

Factors Affecting Negative E-WOM: A Literature Review and Merged Model

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Abstract

This study aims to understand the motivations, firms, systems, and customer-related factors that drive negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communications. We attempt to understand why and how negative eWOM is formed because studies have suggested that negative eWOM may influence customers' purchase behavior more than positive eWOM does. We collected 45 journal articles from 2012-2020 and identified factors and theories based on negative eWOM. A merged model and 21 propositions were developed based on the literature and results of meta research. The effect of negative eWOM is increasing because of the widespread use of social media. Our results shed light on the importance of the intrinsic motivations of negative eWOM and provide business ideas regarding how negative eWOM can be managed with a holistic view that includes multiple levels of factors. Future eWOM research can build on theories as well as our results and findings to ensure continuous development.

Keywords: Word of Mouth, Negative eWOM, Meta Analysis, E-Commerce, Motivations

1. Introduction

The development of the Internet has changed customer purchase behaviors and the working of businesses. Word-of-mouth (WOM) is a type of noncommercial communication noted in purchase behaviors. At present, electronic WOM (eWOM) plays a crucial role in purchase decisions. Industry research reports have noted that online reviews posted by unknown consumers are more reliable than traditional media. The reliability of online reviews is only surpassed by that of reviews provided by family and friends [1]. Customers' purchase decisions are considerably influenced by user-generated content in the form of online customer reviews. The purpose of this study is to understand how and why customers have eWOM communications, especially negative eWOM. Negative eWOM is an increasingly crucial issue for businesses because (1) approximately 70% of customers search the Internet for reviews of brands or services and 50% percent of these reviews are often negative [2] and (2) negative WOM spreads

faster than positive WOM [3]. The Internet makes it possible for negative WOM to considerably influence customers. Oral communication before the Internet was limited to specific areas; however, online negative WOM can rapidly reach millions of people in a short period. Therefore, negative WOM can grievously damage the image of a business [4]. Comparisons of positive and negative eWOM indicate that negative eWOM creates a considerable influence on others [5]. Customers also tend to distribute negative eWOM about products or services. Moreover, the longer the negative eWOM continues for a product or service, the more substantial are the negative comments [6]. All in all, if businesses focus solely on positive eWOM, negative eWOM is likely to jeopardize their development and sustenance.

The motivations of this study are as follows: (1) Studies regarding WOM have focused on positive WOM, whereas the importance of negative WOM has been neglected. We noted that negative WOM has empirical implications for successfully promoting services/products online. We introduce the idea of performing a meta research on negative WOM to improve the understanding of its influences on businesses. (2) Current research regarding negative WOM is scant. We intend to address this research gap regarding negative WOM. The research question of this study is:

RQ1: Which factors influence negative WOM communications?

In this study, we first identified the theoretical foundation of 45 eWOM studies at the individual level. We then developed a merged model of negative eWOM that included all the factors that have been noted in the 45 studies. To clarify how and why negative eWOM occurs, we presented 21 propositions regarding the relationships among the key elements of social communication.

2. Literature and Background

In this section, we review studies related to WOM and provide theories.

2.1 WOM and positive/negative eWOM

WOM refers to oral person-to-person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver with relation to a brand, product, or service [8]. We adopt this definition and refer to WOM as individuals exchanging information about businesses, products, or services. WOM is a type of information exchange for noncommercial purposes and has considerable value in influencing customer purchase decisions [9]. Because of the Internet, WOM is no longer an oral form of communication. Customers can easily share their thoughts about products through social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Amazon customer reviews are also a place to easily find WOM communications. In 2012, Forrester Research noted that three-fourth of customers in China and India post online reviews of products on a monthly basis. Half of the US population relies on online reviews to make purchase decisions [1]. Bazaarvoice [10] noted that searching online and buy offline is a shopping trend. Among online shoppers, 56% read reviews before making purchase decisions, and 45% of customers read online reviews after offline shopping. PwC [11] noted that product reviews posted on social media platforms are the most crucial information source in 27 shopping areas. Social media is a major platform for sharing eWOM [77]. Other platforms include blogs, discussion forums, chatrooms, emails between customers, product review websites, bulletin board systems, and mobile blogs.

