

Article

# The mediating effect of reviewers' consensus on the association between webcare and customer behavioral intentions

Obinna Christian Ojiaku <sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka Nigeria, Department of Marketing, Awka, Nigeria

## Abstract

As firms continue to use their right of reply on social media, deciding on when and how to respond to both positive and negative reviews has been an open question. This study investigates the mediating effect of review consensus' on webcare and customer behavioral intentions. Drawing on signaling theory, cue consistency theory, and moral affect theory, the study specifically examined how a review consensus affects customers' evaluation of a firm after they read an appreciative or accommodative webcare. Young consumers totaling about 282 were recruited from a Southeastern University in Nigeria to participate in a 2(consensus: high vs. low) × 2(webcare: accommodative vs. appreciative) between-subjects factorial design experiment. The findings showed that a positive significant effect for appreciative webcare on customer patronage and recommendation intentions. Also, review consensus was found to have a contrasting effect on appreciative webcare and customer behavioural intentions. The theoretical and practical implications is discussed.

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patronage intentions;  
recommendation  
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## Introduction

The increasing popularity of online reviews in brand and firm evaluation has positioned it as significant driver of consumer behaviour in online context (Jeesha & Purani, 2021). About 64% of consumers consult before patronizing a brand (Jeseo & Tatara, 2025). This reviews are either complaints or compliments and appear on social media in the form of a blog, vlog, word-of-mouth communications, reviews, ratings, and recommendations (Sheng, 2019). However, the permanent and public nature of these reviews suggest its damaging or consolidating effect on brands reputation. Accordingly, firms are proactively monitoring social media and taking advantage of their 'right of reply' by addressing customers' complaints and appreciating customers for their compliments. Both the customers' voice option called online review and the firm's reply called *webcare* or management response is capable of affecting prospective customers' evaluation of the firm. Webcare is defined as "a business's effort to interact with and respond to customer comments on experiences with the business or its products and services" (Gu and Ye, 2014, p. 570). Webcare, depending on its delivery strategy, stimulates purchase intention and consumers attitude towards the firm (Jeseo & Tatara, 2025; Bambauer-sachse & Stuhldreier, 2025).

**Corresponding Author** Obinna Ojiaku  Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka Nigeria, Department of Marketing, Awka, Nigeria

Providing an appropriate webcare can change the trajectory of a firms' online reputation (Wang and Chaudhry, 2018), improve customer relationships (X. Li, Ma, & Bai, 2020), and is critical for customer acquisition and retention in the e-commerce environment. However, firms lose out of the chance of strengthening the customer-firm relationship and increasing patronage when they merely observe events unfold and prospective consumers form their perception about the brand without intervening in consumers online conversations (C. Li, Cui, & Peng, 2017; Voorhees, Fombelle, Allen, Sterling, & Aach, 2014). Firms are often unresponsive to online complaints because of the unknown effects on prospective customers (Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). Moreover, an inappropriate response to online complaints could trigger more negative subsequent ratings (Chevalier, Dover, and Mayzlin 2017; Ma, Sun, and Kekre 2015). Similarly, providing the wrong response to online compliments can adversely affect marketing outcomes (C. Li, Cui, & Peng, 2018), and consumer behaviour (Crijins et al., 2017; Rim and Song, 2014). Therefore, both scholars and practitioners have called for further research on appropriate webcare specific to customers' online complaints and compliments (Ma et al., 2015; Wang and Chaudhry, 2018) by considering various review characteristics before responding (Raju, 2019).

Early webcare research has mainly investigated response characteristics such as timing (Xie et al., 2016), length (C. Li et al., 2018; Sparks et al., 2016), clarity (i.e., vague vs. specific; Schamari and Schaefer, 2015), conversational style (van Noort et al., 2011); response types to complaints: accommodative, and defensive strategies (Dens et al., 2015; Lee and Song, 2010). Some have shown that certain characteristics of the review or reviewer and webcare also affect how consumers evaluate the firm. For instance, the type of complainants (Weitzl, 2019) and the subject of the review (product-related or ordinary review; Li et al., 2018) affect the effectiveness of webcare strategy. Also, past studies show that information consensus among reviewers appropriate how an accommodative or defensive webcare is evaluated (Dens et al., 2015; Lee and Cranage, 2014). Accordingly, Dens et al. (2015) call for more research on how and when to respond to complaints using text reviews in a non-restaurant or hospitality context.

