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Exploring Customers' Situational and Word-of-Mouth Motivations in Corporate Misconduct

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand customers' motivations in engaging in information forwarding and negative word-of-mouth behaviors in light of alleged corporate misconduct. To do so, an online survey was conducted in Singapore using alleged workplace gender discrimination as the corporate misconduct (N = 461). Situational motivation in problem solving was found not only to predict customers' issue-specific information forwarding behaviors, but also to predict their word-of-mouth motivations. However, only four of the tested WOM motivations were found to influence negative WOM, and outrage was found neither to impact WOM motivations nor behaviors. The theoretical and practical implications of this study are discussed.

*Keywords:* altruism, homeostase motivations, information forwarding, outrage, situational theory of problem solving, venting, vengeance

## Exploring Consumers' Situational and Word-of-Mouth Motivations in Corporate Misconduct

### 1. Introduction

People share their thoughts and opinions with their social networks, whether it is through online or offline talk. They express their opinions about a wide spectrum of topics, ranging from political opinions, to experiences with companies, their products, and their services. With the advances in digital media technologies, what people talk about online has the potential to spread rapidly among individuals' social networks. Of particular import to organizations is who engages in such communication behaviors and why, as these behaviors may be detrimental to organizations by affecting others' impressions about them (Berger, 2014). In general, it is safe to say that directly affected and engaged consumers' communication behaviors, especially complaints about a certain product or service (Halstead, 2002; Singh, 1988), are important for organizations to consider.

Beyond product- or service-related complaints, however, a company's customers may also be motivated to talk about the company during times of organizational strife, particularly situations of corporate misconduct (or allegations thereof). Recent years have seen several instances of corporate upheavals brought about by consumer outrage over issues of discrimination (e.g., Uber, Google), racist outbursts (e.g., Papa John's Pizza), and alleged sexual harassment in the workplace (e.g., The Weinstein Company). Although such instances of corporate transgressions arguably have little to no effect on customers' experiences with the products or services, customer outrage ensued nonetheless. What motivates customers to be outraged and talk about allegations of corporate misconduct forms the subject of the present investigation.

The purpose of this study is to understand the motivational drivers of customers' word-of-mouth behaviors in light of alleged corporate misconduct. We explore the impact of issue-specific motivation and outrage on customers' motivations to engage in word-of-mouth

behaviors, and their attendant word-of-mouth and information forwarding intentions. In doing so, this study complements the situational theory of problem solving (J.-N Kim & Grunig, 2011) by explicating the dynamics behind customers' behaviors, as well as articulating specific types of motivations that may be underpinned by individuals' situational motivation in problem solving and outrage. We begin by providing a review of the literature to build our hypotheses and research questions.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Customers' reactions to corporate misconduct**

Corresponding to the increase in corporate upheavals resulting from cases of misconduct, recent years have also seen an increased emphasis on understanding the impact of corporate misconduct and brand transgressions on customers (e.g., Grappi, Romani, & Bagozzi, 2013a; Krishna, S. Kim & Shim, 2018). Scholars across disciplines, including public relations, management, and psychology have attempted to explicate the drivers of consumer activism and negative communication behaviors or word-of-mouth behaviors (negative WOM; Richins, 1983) that ensue when corporate misconduct comes to light. Particular attention has been paid to ethicality- and morality-related aspects of corporate misconduct, including violation of ethical norms (S. Kim, Krishna, & Dhanesh, 2019), negative moral emotion (Grappi et al., 2013a), and the impact of individuals' moral orientations on their reactions to allegations of corporate misconduct (Krishna et al., 2018). Lindenmeier, Schleer, and Pricl (2012), for instance, examined how ethical and social transgressions committed by corporations violate customers' moral norms, engendering consumer outrage and heightened boycott intentions. Romani, Grappi and Bagozzi (2013) found consumers' anger over corporate transgression to be associated with intentions to engage in punitive (communicative) actions against the organization, i.e., negative WOM.

