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What Drives Negative Electronic Word-of-Mouth Online?

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Abstract—The online environment has highlighted the role of negative experiences and emotions by enabling fast and widespread publicity. Recent research has introduced both word-of-mouth and engagement as central concepts relating to negative communication online. In the field of public relations, the previous literature has mostly addressed negative engagement through individual topics such as reputation and crisis communication, but there has been little attention to the different forms it takes. By utilizing recent literature on word-of-mouth (WOM), negative word-of-mouth (nWOM), and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication, we propose negative electronic word-of-mouth (neWOM) as a rising phenomenon of urgency for organizations. A form of negative engagement, it potentially spreads faster and further, causing problems for targeted organizations. Building on a previous understanding of the motives driving negative engagement online (e.g., anger, frustration, irritation), we map the different motives often associated with negative engagement. To illustrate these in practice, we use content analysis to sample online customer discussions and customer complaints in social media in the context of three telecommunications service providers in Finland. Our preliminary results show that venting and revenge stand out as the main motives for neWOM. We call for a more strategic approach to tackling customer complaints and highlight the need to monitor negative engagement online. We conclude with five propositions to guide future research on the topic and propose that a central aim of PR in the online environment should be to keep stakeholders from morphing into hateholders by monitoring and participating in online discussions.

Negative electronic word-of-mouth; Negative engagement online; Customer emotions; Social media; Telecommunications

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent research suggests that we live in a participative, co-operative society [63, 90] in which customers' experiences are born, not only in the spheres controlled by organizations but in various online and offline arenas outside the control of organizations [24, 56, 61, 89]. Some have suggested that building and maintaining customer–organizational relationships have become easier with the introduction of social media platforms [17, 40, 71]. Customers increasingly expect organizations to interact with them in online environments [3, 99], highlighting the need for organizational listening and monitoring [59, 69]. Also, online users are active and involved: they consume content and participate in discussions, share knowledge with other consumers, and contribute to other

consumers' activities [30]. Despite this development, there is a need to understand different concepts about customer engagement [66], and further research on this topic is expected in online environments as well as in various contexts [11]. Moreover, in the engagement literature, “customer engagement,” “consumer engagement,” and “brand engagement” are closely related, see, e.g. [7, 11, 10, 27]. To broadly cover all the concepts in the context of this study, we apply “customer engagement,” “consumer engagement,” and “brand engagement” interchangeably, and we refer to the negative forms of these concepts simply as “negative engagement.” As negative engagement in online environments remains an underexplored concept, in this article, we explore it through one of its concrete manifestations: negative electronic word-of-mouth (neWOM).

While users have typically shared opinions about a product or company both on- and offline [33], it is only recently that scholars have highlighted the benefits and importance for organizations in engaging potential customers and stakeholders online [41, 52, 86, 88]. Engagement itself is a multidimensional process consisting of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions [35, 11]. Moreover, customer engagement also has an experience-based logic [11, 93, 10, 13, 65]. Through engagement, customers reform their roles and behavior and have a greater impact on how experiences are formed: other online users, organizational stakeholders, and service providers are under this influence [88]. For example, eWOM often grows into a central aspect of the overall brand experience of an individual.

We argue that eWOM communication should be treated as an integral part of the behavioral customer engagement process, influencing attitudes, emotions, and the engagement of others [14, 17]. In fact, emotional tone is crucial for the reception of social media messages [24]. EWOM is more advocacy-based [11], which increases its influence. The connection between eWOM and engagement is based on the definition of engagement as a “behavioral manifestation toward a brand or firm beyond purchase, which results from motivational drivers including word-of-mouth activity, recommendations, customer-to-customer interactions, blogging, writing reviews, and other similar activities” [66]. Thus, when other online users process eWOM it could lead to increased levels of (negative) engagement. In general, customer engagement has a process-centered nature, with numerous antecedents affecting this process [7, 38, 93]. As engagement from a negative perspective

is still underexplored, understanding the complex drivers of negative engagement online has become vital for PR research and practice. Additionally, there is a demand for different strategies when addressing and responding to various forms of negative engagement online.