Furthermore, despite that online compliments are more prevalent than complaints, studies examining webcare directed at online compliments are only recent and scant (Wang and Chaudhry, 2018; Schamari and Scheafers, 2015, Li et al., 2020). Besides, the literature has mostly reported adverse effects of responding to positive reviews (Wang & Chaudhry, 2018; Li et al., 2018). We argue that webcare strategies to online compliments matter and to the best of our knowledge, appreciative webcare (i.e., expression of gratitude) is yet to receive scholarly attention in the eWOM context. Appreciation is well established in relationship marketing and has been shown to increase pro-firm behaviour (Raggio et al., 2009, 2011; Voorhees et al., 2014). Therefore, drawing on signaling theory, cue consistency theory, and moral affect theory, the present study investigates the mediating effect of review consensus' on webcare and customer behavioral intentions. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how reviewers' consensus affects prospective customers' evaluation of a firm after they read a response thanking customers for their compliments or apologizing to customers' who complained.

## Theoretical Background and Development of Hypotheses

### *Appreciative Webcare and Behavioral Intentions*

Firms often have to make the strategic choice of responding to compliments. A key aspect of this strategy is to respond by thanking customers (Ma et al. 2015; X. Li et al., 2020). Although, You et al. (2020) show appreciation as a response strategy in the service recovery domain. We recognize the appreciative webcare as a response strategy towards customers' compliments. Appreciative webcare is the act of expressing sincere gratitude to customers who write an online compliment. Though, customers who leave positive feedback may not always expect a response, not responding denies the firm an opportunity to create special experiences for customers (Voorhees et al. 2014). Gu and Ye (2014) argue that customers who saw firms' response to a review and did not receive a response themselves evaluated the firm negatively. Accordingly, prospective customers who read customers' compliments are also likely to read the webcare from the firm and form their judgment based on both the review and webcare.

Perspectives from the moral affect theory suggest that expression of gratitude (i.e., appreciative webcare) from a firm functions as a moral reinforcer and promotes prosocial behavior from the target audience such as increased patronage and supporting a cause the firm is committed to (Mangus, Bock, Jones, Anne, & Folse, 2017; Raggio and Folse 2009, 2011; Voorhees et al., 2014). Previous studies report mixed findings on firms' responses to online compliments (Barcelos et al., 2018; Crijjins et al., 2017; Schamari and Schaefer, 2015; Wang and Chaudhry, 2018). Wang and Chaudhry (2018) find that positive webcare led to negative subsequent rating. Crijjins et al. (2017) find that positive webcare diminishes the gains from negative webcare. Similarly, Li et al. (2018) find that webcare to online compliment adversely affected revenue and rating. Barcelos et al. (2018) showed increased purchase intention after customers read positive webcare on Facebook; Schamari and Schaefer (2015) find that positive webcare positively affected customers' engagement intentions. Accordingly, we argue that appreciative webcare will increase pro-firm behaviour among prospective customers and hypothesize as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** Appreciative webcare is positively related to patronage and recommendation intentions

### *Accommodative Webcare and Behavioral Intentions*

The literature recognizes accommodative and defensive webcare as a response strategy for managing online complaints. However, following preliminary investigation and anecdotes of commonly used webcare strategies for online complaints in our context, we focus on the accommodative webcare strategy. Accommodative webcare consists of efforts to remedy a service failure by acknowledging and apologizing to customers who complain and attempting to remedy the situation (Lee & Song, 2010; Ghosh & Mandal, 2020). When customers complain, they are usually motivated to seek redress (C. Li et al., 2018; Weitzl, 2019) and management response increases their future satisfaction, but when they are ignored their tendency to become dissatisfied in the future increases (Gu and Ye, 2014) and prospective customers who read the conversation online may evaluate the firm negatively.

The public nature of online complaints makes them weighty and is usually more diagnostic than online compliments. Intuitively, accommodative webcare attributes guilt to the firm and

this amplifies the situation (C. Li et al. 2018). But by expressing regret, firms signal a promise to avoid similar failures in the future. Furthermore, it signals the care for the customer and their service quality and in turn increases pro-firm behaviour among prospective customers (C. Li et al. 2017). Accommodative webcare has been shown to improve firms' evaluation (Lee and Song, 2014), increase purchase intention (Piehler et al., 2018), PWOM intention, and sales performance (Li et al., 2018). Accordingly, along this line of reasoning, we propose a positive effect of accommodative webcare on patronage and recommendation intentions.

