Golla and Nanopoulos (2014) identified the determinant factors related to negative eWOM, and suggested to combat negative eWOM by responding with positive eWOM.

Zhang, Zhao, Cheung, and Lee (2014) investigated the influence of reviews posted online at the individual level. They found that potential customers examined the content of online reviews to form perceptions about review informativeness and persuasiveness. Informative reviews act as important supplemental information, which assists potential customers to reduce uncertainty and improve their purchase decision. Potential customers will also refer to heuristic cues associated with online reviews to facilitate their decision-making, such as the ranking level of review sources and the number of review posts. If they find the review credible, their purchase intention can be increased or decrease, according to the character of the posts. However, there are some issues in terms of the credibility of customers' reviews posted on Websites, because of the anonymity, casting some doubt on the accuracy of such comments (Kim, Seo & Schrier, 2014). The validity of eWOM has been further questioned, as some companies insert promotional messages in review sites in order to manipulate potential customers. Bae and Lee (2011) found that potential customers perceive the negative reviews more useful and informative than positive ones, and that the extent to which negative review reduces the amount of purchase is higher than the effect of the positive reviews increasing the amount of purchase.

Understanding the consumers' underlying motivations of their consumption related activities over the social media is a key for marketers to develop better strategies. There are many reasons why people share knowledge and contribute content on social media (Gafni, Geri, Bengov, 2014), including search for social interaction, assistance to other consumers, striving to improve their self-worth or comment for the sake of economic incentives (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). Sharing client consumers' reviews in the social media encourages interaction between consumers online, because the message is considered authentic (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011).

There are five basic ways in which a Facebook user can interact with the content: "Like", "Comment", "Share", "Tag" and "Check-in" (Carah, 2014).

"Like": When a user clicks the 'like' button below an item of content, that item may be distributed into the news feeds of their friends, accompanied by a message telling their friends 'liked' it.

"Comment": Users can write a comment under most items. The comments are then visible to all those who view that item of content, or when the item of content appears in friends' news feeds (depending on the users' privacy settings).

"Share": Users can share an item of content by re-posting it to their own, or to a friend's, wall and news feeds. When they share the item on their wall it may be pushed into their news feed where friends can like, comment on it, and share it again.

"Tag": Users can tag themselves and their friends in images. This enables users to identify photos of themselves and their friends.

"Check-in": Users can check in on a particular location, which pushes a message into the news feeds of their friends telling them they are there.

The Facebook's interactions relevant to this research study are "Like", "Comment" and "Share".

Facebook activities can be dichotomized into active and passive forms of usage (Verduyn, Lee, Park, Shablack, Orvell, Bayer, & Kross, 2015): passive usage involves consuming information without direct exchanges (e.g., scrolling through news feeds, viewing posts), and active usage refers to activities that facilitate direct exchanges with others (e.g., posting updates, commenting on posts); The active users can be further divided between initiators (posting) or continuers (commenting, sharing or liking):

- "Passive" users are exposed to posted consumer reviews, but do not take any action.
- "Active initiators" actively post (write) consumer reviews on the social networks.
- "Active continuers" users click on the "Like", "Share" or "Comment" options, when reading a posted consumer's review.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The objective of this research study is to examine the effect of negative consumers' reviews posted on social networks, about products or services, on the intention to purchase by the readers of the posts, and on the attitude of the targeted firm. The research questions add to the existing information by focusing on the social networks as a eWOM stage, by examining different kinds of posted reviews (both positive and negative). In addition to examining several ways to express sympathy with a specific post, using the Like, Comment and Share interactions. Moreover, studies have been done only focusing on one side, the consumers or the firm. In this research study, the effects of the same review are examined from both sides.

R1 - How do negative consumers' reviews, posted on social networks, affect the attitude of potential customers?

This question is broader than in previous studies, because we try to find not only the influence on intention to purchase, but also the reaction and interaction in the social network. The hypothesis is that publishing negative reviews on the social networks will diminish the desire of potential

customers to acquire the specific product/service. This is based on previous studies which state that potential customers search for online reviews prior to deciding a purchase (Decker & Trusov, 2010), and that negative review has more effect on the public than a positive one (Yun & Park, 2011; Bae & Lee, 2011). Previous research claimed that posting a review on the social networks, without being asked or required to do it, increases the level of authenticity and credibility among readers, and their level of identification is high (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013).

R2 – At what extent can people influence the service or product by posting about them on social networks?