Positive eWOM emphasizes the advantages and positive aspects of products or services that encourage purchasing or consumption. Positive eWOM is a more reliable source of information than business commercials because positive eWOM is often devoid of the customers' personal interests. By contrast, negative eWOM refers to customers' unsatisfactory experiences with products or services. A customer may share their negative experience with other customers. This act is driven by negative emotions in the process of transaction. Satisfied customers buy more products and persuade others to buy the same brands, whereas dissatisfied customers switch brands and tell others about their negative experiences [12]. Therefore, negative online reviews have a considerable influence on businesses [13]. Furthermore, negative online reviews have a larger influence than positives ones [3][14]. ReviewTrackers [15] reported that a negative shopping experience results in a 21% higher

possibility of negative eWOM than positive eWOM. Negative eWOM has a strong and profound influence on products, brand image, and businesses.

Why do customers provide negative/positive WOM? Dichter [16] identified four types of motivations related to WOM: product involvement (experience of product use produce a tension to be relieved by talking to others), self-involvement (the speaker can obtain certain emotional gratification by talking about the product), other involvement (speaker shares care or love by talking about the product as a thoughtful gift to others), and message involvement (no based on speaker's own experience but based on advertisements, commercials, and public relations). Through WOM, customers obtain the gratification of information exchange.

2.2 Theoretical base of the merged model

In our study, we introduce two theories that can help us to understand WOM-related behaviors. The first theory is the U&G theory, and the second theory is the TRA. The U&G theory postulates that motivations guide human behaviors. The TRA assumes that one's behavior is based on human logic. Through the lens of the U&G theory, we noted that numerous WOM articles emphasize motivations as the precursors of WOM. These motivations can be intrinsic or extrinsic. When customers take actions driven by motivations, they obtain gratifications. As noted earlier, negative WOM enables customers to obtain the gratification of information exchange [16]. On the other hand, the TRA helps us to examine WOM research systematically and logically. This theory assumes that people's actions are based on their logical thinking. We then introduce three potential precursors of WOM behaviors: customer, organization, and platform-related factors. These three aspects influence a logical person to engage in an action in the social media context. These theories are explained in the following section.

The U&G theory posits that users' media consumption is purposive and that users actively seek to fulfill their needs through various media [17]. Through the U&G theory, researchers investigate why people use media as well as the gratifications derived from media usage and access. Two types of motivations occur with relation to activities. Intrinsic motivation refers to an individual performing an action or behavior because they enjoy the activity itself. Extrinsic motivation refers to actions driven by the procurement of an external

outcome instead of the activity itself [18]. Intrinsic motivations can also be internal, whereas extrinsic motivations can be external. The TRA assumes that one's behavior is guided by reasoning and sound logic [19]. Numerous studies have applied the TRA to predict how individuals would behave according to their pre-existing attitudes and behavioral intentions. The TRA postulates that individuals decide to engage in specific behaviors according to the outcomes that the individual expects as a result of performing the behavior. From the perspective of the aforementioned two theories, we observed and categorized factors that appeared in our eWOM literature. The proposed relationships are supported by the U&G theory and TRA. We then listed the theories used in the literature and developed a merged model. In the following section, we describe the research method used in this study.

3. Method

Hennig-Thurau et al. [20] provided the earliest eWOM research. Over time, the technology and environment have changed. Therefore, we must develop a new approach to study eWOM. We used negative eWOM related keywords to search the data. We applied a four-step meta research method. We first collected articles from 2012-2020 and then identified the topic areas of the articles. We noted that the outcomes of eWOM and marketing with eWOM were two major themes. Our focus was to understand how and why customers developed eWOM. In step 3, we examined the articles and found 45 journal articles that had a similar purpose to the current research. We then performed meta research and determined the research context, assumptions, and findings of the articles of choice. Through the four-step meta research, we created a merged model of negative eWOM, following a previous study [7]. In the current study, we focused on the factors influencing the intention of spreading negative eWOM. Online review systems and the use of smart phone devices have been widely used. Since 2012, eWOM create a substantial impact to business world-wide. Businesses have paid more attention to eWOM and therefore the competition among eWOM plat became high. For instance, Google, Facebook, Yelp and TripAdvisor are few platforms that compete each other for user attentions [21]. Statistics by BrightLocal shows that since 2012 the high competition among platforms, the number of posts from 2013-2014 have increased 80%. In 2015, the number of posts increases 114% [21]. Thus, the eWOM has great influence to customers

and businesses, given that purchase decisions are highly depend on and online prouduct reviews and eWOM. Therefore, we collected articles from 2012 to 2020 to further analyze their findings regarding WOM communications.