**Hypothesis 2:** Accommodative webcare is positively related to patronage and recommendation intentions

### *Review Consensus and Customer Behavioural Intentions*

Online review consensus refers to the majority opinion about a product, service, or service provider. It is the degree of perceived agreement among reviewers regarding the evaluation of a brand (Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013). Usually, consumers can write positive or negative reviews about brands. But these reviews are less helpful when they lack a consensus. The consensus of reviews signals a brand's consistency, performance quality, and reputation. Also, the social influence theory and cue consistency theory suggest that reviews from different customers are more diagnostic and influential when they provide converging rather than divergent evidence (Lee & Cranage, 2014; Yan & Tan, 2017). Previous studies show that review consensus relates positively with persuasiveness (Dellorcas, Zhang, and Awad 2007), trustworthiness perceptions (Benedicktus et al. 2010), and purchase intentions (Benedicktus et al. 2010; Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013). Accordingly, we argue that review consensus will relate positively with patronage and recommendation intentions and hypothesize as follows:

**Hypothesis 3:** Reviewer consensus is positively related to Patronage and recommendation intentions

### *The Mediating Role of Review Consensus*

Firms thank customers who post positive reviews and apologize and attempt to remedy service failure with customers who post negative reviews. These appreciative and accommodative webcare strategies would affect how customers evaluate a firm to the extent they can infer consensus in the reviews. The cue consistency theory posits that information from multiple sources is more relevant when they provide corroborating information than when they offer disparate conclusions (Miyazaki et al., 2005). Thus, when people agree about their views for a brand agree, it is considered as the truth and more useful than divergent opinion (Doh & Hwang, 2009). Though accommodative webcare may actually attribute guilt especially when there is consensus in negative reviews, prospective customers who read the conversation may infer care and service quality and show a willingness to evaluate the firm positively (Lee and Song, 2010). Prior research shows that an accommodative webcare can heighten consumers' perceived firm remorse and the emotional empathy they have towards the firm (K. Wang & Lin, 2020) and moderate how consumers process webcare in the negative WOM environment (Lee and Cranage, 2014). Thus, consensus information will mediate the effect of accommodative webcare on customer behavioural intentions.

**Hypothesis 4:** Review consensus mediates the relationship between accommodative webcare and patronage and recommendation intentions.

On the other hand, a customer who reads online compliments and an appreciative webcare thanking customers for their feedback will also evaluate the firm based on the consensus information. Consistent with the moral affect theory, management appreciative webcare is characterized as a firm's feeling of thankfulness and gratefulness toward his or her customer (Mangus et al., 2017). Gratitude elicits social and relational benefits and motivates pro-social behaviour among customers and observers (McCullough et al., 2001; Palmatier et al., 2009; Voorhees et al., 2014). When management expresses gratitude to their customers for their online compliments, prospective customers may perceive such gestures as a signal of their relationship commitment and a reward for their customers. And following the moral reinforcer role of gratitude, a prospective customer may want to engage with the firm and be rewarded as well (Magnus et al., 2017; Raggio et al., 2009). However, the cue consistency theory suggests that consensus in information provides corroborating evidence of message validity (Miyazaki et al., 2005) which may affect how customers evaluate an appreciative webcare. Therefore, consumer perception of an appreciative webcare will influence their behavioural intentions through review consensus. Review consensus might explain the lack of consensus reported in previous findings (Barcelos et al., 2018; Schamari & Schaefer, 2015; Wang and Chaudhry, 2018; C. Li et al., 2018). Therefore, we expect consensus information in a positive WOM environment to mediate the relationship between appreciative webcare and consumers' behavioural intentions.

**Hypothesis 5:** Review consensus mediates the relationship between appreciative webcare and patronage and recommendation intentions.

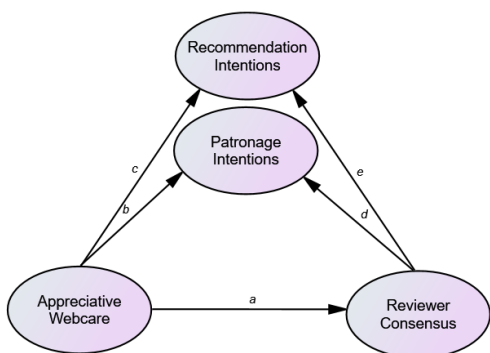


Figure 1a

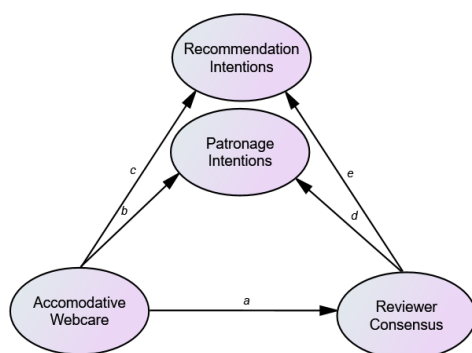


Fig. 1b.

