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### 3. Hateholders and Brandjacking: Negative Engagement of Customers and Stakeholders

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**Abstract:** Social and real-time media allow customers and other stakeholders to easily voice their opinions online when brands or organisations fail to meet their expectations. Such outbursts, which are often addressed through corporate public relations and crisis communication, are labelled negative stakeholder engagement. This study focuses on negative stakeholder engagement behaviour on the social media platform Twitter. Data collected from discussions on two telecommunication companies' Twitter accounts, one in Finland and the other in Australia, are used to illustrate the different forms of negative engagement behaviours.

**Keywords:** negative engagement, hateholders, stakeholders, brandjacking, customer anger, expectations

#### Introduction

Social media platforms have altered the way in which brands and organisations establish and build relationships with different stakeholders. Today, social media platforms, brands and organisations attempt to join customers in dialogue and empower co-creation (Shahbaznezhad *et al.*, 2021; Read *et al.*, 2019; Carlson *et al.*, 2019; Valos *et al.*, 2017). Almost every contemporary mainstream consumer brand now has a social media presence and utilises multiple social media platforms to

build a community and engage their customers and stakeholders. For these social networking platforms to foster co-creation, involvement and participation, it is vital to understand how customers and stakeholders engage with content within their constellation of networked interactions (see, e.g., Bowden, 2009; Brodie *et al.*, 2011).

The sheer scale and connective power of social networking sites offer organic avenues for the development of different forms of stakeholder engagement (Lievonon *et al.*, 2018; Lievonon and Luoma-aho, 2015; Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). For example, Twitter, as a micro-blogging social media platform, is focused on rapid information dissemination (Walker *et al.*, 2017; Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014); thus, it encourages active and influential dialogue between like-minded constituents (see Further reading- Parmar, 2015; Kwak *et al.*, 2010) and supports immediate information sharing (Huff, 2015 – see Further reading). Research has shown that consumers rely heavily on utilitarian information concerning product attributes (Azer and Alexander, 2018), and user-generated reviews are subsequently an important source of credible information (Azer and Alexander, 2018). Notably, 86% of consumers have been found to read online reviews before making a purchase (Chen, 2019 – see Further reading). Given their large user bases, platforms like Twitter are lucrative for brands. As of 2020, the number of monetisable daily active Twitter users worldwide surpassed 166 million (Statista, 2020 – see Further reading). Despite this development, negative engagement has received little scholarly attention in the field of public relations (PR) when compared to, for example, marketing studies.

For brands and organisations, there is a direct route to customers and stakeholders, yet no control for any outcome. PR professionals are well suited to manage these relationships and understand online engagement because they have been trained to nurture relationships. Social media enables customers and stakeholders to engage in mutual, co-creative communications (Kaplan and

Haenlein, 2010) whilst supporting rich networking opportunities between brands and consumers (Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Islam and Rahman, 2016) which enhance brand relationships. From a branding perspective, social networking provides brands with the opportunity to leverage this constellation of connections and drive engagement (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2017).

The new power that stakeholders hold today is transferred from previously organisation-led discussions to individuals and their shared experiences. As such, this is an area of PR research to which engagement fits and contributes. Ideally, customers and stakeholders co-create value when they generate content and participate in discussions, share knowledge with other consumers and contribute to other online user activities (Chu and Kim, 2011; Heinonen, 2011). In the worst cases, customers and stakeholders co-destruct value online through their engagement (Naumann *et al.*, 2017). Fournier and Alvarez (2013) noted that negative brand relationships are more common than positive brand relationships, with an average split of 55%/45%, respectively (Fournier and Alvarez, 2013). Negative forms of engagement may be especially contagious within social media, given the highly networked nature of the medium. Negative information has been found to weigh more heavily on consumers' consumption judgements than positive information; as such, it has a greater impact on attitude formation (Doyle and Lee, 2016; Sherrell *et al.*, 1985). This may have substantial long-term implications for brand reputation, equity and revenues (Anderson and Lawrence, 2014).

This chapter discusses stakeholder expectations and introduces the concepts of engagement and negative engagement—major topics fostering progressive PR. We also introduce a distinctive form of negative engagement behaviour known as brandjacking and discuss why brands' and organisations' communication is hijacked by angry stakeholders and customers. Through illustrative examples from the telecommunications sector, we analyse various negative engagement behaviours in social media. To conclude, we analyse the potential damage done to the intangible assets of the brand or organisation.