4. Review of the Study Findings

4.1 Theories in negative eWOM studies

We identified the theories used in 45 WOM studies. We noted that social theories play a crucial role in guiding researchers to understand WOM behaviors (Table 1). Figure 1 illustrates a merged model comprising all the factors identified in the 45 articles.

4.2 Factors influencing negative eWOM

4.2.1 Organizational factors (firm level)

Incidents occurring in an online transaction may result in negative eWOM; however, customers will not attribute incidents such as online waiting, online interruption, and online service failure to only businesses/service providers. The effects of these incidents can have a significantly negative influence on the total service quality, thus resulting in complaints. E-consumer.gov [22] reported that the top online violations were (1) failure of merchandise or services delivery (16%), (2) other misrepresentations of products or services (19%), (3) failure to honor refunds (11%), and (4) merchant unable to be reached (8%). According to the attribution theory [23], when customers have an unsatisfactory experience when purchasing a product or service, they are likely to complain to the business or indulge in negative eWOM communication. In the literature, we noted that failure severity, response strategy, and firm image were three organization-related factors. Therefore, we propose the following propositions:

P1: The higher the failure severity, the higher is the likelihood of customers attributing the failure to businesses.

P2: The higher the likelihood of customers attributing failures to businesses, the higher is the likelihood of NEWOM occurring.

P3: The higher the failure severity, the higher is the likelihood that NEWOM would occur.

P4: An accommodative strategy decreases the chance of failure attribution to businesses, whereas a defensive strategy increases the chance of failure attribution to businesses.

P5: An accommodative strategy decreases the NEWOM, whereas a defensive strategy increases the NEWOM

P6: A high firm image decreases the NEWOM.

P7: A high firm image negatively moderates the relationship between failure severity and NEWOM.

We then discuss the literature that supports the aforementioned propositions.

Failure severity. Service failure refers to products or services that do not fulfill customer expectations and therefore result in complaints, switching to other businesses, or negative WOM [24]. The discrepancy stems from the shopping experience, which can be explained using the cognitive dissonance theory [25]. This theory postulates that discrepancy in an experience produces a feeling of mental discomfort that leads to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors for reducing the discomfort and restoring balance. In the online context, negative eWOM reduces discomfort. A high failure severity implies that customers attribute their loss to the business, and negative emotion leads negative eWOM [26][27]. Chang et al. [13] noted that when the failure severity is high, the failure is attributed to businesses. Similar findings were reported by Antonetti and Maklan [28]. Moreover, their notion failure severity influences negative WOM are supported [29][30][31][32].

Response strategy. The response strategy refers to the attitudes of businesses toward customers' unsatisfactory experiences with products or services. The response strategy can either be an accommodative or a defensive strategy. An accommodative strategy indicates that a business intends to provide compensation for the customer's loss, whereas a defensive strategy indicates that a business refuses to compensate the customer's loss [33]. They may even attribute the mistake or failure to the customers themselves. This leads to customer attributing the failure to the business, which leads to negative eWOM communication [13].

Firm image. The firm image refers to the reputation of a business. A high firm image is associated with a high capacity for managing customers' negative affectivity in their shopping experiences. Therefore, a business with a high firm image would be less likely to encounter customer dissatisfaction [34], and the negative influence of service failure can be reduced [35]. Balaji et al. [34] further noted that the firm image is related to negative eWOM communication. Customers often believe that one-time service failure occurs by chance. Therefore,

Balaji et al. [34] concluded that the firm image plays a moderating role in the relationship between failure severity and negative eWOM.