## Method

### Subjects and Design

A total of 282 young consumers from a Southeastern University in Nigeria participated in a 2(consensus: high vs. low) × 2(webcare: accommodative vs. appreciative) between-subjects factorial design experiment. The average age of participants is 24.2 years old and 52% are male. Review consensus was manipulated in the positive and negative eWOM environment. Patronage and recommendation intentions were the dependent variables.

## Stimulus Development

An online retailer webpage with a radio button linked to its Facebook review page was simulated to manipulate the review consensus and the webcare strategies. A laptop was chosen for the context after a pretest ( $n = 80$ ) showed that most people (72%) would read reviews and consult others before buying one. To manipulate consensus, the high consensus condition contained 7 positive (or negative) and 1 negative (or positive) reviews when the reviews are positively (or negatively) balanced while the low consensus condition contained 4 positive (or negative), 3 negative (or positive) and 1 neutral review when the review set is positively (or negatively) balanced.

To manipulate webcare strategies, the webpage contained appreciative, accommodative, and no-response webcare conditions. Appreciative webcare contained responses from the retailer appreciating customers for their compliments. Because firms typically appreciate customers when they write reviews whether positive or negative, appreciation for positive responses was manipulated such that it suggests positive affect. On the other hand, the accommodative webcare contained responses from the firm apologizing to customers for service failure or dissatisfying experiences and an attempt to remedy the failure. Both the appreciative and accommodative webcare appeared immediately after the reviews they correspond to. The webpage, customer reviews, and webcare were based on real webpage entries to achieve high ecological validity.

## Pretest

A pretest was conducted ( $n = 24$ ) to ascertain the average number of reviews consumers may read to inform their judgment. Based on the pretest, the majority indicated they read at least 8 reviews (68%). Therefore, the consensus condition was designed using eight reviews and webcare following some iteration. A second pretest ( $n = 80$ ) was conducted based on a 2(consensus: high vs. low)  $\times$  2(webcare: appreciative vs. accommodative) between-subject factorial experiment to check the effectiveness of the manipulation. In the pretest, participants read reviews with varying levels of agreement (i.e., high vs. low) in either a positive or negative eWOM environment. Subsequently, to test for the level of consensus, participants responded to the following statements "All the reviewers share a similar opinion about the retailer", "There is a great deal of agreement among all the consumer reviews or comments", and "A majority of the comments are in one accord". Similarly, participants responded to 6 items for webcare strategies. The statement was "... was very thankful to the customers in most of all the reviews or comments", "... was very grateful to the customers in most of all the reviews or comments", "... was very appreciative in most of all the customer reviews or comments" measuring appreciative webcare. Also, accommodative webcare was measured with the following statements "...apologized to the complaint in most of all the customer comments or reviews", "... admitted responsibility to the complaints in most of all the comments or reviews", and "... attempted to remedy the customers' complaint in most of all the reviews or comments". All the items were anchored on 7 points Likert scale ranging from 7 "strongly agree" to 1 "Strongly disagree" and adapted from existing literature. Similarly, the main experiment used a 2(consensus: high vs. low)  $\times$  2(webcare: appreciative vs. accommodative) between-subject factorial experiment.

## Procedure

The experiment was performed in a University computer lab. Participants were assigned to a computer and prompted to read an online shopping scenario where they had to imagine shopping for a laptop they were to use for their academic studies. The online shopping website was fictitious and had features akin to a real online shopping website such as a picture of a Laptop, seller's information, price, and other standard elements such as search panel, shipping policy, payment security, a shopping cart, and help button. After reading the scenario, the participants were then randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. Thus, participants were exposed to an appreciative or accommodative webcare in high *versus* low consensus conditions. The responses were identical in all the conditions but varied in the low and high consensus conditions. Afterward, participants proceeded to the manipulation check, dependent variables, and demographic information questions. Finally, the participants were thanked and debriefed.

## Dependent Measures

The dependent variables were measured as patronage intention and recommendation intentions. Three items measured both the patronage intention and recommendation intentions. All items were measured using seven-point Likert scales and adapted from Purnawirawan (2014). Items for the patronage intentions include; "I am likely to recommend this retailer to others on social media", "I am likely to speak favorably about this retailer online for others to see", "I am likely to say positive things about this for others to see online". Items for the recommendation intention domains include; "I am certainly likely to buy the Laptop from this retailer", "The likelihood to buy the Laptop from this online store is very high", and "I will definitely choose this retailer".