## **From Stakeholder Expectations to Negative Engagement and Brandjacking**

Communication today is increasingly based on diverse issue arenas (see Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). Related discussions on brands and organisations are controlled by customers' and other audiences' interests and experiences (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). This issue-centric thinking is challenging for brands and organisations that find it difficult to convey their messages. Moreover, individual expectations and experiences are central to shaping organisational or brand reputation as well as engagement for better or worse (Masum and Tovey, 2012; Bougie *et al.*, 2003).

PR is expected to monitor the different issue arenas to identify potential issues and discussions (Olkkonen and Luoma-aho, 2020). In fact, '*neglected, mismatched, and misinterpreted expectations are typical reasons for emerging issues that demand organisations' attention*' (Olkkonen and Luoma-aho, 2020, p. 282) because when undiscovered and unattended, they might lead to reputational losses. From the brand's or organisation's perspective, expectations and experiences are difficult to shape, as they may be formed by a combination of several factors beyond the brand's influence (e.g. customers' emotions, context, sales situation and word of mouth). These combined factors also shape engagement between customers and brands/organisations. On some level, negative engagement results from poor expectation management, as customers react negatively to their perceived or experienced injustices caused by brands and organisations.

### *Destructive expectations as antecedents to engagement*

Expectations can be defined as multidimensional, two-fold assessments of something that is desired and considered good or desirable. Olkkonen and Luoma-aho (2015) placed expectations on a grid, ranging from positive to negative expectations, and included the level of confidence placed in the organisation on the likelihood of something occurring. However, the real value of expectations is their power to shape experiences and, through engagement, to build or destroy organisational

intangible assets. PR builds and nurtures intangible organisational and brand assets (Olkkonen and Luoma-aho, 2020). In fact, reputation could be defined as the ability to meet stakeholder expectations (Coombs, 2007).

Olkkonen and Luoma-aho (2020) noted the destructive power of negative expectations, where stakeholders focus mostly on ‘what is wrong’ or what the organisation ‘is not’ (p. 289). These kinds of expectations misalign relationship roles, outcomes and interactions, as stakeholders focus on the negative side of brands and organisations. Such misalignments can result from either not fulfilling positive expectations or failing to overcome negative expectations (Olkkonen and Luoma-aho, 2020). For brands and organisations, it is important to respond to stakeholders’ values and needs, as negative experiences destroy organisational relationships (Brummette and Zoch, 2016). Destructive expectations may also cause disconfirmations, information gaps and violations between values and reality (Oliver, 1980).

### *Negative engagement*

Engagement is a dynamic and reciprocal concept that represents an individual’s cognitive, affective and behavioural investment in an organisation’s offerings (Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Hollebeek and Chen, 2014; Vivek *et al.*, 2012). Engagement has been defined as ‘*a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object in focal service relationships*’ (Brodie *et al.*, 2011, p. 260). However, not all engagement is positive, and some may even destroy value beyond individuals’ campaigns and cases at the brand/brand relationship level.

Negative engagement is defined as ‘*unfavorable brand-related thoughts, feelings and behaviours during focal brand interactions*’ (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014, p. 63). Depending on the intensity of negative engagement, it can significantly damage brands through value co-destruction (Naumann *et al.*, 2017), declining financial performance (Juric *et al.*, 2016), reduced consumer value (Van Doorn

*et al.*, 2010) and negative word-of-mouth recommendations (Hollebeek and Chen 2014). Negative engagement may be especially contagious within social media, given the highly networked nature of the medium (Azer and Alexander, 2020). Additionally, it has been long recognised that informal customer-generated information is often perceived to be more reliable when compared to formal brand communications (Richins, 1984).

While negative engagement may have the same affective, cognitive and behavioural drivers and dimensions as positive engagement, these dimensions are shaped by context, and they operate distinctively (Naumann *et al.*, 2020; Juric *et al.*, 2016). In communication literature, negatively engaged stakeholders are often referred to as organisational ‘hateholders’—a term for individuals and groups who dislike or hate an organisation or brand (see, e.g., Luoma-aho, 2015). Contrary to organisational supportive faith-holders (Luoma-aho, 2015), hateholders can truly harm the reputation of an organisation or brand.

A key defining feature is that negative engagement orchestrated by hateholders captures premeditated, activated and dedicated expressions of negativity (Luoma-aho 2015; Juric *et al.*, 2016; Hollebeek and Chen 2014). Negative engagement can be segmented based on individuals’ levels of commitment to damaging the focal brand, which may range from ‘brand adversaries’ to ‘brand apathists’ (Hollebeek and Chen, 2014). Thus, the strength of negative engagement differs, and the level of intensity plays an important role (Higgins, 2006).

