The impact of willingness to engage in negative electronic word-of-mouth on brand attitude: a study of airline passengers in South Africa

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Keywords
Negative eWOM, Brand Attitude, Purchase Intent, Travel, Airline, South Africa

Abstract
Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has provided consumers with the opportunity to offer their experiences and opinions to other consumers on a global scale. Both traditional word of mouth (WOM) and eWOM have been found to play a major role in determining consumers' behaviour and attitudes towards a brand. Negative eWOM has been found to have a greater impact on consumers than positive eWOM. This study investigated whether the willingness of a frequent flyer to engage in negative eWOM has a significant negative impact on brand attitude. Brand attitude was measured by three components, namely brand trust, brand affect and consumer purchase intent. The study further examined whether willingness to engage in negative eWOM differed between customers of full-service and low-cost carriers. The primary finding of this study revealed that willingness to engage in negative eWOM after a service failure did indeed have a negative impact on frequent flyers' attitude towards the brand. However, no difference was found between the two types of customers. It is believed that this study can assist airline companies in understanding the effect of eWOM after a service failure and, in a scholarly context, goes some way to addressing the dearth of research in this area of enquiry.

1. Introduction
Traditional word of mouth as a medium of communication has, over the past decade, been augmented with electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communication. This is due to the rapid growth of the Internet and more specifically social media platforms that provide an information-intensive environment. Consumers are able to publicly express their opinions, experiences and complaints after a service failure. These complaints are more commonly known as negative eWOM and have the power to reach a widespread audience. User-generated sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Hellopeter.com are popular social media platforms whereby consumers are able to share their views and complaints (Gregoire, Tripp & Legoux, 2009).

Research has shown that willingness to engage in negative eWOM is highly influential in determining brand attitude (Wu & Wang, 2011). After a service failure, the consumer's level of brand attitude, which is measured by their level of brand trust, brand affect and consumer purchase intent (Wu & Wang, 2011), is negatively impacted. Negative eWOM engaged in by unsatisfied consumers could affect the attitudes of online-users, thus becoming a threat to a company's brand (Shang, Chen & Liao, 2006).

This study sought to examine willingness to engage in negative eWOM, as inspired by the study of Hennig-Thurau *et al* (2004). At present, there appears to be little research on the impact of willingness to engage in negative eWOM, especially the effects that social media

platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Hellopeter.com have on brand attitude within the airline industry.

Through considering an emerging market context, this study looks specifically at domestic passengers using both full-service and low-cost carriers for business and leisure purposes. A study conducted by Simpson and Siguaw (2008) found that willingness to engage in negative eWOM could differ among different types of individuals, as well as the service setting. To this end, this study sought to provide further clarificationas to whether differences in type of traveller and type of airline carrier impact willingness to engage in negative eWOM.

The following research question was thus constructed to provide focus for the study:
Does willingness to engage in negative eWOM have a significant negative impact on brand attitude, both at a macro level and in terms of brand trust, brand affect and consumer purchase intent, amongst domestic frequent flyers in South Africa? Furthermore, does this differ between full-service and low-cost carriers?

More specifically, the following research objectives were formulated to guide the study and provide specificity.
Objective 1: To determine whether willingness to engage in negative eWOM has a significant negative impact on overall brand attitude amongst domestic frequent flyers.
Objective 2a: To determine whether willingness to engage in negative eWOM has a significant negative impact on brand trust attitude amongst domestic frequent flyers.
Objective 2b: To determine whether willingness to engage in negative eWOM has a significant negative impact on brand affect amongst domestic frequent flyers.
Objective 2c: To determine whether willingness to engage in negative eWOM has a significant negative impact on consumer purchase intent among domestic frequent flyers.
Objective 3: To determine whether passengers on low-cost carriers and passenger on full-service carriers differ in terms of willingness to engage in negative eWOM after a service failure.
Objective 4: To determine whether passengers on low-cost carriers and passenger on full-service carriers differ in their level of brand trust, brand affect and consumer purchase intent.

This article continues by means of a literature review to provide a conceptual framework, and thereafter discusses the methodology, findings, conclusions and managerial implications of the research. The article concludes with pertinent limitations applicable to this particular study.

2. Literature Review

The literature review is structured through a consideration of negative eWOM, brand attitude (consisting of the sub-components of brand trust, brand affect and consumer purchase intent), as well as the specific nuances brought to bear by the classification of airline carrier and thus nature of travel.