## Validity of the Scales and CFA

Fit indices considered from the CFA were the normed chi-square ( $\chi^2/df$ ), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The normed chi-square ( $\chi^2/df$ ) below the cut-off value of 3.0 (Kline, 2005) or 5.0 (Bentler, 1990) is recommended. The CFI, TLI, IFI, and GFI values greater than .90 are acceptable fits, while values greater than .95 are most preferred. RMSEA values lower than .10 indicate an acceptable fit, while values lower than .05 indicate a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2010).

**Table 1.** Summary of reliability and validity fit indices for measures used in the study

Measures	$\chi^2$	Df	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	NFI	GFI	RMR	RMSEA (90%CI)	$\alpha$
Webcare	48.20	10	4.82	.94	.98	.93	.25	.13(.09-.17)	.87 (.99, .98)
Review Consensus	0.52	1	0.52	1.0	.99	.99	.10	.00(.00-.16)	.92
Behavioral Intentions	19.86	8	2.48	.99	.99	.97	.04	.08(.04-.13)	.96 (.94, .94)

Note.  $\alpha$ =Cronbach's alpha (>0.6 suggests adequate internal reliability, <0.6 suggests poor internal reliability; values in brackets represents co-efficient for dimensions) CFI: comparative fit index (>0.95 suggests good fit, >0.9 suggests adequate fit, <0.9 suggests poor fit); TLI: tucker Lewis Index(> 0.95 indicates good fit, >0.9

suggests adequate fit, <0.9 suggests poor fit); RMSEA: root mean residual (<0.05 suggests good fit, <0.08 suggests adequate fit, >0.08 suggests poor fit); GFI: Goodness of fit Index (> 0.95 indicates good fit, >0.9 suggests adequate fit, <0.9 suggests poor fit) RMSEA: root mean square error of approximation (< 0.05 is good fit, <0.08 is adequate fit, >0.08 is poor fit) CI: confidence interval.

## Results

### Manipulation Checks

The result shows that the manipulations were successful. Result from independent sample t-test showed that participants in the high consensus level provided higher rating ( $M = 6.09$ ,  $S.D = 0.94$ ) than participants in the low consensus level ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $S.D = 0.94$ ). In regards to webcare strategies, participants provided higher ratings for the appreciative response items than participants in the accommodative webcare condition in the appreciative webcare manipulation ( $M_{appreciative} = 6.49$ ,  $S.D = 0.82$  vs.  $M_{accommodative} = 2.51$ ;  $S.D = 0.69$ ;  $t(144) = -31.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ); and participants in the accommodative conditions provided higher ratings for the accommodative response items than participants in the appreciative webcare manipulation ( $M_{accommodative} = 6.33$ ,  $S.D = 0.71$  vs.  $M_{appreciative} = 2.48$ ,  $S.D = 1.17$ ). The independent sample t-test showed that the scores were significantly differently from each other.

### Hypotheses Testing

First, we report the preliminary result. The correlation between dependent variables patronage and recommendation intentions accommodative webcare ( $r = -.39$  and  $r = -.41$ ) are negative and significant. While appreciative webcare correlates positively with patronage ( $r = .21$ ) and recommendation ( $r = .24$ ) intentions. Review consensus was positively correlated with patronage intentions ( $r = .24$ ) and reviewer intentions ( $r = .25$ ) respectively. Reviewer consensus correlated negatively with accommodative webcare ( $r = -.14$ ) but positively correlated with appreciative webcare ( $r = .17$ ). Age positively correlated with recommendation intention ( $r = .18$ ) and reviewer consensus ( $r = .16$ ). Gender did not correlate significantly with any other variable in the study. The Means, standard deviations as well as the inter-correlations of the study variables are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 2.** Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations between variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Gender	Age	PI	RI	AcW	ApW	RC
Gender	1.48	.50	—						
Age	2.515	.48	.01	—					
Patronage Intentions (PI)	14.96	5.55	-.08	.13	—				
Recommendation intentions (RI)	16.08	4.98	-.10	.18*	.84**	—			
Accommodative Webcare (AcW)	8.94	8.20	.07	-.08	-.39**	-.41**	—		
Appreciative Webcare (ApW)	9.10	8.24	.08	-.01	.21**	.24**	.25**	—	
Reviewer Consensus (RC)	12.95	6.21	-.04	.16*	.24**	.25**	-.14*	.17*	—

\*= correlation is significant at .05 level; \*\*= correlation is significant at .01 level