Negative engagement at an affective level comprises an individual’s negative emotional reactions towards the engagement focus, whereas the cognitive dimension of negative engagement combines an individual’s experiences, interests and attention towards a focal engagement object. The behavioural level of negative engagement is commonly expressed as active, deliberate and

purposeful actions taken towards the engagement object (Naumann *et al.*, 2020). Negative engagement behaviour has been categorised as manifesting through negative review writing, public complaining or negative electronic word of mouth.

### *Brandjacking*

If a customer's experience with a brand or organisation is less than ideal, the brand runs the risk of negative engagement behaviours, such as communication hijacking, by that customer. This is often referred to as 'brandjacking'—an extreme form of brand-related engagement activity, where someone commandeers and dominates communication around someone else's brand or reputation. Brandjacking tactics involve ridicule, impersonation, misinformation, fabrication and memes (Langley, 2016). Brandjacking occurs in easily accessible arenas, such as social media platforms (e.g. Twitter or Instagram).

For example, Twitter hijacking refers to online users taking over an identifier of brand-related content. This particular negative engagement behaviour is also a form of brandjacking (Langley, 2016), and it is understood as the undesired kidnapping of brand-related communications, either offline or online, by non-brand representatives, such as activists or other stakeholders. A common type of brandjacking on Twitter is hashtag hijacking (or bashtagging). It has been defined as using a hashtag in unintended, negative, critical or slanderous ways that run counter to its original purpose or creator (Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2018), and it expands the array of different negative engagement behaviours. Like other forms of negative engagement behaviour, brandjacking often harms the targeted brand or organisation by turning the public focus onto unintended issues and harming the target's reputation (Masum and Tovey, 2012). This is also in line with other negative engagement behaviours in general, even though negative engagement can also lead to a positive or improved state of affairs for the targeted brand or organisation (Lievonen *et al.*, 2018).



### **Industry Example: Negative Engagement in the Telecommunications Sector**

A Twitter data sample was collected from two weeks during spring 2018. Twitter was chosen for its fairly easy access and the possibility of collecting data globally. In total, 2,711 tweets were collected from 2 different telecommunications companies from two cross-cultural contexts—Australia and Finland. Both countries have strong telecommunications infrastructures, yet they represent vastly different markets for language, population, coverage and competition. Additionally, the telecommunications sector is highly competitive and known for active customer service and a poor reputation (an average score of 6.0/10; Brand Finance, 2020 – see Further reading) among customers. The TweetArchivist tool was utilised to collect data fields, including tweet content. Usernames or other user-specific data were not collected and/or analysed. The Australian telecommunication sample data comprised 2,136 customer and stakeholder tweets in English, and the Finnish telecommunications sample data comprised 575 customer and stakeholder tweets in Finnish.

#### *Analysis*

The data were analysed qualitatively. We first extracted tweets with negative engagement behaviour included. Possible re-tweets were not included in the analysis. We then more thoroughly examined how negative engagement behaviour manifested in different ways by analysing the message content of the negative tweets. NVivo was employed as a qualitative engagement tool to categorise the collected tweets based on different negative engagement behaviours. This was accomplished by examining the focus or target (brand or organisation) based on each tweet's context and the engagement behaviour apparent within each tweet's content. Finnish samples were also translated into English for easier comparison.

The numerical count analysis demonstrates that the amount of negative engagement behaviour

varied between the telecommunications brands across the two countries. In the Australian sample, 43.2% (n = 922) of all analysed tweets included some form of negative engagement behaviour, while in the Finnish sample, 22.4% (n = 129) had some form of negative engagement behaviour attached. We next introduce examples of destructive expectations and different negative engagement behaviours, including brandjacking, in the content.

### *Destructive expectations*

Destructive expectations resulted from a) unmet positive expectations and b) failure to improve negative expectations. For example, unmet positive expectations were apparent in the following tweet:

*'Wait a minute ... I was told that my package would cost only 24.90, but I just got an invoice that is double that amount'.*

Failure to improve negative expectations was apparent in the following tweet:

*'I have been thrown around different teams for a couple of weeks now. I tried to cancel my subscription. Can you please finally cancel it? I will not pay the cancellation because the service doesn't meet the standards'.*

Clearly, the focus of these tweets is on 'what is wrong' or what the organisation 'is not'. Moreover, poor expectation management often results in negative engagement behaviours, as individuals react negatively to their perceived or experienced injustices caused by brands and organisations. It also seems that different company teams dealt with this customer at different times, and during these interventions, the company did not improve the customer's expectations.