While negative engagement is a new concept, it is not an entirely new phenomenon in public relations; for example, the literature on crisis response strategies has previously addressed similar topics. Earlier studies on negative publicity highlight that negative information and negative messages have a greater impact on individuals' attitudes and message reception than equal amounts of positive information [24, 80]. Also, negative customer stories and reviews in the online environment appear to gain more publicity [100], and negative stories rise to prominence more easily on the media's news agenda than positive ones [15, 28, 42]. As strong negative emotions are more likely to lead to negative engagement online and thereby result in organizational losses [19, 20], negatively engaged individuals, renamed as "hateholders", are a distinct form of stakeholders at high risk of harming organizations [54]. In fact, studies on customer dissatisfaction show that organizations are often to blame [98], especially when negative engagement occurs online [23]. Interestingly, negative online postings do not even have to relate to an organization to have an impact on users' attitude [24]. The presupposition here is that strong positive engagement leads to fewer public complaints and negative stories and that gaining hateholders should be avoided in the online environment.

Even though engagement in virtual brand communities includes cognitive and emotional dimensions [11], our focus in this paper is on the behavioral dimensions of engagement, such as negatively-valenced and active [101] behavioral manifestations toward an organization, beyond the point of purchase, which results from motivational drivers and includes neWOM [88]. Consequently, we approach the topic by looking at different visible forms of negative engagement behavior online: complaints to the company, negative feedback in general, negative peer-to-peer interaction, and even anti-branding [47, 48, 49].

The purpose of this paper is to utilize theory to illustrate the drivers of negative engagement and, through an illustrative example, analyze the different forms that negative engagement can take in the social media context. We collected illustrative examples from Finland due to its tech-savvy citizenry and its reputation as a free democratic society, inclined to publicly tolerate multiple voices and opinions [57, 96]. Organization of this paper is as follows: we first examine the process of customer experience formation and engagement. We then continue by drawing on word-of-mouth studies and define the less discussed neWOM. Third, we introduce negative emotions and motives for customer complaints, negative feedback, and negative engagement behavior in the online environment. Fourth, we provide three illustrative examples of customer complaints in Facebook discussions of three Finnish telecommunications companies: Sonera, Elisa, and DNA. To conclude, we combine previous research with illustrative examples to present how certain negative emotions affect the complaints process, and we introduce the motives that most significantly predict neWOM in the telecommunications sector. We also discuss the theoretical

and practical implications of our study and present five propositions guiding future research on neWOM and negative engagement. We answer the need to better understand prior experiences as well as the emotions and motives behind neWOM that reflect a more comprehensive state of negative engagement online.

II. CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT AND THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCES

Positive engagement is an aim for brands and organizations due to the manifold benefits associated with it. Positive public engagement consists of different affective motivators; it has different antecedents (e.g., trust and satisfaction); and it leads to different outcomes such as positive WOM and loyalty [44]. The presupposition is that strong positive engagement leads to fewer public complaints and negative stories, a central aim in the practice of public relations and corporate communication. Reference [88] point out that engagement with an organization can have different antecedents, which can be customer-based, firm-based, or context-based [38, 93]. From a PR perspective, engagement is a "part of dialogue and through engagement, organizations and publics can make decisions that create social capital" [86, p. 384]. Also, "engagement is both an orientation that influences interactions and the approach that guides the process of interactions among groups" [86, p. 384].

As different social media platforms have emerged as the main channels for engagement, there are some essential points that stand out from the behavioral perspective: public engagement on social media has positive effects on perceived organizational transparency and authenticity; it also tightens the relationship with publics and audiences [62]. Also, messages and posts on social media reach a wide range of users [62]. It is evident that online engagement mediates the relationship with offline communication behavior [70]. Involvement and commitment are fostered by enabling engagement, which deepens the relationship between an organization and its publics and leads to a greater level of advocacy [62]. Customer engagement with an organization is often a relatively long process [7], which includes sharing meanings, interpretations, and goals [41]. As discussed earlier, engagement comprises cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions [11]. Engagement in virtual brand communities divides into five sub-processes: learning, sharing, co-developing, socializing, and advocating [11], with advocacy being a good example of the visible expression of engagement [11].