Several studies have tried to define how firms and brands should react when consumers' reviews are posted on social networks, thus understanding that such posts may have a powerful influence on the firm (Gregorie, Salle & Tripp, 2015, Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley, 2013; Malthouse et al., 2013; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). The hypothesis claims that because of the popularity of the social networks' platform, the posted review may affect on readers' opinions and purchasing decisions, resulting in influences on demand of such products/services, which in the end affects the firm.

R3 - Is an active user of the social networks affected by a negative review more than a passive user?

When the user decides to openly express sympathy with the posted review, using one of the possible interactions (Like, Share or Comment), the message is propagated to more social circles. This can be understood as a highly identification of the reader, which cause to the reaction. Thus, the hypothesis claims that an active user will be affected more than a passive one.

Methodology

In order to collect the relevant data, three research methods were combined:

1. Three viral pages in Facebook, dealing with consumers' reviews, with a large number of subscribers, were monitored, and data about users' activities on posts was collected (Jindal & Sindhu, 2015). This information helps to understand what the activity patterns are, by analyzing the type of comments, number of shares, and post's exposure levels. The following pages were selected :
 - A** – "Statusim Metzaizim"- the page gathers posts from all aspects including politics, culture, consumerism, sports, humor and more. This page was chosen due to its widespread popularity with approximately 686,300 subscribers.
 - B** – "Frayer.net" – a page defined especially for consumers' negative reviews.
 - C** – "Hakol Kalul"- this Facebook page represents a consumerism broadcast program on TV. Negative consumer posts are uploaded to the page day by day, in order to share them with the public. This page had 75,474 subscribers.

The data was collected for a period of six months, prior to the execution of this research study that occurred from June 1, 2014 to November 30, 2014. The posts selected were of the consumerism category and with negative nature, posted by users of the social networks. As

users interact with that content by liking, sharing, and commenting on it, it moved out into the news feeds of their friends, where it was viewed in contexts visible only to those peer networks. For each selected post, the data collected in this study included the number of "Likes", "Comments" and "Shares", which are the relevant interactions for this study.

2. For each negative review found on those viral pages, a Google search was performed on the Internet (news sites, brand site, firm site) using relevant keywords and the appropriate dates. This was done, in order to find whether the firm was conscious of the criticism targeted toward the product/service they supply, and to see if they reacted.
3. A questionnaire was created, composed of 36 questions. The questionnaire was composed based on the literature review, to obtain preliminary information that can be compared to the actual reactions found in the social networks. Due to the need of being part of Facebook social networks and using it, the questionnaire was distributed, using a snowball sampling (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Corbitt, Thanasankit, & Yi, 2003; Noy, 2008), to Facebook users, who were exposed to posts of consumers' reviews. The survey elaborated using Google Docs, enabled anonymity of the participants. The aim of the questionnaire was to evaluate the extent of consumers' reviews impact. The responses to the questionnaire were analyzed using IBM® SPSS® Statistics, version 20.

Results

Questionnaire Results

Table 1 summarizes the demographic descriptive statistics of the 201 participants of the survey, included in 3 questions.

Table 1: Demographics of the survey participants

Gender	Men	86 (42.8%)
	Women	115 (57.2%)
Age	18 and under	9 (4.5%)
	19-35	146 (72.6%)
	33-55	29 (14.4%)
	55-75	17 (8.5%)
Education	Elementary school	3 (1.5%)
	Highschool	50 (24.9%)
	Undergraduate students	53 (26.4%)
	Bachelor degree graduation	80 (39.8%)
	Master and Doctorate graduation	15 (7.5%)

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics about the use of social networks and the exposure to posts of customer's negative review activities in the social networks (summarizing 4 questions of the questionnaire). Most of the respondents are members of 1-2 social networks, especially Facebook. They surf 1-5 hours a day in the social networks, are members of viral pages and are exposed to negative consumers' activities. More than 90% of the users are exposed to a negative review at least once a week.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of using the social networks reviews

Use of social networks	0	1 (0.5%)
	1 social network	87 (43.3%)
	2 social networks	65 (32.3%)
	3 social networks	25 (12.4%)
	4 social networks and more	23 (11.4%)
Hours per day on social networks	Less than 1 hour	48 (23.9%)
	1-2 hours	60 (29.9%)
	3-5 hours	51 (25.4%)
	6-8 hours	25 (12.4%)
	More than 8 hours	17 (8.5%)
Membership in viral pages	No membership	40 (19.9%)
	Member in 1-2 pages	38 (18.9%)
	Member in 3-4 pages	40 (19.9%)
	Member in 5-6 pages	36 (17.9%)
	Member in more than 6 pages	47 (23.4%)
Exposure to posts of negative reviews (per week)	None	15 (7.5%)
	1-2 posts	82 (40.8%)
	3-4 posts	60 (29.9%)
	5-6 posts	24 (11.9%)
	6 posts, and above	20 (10%)

The respondents were asked which factors (8 questions) affect on their purchasing decision as a potential customer. They had to rate each factor from 1 – 'not at all', to 5 – 'very much'. Table 3 displays the mean and standard deviation of these factors. Although the price is the dominant factor, the second affecting factor is the reviews that other customers wrote about the product/service.

