Webcare responses to consumers' complaints:

The Effect of Response Transparency and Consumer's Perspective on brand attitudes and the Mediating Role of Persuasion Knowledge

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Abstract

Today consumers are able to express their dissatisfaction towards organizations through social media in a way that it is visible to a significant number of people. Organizations, in turn, have to reply to complaining consumers through their digital customer service called webcare. One of the most common webcare strategies is redirecting complainers to private channels, in a way that observing consumers are not informed about the process and the results of the service recovery. This type of response is considered opaque (versus transparent). This study investigated the effectiveness of response transparency. An online experiment (N = 114) was conducted with a 2 (response transparency: opaque vs. transparent response) x 2 (consumer's perspective: complainer vs. observer) between-subject design. The study also addressed whether the relationship between response transparency and brand attitudes was mediated by persuasion knowledge. The findings indicated that response transparency has a positive effect on consumers' brand attitudes. Nevertheless, this relationship cannot be explained by the persuasion knowledge that the response triggers. In fact, both the opaque and transparent responses elicited persuasion knowledge thoughts, that did not influence their brand attitude. Overall, the findings suggest that organizations should be transparent in successful service recoveries. Further practical implications and limitations of the study are discussed.

Keywords: webcare, social media complaints, response transparency, transparent, persuasion knowledge, observers

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Social media have transformed users into active participants who are able to voice their opinions and experiences publicly, anonymously, and with a wide reach. Consumers take advantage of this ability to share their dissatisfaction towards organizations and help others as well (Jayasimha & Billore, 2015). In fact, online customer reviews and complaints are considered particularly helpful among consumers, with 48% of people indicating that they use social media to find information before making a purchase (Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, 2020).

While consumers seem to enjoy the power that social media give them, companies have expressed their concerns about the uncontrollable damage that complaints can cause to their communication channels (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012). This concern is reflected in their public responses as well, where companies often urge complainers to converse privately in order to regain control of the situation (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; van Noort et al., 2014). This tactic is considered an opaque response and is contrary to a transparent one in which the development of the webcare interaction is visible for both the complainers and the observers of the interaction (Hogreve et al., 2019). For example, as shown in figure 1, KLM insists on redirecting the conversation in a private environment, while the consumer keeps expressing their dissatisfaction publicly.

Figure 1

A sequence of opaque responses in the official Facebook page of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines



In fact, Hogreve et al. (2019) found that transparent responses lead to better perceptions of the service quality among the observers of the interaction. On the contrary, opaque responses are more likely to raise uncertainty and have negative effects on the purchase intentions of the observers (Hogreve et al., 2019). To our knowledge, no other study has empirically examined webcare transparency. Nevertheless, transparency as a concept has been investigated thoroughly in the communication field, especially as a crucial element in the trust repair process between organizations and customers (Krosgaard et al., 2002). In particular, research has shown that transparency in corporate communication increases trust, which in turn enhances customer relationships, purchase intentions, and attitudes towards an organization (Gillespie & Dietz 2009; Krosgaard et al., 2002; Liu et al., 2015). Thus, even if transparency is an important aspect of organizational communication, there is a current research gap in regard to its effects on webcare.

Thus, the first objective of this study will be to examine the effect of response transparency on consumers' attitudes.

Moreover, research has indicated that webcare practitioners tend to provide opaque responses to complainers in order to "relinquish control" (van Noort et al., 2014, p.89). Thus, it would be interesting to understand whether consumers are aware of this tactic and its motives, and whether this awareness can eventually affect their attitudes. This argument leads to the second objective of the study: the relationship between response transparency and brand attitudes in regard to the theory of persuasion knowledge (PK). The PK model refers to the phenomenon in which consumers are aware of the marketers' persuasion motives and strategies and shape their responses to marketing efforts accordingly (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Research has shown that consumers use their PK when they are able to understand the ulterior motives of a persuasion attempt (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Sequentially, when consumers use their PK, they are likely to increase their skepticism and negative attitudes towards persuasion attempts (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Obermiller et al., 2005). Since skepticism towards businesses is overall growing, it is crucial to examine whether response transparency may affect the way consumers use their PK and change their attitudes accordingly (Deloitte Global, 2020; Thomas & Kureshi, 2020).

Lastly, previous studies have indicated that there are two types of consumers that are affected by webcare: the complainers and the observers (Hogreve et al., 2019; Weitzl, 2019). However, no research has studied the different effects that webcare strategies can have on complainers and observers. Hence, the third objective of this study will focus on examining how consumers' perspectives (complainer vs. observer) may affect the influence of the webcare response to their brand attitude. The rationale behind this idea is that complainers and observers

can have a different psychological distance and cognitive loads during a webcare interaction which may affect their assessment. Furthermore, apart from the consumer's perspective which is a situational characteristic, consumers might be inclined to engage in different cognitive activities based on some inherent personality traits. One of the traits that is particularly relevant to PK is the need for cognition, which is an inclination towards cognitive activities situations (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Thus, the final object of this study will be to investigate whether an individual's need for cognition may moderate the relationship between transparency and PK.

The research question that is formulated is:

RQ: *How does the response transparency affect consumers' brand attitudes in webcare, and how is this mediated by persuasion knowledge? Moreover, does the consumer's perspective and need for cognition affect the strength of this relationship?*

This research will contribute to the webcare literature in two ways. Firstly, it will generalize the findings of Hogreve (2019) and it will further investigate whether transparency can have positive effects on complainers as well. Secondly, it will be the first study that will examine how PK works in webcare interactions. The findings of this study will offer practical implications to webcare practitioners on how to respond to complaints while taking into account all the parties involved, that is both the complainers and the observers.

Theoretical Framework

Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Webcare

The proliferation of web 2.0 has challenged customer service processes by changing the balance of power between organizations and consumers (Lee & Cude, 2012). Today consumers have the opportunity to actively interact with organizations' social media pages, by engaging with corporate content or even creating their own content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Consequently, this two-way communication system has yielded numerous opportunities for organizations, but also threats, since organizations have no control over the information on their communication channels (Hinchcliffe, 2006; Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012).

One of the most significant threats that organizations face due to this lack of control is online consumer complaints. What makes online complaints particularly threatening is their ability to reach a large audience in a small period of time, which in turn, gives organizations little time to process them and respond accordingly (Horn et al., 2015). Einwiller and Steilen (2015) define complaints as an expression of disappointment towards an organization, with the purpose of drawing attention to an incident. Thus, consumers complain to satisfy both egoistic and collective motivations, such as taking revenge, relieving stress, and warning other consumers or seeking advice (Jayasimha & Billore, 2015; Sundaram et al., 1998).

Complaints may have a significant effect on an organization's image. First, this is because people tend to value and focus on negative information more than on positive information (Ito et al., 1998). This argument has been further supported in the context of digital communication where negative electronic word-of-mouth (NeWoM) has been found to be more influential and useful than positive e-WoM (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Wang et al., 2015). Second, online complaints can spread rapidly and due to the persisting nature of social media, they tend to be visible to users for large periods (Duan et al., 2008; Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

For this reason, companies have to be particularly attentive to NeWoM. In fact, Prim and Pras (1999) have stressed out three reasons why monitoring and responding to complaints is important. Firstly, complaints are valuable feedback for a company to review and possibly change its products or services. Secondly, the company has the chance to defend its actions and satisfy the complainer. Lastly but most importantly, a response might even enhance loyalty when

it is considered satisfactory (Prim & Pras, 1999). This argument makes the organization's response salient in the online environment as well, especially since the vast majority of social media users read consumers' opinions and shape their attitudes based on them (Ahmad & Laroche, 2017).