In addition to negative WOM designed to punish the company, customers may also want to discuss corporate misconduct with their peers, not necessarily to criticize the company, but simply in the course of their problem solving actions (J.-N. Kim & Krishna, 2014). To better understand such *valence-neutral* communication behaviors we turn to the situational theory of problem solving, or STOPS (J.-N. Kim & Grunig, 2011; J.-N. Kim & Krishna, 2014). The STOPS posits that when faced with a problem or an issue for which an immediate solution is not available, an individual will engage in a variety of communication behaviors in his/her path to solving the problem. One of the communication behaviors encapsulated by the STOPS is information transmission, which positions problem solvers as not just consumers of information but also as disseminators of information.

J.-N. Kim and Grunig (2011) differentiated between active and passive forms of information transmission, i.e., information sharing (passive) and information forwarding (active). Information forwarding refers to a proactive, voluntary information giving behavior, without anyone's solicitation (J.-N. Kim & Grunig, 2011). It is a "planned, self-propelled information giving to others" (p. 127). J.-N. Kim and Grunig (2011) suggest that the purpose of information forwarding evolves from problem giving to *problem and solution forwarding* in the process of problem solving; however, such problem giving is conceptualized to be valence-neutral and manifest in the form of simply providing information regarding the problem rather than providing an assessment of or solution for the problem.

Accordingly, negative communication behaviors, also known as negative WOM behaviors (Richins, 1983), and information forwarding behaviors form the outcomes or customer responses to corporate misconduct investigated in this study. It is important at this point, however, to conceptually differentiate between the two outcome variables. Although operationally negative WOM information and forwarding behaviors may manifest concurrently and fall under a broader umbrella of communication behaviors, the two are

conceptually distinct. Negative WOM behaviors refer to consumers' expressions of dissatisfaction with a product or a company to others (Richins, 1983), wherein the object of negative WOM is conceptualized to be an organization or a product (Laczniak, DeCarlo, & Ramaswami, 2011; Weinberger, Allen, & Dillon, 1981). Negative WOM behaviors, therefore, represent an activity directed against a product or an organization, and in the case of this study, a corporate brand accused of misconduct. Information forwarding behaviors, on the other hand, are problem solving actions that are focused on the *issue* rather than the perpetrator of the issue. In addition to being valence-neutral, information forwarding behaviors differ from WOM in that they are focused on providing others information about the issue rather than providing opinions about the issue or the parties involved in it. The next section provides a discussion of possible drivers or antecedents of the two outcomes examined in this study.

## **2.2. Drivers of consumer responses: The situational theory of problem solving**

As noted earlier, the STOPS is a communication theory that explains publics' communication behaviors (J.-N. Kim & Krishna, 2014), encompassing three types of communicative action, information selection, information acquisition, and information transmission. While active publics exhibit information seeking, information forwarding and information forefending as their problem solving behaviors, passive publics engage in information attending, information sharing and information permitting. Their activeness in communicative action is driven by their situational perceptions, namely, problem recognition, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition, which affect their situational motivation in problem solving. When people perceive an issue as problematic (problem recognition) and perceive that they are involved in the issue (involvement recognition) but see few impediments in their way of addressing the problem (constraint recognition), they are (situationally) motivated to engage in active communicative action for problem solving.

At this point, it is important to elucidate the conceptual definition of the word “problem” as used in the situational theory of problem solving. J.-N. Kim and Krishna (2014) defined “problem” as a gap between expected and experienced state and the lack of an immediate, applicable solution to address or eliminate that gap. Such a problem is a perception that arises in the mind of an individual when he or she recognizes that his/her expectations are not being met. Additionally, J.-N. Kim and Grunig (2011) argued that involvement recognition is not necessarily an actual connection or involvement in the problematic situation, but a perceived connection in the mind of the individual. Such a *perceived connection* to the issue may be subjective, and may not represent an actual involvement in the problem, as is generally the case with allegations of corporate misconduct.