Table 3: Factors affecting the purchasing decision

Factor	Mean	Std
The price	4.23	0.80
Reviews of other customers	4.00	1.09
The urgency of the need for the product / service	3.93	1.00
Customer service	3.54	1.09
Visual appearance	3.48	1.07
Popularity of the product / service	3.18	1.05
The brand	3.15	1.09
The amount of people use the product / service	2.88	1.17

The type of users was intended to be defined by the answers, according to the rate of agreement of the respondents, to fourteen items presented in the questionnaire, with responses from 1- 'not agree at all', to 5 – 'completely agree', were analyzed. The intention was to define the users by active users (initiators or continuers) and passive users, and to see if there is a possibility to differentiate between negative and positive initiators and continuers. Principal component factor analysis with Varimax rotation was used to examine construct validity. Three items were intended to compose one factor, "Positive active initiators", but they were excluded, since two of

them loaded highly on two factors and the third item defined by itself a unique different factor. This will be further analyzed in a future study.

Table 4 specifies, for eleven items, the means and standard deviation, and the constructs' definition, according to the reliability, measured by Cronbach's alpha.

Table 4: Type of users - constructs definition

Statement (N=201)	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's alpha	Construct	Mean (SD)
When I am not satisfied with the product/service I purchased, I share my experience with friends on the social networks	2.14 (1.27)	.764	Negative active initiators	2.13 (1.01)
When I'm not satisfied with the product/service I purchased, I will write about it on the page of the business social network	2.21 (1.21)			
I tend to write and upload ('write a post') negative consumer reviews on social networks	2.04 (1.20)			
I tend to click "Like" on negative consumer reviews uploaded to social networks	2.59 (1.57)	.895	Negative continuers	2.26 (1.32)
I tend to "Share" negative consumer reviews uploaded to social networks	1.98 (1.32)			
I usually respond ("Comment") on negative consumer reviews uploaded to social networks	2.21 (1.46)			
I tend to click "Like" on positive consumer reviews uploaded to social networks	2.81 (1.25)	.735	Positive continuers	2.33 (0.96)
I tend to "Share" positive consumer reviews uploaded to social networks	1.96 (1.04)			
I usually "Comment" on a positive consumer reviews uploaded to the social networks	2.23 (1.25)			
I sympathize with the negative consumer reviews uploaded to the social networks, but do not take any action (do not click "Like", "Share" or "Comment").	2.59 (1.29)	.657	Passive	2.92 (1.07)
I sympathize with positive consumer reviews uploaded to the social networks, but do not take any action (do not click "Like", "Share" or "Comment").	3.24 (1.18)			

Finally, four different constructs were defined, defining the types of **users**. Although the users may be passive sometimes or regarding some items (or in some situations) and active initiators or active continuers in another, we tried to define each respondent to one of the categories. In order to perform this categorization, each respondent was classified according to his/her highest response. The respondents in each group were counted.

- **Negative active initiators** – users who start conversations by posting negative reviews. Number of respondents: 25 (12.4%)
- **Continuers** – users who click on "Like" or "Share" buttons or comment on the post. Number of respondents: 86 (42.8%). These were further divided into:
 - **Negative continuers** – users who agree with negative reviews, by using the "Like" or "Share" buttons or by commenting on the post. Number of respondents: 33 (16.4%).

- **Positive continuers** – users who agree with positive reviews, by using the "Like" or "Share" buttons or by commenting on the post. Number of respondents: 53 (26.4%).
- **Passive** – users that are passive, either in positive or negative reviews. Number of respondents: 90 (44.8%).

Further, eight statements about the influence on the readers and on the firms were classified by factor analysis using Varimax rotation (Table 5), in order to build constructs about the impact of reviews. The statements composed two different factors labeled "Influence on firms", and "Influence on readers". One statement, about influencing firms by positive reviews was omitted because it didn't match any factor.