4.2.2 Customer motivations (intrinsic vs. extrinsic)

To resolve the cognitive dissonance in a shopping experience, customers may develop an approach for coping with their negative affectivity. When customers consider negative eWOM as an alternative, specific motivations drive their behavior. Studies have noted a few motivations connected to these behaviors, namely *venting anger*, *reputation/self-enhancement*, *self-affirmation*, *emotional connection*, *reciprocity*, *concern for others*, *sense of belonging*, and *social support*. **Venting anger** is the most straight forward motivation when encountering negative experiences. Consumers commonly express their negative thoughts through Google or Facebook to reduce their stress and anxiety after negative shopping experiences [20]. They may not expect a response or a compensation for their loss; they instead feel relieved after a negative WOM [36]. New technologies, such as social media, have made it easy to spread negative eWOM without time and space constraints [37][38]. Young people attend to have negative eWOM over social media [39]. **Reputation/self-enhancement** refers to a motivation that enhances an individual's personal image for self-protection [40]. When customers boast about the product to enhance their personal image, they intend to receive a positive reputation, fame [41], or the feeling of superiority [42]. **Reputation/self-enhancement** can also enhance negative eWOM; the purpose is to maintain a good image of oneself [43] and to provide positive eWOM [38][44][45]. Self-affirmation is a self-defense mechanism for avoiding anxiety or loss [46][47]. According to the self-affirmation theory, an individual will maintain their image, and negative WOM is a method of maintaining one's image when they feel threatened [41]. Face concern postulates that cognitive dissonance during a shopping experience makes customers lose face. Negative eWOM is the way they get even from the negative experience [34]. **Emotional connection** refers to connecting with friends through experience sharing. Sharing negative experiences with friends is one method of connecting emotionally. To strengthen their connection with friends complaining about a restaurant over Facebook, individuals may become more likely to have negative eWOM about the restaurant [48]. Reciprocity has been noted as a motivating factor for

spreading negative eWOM. According to the social exchange theory, **reciprocity** involves receiving some feedback from others to avoid bad experiences and providing similar feedback to help others [49]. **Concern for others** is associated with altruists who care about others without thoughts about rewards [50]. Their purpose for providing negative eWOM is to prevent others from having a bad experience with the same business [49]. They intend to help people in need [51], and their sympathy drives them to have negative eWOM [52]. Sense of belonging appears in the social identity theory and is defined as the social value and feeling one has in a group [53]. According to Cheung and Lee [49], sense of belonging is one of the primary reasons for WOM. **Sense of belonging** induces a person to consider the group interest to be superior to personal interest and to treat other members as their family and friends. The theory of community notes that an individual's high involvement in a group enables them to contribute more and to be emotionally engaged, thus having eWOM [54]. **Social support** refers to an individual's belief that they are respected and loved. When an individual decides to have negative eWOM, they wish to receive support and approval. Individuals seek care, love, and respect when they have a negative experience and wish for support from others to relieve their own feelings of loneliness [55]. This can also be a reason for negative eWOM [39], which ensures that the individual can recover from the experience without feeling hurt [56]. Therefore, we propose the following propositions:

P8: Venting anger positively influences NEWOM.

P9: Reputation/self-enhancement positively influences NEWOM.

P10: Self-affirmation positively influences NEWOM.

P11: Emotional connection positively influences NEWOM.

P12: Reciprocity positively influences NEWOM.

P13: Concern for others positively influences NEWOM.

P14: Sense of belonging positively influences NEWOM.

P15: Social support positively influences NEWOM.

We observe that most of the motivations, such as venting anger, reputation/self-enhancement, self-affirmation, emotional connection, and concern for others, are internal.

4.2.3 Customer-related factors (individual level)

Product involvement and self-efficacy are two customer-related factors that appear in negative eWOM literature.

Product involvement. Product involvement is the extent to which customers are involved with information about the product. There exist two types of involvement: functional and emotional. A high involvement level indicates high interest from the customer toward the product [57]. When a customer is satisfied with a high-level involvement product, it results in positive eWOM [58]. Otherwise, the customer provides negative WOM [59]. Blodgett, Granbois, and Walters [60] noted that if a business does not perform as expected or if the functions of the product are not developed, customers will have negative WOM. Similar findings are noted in the eWOM study of fashion business [61].

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their innate ability to fulfill goals. Bandura [62] defines it as a personal judgment about "how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations." When customers perceive that they are capable of sharing their experience or knowledge about a product, they are more willing to indulge in eWOM communication [63]. According to Lovett, Peres, and Sarkar [58], customers who are familiar with the product find themselves more confident to share product information. This idea is similar to the concept of perceived behavior control that influences eWOM communication [64][65]. Therefore, we propose the following propositions for customer-related factors:

H16: Product involvement positively influences NEWOM.