Research on engagement highlights how customers take an active role taking part in discussion and creating experiences. Consequently, customers are more often an integral part of experience constitution [31]. Customer experiences are individual and context-dependent interpretations [58] and they link to the value perceived by individuals [31]. The determinants that drive people to engage with an organization may arise from multiple background factors – more precisely referred to as experiences that function as constituencies for engagement [10, 11, 13, 65, 93]. Engagement has different behavioral and attitudinal dimensions that affect both cognitive and affective levels [93, 10] and include multidimensional links between subjects and objects [10]. It is also possible that engagement is experienced only at a psychological level [11]. Moreover,

involvement and participation are related to engagement [93, 10], and emotions are frequently part of the process [8, 21, 73, 74, 77, 98].

Some functions can elicit changes to the nature of the engagement relationship and include situational, influential, and reactional triggers [77]. Individual responsiveness and perceptions of how something fits in an individual's life usually define experiences [13]. For example, negative experiences do not always lead to activity, and there is a possibility that different negative emotions lead to alternative engagement behaviors than merely negative ones [4, 34, 77]. In fact, in social media, liking is usually affectively triggered and commenting cognitively triggered function, whereas sharing could be the combination of both [45]. However, it can be difficult for organizations if customers display dissatisfaction publicly and are ready to take part in negative engagement, for example, through negative public feedback and complaining.

III. NEGATIVE ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH

WOM communication refers to advice and information that customers share with others [22]. Individuals are exposed to experience and opinion sharing through word-of-mouth, especially in online environments. This exposure is critical to the manner in which opinions shape and decisions are made [14]. Word-of-mouth research, in general, has focused on exploring the positive forms of WOM and eWOM, see, e.g. [78], with objectives relating to WOM usage as a marketing tool, and on questions such as whether WOM positively affects buying decisions. Earlier studies, such as [85], have also focused on the factors affecting the efficiency of WOM. WOM motivations have been studied primarily in marketing research [33], particularly from the perspective of the social motives affecting it. In reference [1] researchers explore WOM from this perspective and observe that it is guided by the pursuit of personal and social benefits.

nWOM has recently received more attention. For example, [72] address the challenges that nWOM generates for organizations that are active in the realm of social media. Their research analyzes online firestorms and sudden and wholesale nWOM and complaint outbursts targeted at a person, organization, or group on social media. Moreover, [95] shows that destructive nWOM has a more negative effect than constructive nWOM. Reference [15] suggests that negative expressions are more reliable than positive ones in online environments. Researchers claim that positive expressions are used to build one's identity as well as to justify that one's decisions are correct. According to analysis in [15], positive WOM is motivated by the need for self-image improvement, whereas negative WOM is motivated by the need for one's identity strengthening. Earlier studies have also focused on nWOM and its relationship with the lifecycle of customer journey [75], on nWOM changes in customer satisfaction [67], and on the role of emotions (such as anger) in communication intentions [87]. New and real-time media have introduced changes in the way people communicate by allowing them to share experiences publicly [32]. Although the motives behind the nWOM process have recently received further attention in the PR literature [50], other negative forms of online engagement have only received scant attention, leading to

brands and organizations remaining ill-equipped to deal with bursts of negative customer engagement.

EWOM makes WOM communication available to a wider audience. Social networking sites provide a range of powerful channels for eWOM communication [60]. EWOM is also of high importance as those who are unengaged are also interested in the experiences, and online stories of others, with the internet acting as a collective memory for incidents long passed [33]. Reference [33] introduces research from the perspective of motivations behind eWOM. The researchers argue that the main motives behind eWOM are the need for social interaction, economic incentives, concern for others, and the possibility of improving self-worth. There is a greater level of trust in eWOM than in organizational messages, and people rely on it when making purchase decisions [17, 33]. By engaging, recommending, commenting, liking, or passing along something to their social connections [45], individuals voluntarily display their brand preferences along with their persona (e.g., name and picture), which generates more eWOM [17]. Also, connectivity and position shape the amount of negative influence an individual user has online. The better the user positions in an online environment, the more power and urgency his/her complaints carry [79], for example, through eWOM.