Table 5: Type of influences - constructs definition

Statement (N=201)	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's alpha	Construct	Mean (SD)
I believe that posting consumer reviews on the social networks will have an impact on firms and there will be a change in their activity patterns	3.33 (1.39)	.892	Influence on firms	3.05 (1.30)
When I read consumer's negative review regarding a product/service, I will never purchase it again.	2.68 (1.40)			
I believe that consumer's negative reviews posted on social networks can lead to a decline in sales	3.14 (1.47)			
I believe that consumer's negative reviews posted on social networks have an impact on readers.	3.86 (1.03)	.764	Influence on readers	3.15 (0.87)
I have participated in a consumer protest on the social networks	2.51 (1.45)			
I can influence a firm's product/service through the social networks	3.38 (1.22)			
Consumer reviews on the social networks are a source of reliable information about the quality of the product/service	3.20 (1.15)			

Two constructs were defined, defining the types of **review's influence**:

- **Influence on firms** – respondents that think that reviews posted on social networks affect the firms, especially negative ones, by declining sales, or bringing them to react.
- **Influence on readers** – respondents that think that reviews affect themselves as readers or will affect other readers about consuming the specified service or product.

Correlations were checked between the defined user types, and the different influences, including the "Reviews of other customers" factor (see Table 3), which represents the influence on them. Table 6 presents the significant correlations (in parenthesis the sig 2 tailed).

Table 6 - Correlations

Influences User type	Influence on firms	Influence on readers	Reviews of other customers
Negative Initiators	306** (.000)	.247** (.000)	-
Negative Continuers	.664** (.000)	.577** (.000)	.328** (.000)
Positive Continuers	-.232** (.001)	-	-
Passive	.397** (.000)	.257** (.000)	.210** (.003)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

As can be seen, negative (initiators and continuers) and passive users believe that negative reviews affect the firm and the product/service sales, and affect the willingness of other readers to purchase the product. Interestingly, negative initiators do not read reviews before buying. However, they believe those posts affect other people in their decision to purchase. No differences were found between the active and passive respondents on t-tests performed.

Monitoring of Facebook's pages

Three viral pages of consumers' reviews were monitored in order to find out the behavior of the users about negative reviews, during a period of six months (see Table 7). Each new conversation, during that period, was read, and those that were negative about a service or product were counted as a negative review starting a conversation. For each one of those, the number of "Likes" and the number of "Shares" were recorded. Moreover, all the "Comments" written following each conversation were read and those which were relevant to the issue were counted (comments unlinked to the conversation were omitted).

These viral pages are the most popular of their kind in Israel, and each of them has a relative large number of followers and members. However, it can be seen that the average of active users, posting new reviews, and even continuing the conversation either by "Comments", "Like" or "Share", is very small. The big majority of the members of the social networks are passive. They rather like to read the posts of other members. Most of the continuers click the "Like" button.

Table 7 – Negative reviews monitored on Facebook's pages

Page id	Number of members/ followers	Number of negative reviews starting new conversation	Average 'Comments' per conversation	Average 'Like' per conversation	Average 'Share' per conversation
		(% of members)	(% of members)	(% of members)	(% of members)
A	686300	20 (0.003%)	670 (0.1%)	5161 (0.75%)	398 (0.06%)
B	2655	44 (1.66%)	3 (0.12%)	28 (1.04%)	2 (0.06%)
C	75474	19 (0.03 %)	114 (0.15%)	498 (0.66%)	147 (0.19%)

The firm's reactions

Each of the issues raised in the monitored Facebook's pages (A, B and C) during the specific period was searched in the Internet, in order to find if the firm supplying the service or product was aware of the criticism posted in the social networks, and if the firm reacted in any mode (summarized in table 8). This is important, in order to examine if the feelings of the social networks' users, saying that they can affect the firms' reactions, by posting negative customers' reviews are substantial. The findings are that an average of 53% of the negative conversations was responded to by the firms and those reactions were published. Most of the times the reaction constituted in a written response to the arguments presented. As can be seen in table 8, although this consists in a small sample, the most popular pages get more references by the firm.

Table 8 – Reaction of the criticized firm

Page id	Number of members/followers	Number of negative reviews starting new conversation (From Table 7)	Number of issues with firm's reaction (percent)
A	686300	20	12 (60%)
B	2655	44	18 (41%)
C	75474	19	11 (58%)

Discussion

This study examined the effect of negative consumers' reviews posted on social networks, about products or services, on the intention to purchase by the readers of the posts, and on the attitude of the targeted firm.