The process of handling consumer queries on social media refers to webcare. Webcare's goal is to identify consumer problems and solve them in order to achieve customer satisfaction and prevent negative effects in a larger audience (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; Van Noort et al., 2014). According to research, webcare supports processes of public relations management, customer care, and marketing. In particular, previous studies have found that consumers usually expect an organizational response in their complaints, which in turn can positively shape the attitude of the complainer and the observing consumers towards the organization (Demmers et al., 2013; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; Van Noort et al., 2014).

Webcare and Brand Attitude

In general, attitude is an "enduring evaluation of an object, issue, person, or action" (Hoyer & MacInnis, 1997). The definition itself shows that attitude is relatively stable, and is based on an individual's past and present (Gordon, 1935). Attitude as a concept has been investigated thoroughly in consumer behavior studies since it is considered to be the link between organizations and purchase motivations (Rossiter & Bellman, 2005). Consequently, a great number of studies have found that consumers' attitudes are positively associated with purchase intentions (Wu, 2003). Brand attitude, in particular, is defined as the "predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to a particular brand" (Phelps & Hoy, 1996, p.90). Hence, brand attitude is related to the assessment of product-related attributes, as well as to the assessment of symbolic advantages (Keller, 1993).

In the social media context, brand attitude can be affected by negative reviews and complaints (Purnawirawan et al. 2015). Consequently, as mentioned above, webcare is an opportunity to repair or even strengthen brand attitudes for both the complainers and observers (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). In fact, consumers who were exposed to a webcare response demonstrated a higher brand attitude than those who were not (van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Thus, webcare is a crucial customer relationship management tool, which can build positive brand attitudes, and in turn increase purchase intentions and brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002; Chiou et al., 2013).

Webcare Strategies

Even though it has been confirmed that, overall, webcare is beneficial for an organization's image, research has shown that in order for it to be effective, it needs to follow the right strategy (Lee & Song, 2010). Firstly, it is important to understand when webcare specialists should reach consumers. For this reason, studies have examined the effect of proactive versus reactive webcare, with the majority of them indicating that both complainers and observers preferred webcare responses that were following an explicit request (Demmers et al., 2013; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012).

Secondly, organizations should be attentive to what message they communicate to complainers through webcare (van Noort et al., 2014). Based on the type of response, strategies can be divided into accommodative and defensive, with the former focusing on corrective actions and reputation restoration and the latter denying responsibility (Coombs, 1998). In webcare, Lee and Cranage (2014) indicated that an accommodative response shows accountability and includes any form of apology or corrective action. On the other hand, a defensive response equals null or limited responsibility, and thus, is more likely to be a reputational threat (Lee &

Song, 2010). The majority of the studies that have compared the effect of accommodative versus defensive have concluded that accommodative responses are more beneficial towards consumers' attitudes (Audrain-Pontevia & Kimmel, 2008; Lee & Song 2010; Casado-Díaz et al., 2018).

Apology and Corrective Action

Research has shown that when an accommodative response includes an apology and corrective action, it is particularly effective (Van Noort et al., 2014). A mere apology is an expression of the organization's concern and usually complainers expect it from an organization (Mack et al., 2000). While research has shown that an apology might increase the blame consumers attribute to an organization, Davidow (2003) supports that an apology can and should focus on showing compassion rather than taking the blame (Lwin et al., 2016).

Thus, when offering an apology, organizations should be attentive to the way they express it. An effective apology should be genuine and authentic and differ from an apologia that is meant to defend the company's actions (Grebe, 2013). In addition, apologies have been found to be particularly effective when they appear to be honest and accepting since they are perceived as more sympathetic and sincere (Xia, 2013).

Nevertheless, even a sincere apology does not equal problem solution or future prevention, and thus, it is not enough to address consumers' expectations (Mueller et al., 2003; Purnawirawan et al., 2015). For this reason, an effective apology must be both sincere and must be followed by a promise or action for future prevention (Purnawirawan, 2013; Van Noort et al., 2014). This tactic is called apology and corrective action and it is an effective way for organizations to acknowledge the situation and at the same time, give closure to the customer by stating that the problem is solved and/or will not happen again (Purnawirawan et al., 2015).

Response Transparency

As noted before, a significant amount of research has focused on apology and corrective action and its effectiveness as a webcare response. Nevertheless, even if the majority of studies have shown that an apology with a corrective action positively influences consumers, less is known about the different ways organizations implement this strategy and how this may affect consumers (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015; Lee & Song, 2010).

One of the most common organizational webcare tactics is redirecting public webcare conversations in private environments. In fact, 60% of the companies urge consumers to talk privately through direct messages (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). Companies that implement this tactic are less transparent about their service recovery process. Hogreve (2019) investigated this tactic and introduced the term service recovery transparency which refers to the "extent to which a service provider's recovery efforts, handling, or results are visible to other observing consumers" (p.4). In particular, when companies choose to handle the customer service process through private messaging, they usually disable observing consumers from knowing the process and the outcome of the interaction. In this case, the response is considered to be opaque. On the contrary, companies that give transparent responses, inform observing consumers about the result of the interaction publicly in the comments. In addition, responses can be also semi-transparent when selected aspects of the webcare interaction are shown publicly and other aspects are shared through direct messages (Hogreve et al., 2019). For example, companies might choose to apologize publicly, and handle the rest of the process privately.

In general, transparency is one of the most important factors that establish trust and positive relationships between organizations and consumers (Reynolds & Yuthas 2008; Willmott, 2003). Respectively, transparency signals an honest and open communication

(Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010), and has been found to positively influence consumers' uncertainty and purchase intentions (Liu et al., 2015). The concept of response transparency in webcare was first stressed by Stevens (2018) who indicated its importance as a signal of the organization's concern for both complainers and observers. This assumption was empirically tested by Hogreve et al. (2019) who found that transparent responses have positive implications to the observing consumers.

In conclusion, transparency is a crucial asset that establishes trust, certainty, and positive relationships between organizations and corporations (Reynolds & Yuthas 2008; Willmott, 2003). Along with this, we expect that transparent responses in webcare foster positive attitudes towards the brand. Taking into consideration that the response transparency differs based on the amount of visible information, we classify responses into transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H1a: A transparent response yields higher brand attitudes than an opaque and semi-transparent responses

H1b: A semi-transparent response yields higher brand attitudes than an opaque one

Persuasion Knowledge

Organizations handle consumers' complaints privately in order to control the situation in a way that it will not receive public attention and harm their reputation (Hogreve et al., 2019; Van Noort et al., 2014). As a result, the majority of the organizations prefer this opaque approach to webcare, and thus, it is important to understand how this tactic and its motives are perceived by consumers, and how they may affect their attitudes. Considering this, the concern raised is whether response transparency may trigger consumers to activate their PK.