neWOM has received less attention from researchers, even though it has recently been attracting greater levels of interest. Reference [46] shows how researchers have tested the effects of neWOM on purchase behavior among those who have posted and those who have viewed the corresponding content. In reference [91] neWOM and its influence are investigated alongside emotions about repatronage and switching intentions. Reference [97] have focused on the motives behind online product reviews, while [18] introduces research on neWOM by comparing the impact of both positive and negative WOM. Table 1 shows the differences between WOM, nWOM, and eWOM and what we propose as an addition: neWOM.

TABLE I. DEFINITIONS OF WOM, NWOM, EWOM, AND NEWOM

Concept	Definition	Value and impact
WOM	Oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator, whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial regarding a brand, product, or service [2]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neutral or positive • Offline
nWOM	"Interpersonal communication among consumers concerning a marketing organization or product which denigrates the object of the communication" [76, p. 697]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative • Offline

Concept	Definition	Value and impact
eWOM	“Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” [33, p. 39]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neutral or positive • Online
neWOM	<i>Negative post that is made available online to other users and is designed to denigrate a product, organization, or brand</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative • Online

As shown in Table 1, on the one hand, WOM communication refers to person-to-person communication in offline environments regarding positive statements about a product or organization. Examples include brand recommendations to friends when discussing with them privately or in small groups. On the other hand, nWOM communication aims to denigrate a product or an organization. For example, warning neighbors to avoid a nearby restaurant.

Even though [33] refer to any positive or negative online statement in their eWOM definition, neWOM as such has not been precisely defined in the previous literature. One attempt to acknowledge this is the description of neWOM as a negative online post that is harmful to an organization. It is also important that this outburst is made visible to other users. For example, taking unfavorable pictures of food ordered from a restaurant and posting them online. To conclude, we define neWOM as *a negative post that is made available online to other users and is designed to denigrate a product, organization, or brand.*

IV. WHAT DRIVES NEWOM?

Negative feedback and customer complaints are not a new phenomenon; customers have always complained about organizations and bad service [23]. New communication technologies, however, encourage customers to express their opinions to a wider audience and allow them to build constituencies more easily. Through these behaviors, they can advocate for or harm companies [25, 42]. In the online environment, negative complaints are easily visible to the masses, causing reputational damage and negatively affecting company reputation [37, 79].

Different emotions and motives have a close relationship and are integral to customers' complaints and negative feedback. Both have a functional-behavioral dimension: emotions motivate people to action, provide information about goal achievement, mobilize people to undertake action, and give specific directions to behavior [95]. Using the eWOM motives delineated by [33] and the categorization of nWOM motives and goals by [95] (Table 2), it is easier to separate different emotions and motives behind certain online actions taken by individuals when they experience disappointment, regret, uncertainty, anger, frustration, or irritation. Due to the dearth of research

focusing specifically on negative electronic WOM motives, both eWOM [33] and nWOM [95] studies could be used as a starting point. The motives from both studies can be unified and applied to online environments, making them more applicable to what we see as neWOM and *negative engagement* online.

TABLE II. REASONS FOR NEWOM COMBINED WITH NWOM GOALS AND EWOM MOTIVES

Emotion condition behind nWOM ^a	Reasons for nWOM ^a	Reasons for eWOM ^b	Combined reasons applied to neWOM (based on previous literature)
Uncertainty and disappointment	Self-presentation: Managing the impression of another impression, or one's self-image	Extraversion / positive self-enhancement: Driven by one's desire for positive recognition from others	Presentation of self
Uncertainty and disappointment	Comfort search: Seeking comfort, moral support, or understanding	Economic incentives: Trying to receive rewards or financial benefit	Comfort search
Uncertainty and disappointment	Advice search: Engaging in nWOM to gain cognitive clarity	Advice seeking: Receiving tips or support from other users to help solve problems	Advice
Regret and disappointment	Bonding: Decreasing interpersonal distance and strengthening social bonds	Social benefits: Chat with like-minded people is a nice thing and it is fun to communicate in this way	Bonding
Regret and disappointment	Entertaining: Keeping a conversation going and amusing the conversational partner	Social benefits	Entertain