Another important point to note here is the role of situational motivation in predicting communicative action. Defined as, “a state of situation-specific cognitive and epistemic readiness to make problem-solving efforts — that is, to decrease the perceived discrepancy between the expected and experiential states” (J.-N. Kim & Grunig, 2011, p. 132), situational motivation in problem solving mediates the relationship between the three situational perceptions and communicative action in problem solving. Situational motivation in problem solving thus sums up and carries forward the impact of three perceptual variables on communication behaviors, such that scholars have utilized situational motivation as a proxy for the three perceptual behaviors (e.g., Kim, Shen, & Morgan, 2011; Krishna, 2018). As Krishna (2018) noted, “Conceptually, the presence of motivation assumes [the presence of] problem perceptions,” and therefore, “Operationally... situational motivation in problem solving may act as a proxy for problem perceptions” (p. 1089).

J.-N. Kim and Grunig's (2011) conceptualization of situational motivation in problem solving as discussed above mirrors theorizing on human motivation. In particular, Einwiller, Viererbl and Himmelreich (2017) summarized three aspects of the motivational state as “(1)

set in motion by stimulants like wants, desires, or environmental stimuli eliciting (2) an agitation (in the psychology literature generally termed arousal) that directs the activity towards (3) reaching a particular goal” (p. 1181). Drawing from Mandler’s (1990) discrepancy-evaluation theory, Einwiller et al. (2017) noted that a (typically external) stimulus, i.e., a precipitating event or behavior, elicits an agitation in an individual set off by a discrepancy between one’s expectations and one’s experience. Such agitation then results in an emotional arousal, which then leads to action, i.e., communication behaviors. Indeed, the conceptualization of problem recognition as a discrepancy between expected and experienced state (J.-N. Kim & Krishna, 2014) echoes Mandler’s (1990) discrepancy-evaluation theory. Combining the two theoretical perspectives, we argue that the discrepancy between expected and experienced state may arouse situational motivation in an individual as well as an emotional response, all of which together constitute a motivational state, which may then elicit action.

Furthermore, per the prediction of the STOPS model, situational motivation is also expected to predict individuals’ information forwarding behaviors. However, given that information forwarding behaviors are valence-neutral, no relationship is expected between information forwarding and outrage, since outrage represents a negative emotional state incongruent with the neutral nature of information forwarding. The following hypothesis is therefore posited:

H1: Situational motivation in problem solving is positively associated with information forwarding.

Powerful as situational motivation in problem solving is in explaining communication behaviors about an issue, whether it captures motivations that lead to individuals engaging in WOM behaviors fully is not yet clear. As noted earlier, issue-specific communication behaviors are conceptually distinct from WOM. It would therefore follow that individuals



may have different kinds of motivations behind their WOM behaviors than just problem solving. Word-of-mouth motivations, particularly in the case of corporate misconduct are discussed next.

### **2.3. Word-of-mouth motivations**

Extant literature on need-motive-value approaches suggests that individuals differ in their needs, motivations, and values, and that their needs drive their behavior (Maslow, 1943; 1971, as cited in Sheldon & Gunz, 2009). This notion of psychological needs working as human motivation has been applied and extended to understanding individuals' motivations for engaging in WOM behavior. Existing research suggests that WOM behavior is driven by motivation (e.g., Berger, 2014; Berger & Schwartz, 2011), and that motivation results from the combination of individual needs and desires (Humphreys & Revelle, 1984). Alexandrov, Lilly, and Babakus (2013) posit WOM as a "socially embedded process" (p. 532) where the transmitter of WOM gains personal and social benefits by engaging in the behavior.

Much of the scholarship thus far related to WOM motivations has been the domain of marketing literature, with emphasis being given to negative WOM as complaining behavior (e.g., Richins, 1983; Willemsen, Neijens & Bronner, 2013). Such an emphasis is not surprising, given that the conceptualization of WOM has been limited to consumption-related expectations (e.g., Anderson, 1998). Also unsurprising, then, is that much of the discussion around WOM motivations has been primarily focused on positive or negative *product*-related experiences driving positive or negative WOM respectively (e.g., Richins, 1983). Helping the company, altruism, and extracting vengeance for a negative product experience have all been discussed as WOM motivations (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Sundaram, et al., 1998).