PK was introduced by Friestad and Wright (1997) and it refers to an individual's ability to correctly identify a persuasion attempt and develop coping mechanisms against persuasion. In other words, through PK, consumers are able to identify how, when, and why persuasion attempts are taking place and respond accordingly, by rejecting or accepting it.

This process refers to the PK model, which consists of three elements (Friestad & Wright, 1997). First, the agent, which is the source of the persuasion attempt. Second, the target, which is the person that the persuasion attempt is aimed at. Third, the persuasion attempt, which is the persuasion strategic behavior of the agent towards a target.

PK has a cognitive and an attitudinal dimension (Rozendaal et al., 2011). The former refers to the identification of the persuasion message, its source, and intention, while the latter to the affective response, which is usually related to skepticism and negative arousal (Rozendaal et al., 2011). Accordingly, when a persuasion attempt takes place, the target's PK helps them recognize and evaluate the attempt, and consequently, select and apply the adequate coping mechanism. Nevertheless, coping does not necessarily mean rejection of the attempt, but rather having control over a target's behavior after the exposure (Friestad & Wright, 1997). It is important, thus, to understand that PK does not solely refer to the resistance of the persuasion activity, but rather to the ability to actively choose whether to accept or reject it (Friestad & Wright, 1995).

There are three different types of PK: agent knowledge, tactic knowledge, and topic knowledge (Wänke, 2009). Agent knowledge concerns the beliefs and judgments about the agent (Kirmani & Campbell, 2009). For example, consumers may use agent knowledge to understand the motives and goals of a salesman. Tactic knowledge refers to the familiarity of a consumer with the strategies and tactics used by the agents (Lorenzon & Russell, 2012). In addition, tactic

knowledge is the most relevant type for webcare and it has been found to be positively correlated to resistance and skepticism toward advertising messages (Obermiller et al., 2005; Tutaj & Reijmersdal, 2012). Last is the topic knowledge, which refers to the information and knowledge about a particular topic (Kirmani & Campbell, 2009).

Campbell and Kirmani (2000), indicated that the use of PK depends on the cognitive capacity of the target, and the accessibility of persuasion motives. In particular, people form a first opinion on a person/behavior, which is later altered based on their "higher-order inferences", such as the ulterior motives (p.78). In order to understand and process those motives, individuals need to have a high cognitive capacity. Cognitive capacity on persuasion attempts depends on the marketplace experience of the target (Shrum et al., 2012; Wright et al. 2005), as well as the target's perspective[1] (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000).

At the same time, accessibility is defined as the extent to which a construct can be decoded by an individual (Higgins, 1989). In persuasion attempts, different motives have different levels of accessibility (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). For example, in a sales transaction, the most accessible motive is the motive to increase sales, while the ulterior motive might be to establish consumer loyalty (Sujan et al., 1986). This means that consumer loyalty is a motive with low accessibility and is recognized mainly when the agent's behavior is strongly associated with it. For example, the salesperson might try to build a relationship with a customer through an over-friendly communication style. In that case, even a customer with low cognitive capacities is likely to identify the persuasion attempt and resist it.

[1] The role of the target's perspective will be further discussed later on.

Persuasion Knowledge in Webcare

Examining how PK may affect webcare interactions is fairly interesting since to our knowledge no research has examined this relationship before. Based on the research by Campbell and Kirmani (2000), we will apply the above-mentioned factors that influence the activation of PK in a webcare interaction. In particular, we will examine how the cognitive capacity of a webcare target, and how the accessibility of the webcare's motives can activate PK.

For example, when consumers complain in a corporate social media channel, webcare agents may respond with an apologetic or sympathetic message (van Noort et al., 2014). This response is an effort toward persuading the dissatisfied customer (Shen, 2010; Ghosh, 2017). The initial impression will probably be that the agent is sincere, empathetic and helpful. However, based on their cognitive capacity the consumer might use tactic and agent knowledge to conclude that the ulterior motive of the agent is to change his attitude and behavior towards the company. For example, a marketer with relative experience in social media marketing, is more likely to understand that the reason why a webcare practitioner is apologizing is to stimulate sympathy.

Furthermore, the most accessible motive of the webcare response is the attempt of the company to serve and satisfy the customer, while the ulterior is to mitigate the undesirable effects of the complaint for consumers. In regard to transparency for example, by offering an opaque response organizations attempt to simultaneously serve the consumer and control the situation in a way that the negative publicity will be minimized. However, redirecting complainers in private environments is against the visibility affordance of social media, and is likely to trigger suspicions. This way consumers are likely to unveil the ulterior motive of the organizations and activate their PK regardless of their cognitive capabilities (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000).

Summing up, it is important to understand that the cognitive capabilities of a consumer and the tactics used by the agent interact when consumers assess a persuasion attempt, such as webcare. Thus, practitioners should be particularly attentive to not cuing their motives in their webcare responses. Especially since awareness of the ulterior motives has been found to increase concerns of deception or manipulation, which is one of the reasons that make people resist persuasion (Fransen et al., 2015).

Based on the above arguments, we suggest that an opaque response is likely to violate consumers' expectations regarding visibility of information, and to facilitate PK activation (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). In this case, PK may enhance suspicions and skepticism, which in turn might damage consumers' trust (Rozendaal et al., 2011). Trust is one of the main predictors of brand attitude, and thus, brand attitude is expected to decrease (Gecti & Zengin, 2013). For this reason, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: The impact of the response transparency to consumers' brand attitudes is mediated by the use of PK.

Consumers' perspective: The Complainer and the Observer

Before, complaining was a dyadic communication between the organization and the complainer. Today, social media have enabled users to make their opinions visible to others, making communication triadic (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Accordingly, one of the reasons why consumers choose social media to complain is the altruistic motive of warning other consumers (Jayasimha & Billore, 2015; Willemsen et al., 2013). Thus, the importance of public complaining lies in the visibility affordance of social media which enables consumers to help each other (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Consequently, webcare's goal is twofold: to satisfy the complainer and to mitigate the complaint so it will not affect observers (Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017).

For this reason, it is important to examine how webcare can influence both complainers and observers. Regarding response transparency, Hogreve et al., (2019) indicated that a transparent approach (versus an opaque one) leads to higher service quality for observers. This might be due to the fact that when companies choose to handle a public complaint privately, they conflict with the process of social learning. In particular, based on the social learning theory, people adopt attitudes and behaviors based on their observations of others, without having to undergo the experiences themselves (Bandura, 1971). Accordingly, a complaint's public nature gives the opportunity to observers to form opinions and behavioral intentions towards a company. However, when the conversation is moved from a public to a private environment that is not visible, the social learning process of the observers is interrupted, and this leads to uncertainty and negative attitudes towards the company (Liu et al., 2015).

These negative effects of opacity in webcare can also be explained by the signaling theory. Signaling theory is the theory based on which one party should convey information about itself to another party in a credible way (Spence, 1973). In the context of webcare, a response operates as an observable signal for observers (Hogreve et al., 2019). Moreover, similar to a response, the observable signals vary based on their characteristics. For example, when the response is transparent, communication is facilitated and signals trustworthiness and honesty, which are important elements for consumers' positive attitudes and behaviors. (Brady, 2003; Liu et al. 2015; Spence, 1973). On the contrary, when the response is opaque, consumers face information asymmetry, since observers cannot observe the signal and communication is hindered (Connelly et al. 2011; Spence, 1973). Thus, a non-transparent communication may raise suspicions and skepticism, since observers may think that the company is secretive (Cheung & Leung, 2016; Hustvedt & Kang, 2013).