To test the hypothesized relationship, the results showed that appreciative webcare had a positive and significant effect on patronage ( $\beta = .12, p < .05$ ) and recommendation intentions ( $\beta = .13, p < .01$ ), suggesting that as firms appreciate customers compliments, prospective customers willingness to buy and recommend the firm increases. Therefore, H1 was supported. Hypothesis 2 predicted positive and significant relationship between accommodative webcare and patronage and recommendation intentions. The result showed that a negative but significant effect for accommodative webcare patronage ( $\beta = -.25, p < .001$ ) and recommendation intentions ( $\beta = -.23, p < .001$ ). This suggest that patronage and recommendation intentions reduced as accommodative webcare increases. Therefore, H2 was partially supported. We found Support for H3 as reviewer consensus significantly influenced patronage ( $\beta = .18, p < .001$ ) and recommendation intentions ( $\beta = .17, p < .001$ ). Effect sizes ( $R^2$ ) of all variables were as follows: Patronage intentions = .44 { $F(3, 216) = 17.27, p = .00$ } and Recommendation intentions = .46 { $F(3, 216) = 19.07, p = .00$ }. Table 2 shows the total effects of webcare strategies and reviewer consensus on customer behavior intentions. Age was included as a covariate due to its significant positive correlations with recommendation intentions.

**Table 3.** Hayes PROCESS macro results of total effects of dimensions of webcare and reviewer consensus on dimensions of customer behavioral intentions (with age as a covariate)

Predictor Variables	Patronage Intentions					Recommendation Intentions				
	B	SE	t	p-value	95% CI	B	SE	t	p-value	95% CI
Age	.87	.71	1.22	.22	[-.53, 2.27]	.93	.63	1.47	.14	[-.31, 2.17]
Appreciative Webcare	.12	.04	2.71	.01	[.03, .21]	.13	.04	3.19	.00	[.05, .20]
Accommodative webcare	-.25	.04	-5.94	.00	[-.33, -.17]	-.23	.04	-6.18	.00	[-.30, -.16]
Reviewer Consensus	.18	.06	3.14	.00	[.07, .30]	.17	.05	3.24	.00	[.07, .27]

Bias corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals (CI) for the mediation effects are shown in Table 3. The mediation effects hold where the CI does not include zero. Reviewer consensus mediated the association of appreciative webcare with patronage intentions and recommendation intentions; but not for the association of accommodative webcare and patronage and recommendation intentions. This suggests that reviewer consensus serves as a mechanism through which appreciative webcare influences patronage intentions and recommendation intentions.

**Table 4.** Completely standardized bootstrap tests of mediating effects of reviewer consensus on association of dimensions of webcare with dimensions of customer behavioral intentions/consensus on dimensions of customer behavioral intentions (with age as a covariate)

Pathways of prediction	B	SE	95% CI
Appreciative Webcare →Reviewer consensus →Patronage intentions	.02	.01	<b>[.00, .05]</b>
Appreciative Webcare →Reviewer consensus →Recommendation intentions	.02	.01	<b>[.00, .05]</b>
Accommodative Webcare →Reviewer consensus →Patronage intentions	-.02	.01	[-.04, .00]
Accommodative Webcare →Reviewer consensus →Recommendation intentions	-.02	.01	[-.04, .00]

Note: Bold fonts indicate significant mediation paths

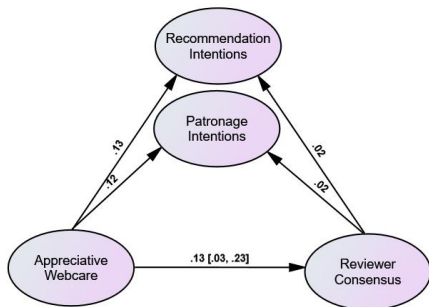


Fig 2a.

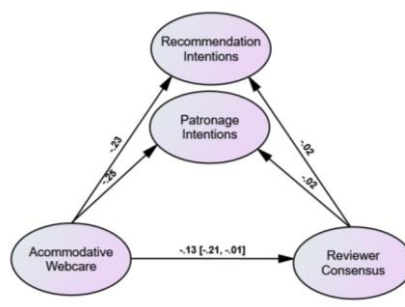


Fig. 2b.