The exposure of social networks' members to negative reviews is very large: according to Table 2, more than 90% of the users are exposed to a negative review at least once a week, and more than 80% are members or followers of at least one viral page. Additionally, users base their consuming decisions on other people's opinions (see Table 3 - factor "Reviews of other customers", with an average of 4.00). Moreover, users admit that in some extent consumers' negative reviews affect the readers' purchasing decisions. This can be seen in Table 5, where specifically the item "I believe that consumer's negative reviews posted on social networks have an impact on readers" has a mean of 3.86. As can be seen, negative (initiators and continuers) and passive users believe that negative reviews affect the firm and the product/service sales, and affect the willingness of other readers to purchase the product. These results are concurrent with prior studies (Gensler et al., 2013, Decker & Trusov, 2010, Yun & Park, 2011, Bae & Lee, 2011), and supported the hypothesis of first research question (R1), which noted that publishing negative reviews on the social networks would diminish the desire of potential consumers to acquire the specific product or service. According to Table 6, interestingly, negative initiators, who consist of 12.4% of the social network users, do not read reviews before buying. However, users believe those posts affect other people in their decision to purchase. It may be interesting to examine the reason of this contradiction, maybe it can be connected to their personal characteristics, as self-confidence, but this is beyond the scope of this study.

The first factor analysis performed was to find the types of users, and the second analysis was to find the types of expected influences. However, finding the "Positive" initiators and the "Positive" influences were beyond the scope of this research study. These are interesting factors that should be further examined, as literature noted that positive WOM occurs approximately three times as often as negative WOM (East, Hammond, & Wright, 2007). However, their research was done for classical WOM and not on the social networks, which has different characteristics.

As it can be seen in Table 5, members of social networks are not sure that posted consumers' reviews can affect the product or service sales (mean 3.05). Moreover, they state that the reviews posted do not have a significant effect on the readers (3.15). However, from Table 8 it can be seen that in 53% of the cases (average of all reactions), the firms are concerned about the posts, and they react after negative reviews are posted. Although the firm's reactions are not studied in detail in this research study, it is important to note that there is a reaction. It demonstrated that the users' feelings of posting negative reviews can affect the firm are substantiated. This can enlighten the fact that, nevertheless, there is an influence, partially accepting the hypothesis of the second research question (R2), but this influence it is not as big as described in prior studies (Gregorie, Salle & Tripp, 2015; Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley, 2013, Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012) like a "firestorm".

According to the categorization of the users, it can be seen that most of the users are passive (44.8%). The active users are divided as initiators and continuers: 42.8% are continuers (16.4% negative and 26.4% positive), and only 12.4% are initiators. Moreover, according to the monitoring of Facebook's pages (Table 7); it can be noted that the majority of the members of the social networks are passive users, who are exposed to the reviews, but don't perform any action. It can be also seen that the overall number of posted negative reviews is very small. However, each negative review posted has a repercussion, performed by "Comments", "Likes" and "Shares" to the post, which enlarge the audience of each posted review, by continuers' users. Among the continuer users, the most common (as seen in Table 7) are the "Like" actions. This can be explained as the action of clicking the "Like" button is the easiest and less committed of the three actions. The user does not need to express himself, like in a "Comment", and also the commitment is lower than in a "Share" action, where the user enlarges the circles in where the review is posted.

As can be seen in Table 6, passive users correlate to perception of influences, both to the firm and to the readers, while the active users' correlation to the influences depends on the type of the active user (initiator or continuer). As seen in Table 2, 92.5% of the social media users are weekly exposed to at least one post of negative reviews. However, t-tests performed to examine if there are differences between active and passive users did not show any difference. The hypothesis of the third research question was that an active user will be more affected than a passive one, because his/her action, either "Post", "Like", "Share" or "Comment" can be understood as a highly identification of the reader, which cause to reaction. Nevertheless, the results did not find any difference, indicating that active users are not affected more than passive users, and thus, the third hypothesis was rejected.

Conclusion

The use of social networks in order to disseminate reviews, either positive or negative, is a relatively new form of eWOM, of which the firms need to be aware. The eWOM expands through the social networks in a viral manner, reaching, in a minimum amount of time, a very large audience. This must be an arousing alert for firms' managers, who must understand the effects of such reviews through the media. The firm' managers must know how to motivate the consumer to post positive posts, and how to respond to negative posts, in order to minimize their damage. The potential customers are affected in the same way, incoherently on the type of user over the social network, active or passive. Most of the potential consumers read posted reviews prior to deciding which product to purchase, although most of them will not post their own review.

Limitations and Further Research

The findings of this study should be applied while considering its limitations. First, the sample of respondents and sites were all of the same country. Therefore, future studies should include assessing different countries. In addition, the majority of the respondents were aged 19-35 (72.6%). Future research should consider assessing the attitudes of an older population, even though they may be less connected to social networks. Moreover, the study must be repeated on a larger sample of users and Websites to increase the generalizability. Finally, positive reviews need to be further explored, in contrast to the negative ones.

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