Based on the social learning theory, we suggest that an opaque response is likely to lead to information asymmetry and to a lack of closure for observers (Bandura, 1971). Same does not apply to complainers. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H3: Consumer's perspective moderates the relationship between response transparency and brand attitude. In particular, a transparent response yields higher brand attitudes for observers than for complainers.

Persuasion Knowledge of the Complainer and the Observer

As mentioned before, among the factors that might motivate a consumer to use PK is their cognitive capacity (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). In turn, one of the factors that might influence consumers' cognitive capacity is their perspective, namely whether they are the targets or observers in a webcare interaction (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000).

Following this rationale, Campbell & Kirmani, (2000) found that the targets of a persuasion attempt are less likely to use their PK than the observers, and thus, are more likely to be persuaded. This is due to the fact that targets engage in a large number of cognitive tasks, such as thinking about the communication process and its possible outcomes (Gilbert et al. 1987; Gilbert et al. 1988). On the contrary, observers do not have to invest any cognitive resources into the interaction, and thus, are more likely to make inferences about the ulterior motives of the persuasion attempt (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Gilbert et al., 1988).

In a webcare interaction, we consider that the target corresponds to the complainer and the observers to the observers (Weitzl, 2019). Hence, based on the evidence of Campbell and Kirmani (2000) we conclude that the observers are more likely to focus on the agent's motives and tactics and use their PK to assess the webcare interaction, than the complainer. Thus, we expect that:

H4: The effect of the response transparency on the persuasion knowledge activation is moderated by consumer's perspective, in a way that observers are more likely to activate their persuasion knowledge than targets.

Need for cognition

Based on the above, it is expected that consumers' brand attitudes after a webcare interaction are affected by their perspective, which is a situational characteristic. At the same time, consumers' attitudes may be affected by certain personality traits as well, which are relatively enduring characteristics. For example, based on their personality, consumers have different predispositions on the way they think and assess situations (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982).

This personality trait refers to the need for cognition (NFC), which is the extent to which an individual is inclined to engage and enjoy cognitive activities (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). People with a high NFC enjoy cognitive activities and tend to organize their thoughts in a meaningful way, while people with a low NFC tend to process information in a less elaborative way (Coutinho et al., 2005; Gulgoz, 2001; Sadowski & Gulgoz, 1996). Accordingly, people that enjoy cognitive tasks tend to pursue situations that require problem-solving and effortful thinking (Erbas, 2012).

NFC can be relevant to the way consumers use their PK, since people that demonstrated a high level of NFC tend to make inferences and decisions after they carefully and critically evaluate the different aspects of a situation (Nair & Ramnarayan, 2000). Consequently, in a webcare interaction consumers with a high NFC are expected to be more likely to try to infer the ulterior motives of the organization, and thus use their PK. This is because NFC operates as a motive to pay attention and process a message by dedicating a great deal of cognitive effort (Gulgoz, 2001). On the contrary, consumers with a low NFC will likely focus on peripheral

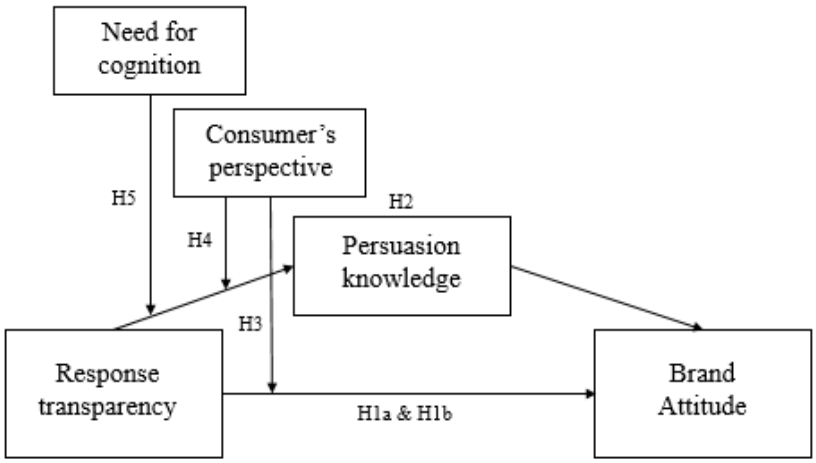
elements, such as the tone and style of the response (Cacioppo & Petty, 1983). For example, in advertising, low-NFC consumers are more likely to be influenced by the humor or the tone of the message, rather by the product attributes (Martin et al., 2003; Zhang, 1996).

Hence, we expect that:

H5: The need for cognition will moderate the relationship between response transparency and persuasion knowledge, in a way that consumers with a high need for cognition will be more likely to activate their persuasion knowledge.

Figure 2

Conceptual model of the relation between response transparency and brand attitude



Method

Design

To test the relationship between response transparency and brand attitude in webcare, we conducted an online experiment with a 3x2 between-subjects design. The independent variable was the response transparency (3: transparent, semi-transparent, and opaque), the mediator was the PK, and the moderators were the consumers' perspective (2: complainer vs. observer) and the need for cognition. The dependent variable was brand attitude. The conceptual model is displayed in Figure 2.

Stimuli

Three different webcare conversations were created for the purpose of the experiment. The conversations were between a complainer and an internet provider business and were about an internet service failure that that the complainer experienced. The company's name ("TelePrima") and logo were fictitious, in order to eliminate bias in brand attitudes. In addition, Facebook was used as the social medium where the conversations took place, since it is the most popular social medium today (Statista, 2020).

The three conversations differed based on the company's response transparency. In particular, transparency was manipulated following the study of Hogreve (2019), and the three conditions differed based on the information visibility. (1) Transparent responses displayed both the apology and the corrective action publicly, (2) opaque responses included only one organizational response that was inviting the complainer in a private conversation, (3) and semi-transparent responses were offering an apology in the comment, while handling all the rest communication privately. The webcare conversations can be seen in the Appendix A.

Measures

Brand Attitude

In the questionnaire, brand attitude was measured based on the research of Holbrook and Batra (1987). The following question was presented to the participants: "Based on the conversation you read earlier, how would you evaluate your attitude towards TelePrima? The question could be answered by a 7-point semantic differential scale of five objects*: dislike/like, positive /negative, unfavorable /favorable, bad/good, not usable /usable*. The reliability of the scale was excellent ($\alpha = .9$) with an average score of 3.95 ($SD = 1.31$)

Persuasion Knowledge

PK was assessed based on the study of Forehand and Grier (2003), who measured respondents' PK by asking an open-ended, though-listing question. Open-ended, though-listing questions are particularly effective in measuring situation-evoking PK, and thus, we considered it to be the optimal option for measuring PK activation (Ham et al., 2015).