2.1 Negative eWOM

WOM communication is widely accepted in traditional marketing research (Lee, Park & Han, 2007) as an important marketing channel (Silvermann, 2001). Silvermann (2001) defines WOM as the communication between people about products or services. Similarly, Jalivand *et al* (2010) defines WOM as a communication process that allows customers to share information, experiences and their personal views that, in turn, affects their purchase intent. Past research on shopping and purchase behaviour has shown that consumers are more influenced by those with whom they interact (Kiecker & Cowles, 2001). Thus WOM can be seen as more credible than the most sincere salesperson and is able to influence more people at a greater rate, and is also more influential than conventional marketing (Silvermann, 2001).

WOM communication can be spread through a variety of channels including in person, over the phone, through the mail and, WOM via the Internet, which has increased in frequency

(Kiecker & Cowles, 2001). The rise of Web 2.0 has brought about a WOM revolution, as consumers are increasingly using online communication as a means of interpersonal communication. This study will be focusing on WOM communication through electronic channels (eWOM). The next section discusses the definition of eWOM and in particular the impact of negative eWOM.

The increasing usage of the Internet has empowered both companies and consumers, providing a means of sharing information and opinions both from business to consumer and vice versa (Jalivand, Esfaheni & Samiei, 2010). This sharing of consumer attitudes and behaviours on the Internet is also known as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Silvermann, 2001). eWOM communication is any positive or negative comments that are expressed about a brand and its' product or service, via the Internet (Hennig & Thurau, 2004). From the above-mentioned literature, this study will only be focusing on the negative statements of eWOM communication. Negative eWOM is formally defined as negative feedback communicated between people about goods or services and a brand, by being posted and viewed on online forums (Wetzer, 2007).

Negative eWOM can also be characterised as a method of revenge behaviour. Research has shown that dissatisfied consumers tend to hold a grudge against the firm in question, which results in them seeking revenge or having a desire to avoid any interactions with the firm (McCullough *et al*, 2001). The desire for revenge can be characterized as a customer's wish to punish the firm (through online complaining) that has caused them harm or inconvenience (Bechwati & Morrin, 2003). A desire for avoidance is a customers' wish to no longer have any involvement with the firm. This could lead them to seek the services or products of competitor firms (McCullough *et al*, 2001).

Research has suggested that negative WOM is more influential and leads to greater attention, and is communicated to more people, than positive WOM (Lau & Ng, 2001). The motives for positive eWOM are different from that of negative eWOM. Individuals engage in positive eWOM for product involvement and self-enhancing reasons whereas an individual practices negative eWOM for anxiety-reducing, revengeful and advice-seeking reasons (Amblee & Biu, 2008). Hennig-Thurau *et al* (2004) further investigated these motives and found possible reasons why individuals engage in eWOM. The study concluded that the main reasons for eWOM behaviour are: their desire for social interaction, economic incentives, concern for other consumers and the likelihood to increase their self-worth. For example, a negatively reviewed post will have the effect of discouraging potential customers, who view complaint websites and user-generated websites, from the brand or company, thus decreasing their potential and future sales. This study focuses on two of these reasons, specifically concern for others and the desire to hurt the company.

eWOM communication can be used in various ways for example, blogs, discussion forums, news groups, emails, web pages, virtual communities and review sites, with each communication channel having different levels of interactivity (Silvermann, 2001). This study will only be focusing on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and HelloPeter.com. These online platforms have become popular communication channels and have attracted many Internet users worldwide. Social media plays a significant role in eWOM communication, as it has created an information-intensive environment where consumers can easily share their experiences and opinions about product or services (Chuan, 2009).

When consumers search the Internet for product or service information, they usually find information about the price while other product properties are uncertain (Wang, 2010). This explains initial feelings of uncertainty, held by consumers to purchase the product. This

uncertainty and risk for consumers is usually lowered through eWOM. This leads to consumers actively searching for information on the Internet to fulfill their own personal needs. The effect of a negative comment will have a strong negative impact on consumer's attitude towards a brand.

Negative eWOM shared by one discontented customer on the Internet has the capacity to reach thousands of potential consumers. Research has shown that consumer complaint behaviour or a consumer's willingness to engage in negative eWOM can affect a company's reputation (Holloway & Beatty, 2003). When a potential consumer seeking information views the negative review, it leads to distrust towards the brand and a negative attitude towards the brand being formed (Wang, 2010). This negative attitude adopted by the consumer is their overall evaluation of the brand, which can be defined as their brand attitude.

2.2. Brand Attitude

Brand attitude is defined as how a consumer evaluates a brand whether good or bad (Low & Lamb, 2000). Wilkie (1986) believes that consumers judge whether the brand is beneficial and then form a brand attitude based on that judgment. A positive brand attitude results in the increase of a consumers' purchase intent (Kotler & Keller, 2008). This would be of interest to industry as an organization that builds and maintains positive brand attitudes has an increased probability of retaining consumer purchase intent, which translates to better performance (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002).