Emotion condition behind nWOM ^a	Reasons for nWOM ^a	Reasons for eWOM ^b	Combined reasons applied to neWOM (based on previous literature)
Regret, uncertainty, and disappointment	<p>Warning:</p> <p>Helping the receiver make a satisfying purchase decision</p>	<p>Concern for others:</p> <p>Warning others about bad products and saving others from having the same negative experience; helping others to have a positive experience</p> <p>Platform assistance:</p> <p>When the matter is published, it is more likely to be seen, which is a more convenient way to reach the company</p>	Warning
Anger, frustration and irritation	<p>Revenge:</p> <p>Behavior designed to harm someone else in response to the feeling of being harmed by that person</p>	<p>Venting negative feelings:</p> <p>Because the company has done harm, it deserves the same treatment, and there has to be vengeance</p>	Revenge
Anger, frustration, and irritation	<p>Venting:</p> <p>Blowing off steam by expressing a particular emotion</p>	<p>Venting negative feelings</p>	Venting

a. [95]
b. [33]

Table 2 presents eight categories of nWOM goals and eWOM motives, with certain emotions affecting each nWOM goal. The table also introduces combined reasons applied to neWOM. The goals and motives presented in the table can be connected in the context of affecting the emotion-related conditions. Additionally, the nWOM goals and eWOM motives are presented on the line that most likely bears a resemblance. For the sake of clarity, the last column in the table combines both nWOM goals and eWOM motives and applies them to eight neWOM reasons: Presentation of self, Comfort search, Advice, Bonding, Entertain, Warning, Revenge, and Venting.

According to [95], the common emotions behind the self-presentation, comfort search, and advice search goals were uncertainty and disappointment. Regret and disappointment emotions most often affected bonding and entertaining. Uncertainty and disappointment played a part and affected individuals' likelihood to engage in warning, but this goal was most likely affected by the emotion of regret. Revenge and venting goals were respectively affected by the emotions of anger, frustration, and irritation.

In the construction of the neWOM concept, we follow the definition of negative engagement, which is "an experience-based series of participative actions in online environments where negative issues concerning an organization or brand are publicly discussed" [51, p. 288]. These experiences, however, may be either personal or mediated through the sharing of experiences with others or with media outlets [51]. Negative engagement is also a process; a relationship between an individual and an organization might go through multiple interactions and, over time, may turn from positive to negative or vice versa [4, 5, 8, 36, 98]. All influence, however, is not created equal, and we argue that negative engagement is especially influential as negative reports are generally more credible than positive ones [15].

Issues leading to negative engagement behavior usually reflect the apology, justice, or compensation sought by the customer in order to find a way "to get even" with an organization [83]. From this perspective, and by combining definition of negative engagement in [51] with the above-presented viewpoints of [33] and [95], venting and revenge can be seen as integral aspects of neWOM, not only because of the background emotions of anger, frustration, and irritation, but because the initial motives also describe the possible public action in a relevant manner. In addition, [95] and [33] refer to revenge and venting as goals that are more destructive in nature.

Other goals, especially warning, entertaining, and bonding could also fulfill the characteristics of neWOM as the focus is more on interacting with others than the individual itself [95]. However, these motives do not reflect purely negative engagement behavior as such and relate more to the seeking of social benefits, concern for others and platform assistance [33]. In fact, [95] show that self-presentation, comfort search, advice search, bonding, entertaining, and warning are more constructive in nature, which in most cases arguably turns them away from neWOM, even though nWOM can sometimes be motivated by the need for one's identity strengthening [15]. As discussed earlier, emotions play a key role in engagement and affect processes such as in the establishment of trust [82]. Additionally, individuals' experiences are central to engagement [11]. Moreover, research on risk-related industries has found that emotional intensity correlates with a customer's will to engage with an organization [43]. Negative experiences [64, 10, 11] contribute to negative emotions (e.g., anger, regret, frustration, disappointment, and dissatisfaction) [98] and, eventually, to neWOM.