Participants were asked “Why do you think the organization gave this response?”, which induced them to identify the motives behind the organization’s response. To measure PK activation, responses were classified into three categories that represent the degree of PK activation (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). In the first category, participants demonstrated no PK in their answer, by only mentioning public-serving intentions (e.g., *To fix the problem for the customer*). In the second category, participants were considered to activate their PK by mentioning firm-serving intentions (e.g., *For marketing reasons*). In the third category, participants were considered to activate their PK to a greater extent, by acknowledging the particular strategy with which the organization fulfils its firm-serving intentions (e.g., *That was an automated answer given to anyone that complains. And is a strategy to avoid public conversation and put in DMs).* In table 1, the decision rules for each category are shown in more detail. In total, participants demonstrated a moderate level of PK activation with an average score of 1.95 (SD = .79).

Table 1

Decision rules for the classification of the answers to the PK open-ended question

Levels of persuasion knowledge	Decision Rules
1. No activation of PK	Mentioning any of the above as an intent: help consumer satisfy consumer needs solve the situation/problem protect consumer privacy And / or Considering the response as a standard procedure

2.	PK activation	Mentioning any of the above as an intent: Marketing/ PR/ Communication/ Customer service reasons Company's interest/benefit And / or Framing public-serving intentions in a negative way, by adding the words "show", "appear" (e.g., "Teleprima showed that cared about the customer and that respect it's personal data").
3.	Higher level of PK activation	Acknowledging that the opaque or the semi-transparent response is a tactic to: Gain control of the situation Avoid negative publicity Avoid public realm Or Acknowledging that the transparent response is a tactic to: Show observing customers that they care/solve problems

Need for Cognition

Participants' need for cognition was measured on a 7-point Likert scale, based on the scale of Lins de Holanda Coelho et al., (2018). The construct consisted of six items (e.g. *I would prefer complex to simple problems*) The reliability of the scale was unacceptable ($\alpha = .32$) with an average score of 4.55 (*SD* = .65). Since the scale's reliability was unacceptable, NFC was not included in the study and H6 was not tested.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through social media, after receiving a link to the questionnaire in Qualtrics. Firstly, participants could read an introduction message, where they were given basic information on the study and on the participation terms. Then, the participants read the consent form.

After giving their consent, participants were randomly given one of the two scenarios that assigned to them the role of the observer or the complainer. Consumer's perspective was based on a scenario-based experiment, since it is considered to be particularly helpful in providing a high internal validity (Kim & Jang, 2014).

Participants who were acting as complainers were given a scenario where due to Covid-19 measures all their work meetings are online. In particular, while presenting a proposal to an important client via zoom, their internet connection goes off. The internet connection does not return in the next two hours. Even if they manage to send a mail to the client to explain the situation and promptly apologize, the meeting is canceled for the day. Frustrated by the inconvenience and considering that this is not the first time this is happening, they decide to write a complaint under an official Facebook post of their internet provider "TelePrima", and accordingly a specific webcare conversation takes place. On the other hand, participants who were acting as observers were given a scenario where they are planning to change their internet provider since due to corona their demands are higher. After a quick market search, they find that the company "TelePrima" offers a decent internet package. Before calling them, they decide to browse their Facebook page, where they come across a specific webcare conversation. After both of the groups read the assigned scenario, both were exposed to one of the three fictitious webcare conversations.

Thus, the conditions were six: (1) Observer and transparent response, (2) Observer and opaque response, (3) Observer and semi-transparent response, (4) Complainer and transparent response, (5) Complainer and semi-transparent response, (6) Complainer and opaque response. After the respondents were exposed to a certain condition, they were asked the manipulation check questions, the PK question, and the brand attitude questions based on the scenario they

were given. In the last section, participants were asked to complete some questions about themselves. In particular, participants were first asked demographic questions, then questions on their personal webcare interactions (e.g., *Have you ever complained to a company through social media?*) as well questions to indicate their NFC. Lastly, they were thanked for their participation and they were informed that TelePrima and the conversations were fictitious and were created for the purpose of this study.

Participants

In total, 332 responses were collected thereof 99 have not agreed to the informed consent or complete the questionnaire, and therefore were deleted from the dataset. In addition, participants who filled the open-ended question with an invalid answer (e.g. "yes", "ξξξξξξξξξξ") were deleted (n = 6).

Taking into consideration the total number of participants that were excluded, the sample consisted of 225 responses. Participants were approximately equally distributed over the six conditions (See Appendix B for the distribution frequencies). No significant differences were found among the four conditions regarding participants' age ($F(3, 110) = .517$, $p = .671$), gender ($\chi(9) = 12.35$, $p = .194$), and education level ($\chi(12) = 6.37$, $p = .896$).

Overall, 64% of the participants were Greek, and the mean age of the sample was 27 years old (SD =1.22). Out of the respondents, 60 were females and 50 males, while four indicated another gender (Non-binary and Transgender) or chose not to answer. The majority of the participants had obtained at least a bachelor's degree (n = 104). Lastly, while 68% of the participants are likely to look at consumer's online complaints, only the 30% has actually complained to companies on social media.

Manipulation checks

To ensure that participants interpreted the study's scenario and stimuli correctly, two manipulation checks were included. After being exposed to the stimuli, participants were asked whether they were acting as complainers or observers in the webcare interaction. In total, 53 participants did not perceive correctly their role in the scenario, and therefore were not included in the final dataset.

Participants' perceptions on the level of the stimuli's transparency was measured on a 7-point Likert scale. The construct consisted of three items (e.g. The way TelePrima handled the problem was visible). The reliability of the scale was good ($\alpha = .87$) with an average score of 3.85 ($SD = 1.68$). A one-way ANOVA was performed in order to examine the manipulation check. Levene's test was not significant ($F(2,177) = 2.95$, $p = .064$), therefore the assumption of homogeneity was met. The ANOVA was significant, indicating that there are differences in how participants perceived the different conditions, $F(2, 177) = 25.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta 2 = .02$. In particular, participants who were exposed in the transparent stimuli scored higher ($M = 4.6$; $SD = 1.60$) than those who were exposed in the semi-transparent stimuli ($M = 3.19$; $SD = 1.42$), and those who were exposed to the opaque stimuli ($M = 2.88$; $SD = 1.24$). A Post Hoc Bonferroni analysis revealed that the transparent condition differed significantly from the opaque response (Mdif = 1.76, p = .00) and the semi-transparent (Mdif = 1.49, p = .00). No significant difference was found between the opaque and the semi-transparent response (Mdif = .27, p = .96). For this reason, we considered that the interaction in the semi-transparent condition was not interpreted as intended, and thus, the semi-transparent condition was not included in the analysis. Therefore, the final analysis featured 114 participants that were almost equally distributed across the four conditions, as seen in table 2.

Table 2

Frequency distribution of participants per assigned condition

Condition	Observer	Complainer
Transparent	32	29
Opaque	29	24

Results

The results of our study were based in a quantitative statistical analysis that tested the four hypotheses that were formulated before[2]. In addition, we performed a qualitative analysis on the text data from the open-ended question. The qualitative analysis aimed in investigating the different lines of thoughts regarding the webcare interaction.