Many researchers believe that there are three components for attitude: cognition, affection, and conation (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2006). A study conducted by Rhodes and Courneya (2003) defined attitude in terms of affective (whether it is enjoyable or not) and instrumental (whether it is beneficial or harmful) evaluations toward a brand. For the purpose of this study, brand trust, brand affect, and purchase intention were used to represent the cognition, affection, and conation components of brand attitude, respectively.

To date research has addressed only cognitive and affective components of brand attitude, while few studies have treated brand attitude as one dimension. A one-dimensional scale provides an overall "feelings" measure towards the brand and therefore no clear distinction between the different components of brand attitude can be identified (Erevelles, 1992). A one-dimensional model provides a limited view of attitudes, as minimal insight into how consumers evaluate brands using different criteria is provided (Erevelles, 1992). Literature states that trust, affection, and intentions are components in most accepted hierarchical conceptualisations of the communication process (Engel *et al*, 2006; McGuire, 1976), and therefore this study adopted the theory of the three components of attitude. This study interpreted cognition as brand trust, affection as brand affect, and conation as consumer purchase intent as adapted from the study by Wu and Wang (2011).

Brand attitude is an important construct as consumer's intentions and behaviour are aligned with their attitude towards the brand. Consumer attitudes toward brands can explain how consumers become attached to brands in their memory, which affects their purchase behaviour (Low & Lamb, 2000). Messages from consumers within an online community signal whether that consumer has a positive or negative attitude towards the brand. A consumer's view of these messages in a community can affect their attitude. Negative messages from unsatisfied consumers could affect the attitudes of the other members, thus becoming a threat to companies (Shang, Chen & Liao, 2006). Favourable brand attitudes are formed on the foundation of a single, favourable WOM communication, despite the presence of extensive information on the brand (Mangold, Miller & Brockway, 1999). This study aims at examining whether the reverse is true, leading to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: After a poor service encounter, willingness to engage in negative eWOM is associated with reduced levels of overall brand attitude amongst domestic frequent flyers in South Africa.

According to Wu and Wang (2011), brand attitude can be defined in terms of brand trust, brand affect and consumer purchase intent. These three sub-components are profiled below.

2.2.1 Brand Trust

Researchers have developed several models of brands and their effect on consumer behaviour. Earlier models have focused on how consumers perceive and evaluate brands by investigating brand awareness, image and personality. More recently, researchers have argued that it is important to focus on how consumers build brand relationships. These brand relationships are built on relationship-based ideas such as trust and bonds with the brand. This study will focus on the recent model of relationship-based ideas and, more specifically, the construct of trust (Schmitt & Geus, 2006).

Research has isolated the construct of trust. Lewicki and Bunker (1995) interpret the concept of trust in three different approaches. The first approach is from the view of a personality psychologist, which isolates trust as an individual characteristic. The second approach is from the view of a social psychologist, which generalizes trust as an expectation that is specific to a transaction. Lastly, the third approach is from the view of an economist or sociologist, which measures how organisations reduce uncertainty, and in turn increase trust. Lee and Lau (1999) define trust as the willingness to be dependent on another party in the face of risk. This willingness stems from a past experience and understanding with the other party, and relying on the expectation that the other party will deliver a positive outcome. Jahangir *et al* (2009), like Lau and Lee (1999), also define trust as the willingness to act and the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the brand to meet consumer's expectations. From the above-mentioned literature, it is clear that expectations, willingness and risk are critical components of trust.

Expanding from the above-mentioned literature, brand trust can be defined as follows. Brand trust is a feeling of security held by customers in their interaction with a brand that is based on the knowledge that the brand is reliable and responsible for the interests of consumers (Delgado-Ballester *et al*, 2003). Wu and Wang (2011) identify brand trust as the cognitive component of brand attitude as it is the knowledge of the product formed after direct experience. These definitions of brand trust correspond to the above-mentioned definition of trust in that firstly, brand trust involves a component of risk and secondly it is defined by feelings of security held by the customer that the brand will deliver on customer expectations.

Brand trust is reported to be an antecedent of brand credibility, brand attitude, brand extension acceptance, be fundamental to the development of loyalty, and be essential in building customer relationships on the internet and one of the most influential relationship marketing tool available to a company (Jahangir, Parvez, Bhattacharajee & Ahamed, 2009). This study will only be investigating brand trust as a component of brand attitude. Wu and Wang (2011) linked brand trust to the cognitive component of brand attitude. Brand trust is related to the cognitive component, as it is the confidence that consumers have when in their choice of brands and the certainty that the brand is reliable, and will meet their performance expectations (Wu & Wang, 2011).