To conclude, from the perspective of neWOM, both experiences [64] and emotions provide the baseline for actual engagement behavior online. It is reasonable to claim that emotions such as anger, irritation, and frustration play a

significant role in neWOM. Reference [10] distinguish online engagement from participative and involvement actions by underlining the role of customers' experiences with certain engagement objects (e.g., an organization). The researchers claim that being present suffices for online engagement behavior [11]. However, we propose that actual participative actions from individuals are required and that only negative public engagement through neWOM actually harms organizations

V. THREE INDUSTRY EXAMPLES OF neWOM

The telecommunications industry consists of services that attract much competition and high amounts of customer complaints [84]. What most likely predicts the probability of the customer to complain from the economic perspective are perceived costs, perceived benefits, and the probability of the success of the complaint [68]. From a behavioral perspective, an individual's ability and motivation also influence the likelihood of complaint [68].

We explored customer experiences and neWOM motives in the Finnish telecommunications industry by analyzing negative posts and comments on Facebook. Our analysis focused on three of the biggest telecommunications companies in Finland: DNA, Elisa, and Sonera. We chose telecommunications, as the industry is highly volatile and competitive, allowing for more comparisons and customer switching behaviors. We used Finland due to its tech-savvy citizenry and its reputation as a free democratic society, inclined to publicly tolerate multiple voices and opinions [57, 96]. The idea was to explore observable motives by analyzing negative comments and posts on companies' Facebook pages. We wanted to know what motives most likely appeared and whether the combined reasons of venting and revenge were present alongside negative emotions of anger, frustration, and irritation that usually relate to neWOM.

We analyzed the comments on each company's Facebook page, and the data was collected in the period of 2015-2016. The data was analyzed using double coding, see, e.g. [12], whereby two coders analyzed the comments, and reached a consensus by comparing and discussing about the results. The data was re-checked in early 2017, and an agreement reached with high intercoder reliability, yielding over 90%. Overall, we reviewed 687 comments and posts (245 in DNA, 252 in Elisa, and 191 on Sonera Facebook pages). To be accepted for closer analysis, we selected the comments if they fulfilled the categorization of negativity according to [95]. From the collected data, 90 comments or posts fulfilled this criterion. We excluded the content if it was either positive or neutral, such as questions and statements provided both by the company and the customers.

Overall, the number of negative posts and comments was 13.1% of all the analyzed content. As such, the amount of neutral and positive content was considerably higher, which is not unusual for shared media platforms monitored and controlled by the organizations itself. During the analysis of the negative content, it became obvious that individual posts and comments could fulfill the characteristics of more than one of the categories of [95]. As a consequence, we draw 121 separate codings from the original number of 90 selected posts and comments. The coded data is introduced in Table 3.

TABLE III. MOTIVATION BEHIND NEGATIVE POSTS AND COMMENTS

	DNA	Elisa	Sonera	Overall Amount of coded data	Percentage out of coded data
<i>Venting</i>	20	27	25	72	59.5 %
<i>Revenge</i>	10	7	9	26	21.5 %
<i>Comfort search</i>	4	3	0	7	5.8 %
<i>Warning</i>	5	0	0	5	4.1 %
<i>Advice</i>	2	2	0	4	3.3 %
<i>Entertain</i>	2	1	1	4	3.3 %
<i>Bonding</i>	1	1	1	3	2.5 %
<i>Self-presentation</i>	-	-	-	-	0 %
The overall amount of posts analyzed	44	41	38	121	100 %

As per Table 3, *venting* was the most apparent motive behind all negative posts and comments, with a share of 59.5% of all the coded data. An example of this was strong presentations of emotions, which manifested through cursing, using capital letters, and expressing hostile comments towards the organizations:

“what the fuck is going on when there is no speed and the internet connection is constantly lacking you fucking clowns! you cannot do anything else but cash in”

“map out whole DNA/WELHO BECAUSE THERE IS NOTHING THAT WORKS WITH THEM SHITTY COMPANY you can sell it to russians... end of discussion”

The *revenge* motive was also considerably common in the coded data, with a share of 21.5%. An example of this were comments that aimed at damaging the operator. For instance, customers gave threats that they change their current operator:

“—This is pretty gross. And very unfortunate for you is that these slip-ups will go from ear to ear and get a negative image from you.”