Quantitative Statistical Analysis

To test the hypothesis that transparent responses yield higher brand attitudes than opaque responses (H1a), an independent t-test was performed. Levene's test was not significant F (1, 112) = .912, p = .342, so the assumption of homogeneity was met. The data for the opaque response was not normally distributed (z-score skewness/kurtosis = -.217 and -4.02). The data for the transparent response was normally distributed (z-score skewness/kurtosis = -1.35 and .003). Therefore, the p-value may not be reliable and more weight should be placed on the bootstrapped 95% confidence interval that will be provided. On average, the transparent response yielded higher brand attitude scores (M = 4.59, SD = 1.32) than the opaque response (M = 3.49, SD = 1.10). This difference is significant (Mdif = 1.09, t (112) = -4.80, p < .001) and generalizes to the population (95% CI -1.10, .22). The BCA 95% CI [-1.55, -.64] does not cross zero. The difference is a large-sized effect d = .91. Thus, we can conclude that H1a is supported, and that transparent responses yield higher brand attitudes than opaque responses.

[2] H1b & H6 were not tested for reasons stated in the Method section

To investigate whether the impact of the response transparency on consumers' brand attitudes is mediated by the use of PK (H2), a simple mediation analysis was performed using process model 4 (Hayes, 2013). The mediation analysis confirmed that there is a positive total effect of response transparency on brand attitudes, b = 0,53, p = .000 was found. These results confirm H1a, as stated above as well.

The direct effect of response transparency on PK activation was not statistically significant (b= -.1209, s.e.= .0733, p=.101), indicating that the opaque response did not lead to higher level of PK activation. Similarly, the direct effect of PK activation on brand attitude was not statistically significant (b = -.1164, s.e.= .1479, p = .432), indicating that people who activated their PK did not demonstrate different brand attitudes than those who did not. Thus, PK does not explain the link between response transparency and brand attitude, since there was no significant total indirect effect (IE = .0141; 95% BCa CI [-.0184, 0.735]). Thus, no support was found for H2. The standardized regression coefficients can be found in appendix C.

Lastly, to examine the moderating role of the consumers' perspective on brand attitude, a moderated mediation analysis was performed, using Process model 8 (Hayes, 2013). Firstly, it was checked whether consumers' perspective moderated the direct effect of response transparency on brand attitudes. The analysis showed that the moderating effect of consumers' perspective was not significant (IE = -.0286; 95% BCa CI [-.139, .032]), indicating that the transparent response did not yield higher brand attitude scores for observers than for complainers. Secondly, it was checked whether consumers' perspective moderated the effect of the response transparency on the PK activation. Again, the analysis showed that the moderated mediation was not significant (IE = .442; 95% BCa CI [-.303, .1.18]), indicating that observers did not activate their PK more than the complainers. Thus, H4 and H5 were not supported. The

standardized regression coefficients can be found in appendix C.

Qualitative analysis

Since PK measurement was based on an open-ended question, it was fairly interesting to perform a short qualitative analysis to gain a deeper understanding of how participants assessed the webcare interactions. The answers can give valuable insights into the specific participants' thoughts that were triggered through the different conditions, and even explain why the findings did not confirm our expectations.

The researchers classified the answers into three categories based on the level of PK activation. In the first category participants were not considered to demonstrate any PK activation. In total, approximately 32% of the final sample belonged to the first category with 37 participants mentioning public-serving motives behind the company's answer. After taking a closer look at the answers, the first category was further classified into 3 sub-categories.

Customer-Serving Motives.

In the first sub-category we included answers that solely mentioned that the company aimed at helping the customer and fixing the problem. Such answers were found mainly in the *transparent condition,* with participants indicating that the company wanted to be "*direct and helpful*, "*fix the problem for the costumer", or "help the costumer*". Respectively, such answers were also found in the opaque condition, with participants indicating that TelePrima wanted to "*help solving the problem",* "*solve the problem".* In addition, one participant associated the opaque response with a strategy for the company to "*foster a personal relationship"* with them.

Efficiency

In the second sub-category, we classified answers that recognized the opaque strategy as a beneficial and efficient strategy for companies to deal with customer service issues. For

example, in the *transparent condition* a participants associated the response with a template, that "*is the fastest way to task an issue*[3]", while other participants indicated that in general, this is a "*fast way to deal with future implications".* In addition, participants have considered the company's answer as *a "standard protocol", "typical complaint management",* and "*part of their politics system",* without pointing out the motives and reasons underlying it. Similarly, *the opaque response* was considered a way that is "easier for them to respond with this in every complainer". Also, a participant considered it an efficient response, since "*Customer related questions should be assigned to the authorized experts within the company."*

Privacy

In the last sub-category, there were few participants that recognized the redirection in a private medium as a privacy protection strategy. This sub-category was only identifiable in the *opaque condition* where participants indicated that TelePrima wanted to "*protect their privacy", "respect the customer's personal details",* and *"did not want to leak private information".*

In the second category participants were considered to activate their PK. In total, approximately 38% of the final sample belong to the second category with 44 participants mentioning firm-serving motives behind the company's answer. These 44 responses were later divided into two sub-categories.

Firm-serving motives

Firm-oriented answers were the ones that focused on TelePrima and its own benefit from the webcare interaction. For example, in the transparent condition there were participants mentioning that the answer was given "*Just to get away with it", "Eliminate negative feedback*

[3] The quotes represent participants' answers verbatim from the questionnaire and they might include spelling errors

online", and because *"It was the best way for teleprima"*. Respectively, in the opaque condition there were participants mentioning that the answer was given "*to show they are sorry", "for better customer service purposes",* and for "*marketing*".

Customer-serving motives

In this sub-category, participants noted that the reason why TelePrima gave this answer is to benefit itself by satisfying the customer. In the transparent condition, participants focused on customer retention factors, such as that TelePrima did not want "*to lose the client"* or "*that it told the client exactly what he wanted to hear".* Similarly, in the opaque condition, participants indicated that TelePrima wanted to "*To show they are transparents and close to their clients*" or "*To show they really wanted to fix the problem*".

As shown, it is interesting that a large number of participants used the word "show" to clarify the underlying motives of the company's answer. For example, they mentioned that TelePrima wanted to "*show they are sorry"*, or "*show they really wanted to fix the problem".* This way participants subtly indicated that the company's efforts prioritize its own interest and are driven by firm-serving motives and not by genuine care.

In the third category, participants were considered to activate their PK to a greater extent. In total, approximately 29% of the final sample mentioned the particular strategy with which the organization fulfils its firm-serving intentions. These 33 participants were not divided into sub-categories, since they all correctly identified webcare strategy.

Firstly, in the opaque condition, participants correctly identified the intent of the company to relinquish control and avoid bad publicity through redirecting the complainer. For example, responses mentioned that "*TelePrima did not want to get publicly exposed"*, or that *TelePrima "wanted to give the other observers the impression that they can handle the problem*

even if she will not". Some of those participants even offered more deliberate explanations by recognizing the visibility affordance (e.g. "*Open to see for everyone you see they refund, in the DMs I can't see they may or may not resolve the issue, so only positive image in the open")* or by raising speculations about the company's overall performance (e.g. *"TelePrima did wanted the conversation not to be transparent. Maybe, there were more comments like that one. Maybe, the internet connection they provide isn't the best after all...")*

Probably the most remarkable finding of this qualitative analysis is that contrary to our expectations, participants appeared to recognize firm-serving motives in the transparent response. In other words, some responses identified the transparent response as a way for the "*company to show other customers they care"*, and *"to make sure other people know that the problem is resolved".* Similar to the opaque condition, in the transparent response there were participants who recognized the visibility and persistence affordance of Facebook (e.g. "*Because as they were being visible they need to apply a very effective solution so that other FB users can see they care about their customers.*").