If a consumer has a feeling of low expectation from viewing negative online reviews, then their overall feeling of trust towards the brand will be low. Since negative eWOM is more influential than positive eWOM (Lau & Ng, 2001), negative eWOM will gain more attention and will have a stronger impact. A consumer will begin to form a negative attitude towards the brand and, consequently, exhibit lower brand trust (Wang, 2010).

Based on the literature reviewed, the following hypothesis is posited:

Hypothesis 2a: After a poor service encounter, willingness to engage in negative eWOM is associated with reduced levels of brand trust amongst domestic frequent flyers in South Africa.

2.2.2 Brand Affect

Brand affect is defined as the likelihood of a brand to create a positive or negative emotional reaction for the consumer as a result of its use or interaction (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002). It can be interpreted as the affection component of brand attitude, which represents the overall evaluation of the consumer towards the brand (Wu & Wang, 2011).

Positive emotions have been found to improve brand affect and decrease the extent to which WOM influences brand attitude. The affect towards a brand is positive for which the potential pleasure derived is higher (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002). This suggests that unsatisfactory services can increase a consumer's willingness to engage in negative eWOM behaviour, which will result in more negative affect towards a brand.

Research has shown that brand affect is a strong influence of brand loyalty but is a more spontaneous and less deliberately reasoned construct (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Brands that make the customer "happy", "joyful" or "affectionate" cause a stronger attitudinal and emotional commitment. Howard and Gengler (2011) found that one person's affect can influence another person's evaluations and this has significance in understanding consumption related outcomes in interpersonal interactions. Dick and Basu (1994) proposed that purchase intent increases when consumers have a more positive brand affect due to the emotional connection with the brand (Anuwichanont & Rajabhat, 2011).

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) found that brand affect influences the level of word of mouth towards the brand, which is further supported by the research conducted by Scarpi (2010). This study aims to determine whether the willingness to engage in negative eWOM has an impact on brand affect, leading to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2b:After a poor service encounter, willingness to engage in negative eWOM is associated with reduced levels of brand affect amongst domestic frequent flyers in South Africa.

2.2.3 Consumer Purchase Intent

In the study conducted by Wu and Wang (2011), consumer purchase intent is defined as the conation component of the brand attitude construct. The conation component can be defined as the possibility of a consumer to behave with regard to a product (Assael, 2004). Several studies used varying definitions of consumer purchase intent. Blackwell, Miniard and Engel (2001), propose that purchase intention represents whether the consumer is likely to purchase in the future. Shao, Baker and Wagner (2004) identified that purchase intent refers to the attempt to buy a product or interact with a brand. Wu and Wang (2011) define consumer purchase intent as the decision that a consumer makes to purchase a certain product. This definition is supported by a study conducted by Dodds *et al* (1991), which examines the effect of price, brand, and store information on buyers' product evaluation.

Purchase intention is an important consideration for marketers as it is less expensive to retain an existing customer than to gain a new one (Schneider, White & Paul, 1998). This is substantiated by the theory of intent to repurchase as stated by Olaru, Purchase and Peterson (2008). Their study states that the intent to repurchase depends on the value obtained in the consumer's previous transactions (Wathne et al, 2001; Kaynak, 2003; Bolton *et al*, 2000). For the purpose of this study, the intent to repurchase will be examined under the definition of the above stated for consumer purchase intent.

Research shows that companies can increase purchase intent by responding efficiently and effectively to service failures (Blodgett et al, 1993; Seiders & Berry, 1998). This leads to the

discovery that poor service recovery could reduce the consumers' future intentions to purchase from the failing firm and increase their willingness to engage in negative eWOM (Maxham, 1999).

Customers' purchase intent can depend on numerous influences. Kumar (2002) found that performance, competition, and cost considerations are influencers of consumer purchase intent. Creyer and Ross (1997) found that consumers purchase intent is influenced by business ethics. Evidence also found that word of mouth could influence consumer behaviour, which can be translated to purchase intent (Goldenberg, Libai & Muller, 2001). eWOM is often the major influence in brand choice. In a study conducted by East, Hammond and Lomax (2008), it was stated that negative eWOM could have twice as much impact on purchase intent than positive eWOM.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, the following assertion is hypothesised:

Hypothesis 2c: After a poor service encounter, willingness to engage in negative eWOM is associated with reduced levels of purchase intent amongst domestic frequent flyers in South Africa.