“Never again Elisa and none of my friends who live abroad will buy any of Elisa's products when they come to Finland! Outrageous!”

Comfort search, *warning*, *advice*, *entertain*, and *bonding* all reported shares of less than six percent. *Comfort search* was noticeable when customers sought sympathy by seeking support and understanding from others:

“Well, when the setting is ‘big company against weak consumer’ the customer has only one option.”

Warning appeared as comments that were directed at others. These posts were aimed at preventing others from making mistakes:

“Advice for all the Dna-people out there; those regular boxes you get with your subscriptions – throw them into a puddle”

Advice took the form of help-seeking through commenting. In the coded data, advice-seeking was related to negative posts or to occasions in which comments were negatively valenced:

“VERY difficult. What to do?????”

Entertain was apparent in negative comments in the form of humor. For example, customers used funny name-calling to refer to the advertisers of the companies after they saw an unappealing ad:

“Is there some alcoholic doing these advertisements when he thinks that the more is, the better?”

Bonding was apparent when customers wanted to stir discussion with other users by e.g. asking whether others had similar problems with their mobile connections in a certain area:

“Does anyone else witness this pissed Elisa/Saunalahti mobile connection in the area of Uusimaa?”

“Are you trashing Sonera here? I’m in!”

Self-presentation was not apparent in the coded data, even though the comments were public and, as such, could represent a form of presentation of self. However, [95] claim that self-presentation should appropriately influence the image that others have about the messenger. As such, this was not distinguishable in the coded data.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The central idea of this paper was to illustrate the drivers and motives of negative engagement, and to analyze how it appeals and then transfers into neWOM in the social media context. Existing studies on nWOM and eWOM, as well as illustrative data on customer complaints, show that behaviors vary and different negative experiences and emotions may lead to different types of public behavior or even a lack thereof. Studies show that customer complaints usually result from a real or perceived injustice or wrong [23]. Sharing experiences and emotions online, however, allows for multidimensional interaction [17, 60]. By introducing nWOM goals [95] and taking eWOM motives [33] into consideration as components of neWOM, it was possible to distinguish negative actions that are potentially destructive to organizations. Our illustrative examples showed that the motives that fulfill the characteristics of neWOM (and as such, characteristics of negative engagement) include venting and revenge, which represented 81% of the analyzed negative postings. Venting and revenge often result from emotions of anger, frustration, and irritation, which easily lead to more destructive forms of neWOM. The results on negative postings also showed that individuals seek comfort, advice, and sympathy, which could also mean that neutral and positive discussions could transform into a more

negative state if not recognized in time. Destructive nWOM (i.e., revenge and venting) has more negative effect than constructive nWOM [95] and calls for organizations to invite and acknowledge continuous customer feedback. Studies on customer dissatisfaction show that organizations are often to blame [98] when neWOM occurs online [23]. This seems to highlight a lack of strategic communication and underscores the need for increased monitoring of the online environment. Beyond the individuals affected, negative messages and posts by hateholders could remain online long after the original publication [20], be contagious [102], and continue to spread negative (and sometimes even false) information about organizations [29, 72].

To conclude, the drivers of neWOM include experiences, motives, and emotions that can be linked to certain forms of negative engagement. Previous literature shows that emotions are integral to the negative engagement process as they work as constituencies for neWOM. According to our illustrative examples, venting and revenge constitute motives that most likely drive neWOM and other negative engagement behavior. Especially important are the background emotions of anger, frustration, and irritation that motivate the more destructive forms of neWOM. This paper has several implications for both theory and practice of PR. We summarize these with our five propositions on neWOM and PR.