Discussion

The purpose of this study was twofold: first, to explore the role of response transparency in webcare by determining whether it can influence consumers' brand attitudes; second, to understand if PK activation can explain this relationship. Moreover, the study investigated whether the consumer's perspective and need for cognition can affect the strength of the relationship between response transparency and brand attitudes, and between response transparency and PK. In this chapter, we will discuss the findings, possible limitations and practical implications of the study.

Response transparency and brand attitude

Regarding the first purpose of the study, the findings suggest that response transparency strongly affects brand attitude. As expected, the transparent response yielded higher brand attitudes towards the company than the opaque response. These findings are in line with previous studies, that suggested that transparency in webcare is more effective than opacity (Hogreve et al., 2019; Stevens et al., 2018). Firstly, this is due to the important role of transparency in corporate communication in general, which signals honesty, sincerity, and genuineness on behalf of the company (Liu et al., 2015; Stevens et al., 2018). The second reason that has been stressed out by scholars is that transparent responses show consideration not only towards complainers, but also towards observing customers (Stevens et al., 2018).

Another explanation for this outcome can be found in the brands as intentional agents framework (BIAF) (Kervyn et al., 2012). The BIAF is based on the assumption that people form perceptions towards brands the same way they do with other people (Fournier, 1998). These perceptions are based on two dimensions: the brand's intention (warmth) and the brand's ability (competence) (Fiske et al., 2002). A brand that is well-intentioned is rated more favorably than an ill-intentioned brand, and a high-ability brand is rated more favorably than a low-ability brand (Kervyn et al., 2012). Thus, it is possible that in our case, the transparent response signaled sincerity and trustworthiness, and thus it was considered warm, and at the same time, the successful service recovery signaled capability and efficiency, and thus it was considered competent (Fiske et al., 2002). On the other hand, is it likely that the opaque response signaled secretive behavior, and thus it was considered non-warm, while at the same time, participants could not infer the outcome of the interaction, and thus competency remained unknown (Fiske et al., 2002). Thus, a consumer that sees a transparent response can infer that the brand is warmth and competent, and thus, develop favorable attitudes. Similarly, a consumer that sees an opaque

response can infer that the brand is not warmth and competent, and thus, develop less favorable attitudes.

The mediating role of persuasion knowledge

To our knowledge, no other study has examined the role of PK in webcare. Our results showed that PK cannot explain the relationship between response transparency and brand attitudes. This finding is not in line with our expectation based on which the opaque response would trigger a higher PK activation, which in turn would yield lower brand attitudes.

Overall, participants demonstrated a moderate PK activation regardless of the response transparency. In other words, the majority of the participants activated their PK in both the transparent and opaque response. This outcome can be better understood by looking at the demographic characteristics of the sample. According to Friedstad and Wright (1994) PK continuously develops throughout a consumer's life. One of the factors that can increase it is the consumer's education (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The sample of the present study is highly educated, with the majority having obtained at least a bachelor's degree. Usually, people with higher education demonstrate a greater level of critical thinking and sophisticated evaluations towards persuasive messages (DeGregorio & Sung, 2010; Friestad & Wright, 1994). Thus, the education level of the participants could explain why both the opaque and transparent responses triggered critical evaluations and PK activation contrary to our expectations.

The second factor affecting PK is the age, in a way that the older the consumers are, the more capable they are of using their PK based on their experiences (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The average age of the participants is 28 years old, meaning that our sample consists mainly of millennials and Gen Z individuals. Consequently, the majority of the participants are digital natives that have been raised in the digital era, have been using social media for a relatively long

period of their lives, and thus, are more or less familiar with different webcare tactics (Smith, 2011; Williams et al., 2012). The theory suggests that when consumers have been exposed to numerous persuasion attempts by different marketers, they may recognize them more easily and cope with them (Henrie & Taylor, 2009). In conclusion, it's likely that the participants of this study have already been exposed to innumerable webcare persuasion attempts in real life, and they are aware of different strategies and their intentions. For this reason, on the one hand, participants recognized the strategy behind the opaque response as expected (e.g. "*To not get publicly exposed*"). On the other hand, and contrary to our expectations, they also recognized the ulterior motive the transparent response (e.g. "To be likable to other users by showing that they handle problems well and immediately").

In addition, PK theory can further explain why PK did not affect brand attitudes. Friedstant and Wright (1997) have indicated that PK activation does not necessarily mean that the consumer will develop negative attitudes or behaviors against the organization. In fact, a consumer can be aware of the persuasion attempt and actively choose to accept it and not to develop negative attitudes. This can be further explained by the cognitive and attitudinal dimensions of PK (Rozendaal et al., 2011). When the cognitive dimension of PK is activated, the consumer is able to identify the persuasion message and its intention. Nevertheless, only the attitudinal dimension of PK is related to skepticism and negative arousal.

In our case, a relatively high number of participants demonstrated cognitive PK activation, by reflecting on the firm-serving intentions of the company in their answers to the open-ended question. However, it is possible that participants recognized the persuasion efforts of the company, but also perceived them as beneficial for the consumers as well, and thus negative arousal did not occur (Dahl, 2015). For example, in the transparent response the idea

that the company wants to "*To solve the problem and show others that they try to solve the problem*" seems to acknowledge both firm-serving motives, as well as public-serving motives. Similarly, in the opaque response the idea that the company wants to "*Protect public image, troubleshoot the root causes of the problem (if any) and minimize complaints, hoping for a response of appreciation from the customer.*" seems to recognize that the response has a firm-serving motive, but the consumers are still benefited from it. Thus, it is possible that the vast majority of the participants activated solely the cognitive dimension of PK and not the attitudinal. In fact, only few participants explicitly demonstrated attitudinal PK thoughts in their answers (e.g. "*TelePrima did wanted the conversation not to be transparent. Maybe, there were more comments like that one. Maybe, the internet connection they provide isn't the best after all...*"; *"Because TelePrima wanted to give the other observers the impression that they can handle the problem even if she will not."; "Because they don't want other people to know their bad service").*

The moderating role of consumer's perspective

Lastly, the moderating role of consumer's perspective was not supported. Firstly, consumer's perspective did not affect the strength of the relationship between response transparency and brand attitudes. This is contrary to Hogreve et al., (2019) findings that suggest that transparent responses are particularly appreciated by the observing consumers. Based on their study, opaque responses interrupt the social learning process of observers and lead to information asymmetry (Liu et al., 2015). Nevertheless, in our study, observers did not indicate higher brand attitudes than complainers. Similarly, contrary to our hypothesis, consumer's perspective did not affect the strength of the relationship between response transparency and PK. Our expectation was based on the theory of Cambell and Kirmani (2000) that suggested that in a

persuasion attempt, observers are more likely to activate their PK since they are less cognitive busy than complainers are at that time.

This contradiction could be explained by possible lack of ecological validity**.** First of all, a relatively high number of participants failed the manipulation checks (*n*=53), while for those that passed them, it is not possible to assess whether they did it by chance. It is possible, thus, that the participants were not fully engaged in the scenario and the assigned role ("APA Dictionary of Psychology", n.d.). In such a case, participants were not influenced by the manipulation of the consumer's perception, and did not take it into account when filling the questionnaire.