## Discussion and Conclusion

With the increasing popularity of social media, consumers are now speaking out for or against brands as a way of hurting or helping the brand. On the other hand, firms engage with customers to show care and strengthen brand reputation and customer relationships. Firms thank customers who write online compliments and apologize and recompense customers with complaints. However, prospective customers who read the reviews and webcare evaluate the firm based on these conversations. In the present study, we investigate the mediating effect of review consensus on webcare and consumers' behavioural intentions. We found a positive significant effect for appreciative webcare on customer patronage and recommendation intentions. This finding corroborates Voorhees et al. (2014) who find that a firm's relationship investment in thanking customers for their feedback increases purchase intention by more than 50 percent but contradicts Li et al. (2018) and Wang and Chaudhry (2018) who find that responses to positive review negatively affect customers evaluation. Furthermore, we empirically showed that thanking customers can potentially impact on third-parties confirming Raggio and co. assertion. A firm's expression of gratitude for customers' online compliments triggers pro-firm behaviour among prospective customers and also acts as a social reward in line with the positive reinforcement theory for them to want to engage with the firm as well. It signals a firm's care, service quality, credibility, and benevolence.

Surprisingly, apologizing and attempting to recompense customers when they complain online does not have any positive effect on prospective customers' intention to buy or speak positively about the firm. This finding contradicts previous findings by Piehler et al. (2018) and Wang and Chaudhry (2018) who find a positive effect of accommodative webcare on customers' favourable evaluation. Responding to negative comments from customers requires committing a lot of time and manpower to respond and following-up on customers to resolve a complaint. However, providing an accommodative webcare may not suffice to salvage the harm caused to the firm's reputation, especially among prospective customers. A plausible explanation for this finding is that online complaint handling rarely includes a testimonial from the customers for a successfully resolved issue. Therefore, prospective customers who read the complaint and the accommodative webcare may not be privy to also see when the complaint was successfully resolved.

Finally, the study further confirms that review consensus relates positively with prospective customers' intention to patronize or recommend a firm, supporting previous research (Benedicktus et al., 2010; Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013). More importantly, our study demonstrates the mediating role of reviewers' consensus on how prospective customers evaluate webcare efforts from a firm. The finding confirms the mediating effect of review consensus on appreciative webcare and patronage and recommendation intentions, supporting past research (Barcelos et al., 2018). Our result showed that the Beta value for appreciative webcare reduce from 0.13 to 0.02 and accommodative webcare reduce from -0.23 to -0.02 when the mediating effect of consensus was factored in. This suggests that consistent with cue consistency theory, review consensus has a contrasting effect on firms' expression of gratitude and customer pro-firm behaviour. This suggests that consensus of opinion validates a message and it is considered the truth. Our finding explains the negative effect of management response on consumer behaviour found in previous studies (Crijins et al., 2017; C. Li et al., 2018; Wang and Chaudhry, 2018). In contrast, the mediating role of consensus on accommodative webcare on patronage and recommendation was both negative and non-significant.

In conclusion, as firms continue to use their right of reply on social media, deciding on when and how to respond to both positive and negative reviews has been an open question. Previous research has mainly focused on negative reviews and webcare. The attention on positive review webcare is limited. Based on a field experiment, our study highlighted the importance of thanking customers for their online compliments. We show that a 'thank you' message to customers who write positive reviews has a positive effect on prospective customers' intention to buy or say positive things about the firm. In contrast, prospective customers did not evaluate accommodative webcare positively. The effectiveness of the appreciative or accommodative webcare is further explained by review consensus. Therefore, it is important firms pay attention to online conservation and leverage it to mold public opinion and generate positive consumer evaluation.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The present study makes some notable contributions to the literature: First, many scholars have examined the effect of webcare for negative reviews (Dens et al., 2015; Ma et al., 2015; Weitzl, 2019) and review consensus (Benedicktus et al., 2010; Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013; Khare et al., 2011), the context has been mainly in the hospitality sector from western context. We

highlight the effect of accommodative webcare on patronage and recommendation intentions from the sub-Saharan African perspective and in the online retail sector and show that apologizing and recompensing online complainants may not suffice to stimulate favourable consumer behaviour. By so doing, we extend the literature by offering fresh insight into how consumers from the non-western domain evaluate online customer-firm conversation. Furthermore, our study extends prior research on the role of reviewer consensus and show that review consensus also affects how consumers evaluate online compliment. The focus of the previous study has been on its effect in the negative eWOM environment (Dens et al., 2015; Lee and Cranage, 2014), we make a subtle contribution in this regard and also demonstrate that reviewer consensus can also act as a mediating variable between webcare and customer evaluation.