Furthermore, approval utility-based motivations also come into play in encouraging WOM behaviors (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Specifically, self-enhancement through the projection of a certain version of oneself through WOM can also motivate one to engage in

WOM behaviors. The desire to entertain others as well as to help them (altruism) may also serve as approval-based motivators (Berger, 2014). Additionally, homeostase utility, that is, the desire for balance in one's life may also motivate one to speak negatively about an organization. In particular, the desire to vent one's feelings, to make sense of a situation, as well as to seek emotional support from others may also drive negative WOM behaviors (Sundaram et al., 1998).

Less studied in the literature, however, are negative WOM behaviors arising out of customers' reactions to corporate (mis)conduct. And yet, much research has shown that not only do instances of corporate misconduct lower customers' relational perceptions (Krishna et al., 2018) and elicit outrage (Lindenmeier, Schleer & Priel, 2012), they also engender lower purchase intentions among consumers and increase intentions to engage in punitive actions against the organization (Romani, Grappi & Bagozzi, 2013). It logically follows, therefore, that instances of corporate misconduct may result in punitive actions against the offending organization manifesting in the form of negative WOM behaviors.

A question that arises, then, is which of the motivations discussed in relation to product experience-related WOM motivations would also translate to WOM motivations in the context of corporate misconduct. The motivators discussed in earlier paragraphs deserve attention. The approval and homeostase utility-related motivators, for instance, may hold importance in driving negative WOM behaviors in the context of corporate misconduct. Specifically, the desire for self-enhancement, to entertain others, and to help them make an informed decision (altruism) by knowing what the company did may continue to influence individuals' negative WOM behaviors. The need to vent about the situation and to make sense of it, as well as to seek emotional support regarding the misconduct may also motivate negative WOM behaviors. Furthermore, the expectancy violation experienced by consumers due to the corporate misconduct (S. Kim et al., 2019) may also trigger the desire to take

revenge on the company for violating their expectations. The need for vengeance, then, may also be a motivator for negative WOM behaviors. The following hypothesis is therefore posited.

H2: Negative WOM behaviors are predicted by (a) vengeance, (b) emotional support, (c) venting, (d) sense-making, (e) altruism, (f) entertainment, and (g) self-enhancement motivations.

Then, although J.-N. Kim and Grunig's (2011) situational motivation accounts for individuals' readiness for problem solving regarding a specific issue, it does not account for WOM behaviors aimed at entities responsible for the issue (e.g., organizations engaging in corporate misconduct). The STOPS framework posits that individuals' situational motivation in problem solving results in a variety of information behaviors about the issue. We also know from the preceding paragraphs that individuals' WOM behaviors are influenced by different WOM motivations. It would therefore not be a stretch to argue that individuals' situational motivation may also underpin different WOM motivations. We therefore posit the following hypothesis:

H3: Situational motivation in problem solving is positively associated with (a) vengeance, (b) emotional support, (c) venting, (d) sense-making, (e) altruism, (f) entertainment, and (g) self-enhancement motivations.

The role of outrage as it relates to motivation also deserves further attention. In instances of corporate misconduct, outrage has been found to be a powerful predictor of consumers' behavioral intentions against the offending organization. Indeed, Grappi et al. (2013b) found outrage to motivate individuals' negative WOM behaviors against an organization. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is posited:

H4: Outrage is positively associated with negative WOM behaviors.

Furthermore, since outrage is an emotional state, it would logically follow that it may trigger homeostatic motivations. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) evoked balance theory (Heider, 1946, 1958) to note that a positive or negative consumption experience may result in an imbalance within the customer, resulting in the need to restore a state of equilibrium. Such equilibrium may be restored through actions driven by homeostatic motivations. Outrage resulting from corporate misconduct too may result in such disequilibrium, which may be addressed through homeostatic motivations. Einwiller et al. (2017) too noted that the agitation energizes behavior which is “directed at achieving particular goals,” i.e., motives (p. 1181). Homeostatic motivations of venting, vengeance, sense-making, and emotional support may therefore be triggered by outrage. The following hypotheses are therefore posited.