### *Negative Engagement behaviours*

Negative engagement in the analysed data consisted of a variety of behaviours. In negative reviews and public complaints, individuals often complained about bad service, and they sought justice:

*'I complained about the speed of the internet last Friday. They said they'd call me in 48 hours. Your service is as slow as your internet. I want a refund!'*

Individuals also wrote negative reviews while also informing others about possible problems:

*'FYI, your mobile service has not been working in our area for 2 days in a row now. Is there a major outage, or is it just me?'*

Retaliatory actions were apparent:

*'Your service is totally incompetent. People, avoid at all costs! I am off to another provider!'*

More emotionally intense and destructive behaviours were also shown by individuals:

*'Your customer service line is full of s\*\*\*!'*

### *Brandjacking*

Brandjacking was present (although irregularly) in the data. For example, some customers and stakeholders were using hashtags that attached the name of the brand with 'sucks'. Other kinds of hashtags also accompanied or followed the hashtags of brands and organisations, such as '#customerservicefail' and '#notafan'.

More intense and vulgar hashtags and tweets were also found. These often harm the targeted brand or organisation because they turn the public focus onto unintended issues, decreasing the target's reputation through unwanted associations.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Negative engagement behaviour varies in its intensity and orientation on social media. While currently more or less conceptual, our illustrative data analysis shows that within Twitter, negative engagement behaviour can take more intensive forms, including a highly activated and aggressive state, with the intention to 'get even' with a brand. Moreover, negative engagement behaviour can also use a less intense manifestation of dissatisfaction and disenchantment with a brand. It is possible that negative engagement behaviour is more informative and diagnostic for the brand or for other customers and stakeholders. For example, some individuals often attached hyperlinks and screenshots to their tweets. However, by giving detailed descriptions of the issue, customers make it easier for the company to solve the problem.

Additionally, some negative engagement behaviour aims at brand experience enhancement for both the brand and other engagement actors, whereas other behaviours aim at achieving personal goals against the brand. For example, complaining about a product or service is often a way to seek justice and mostly benefits the individual, whereas simultaneous provision of diagnostic or informative information could also help others. It is also possible to see reprisal against the brand for personal gain or to make a general call for collective negative sentiment towards the brand.

The data show that individuals and groups of online users can negatively advocate for or harm companies on Twitter. Negative engagement behaviour is also easily visible to the masses in other social media channels and online brand communities, causing reputational damage (Zhou *et al.*,

2020), even outside the original issue arena. This was apparent in the analysed data when customers and stakeholders attached external hyperlinks to the tweets, shared the content by retweeting or spread the content between different social media platforms and applications.

Even though service-recovery strategies were not within the main scope of this study, the authors recognised that customers/stakeholders who participated in negative engagement behaviour were more satisfied after service recovery and more willing to repurchase products or use the brand's services again by stating this publicly in Twitter discussions with the brand. Previous studies have supported this notion (e.g. Bijmolt *et al.*, 2014). However, what often makes it difficult for brands to reconcile is that the tweet content does not always point towards a specific criticism regarding the nature of the problem. This was also a common phenomenon within our illustrative dataset. Thus, reconciliation efforts are easier when the content within a tweet points towards a specific criticism concerning perceived misconduct by a brand or a deficiency of its products and/or services.

To conclude, negative reviews and customer complaints have often been understood as negative engagement forms that are only harmful for brands. However, revealing a negative issue publicly could be beneficial for the brand involved (Finkelstein and Fishbach 2012), and the underlying aim of negative engagement is often a positive, or at least an improved, state of affairs when an individual seeks justice, is looking for help or is helping others during the process. Thus, denial or avoidance should not be considered by PR professionals when addressing negative engagement in social media.

**Lessons for future research in the PR field are as follows:**

- Research should examine sectors other than telecommunication to explore negative engagement in other contexts.

- Empirical research should test competing typologies and frameworks for negative engagement.
- The use of alternate timeframes, multiple data collection periods and different social media channels could provide different results in terms of negative engagement research.

## Disclaimer

The research presented in this chapter was collected for the University of Jyväskylä doctoral dissertation ‘*Approaching the Concept of Negative Engagement in Corporate Communication*’ (2020). The copyright for this dissertation belongs to the corresponding author, Matias Lievonen, of this chapter. The research presented here has not been otherwise previously published.

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