According to the study conducted by Simpson & Siguaw (2008), the nature of travel and, therefore, carrier type may have an impact on their willingness to engage in negative eWOM. This is discussed below.

2.3 Impact of Carrier Type on Willingness to Engage in Negative eWOM

A full-service carrier as defined by Reichmuch (2008) is an airline that primarily focuses on providing a wide variety of pre-flight and on-board services. Their specific service characteristics include a range of aircraft types, domestic and international flight schedules and a range of service classes. In contrast, low-cost carriers focus on reducing the costs of their services. They achieve this by the high usage of their standardised fleet, high density seating of passengers, elimination of service classes and in-flight services available reduced to on-board payments (Huse & Evangelho, 2007).

From the above distinguishing characteristics of full-service and low-cost carriers, the factors that drive the decision-making process of a traveller in their selection of an airline include service expectation, service perception, service value, passenger satisfaction and airline image (Fourie & Lubbe, 2006). Since carriers are aware of complaining and angry customers, it is necessary to examine their willingness to engage in negative eWOM after service failures of full-service or low-cost carriers (Tuzovic & Mangold, 2008). An online social media platform like Twitter facilitates the exchange of travel information. This information can express real-time issues concerned with airline service failure, which could change a potential customer's decision-making process (Sreenivasan *et al*, 2012).

Travel products, and more specifically, airline services are high risk purchases, which prompt airline users (either full-service or low-cost carriers) to base their decisions on recommendations and reviews of individuals who have experienced and are more knowledgeable of the airline, thus influencing their purchasing decisions (Xiang and Gretzel, 2009). This study aims to determine whether passengers flying on full-service or low-cost carriers differ in terms on their willingness to express negative opinions, recommendations or sentiments via social media platforms (Sreenivasan *et al*, 2012). Based on the aforementioned literature, the following assertion is hypothesised:

Hypothesis 3: Passengers on low-cost carriers and passengers on full-service carriers differ in terms of willingness to engage in negative eWOM after a service failure.

Type of airline carrier has, likewise, been found to have an impact on a consumer's brand attitude. This is scrutinised below by considering the individual components of brand trust, brand affect and consumer purchase intent.

2.4 Impact of Carrier Type on the Dimensions of Brand Attitude

A customer's brand attitude is formed at their initial service delivery experience with an airline (Jensen, 2009). Low-cost carriers and full-service carriers differ in terms of their service offered. Passengers select low-cost carriers primarily for their low prices and full-service carriers for their additional product services (O'Connell & Williams, 2005). It is therefore expected that the level of brand attitude for low-cost carriers and full-service carriers would be different as well (Pitt & Brown, 2001). A study conducted by Jensen (2009) claimed that the expectations held by customers with regards to service delivery differ between full-service and low-cost carriers. These expectations are aligned with a customers' brand trust. After a service failure, a customers' initial level of brand trust decreases. This decrease in brand trust is the driving component in a customers' change in brand attitude towards a full-service or low-cost carrier (Pitt & Brown, 2001). This lead to the following being hypothesised:

Hypothesis 4: Passengers travelling on full service carriers and passengers on low-cost carriers differ in terms of brand trust, brand affect and customer purchase intent.

The methodology used to assess the assertions hypothesised above is discussed directly below.

3. Methodology

The following section address the methodology employed within this study. This includes research design and method, sampling, and the measurement instrument.

3.1. Research Design and Method

The target population for this study consisted of domestic frequent flyers passing through the South African airport. Those individuals who had taken more than two return trips in the preceding twelve months for either business or leisure purposes were classified as frequent flyers. The method used to carry out this study was electronic (internet) interviewing survey method. The survey was structured towards gaining relevant information in terms of negative eWOM and brand attitude amongst frequent flyers. The method included sending out an online questionnaire link via social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter, and email.

3.2. Sampling

This study made use of non-probability convenience sampling design, with the sampling technique being online intercept sampling. The sampling frame included those respondents who had taken two or more return trips in the preceding twelve months and had passed through the airport in question for a domestic flight. These respondents also needed to be accessible to the researchers through Facebook, Twitter and email. The questionnaire link was sent out to 250 possible respondents who meet these criteria in order to ensure an appropriate sample. The final sample size attained was 163 respondents, resulting in a 65% response rate, and was deemed sufficient for the purpose of this study (Wu & Wang, 2011).