H5: Outrage is positively associated with (a) vengeance, (b) emotional support, (c) venting, and (d) sense-making motivations.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Data Collection**

In order to test the proposed hypotheses, survey data were collected using an online research panel through Qualtrics in December 2016 among Singaporeans. Respondents were first asked whether they identified as consumers of any one or more of four brands, i.e., Adidas, Nestle, Dell, and Apple. These four brands were identified based on their ranking as some of the more ethical companies in the world according to indices released by *Forbes* and *Business Insider*. The respondents were asked to choose one brand of the four that they used most. They could select one of the four brands listed earlier from a list or choose “I don’t use any of these brands.” Those who responded “I don’t use any of these brands” were eliminated from this analysis.

A total of 461 brand users responded to the survey, of which 93 were between the ages 20 to 29, 109 participants were between 30 to 39 years old, 115 were between 40 and 49

years old, 103 individuals were between 50 and 59 years old, and 41 participants were over 60 years of age. Of the participants, 228 self-reported being male and 233 said they identified as female. Quotas related to age and gender were included to ensure that the sample reflected the population distribution of Singapore (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2015). The education and ethnic distribution of the sample are reported in Tables 1 and 2.

[Insert Tables 1 and 2]

### **3.2. Survey Procedures**

Upon choosing the brand that they use, participants responded to a series of questions about their demographics, followed by their attitudes toward, relationship, and other factors about the chosen brand. After responding to these items, the following vignette was shown to the participants:

After shopping, you enter a coffee shop. While reading a newspaper over coffee, you come across a news article stating that several global companies have been accused of gender discrimination at top management level. These companies face the potential of being sued for discriminating against women in employing and promoting them to the corporations' top management. Reporters also uncovered significant salary/wage gaps between the women and the men in the companies, with men being paid a lot more than the women. In the news article, Amnesty International argued that these companies have intentionally discriminated against women to save costs and maximize profits. One of the companies implicated in this article is [Adidas, Nestle, Dell, Apple].

To ensure that the participants read the vignette, the vignette was left on the screen for a minimum of 25 seconds. After reading the vignette, the participants then responded to a series of questions about their feelings and behaviors about the organization in light of what they had just read. Participants were reminded of the fictional nature of the vignette prior to

their exiting the survey, and asked to confirm that they understood the corporate brands had not actually been accused of the gender discrimination as per the best knowledge of the researchers.

### **3.3. Measures**

The design of the survey and operationalization of various constructs were made based on extant literature as explained below. All items were measured using Likert scale, running from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

#### **3.3.1. WOM motivations**

Measurement items for word-of-mouth motivations related to corporate misconduct were developed using existing conceptualizations. Based on Berger's (2014) and Sundaram et al.'s (1998) conceptualizations of word of mouth motivations, measurement items were created. These included, "I would be motivated to share my opinions about this situation to sound more intelligent," and "I would be motivated to share my opinions about this issue to sound like an expert in it" (see Table 3).

[Insert Table 3]

#### **3.3.2. Situational motivation**

Three items were used to measure situational motivation. We adopted and revised J. - N. Kim and Grunig's (2011) statements as following: "I would be curious about this issue", "I would often think about this situation to solve it," and "I would want to better understand this situation."

#### **3.3.3. Information forwarding**

To measure information forwarding behavior intention about the issue, we adopted and revised J.-N. Kim and Grunig's (2011) statements as follows: "I am likely to spend time discussing this issue with someone I do not know well," "I am likely to discuss this issue with my family and/or friends," and "I am likely to have conversations about this issue with

others.” The valence of these measures was kept deliberately neutral to account for both positive and negative word of mouth, as per the theoretical assumptions of the STOPS.