H17: Self-efficacy positively influences NEWOM.

4.2.4 Platform-related factors (system level)

We noted that platform-related factors, such as the audience size, tie strength, and others' ratings, contribute to negative eWOM.

Audience size. Each media platform contains audiences from different countries and cultures. People in the United States prefer Facebook (the most popular social media platform in the United States) and Instagram [66]. Barasch and Berger [67] noted that the desire for self-expression drives audiences to provide their thoughts and opinions and obtain fame and reputation. Goes and Au Yeung [68] noted that an influencer posts more content when they have numerous followers. A high density of population in an area can lead to negative WOM [69].

Tie strength. The social capital theory notes that social capital comprises three aspects: structural, relational, and cognitive aspects. Social capital is defined as the assets that individuals obtain through networking [70], and the structural aspect refers to tie [71]. The strength of the tie encourages knowledge sharing by the audience. The emotional connection in the strong tie enables audiences to share negative eWOM [34]. The strength of the tie increases their trust [72], thereby positively influencing knowledge and eWOM [73][74].

Others' ratings. The social influence theory postulates that pressure from peers results in certain behaviors [75]. Sridhar and Srinivasan [75] noted that in the online context, others' ratings influence an individual's rating. For instance, if a customer receives a positive review from an individual, they are more likely to give them favorable remarks during their review. Otherwise, they are more likely to provide an unfavorable review.

According to the aforementioned findings, we propose the following propositions:

P18: The audience size moderates the relationship between reputation/self-enhancement and NEWOM.

P19: The audience size positively influences NEWOM.

P20: The tie strength positively influences NEWOM.

P21: Low ratings by others lead to increased NEWOM, whereas high ratings by others lead to decreased NEWOM.

4.2.5 Customers' reactions

We noted that customers with negative shopping experiences produce two reactions. First, they decide whether to attribute the experience to the business. Second, they express negative eWOM to balance their cognitive dissonance in the shopping experience.

Attribute to organization. The attribution theory provides an explanation regarding how an individual makes sense of specific events or behaviors [13][76]. High service failure severity is often attributed to businesses, thus increasing the chances of negative eWOM [13][28].

Negative eWOM. This refers to when customers who are unsatisfied with the product or service in a shopping experience post their negative experience or feelings on the Internet through social media or other platforms. The message will send one customer over another. Thus, negative eWOM communication occurs. In recent years, widely used

handheld devices, such as smartphones, have made it possible for negative eWOM communication to be shared in a timely and efficient manner. This increases the effect of such communication. How and why negative eWOM spreads has become a crucial issue for researchers and practitioners.

5. Discussion

The present study provides a systematic review of the literature regarding negative eWOM communication. First, the study findings advance the current knowledge about negative eWOM communications. Although numerous studies have explained positive eWOM behaviors, few studies have examined negative eWOM. Our study analyzed studies regarding negative eWOM and determined the reasons that customers spread negative eWOM and the factors that contribute to negative eWOM. Although the results and findings in the 45 studies considered were inconsistent, we attempted to sort the information and summarize similar findings to focus on the causes and consequences of negative eWOM. Second, the literature indicates that a holistic view of negative eWOM has yet to be developed. Therefore, we prepared a merged model that identifies the primary factors at the individual, firm, and system levels. Recent studies regarding eWOM have covered a wide range of eWOM problems. Therefore, these studies are less informative for businesses to determine strategic decisions. The current study analyzed and summarized these studies and derived a merged model that can inform businesses and future researchers about negative eWOM motivations and behaviors. Our merged model contributes to businesses by informing them about the potential actions that they can take at different levels, such as the customer, organization, and platform levels. Therefore, they can create the potential effect of altering negative WOM. Third, we derived propositions that can enable future researchers to further analyze communications and find theories from other disciplines that can serve as an alternative for expanding our understanding of negative eWOM. Future research may use the results of this study to expand or fine-tune our merged model. Consequently, the knowledge of eWOM can be more precise and informative. Finally, we noted the intrinsic motivations (e.g., self-affirmation and sense of belonging) that play crucial roles in negative eWOM behaviors. Intrinsic motivations are unlikely to be managed. They deserve more attention to ensure that businesses can take actions to create positive experiences in online contexts. An improved understanding of customers' intrinsic motivations would enable businesses to create

emotional connections with customers to convince them that businesses care about their needs.