3.3. Questionnaire Design

A short questionnaire was designed to measure the constructs addressed in the literature review. The questionnaire consisted of 32 questions: three filter questions, one open-ended question regarding the airline most used for classification purposes, six questions relevant to negative eWOM and sixteen questions relevant to brand attitude which comprises of eight questions relevant to brand trust, three questions for brand affect and five questions for consumer purchase intent. An additional four questions were added to obtain an additional

measurement for brand attitude. Two demographic questions were included at the end of the questionnaire to determine reason for travel and the gender of the respondent.

The measurement instrument made use of a basic seven-point Likert scale to measure both negative eWOM and brand attitude. For the negative eWOM scale, a high score of seven is a favourable outcome and indicates that the willingness to engage in negative eWOM is high. For the multi-dimensional brand attitude scale, a high score indicates that the impact will be less significant than a low score. The questions for negative eWOM were adapted from a study conducted by Hennig-Thurau *et al* (2004) and the brand attitude questions from a study by Wu and Wang (2011). The measures for brand attitude were adapted in order to fit the context of the study. The additional brand attitude scale was adapted from a study by Mitchell and Olsen (1981).

3.4. Data Analysis

At the outset, the data was tested for normality and found to confirm. Correlation analysis was then used to test objectives one and two a/b/c, measuring the impact of one factor on another, and independent sample t-tests were used for objectives three and four, measuring differences between the various groups.

5. Results

The following sections summarise the relevant data in terms of descriptive statistics and then the assessment of the objectives set at the outset of the paper.

5.1. Composition of the Sample

The percentage of male respondents was 36.8% and female respondents were 63.2%, which is within keeping of the profile generated by Scarpi (2010). The percentage of business travellers was 29.4% compared to 70.6% for leisure travellers. The percentage of travellers who flew with full-service airline was 17.8% while that of low-cost airlines was 82.2%.

5.2. Scale Reliability

The reliability of each of the four constructs was determined by calculating the Cronbach Alpha, which indicates the internal consistency reliability of the construct. A value greater than 0.6 indicates satisfactory internal consistency reliability (Malhotra, 2010). The reliability for the negative eWOM construct was satisfactory with a value of 0.67. The Cronbach Alpha values for the brand attitude components were 0.948 for brand trust, 0.947 for brand affect and 0.916 for consumer purchase intent. These values indicate that the scales were reliable and all items should be included in the scale.

5.3 Discussion of Findings

5.3.1 Findings pertaining to Objectives 1 and 2

The relevant tables for addressing objectives 1 and 2 can be found below. Table 1 considers objective/hypothesis 1 whilst Table 2considers objective 2 and hypotheses set 2a, 2b and 2c.

Hypothesis 1: *After a poor service encounter, willingness to engage in negative eWOM is associated with reduced levels of overall brand attitude amongst domestic frequent flyers in South Africa.*

Table 1: Correlation output for Hypothesis 1

Correlations

		neg_ewom	Brand_attitude
neg_ewom	Pearson Correlation	1	-.224**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.002
	N	163	163
Brand_attitude	Pearson Correlation	-.224**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.002	
	N	163	163

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

The null hypothesis was rejected at both the 5% and the 1% significance level as the p-value of 0.002 is less than the industry accepted 0.05 (Rice, 1988). It may therefore be concluded that willingness to engage in negative eWOM has a significant negative impact on overall brand attitude among domestic frequent flyers passing through the airport. The correlation coefficient is -0.224, which indicates that there is a moderate negative linear relationship between the two constructs. This suggeststhat as the willingness to engage in negative eWOM increases, the level of brand attitude towards the airline decreases.

Thus, it would appear that after a service failure, customers' expectations are not fulfilled, leading them to engage in negative eWOM and have a lower brand attitude (Buttle & Burton, 2001). The outcome of a study by De Matos, Alberto and Rossi (2008), revealing that negative WOM has a significant negative impact on brand attitude, aligns with the finding of this study that negative eWOM has a negative impact on a consumer's overall brand attitude.

Table 2 now considers the set of hypotheses (H2a, H2b and H2c) addressing objective 2 in the study.

Correlations

		neg_ewom	CPI	BA	BT
neg_ewom	Pearson Correlation	1	-.209**	-.154*	-.215**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.004	.025	.003
	N	163	163	163	163
CPI	Pearson Correlation	-.209**	1	.688**	.661**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.004		.000	.000
	N	163	163	163	163
BA	Pearson Correlation	-.154*	.688**	1	.754**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.025	.000		.000
	N	163	163	163	163
BT	Pearson Correlation	-.215**	.661**	.754**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.003	.000	.000	
	N	163	163	163	163

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Table 2: Correlation output for Hypotheses 2a, 2b and 2c

Hypothesis 2a: *After a poor service encounter, willingness to engage in negative eWOM is associated with reduced levels of brand trust amongst domestic frequent flyers in South Africa.*

As reflected in Table 2, the null hypothesis was rejected at both the 5% and 1% significance level, with a p-valueof 0.003. The correlation coefficient was found to be negative (-0.215), leading to the conclusion that as the willingness to engage in negative eWOM increases,

the level of brand trust decreases. This is congruent with De Matos, Alberto and Rossi (2008), who found that there is a significant negative impact of negative eWOM on brand trust.