1) *NeWOM is a distinct phenomenon with specific emotional triggers formed through a complex interplay of experiences, motives, and communication.*

Brands and organizations cannot control the environment or all customer experiences in the online environment, but acknowledging the factors contributing to neWOM can help them understand the logic on which it is based. Creating meaningful customer experiences is considered essential to accomplish competitive advantage and customer satisfaction [6, 92].

2) *NeWOM is a contagious collective phenomenon, and its highly transferrable nature and high level of credibility make it difficult to control.*

If organizations can understand the predictors of neWOM, they would be better equipped to respond to negative outbursts and to circumvent negative engagement processes early. It is possible that early detection can prevent negative information to become viral, thus diminishing the effects to others. Once the neWOM cycle begins, there is little that brands and organizations can do. Previous studies have noted how taking blame might decrease the power of negative engagement [81] and lessen anger if the receiver’s situation is heard and accepted [87]. This supports the notion that organizations should admit responsibility when necessary. Previous studies confirm that response strategies including denial, excuses, or lack of communication, could harm brands and organizations [23], while empathy and listening usually lead to more positive results [59].

3) *Monitoring the drivers of negative engagement can help brands and organizations predict future neWOM.*

If venting and revenge are the probable drivers of neWOM, then organizations should take a closer look at customer emotions. For example, finding ways to avoid the formation of such emotions like anger, frustration, and irritation could ensure that customers are not motivated by venting and revenge in the first place. Also, if the organizations can monitor social media, it could lead into better reputation [39], and ensure that the messages sent by the organization are the most effective [24].

4) *A central future task of PR in the online environment will be to keep stakeholders from morphing into hateholders.*

Once negative message becomes public online, different users may refer to it and cause already resolved issues to stir more negative and destructive emotions, such as anger [17, 20, 102]. Reaching disappointed customers promptly—before they turn into hateholders—is important and calls new approaches to identify negative emotions among those who actually are disappointed [69]. If hateholders have already developed it is crucial to reach them before their complaints become generalized in online communities. We encourage dialogue strategy as it seems that passive or unresponsive organizations arouse dreadful customer emotions [16]. Mitigating negative emotions and acknowledging or re-compensating customers can serve as vital mechanisms to avoid more destructive forms of engagement. Since the manner in which negative engagement is expressed is important [81, 87], PR professionals should enable customer feedback and receive the complaints. Cases in which engagement behavior is more constructive than destructive, positive results could be expected. In fact, without public complaints, issues causing negative emotions might have never surfaced. Real-time feedback may contribute to innovation and improvement. As negative engagement is often issue-related, the traditional way of mapping customers and stakeholders is outdated, and novel approaches, such as issue arena analysis, could help to detect such matters [94]. Some even suggest playing the devil’s advocate to plan for unexpected stakeholders and their reactions [55].

5) *Non-strategic communication may backfire and further increase neWOM, thus calling for a more strategic approach when it comes to dealing with neWOM.*

In case of negative engagement, non-strategic communication may harm organizations. Customers expect that they can use various channels to interact with organizations online. Organizations can gain advantage by reacting to negative engagement, but strategic planning is essential to ensure that the measures taken do not generate additional issues, which might lead to greater levels of anger, frustration, or irritation. Inauthentic machine responses should be avoided as customers expect online interaction to be humane and accommodating.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

This study was a first attempt to illustrate the drivers and motives of neWOM, portraying it as a form of negative engagement online. There are several limitations to this study. First, as a preliminary attempt to illustrate neWOM as harmful to brands and organizations, we focused mostly on concept creation. As such, the data was limited to merely illustrate the

argument. Second, we focused only on studies of eWOM and nWOM although negative engagement can also occur in other contexts, even within positive engagement environments. More research is indeed needed; concerning the illustrations provided, future studies should focus on exploring negative engagement in practice and across cultures and organizational lifespans, and in different crisis settings. Given these limitations, this article presents a new angle of approach to the concept of negative engagement. Moreover, as research on the organization–stakeholder relationships expand, this study can serve as a starting point in negative engagement research in new environments.

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