We formulated a merged model and posit that (1) an individual's negative WOM is driven by motivations, thus enabling them to obtain gratifications, and (2) an individual's WOM is a logical action to obtain their desired outcomes. Although each of the articles used in our meta research has a theoretical basis, we noted that motivations and human logical thinking can serve as bases for the conceptualization of the various theories that appear in these 45 studies.

This study has some limitations worth noting. First, we collected 45 journal articles for our analysis and neglected other sources of information, such as dissertations and conference papers. Although these are good sources of information, we had concerns that adding such information would make it difficult for our analysis to be consistent because some dissertations are fairly long and contain multiple research purposes.

6. Conclusion

We collected 45 eWOM journal articles from 2012 to 2020 and developed 21 propositions and a merged model. In this model, the motivations of negative eWOM, platform, organization, and customer-related factors were identified. We noted that intrinsic motivations play a crucial role in negative eWOM. Our results contribute to the development of eWOM research and provide practitioners with information regarding how to minimize the influence of negative eWOM and increase the effect of positive WOM for business success.

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Table 1. Theories Applied in Literature

Theories	Numbers
Social Exchange Theory [73] [45] [41]	3
Social Learning Theory [41]	1
Self-affirmation Theory [41]	1
Self-determination Theory [73]	1
Attribution Theory [31][13][28][41] [78]	5
Cognitive Dissonance Theory[34]	1
Social Support Theory [34]	1
Social Influence Theory [79] [67] [75]	3
Social Psychology [49]	1
Social Capital Theory [80] [73]	2
Social Identity Theory [54][52][39]	3
Theory of Community Commitment[54]	1
Motivation Theory[51] [81]	2
Interdependence Theory[30]	1
Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory[32][82]	2
Self-Enhancement Theory[44][43]	2
Theory of Planned Behavior[64]	1
Theory of Reasoned Action[61]	1
Situational Theory of Problem Solving[83]	1
Social Cognitive Theory[63] [65]	2
Elaboration Likelihood Model [63]	1
Frustration-Aggression Theory [84]	1
Others [85] [69] [86] [87] [48] [27] [68] [29] [58] [38] [56] [88] [89] [90] [91] [92]	16

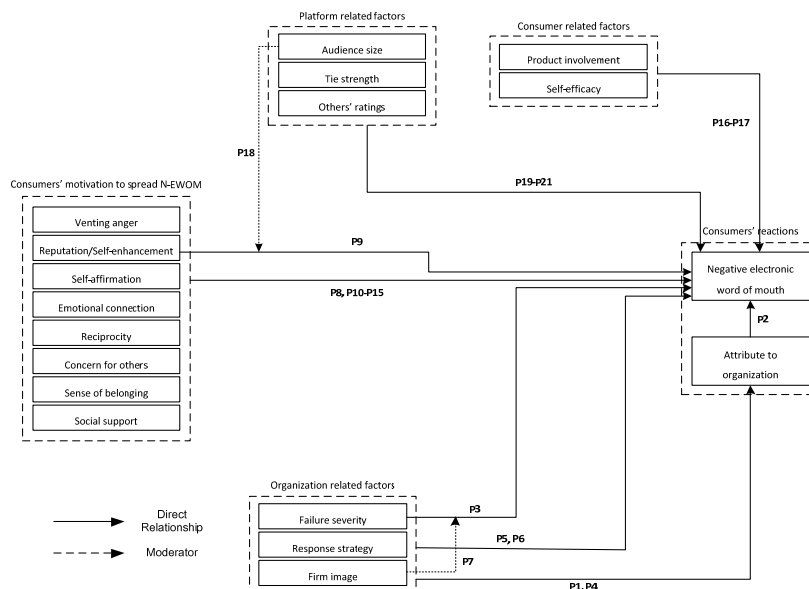


Figure 1. A merged framework of the factors that influencing Negative eWOM