Hypothesis 2b: *After a poor service encounter, willingness to engage in negative eWOM is associated with reduced levels of brand affect amongst domestic frequent flyers in South Africa.*

As reflected in Table 2, the null hypothesis was rejected at the 5% significance level, with a p-value of 0.025. The correlation coefficient was found to be negative (-0.154), leading to the conclusion that as the willingness to engage in negative eWOM increases, the level of brand affect decreases. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) found that brand affect influences the level of WOM towards the brand. The current study builds on this prior research by substantiating the finding that willingness to engage in negative eWOM has a significant impact on brand affect.

Hypothesis 2c: *After a poor service encounter, willingness to engage in negative eWOM is associated with reduced levels of purchase intent amongst domestic frequent flyers in South Africa.*

As reflected in Table 2, the null hypothesis was rejected at both the 5% and 1% significance level, with a p-value of 0.004. The correlation coefficient was found to be negative (-0.209), leading to the conclusion that as the willingness to engage in negative eWOM increases, the level of consumer purchase intent decreases. A study conducted by Holloway and Beatty (2003) found that majority of consumers who had complained after a service failure had no intention of repurchase, which supports the corresponding finding in this particular study.

The hypotheses of 1, 2a, 2b and 2c, measuring brand attitude and the sub-components of brand trust, brand affect and consumer purchase intent, were thus supported. This aligns with the assertion in the first hypothesis that postulates that as willingness to engage in negative eWOM increases, the level of brand attitude towards the airline decreases. In this respect, hypotheses 2a, 2b and 2c are allied in their support of hypothesis 1.

5.3.2 Findings pertaining to Objective 3

In order to determine whether there is a difference in willingness to engage in negative eWOM between those travellers flying on a full-service airline and those on a low-cost airline, an independent sample t-test was again utilised. The relevant output can be found in Table 3 below.

Hypothesis 3: *Passengers on low-cost carriers and passengers on full-service carriers differ in terms of willingness to engage in negative eWOM.*

Table 3: Independent Samples Test for Hypothesis 3

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
neg_ewom	Equal variances assumed	.358	.550	1.356	161	.177	.25039	.18469	-.11434	.61511
	Equal variances not assumed			1.255	38.137	.217	.25039	.19944	-.15331	.65408

As evident in Table 3, the significance value for this test reflects as 0.550, leading to the failure to reject the null hypothesis at the 5% level. Thus, hypothesis 3 cannot be supported. It may therefore be concluded that frequent flyers that travel on full-service airlines have the same willingness to engage in negative eWOM after a service failure as those travelling on low-cost airlines. This finding is corroborated by the Tuzovic (2010) in which it was found that the majority of passengers using either full-service or low-cost carriers do not differ in their customer-complaint behaviour or their willingness to engage in negative eWOM.

5.3.3 Findings pertaining to Objective 4

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-Test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
CPI	Equal variances assumed	.699	.404	-1.613	161	.109	-.45723	.28351	-1.01711	.10265
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.788	46.299	.080	-.45723	.25578	-.97200	.05754
BA	Equal variances assumed	3.100	.080	-2.521	161	.013	-.74026	.29367	-1.32020	-.16033
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.161	35.867	.037	-.74026	.34254	-1.43506	-.04547
BT	Equal variances assumed	9.712	.002	-2.001	161	.047	-.59348	.29664	-1.17929	-.00766
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.605	34.295	.118	-.59348	.36971	-1.34459	.15763

In order to assess the impact of the type of airline carrier (i.e. low-cost or full-service) on brand trust, brand affect and consumer purchase intent, an independent sample t-test was once more employed. The relevant output can be found in Table 4 below.

Hypothesis 4: *Passengers travelling on full service carriers and passengers on low-cost carriers differ in terms of brand trust, brand affect and customer purchase intent.*

Table 4: Independent Samples Test for Hypothesis 4

As is evident in Table 4, bothconsumer purchase intent and brand affect were not found to differ between the two carrier types (p-values of 0.404 and 0.080, respective) whereas brand trust (with a p-value of 0.002) was indeed found to differ at the 5% significance level.