One way to enhance ecological validity is to create a scenario based on a recent event, by describing a situation that most of the participants have been recently experienced (Smith & Bolton, 1998). For example, during the Covid-19 many people experienced issues with airline companies, so a study that would use webcare interactions with a real airline company (e.g. KLM) could be perceived as more realistic. In addition, researchers could create personalized stimuli, by asking participants to create or insert their existing username and later, use this username in the stimuli. Lastly, researchers could assess the degree of immersion into the scenario through the transportation scale (Appel et al., 2015).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Overall, the findings of the study should be interpreted with caution and some limitations and issues should be taken into account. The first limitation was the methodological issues of the NFC variable and the semi-transparent condition. Firstly, the NFC variable was not included in the analysis because the Cronbach α was very low, and thus it was lacking internal consistency. The initial scale for the NFC consisted of 18 items, however in this study we used the adapted

version by Coelho et al., (2018) that consisted of six items. The low α could be due to a low number of items (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011), and thus it is suggested that in the future, researchers should use the initial scale by Cacioppo et al., (1984).

Regarding the semi-transparent condition, it was expected that disclosing an apology in the semi-transparent response would act as a signal of transparency and, eventually would evoke more favorable attitudes. Nevertheless, it was not manipulated efficiently, and was perceived as transparent as the opaque response. Thus, we could not confirm whether a semi-transparent response is perceived more favorably than an opaque one. For this reason, future research could experiment with different types of semi-transparent messages to examine which type would evoke more favorable attitudes. In other words, researchers should create and test different types of semi-transparent responses that differ based on the information they disclose. For example, a semi-transparent response could report the process of the service recovery publicly, but not the result and vice-versa (Hogreve et al., 2019). That would be particularly helpful in cases that the results of the service recovery cannot be reported publicly because of an unsuccessful service recovery. The findings of such a study would offer valuable information to social media practitioners to maximize the benefits of their webcare strategies regardless of the outcome of the service recovery.

One issue of the study was the PK activation measurement. Since the measurement was based on an open-ended question, the coding of the answers and the development of the PK activation levels was based on observation of the data and the literature of PK. The categories that came up were three, and thus, the coding of the PK might be limited and not representable of all the possible levels of PK activation. Nevertheless, this type of though-listing measure is considered an advantage when measuring PK activation, since it is particularly effective in

measuring situation-evoking PK, unlike close-ended questions (Ham et al., 2015). Therefore, future research should use an open-ended question, but reconsider the coding procedure to enhance measurement validity.

In conclusion, response transparency is a fairly new concept in the webcare literature that needs further understanding. Future research should focus on examining response transparency and explain how it can positively affect attitudes and behaviors. This study unsuccessfully attempted to explain the relationship between response transparency and brand attitudes based on the PK concept. Even though the results should be interpreted with caution because of the limitations that were mentioned above, additional focus should be given on explaining why transparent responses result in more favorable attitudes.

In fact, it would be interesting to examine how trust interplays with response transparency, since trust is considered as one of the most significant organizational assets when building customer relationships and shaping brand attitudes (Porat, 2017; Rammile, 2015). Trust has already been examined thoroughly in relation to transparency, and scholars have indicated that greater transparency in corporate communication can lead to higher levels of trust towards the company (Bennis et al., 2008). Overall, transparency signals trustworthiness and accountability, and research has shown that consumers "reward" trustworthy organizations' behaviors (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016).

This indication raises the question whether webcare transparency can lead to higher trust and accountability, that in turn may mitigate the negative effects that an unsuccessful service recovery can have. In other words, would consumers appreciate the openness of a company even if the company does not fix the complainer's problem? Thus, future research could compare transparent responses with unsuccessful and successful outcomes, and examine how their

influence in brand attitudes is mediated by trust and accountability. According to the BIAF model, a transparent response in an unsuccessful service recovery would generate a perception of warmth towards the brand, since it is sincere, but not a perception of competence, since the outcome was unsuccessful (Kervyn et al., 2012). Hence, future research could determine to what extent consumers appreciate honesty and transparency on behalf of the company regardless of the outcome.

Practical and Theoretical Implications

The majority of the organizations have been found to redirect complainers on social media to converse through private channels (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015). This study aimed to examine how this tactic is perceived by consumers and how their attitudes towards organizations can change. Overall, the findings indicate that transparent responses are perceived more favorably than opaque ones. This outcome contributes to the literature of webcare, by focusing on the sparse topic of webcare transparency. Firstly, it shows that the webcare redirecting strategy is perceived as non-transparent by consumers. Secondly, it generalizes the findings of Hogreve et al., (2019) that indicated that transparent responses are perceived better by consumers. The present study took Hogreve's (2019) research one step further by attempting to explain the relationship between response transparency and brand attitude and by investigating the role of consumer's perspective.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of transparency in webcare interactions. Thus, some practical implications can be derived from that assumption. Webcare professionals should be aware that when they respond to online complaints they address not only the complainer, but the observing consumers as well. For this reason, they are advised to handle the conversation as much as possible in the public domain by protecting the consumer's privacy at

the same time. Even though, we did not examine unsuccessful service recovery cases, we advise companies to be transparent when dealing with successful service recoveries. In any case, companies should not underestimate the knowledge and experiences of their customers. The study showed that regardless of the response transparency, consumers activate their PK and are aware of their motives. This means that even in a transparent response, consumers might be aware that the company is attempting to persuade them, and influence their attitudes and behaviors. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that they will alter their attitudes in a negative way.

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Appendix A

The opaque response



The semi-transparent response



The transparent response



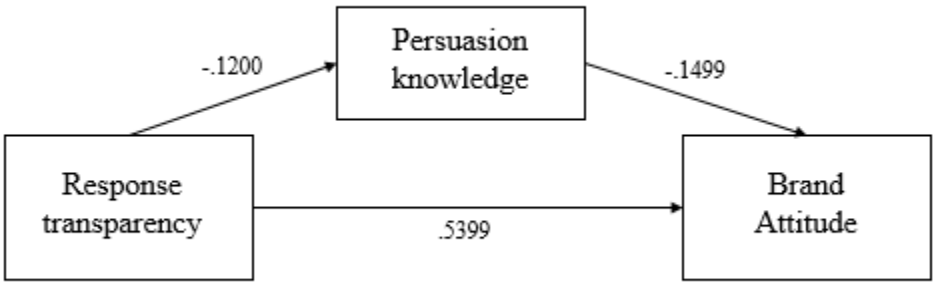
Appendix B

The distribution of the participants over the six conditions

№ of participants	Consumer's perspective	Response transparency
1 (*N* = 37)	Observer	Transparent
2 (*N* = 34)	Observer	Opaque
3 (*N* = 36)	Observer	Semi-transparent
4 (*N* = 42)	Complainer	Transparent
5 (*N* = 39)	Complainer	Opaque
6 (*N* = 37)	Complainer	Semi-transparent

Appendix C

Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between response transparency and brand attitude as mediated by persuasion knowledge.



Standardized regression coefficients for the moderating role of consumer's perspective