Second, an important contribution of this research is that it suggests how firms should respond to online compliments. The finding from the study shows that by expressing gratitude to customers for their online compliments, firms can effectively manage positive eWOM. And this is capable of stimulating pro-firm behaviour among observing customers. Recent research has also shown appreciative response as an effective strategy for addressing service failure with low severity (You et al., 2020). Existing literature is mostly rife with responses to negative reviews, our findings enrich and extend the literature to include responses targeted at online compliments as well as online complaints.

Finally, in this study, we attempted to synthesize the signaling, moral affect, and cue consistency theories to explain how consumers process both positive and negative eWOM and their corresponding webcare strategies. We proposed and found that both reviews characteristics and webcare are important signals consumers rely on to process the online conversation. Though, this perspective has been investigated in the negative eWOM environment (C. Li et al., 2017; Dens et al., 2015; Lee and Cranage, 2014), we extend the literature and account for its effect in the positive eWOM environment. In addition, we applied the cue consistency theory to explain how the agreement among reviewers affects prospective customers' evaluation of a firms' webcare strategies and we show that it mediates the relationship between webcare and consumer behaviour. With regard to the moral affect theory, we show that firms' expression of gratitude plays a moral reinforcer role that stimulates pro-firm behaviour among prospective customers. Previous research in this domain has mainly focused on the recipient of the thank you message (Magnus et al., 2017; Raggio et al., 2009), we believe we are the first to empirically demonstrate its effect on prospective customers and in the e-commerce environment.

### **Practical Implications**

While the literature mostly showed that addressing customers' online complaints can mitigate the situation and lead to favourable brand evaluation among customers, our study reports a contrary opinion. Though we find a non-significant effect for accommodative webcare, we suspect the context of our study might make the difference. Therefore, when responding to customers' comments on social media, marketers should address negative reviews with caution. It is as if service failure is a norm, and customers are indifferent about the accommodative webcare directed to address the online complaint. This has implications for the resources firms are willing to commit to engaging with customers online. However, considering the damaging effect negative reviews might have, it is worthwhile for firms to

commit to addressing it and extracting satisfactory feedback as a thread in the conversation for prospective customers to evaluate.

Because online compliments are more prevalent than complaints, firms do not always know how to respond. They are often preoccupied with addressing complaints. Our result suggests that a sincere thank you to customers who leave a compliment can lead to positive outcomes for relationship creation and development even with prospective customers. Therefore, it is worthwhile to appreciate customers who compliment the firm. This is especially true when there are corroborating evidence of the firm's performance. Firms can also benefit from customer compliments by expressing gratitude and proactively leveraging on the positive comments in their marketing communication and efforts. Furthermore, appreciative webcare can foster a positive company image and strengthen customer-firm identification (Raggio et al., 2009).

The results also show that prospective consumers will evaluate online reviews and webcare based on the level of agreement among reviewers. The review consensus should affect when and how firms respond to positive or negative reviews. Review consensus is enough evidence capable of attenuating webcare efforts by firms. This has implications on how to induce and display online conversation in social media. Firms may display an array of positive reviews and their corresponding webcare effort on the first page of the review page and possibly shuffle the display of negative reviews with positive reviews.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

As with most empirical research of this nature, this study has its limitations with an avenue for further studies. Although we recognized and examined appreciative webcare, we did not account for other message contents typically used to address positive feedback. Firms seldom include promotional content (X. Li et al., 2020) or a promise and commitment of quality service in their thank you messages. For example responses such as this: *"Thank you for taking time to review our services. We're super glad to know that you're satisfied with our services. At XYZ our goal is to ensure that our customers derive premium satisfaction from shopping with us. Hence, we are working hard to actualize this. Thanks!"* contains a promise. It would be insightful for future studies to address these webcare strategies for online compliments. Likewise, it would be interesting to understand how such expressions of gratitude help stimulate relationship creation and development with current and prospective customers.

Also, while the characteristics of webcare such as length, response timing, and message source (i.e. manager vs. employee) have been examined in the context of negative eWOM (Xie et al., 2017; Sparks et al., 2016), it would be exciting to know how consumers react to these characteristics in the positive eWOM and webcare environment. The previous study in the positive feedback context shows that delayed response is more effective than immediate response because immediate response suggests automated reply (Voorhees et al., 2014). Therefore, it would be refreshing to see how these characteristics play out in the online conversation environment. Furthermore, we show the mediating effect of review consensus on webcare and consumer behaviour. However, trust has mostly be reported as a mediating variable in extant studies. We feel this is a potential limitation of our study and an important avenue for future studies.

## Declarations

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## Orcid ID

Obinna Christian Ojiaku  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9727-112X>

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