6. Conclusion

This study looked at the consequence of a service failure in the South African airline industry by considering customers who were frequent flyers. It was found that as willingness to engage in negative eWOM was heightened, this produced a significant negative impact on brand attitude, both overall and in terms of the three sub-components of brand trust, brand affect and consumer purchase intent. Moreover, as willingness to engage in negative eWOM increased, this negatively impacted on their level of the brand trust the most and their level of brand affected the least.

Furthermore, this research revealed no significant difference in willingness to engage in negative eWOM between full-service and low-cost carrier passengers. By implication, this creates a competitive market for airlines due to limited differentiation in the local market. However, brand trust was found to be a differentiating factor. In this respect, the level of brand trust differs significantly between passengers on full-service carriers and those on low-cost carriers, whereas their level of brand affect and consumer purchase intent does not.

7. Managerial Implications

The purpose of this study was to identify whether the willingness of consumers to engage in negative eWOM has a significant negative impact on brand attitude as well as if there is a difference in this willingness between full service airline travellers versus low-cost airline travellers. Based on the findings, a number of managerial implications are advocated.

Airline companies in South Africa should seek to identify the motives that stimulate positive eWOM communications and develop processes to minimise negative eWOM communication and its impact. Negative statements made by frequent flyers can easily discourage potential customers of the airline as many travellers look to online communication platforms for information regarding the experiences other travellers have had. Online

communication platforms provide marketers with a real time communication tool where they can address the concerns of disgruntled consumers and encourage potential consumers to use their airline. This requires a more present online profile (e.g. Facebook and Twitter profiles) where marketing management of the airlines can address situations as they occur and provide continuous updates and solutions on overcoming service failures. Social network marketers need to consider eWOM as an important online communication tool, and adapt their advertising strategies accordingly to build strong customer relationships (Chu, 2009). Given that eWOM has a very powerful influence, it can't be ignored, but rather managed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the airline's marketing strategies (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2005).

It is also necessary to constantly monitor feedback mediums such as complaints portals to ensure immediate action and accountability can be taken when negative eWOM occurs. Both full-time and part-time employees should be trained to fully understand the power of eWOM and the implications that it has on a customer's attitude towards a brand after a service failure. They should then be equipped with the skills in order to effectively manage disgruntled passengers. Being responsive, willing to help and having a courteous attitude should be a priority objective for employees as part of the service experience. It is important for firms to understand as much as possible about service failures in terms of what it means to the attitudinal strength of their customers relationship with them (Bejou & Palmer, 1998). Remedies to decrease willingness to engage in negative eWOM after a service failure can include compensation in the form of discounts on flights or complementary flight tickets. During the duration of service failures (for example,a flight delay), real time updates should be communicated and provide refreshments on the ground or in-flight if necessary.

In this respect, airline companies would be advised to have a more interactive relationship with their customers. They could directly manage customers' brand attitude by focusing on brand trust. By increasing the interactivity with customers, the airline is able to reap the benefits of repeat patronage.

The second aspect of the study revealed that passengers flying on full-service and those on low-cost carriersexhibit no statistical difference in their willingness to engage in negative eWOM. These similarities indicate that significant adjustments to operations and communication efforts need not be made to account for the changing passenger mix (Dresner, 2006). However, it is still crucial to address these consumers in a timely and effective manner to influence their willingness to engage. Successful strategies for creating and protecting successful brands can only be developed if marketing managers understand the influences of brand attitude. This study goes some way in explaining these effects.

From the above, it may be concluded separate strategies addressing different types of travellers are not necessary and rather a unified approach to communication may in fact be developed. In the communication to dissatisfied passengers, it is important to focus on building sustainable brand trust as this is the most affected aspect of brand attitude after service failure. Here, the airline would best be advised to be honest and sincere in addressing consumer concerns and compensate consumers in order to maintain positive brand perceptions and repeat patronage.

8. Study Limitations

The primary limitation of this research relates to the ability to generalise the findings beyond the scope of this particular study. A single industry (i.e. airliners) in a single geographic region (i.e. the country of South Africa) was considered. Furthermore, this study only looked at domestic passengers and not international passengers. The context is thereforesomewhatspecific. Added to this, the airline industry in South Africa is relatively small

and low-cost carriers are incorporated into the holding companies of the full-service carriers. This market dynamic is not necessarily replicated in other parts of the world. Finally, an exploratory study into eWOM in the airline industry might expose other pertinent variables such as depth of consumer knowledge, the individual's reputation as an authority figure, etc. that may affect the situation. This would likely prove fertile ground for further research.

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