### **3.3.4. Negative WOM**

Consumers' negative WOM behaviors were adapted from Romani et al.'s (2013) scale measuring destructive punitive action. The three items were “I am likely to say to people negative things about the company to generate a negative public identity,” “I am likely to recommend people not to buy products or services of this company,” and “I am likely to proactively post a negative comment or an image to criticize this brand via social media.”

### **3.3.5. Consumer outrage**

Consumer outrage was measured using three items adapted from Grégoire and Fisher (2008), including “I feel outraged,” “I feel resentful,” and “I feel angry.”

## **3.4. Data analysis**

Data were analyzed using Stata IC/14. First, Cronbach's alpha for all observed variables were calculated to ensure reliability of the measurement items. All variables were found to have a Cronbach's alpha of  $>.70$ , with the lowest being .768 and the highest being .954 (see Table 4 for Cronbach's alpha values). Following this analysis, structural equation modelling was performed using Stata IC/14. Maximum likelihood procedures with imputation of missing data were used in conducting the analyses. Hu and Bentler's (1999) joint-criteria, were used to assess model fit, whereby  $CFI >.95$ ,  $SRMR \leq .10$ , or  $RMSEA \leq .06$  and  $SRMR \leq .10$  is considered a good model. Standardized coefficients are reported.

[Insert Table 4]

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Hypothesis testing**

First, to confirm the operationalization of WOM motivations, a confirmatory factor analysis of the seven WOM motivations was conducted, and achieved good fit ( $\chi^2(188) =$

658.428,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .955, RMSEA = 0.074; SRMR = .039). Then, to test the hypotheses, structural equation modelling was utilized using Stata IC/14. Kline's (1998) two-step process was used, such that the measurement model was tested first. The measurement model achieved acceptable fit ( $\chi^2(309) = 1008.848$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .935, RMSEA = 0.070). The structural model (see Figure 1) was then tested and was also found to have acceptable fit ( $\chi^2(587) = 1596.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .935, RMSEA = 0.061). The paths were then analyzed to test the hypotheses. Pre-vignette brand attitude was added as a control variable and was measured by three items adapted from Spears and Singh (2004) where participants responded on a scale of one to five whether they thought the brand was bad/good, unappealing/appealing, and unlikable/likable ( $\alpha = .907$ ).

[Insert Figure 1]

First, H1 predicted a positive relationship between situational motivation in problem solving and information forwarding, and was supported ( $\beta = .746$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In H2, the seven WOM motivations were expected to predict negative WOM. However, only four relationships were found as emotional support (H2b), entertainment (H2f), and self-enhancement (H2g) failed to significantly predict negative WOM behaviors. Vengeance (H2a:  $\beta = .675$ ,  $p < .001$ ), venting (H2c:  $\beta = .259$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and altruism (H2e:  $\beta = .173$ ,  $p < .01$ ) all significantly predicted negative WOM behaviors. In contrast, sense-making was negatively associated with WOM behavior (H2d:  $\beta = -.389$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Pre-vignette brand attitude was found to be associated with negative WOM behaviors ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $p < .05$ ) but not with valence-neutral information forwarding ( $\beta = .014$ , n.s.). Positive pre-vignette attitudes were found to be associated with negative WOM behaviors, even though this effect size was small.

Next, H3 predicted a positive relationship between situational motivation in problem solving and all seven WOM motivations. All paths were found to be positive, such that H3 ( $p$



< .001) was supported (see Figure 1). However, neither H4 nor H5 were supported, as outrage was not found to predict either WOM motivations or the four homeostatic motivations.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand customers' motivations in engaging in information forwarding and negative WOM behaviors in light of alleged corporate misconduct. To do so, an online survey was conducted in Singapore using alleged workplace gender discrimination as the corporate misconduct (N = 461). We found situational motivation in problem solving not only to predict customers' issue-specific information forwarding behaviors, but also to predict their WOM motivations. However, only four of the tested WOM motivations were found to influence negative WOM, and outrage was found neither to impact WOM motivations nor behaviors. The theoretical and practical implications of this study are discussed next.

One of the key purposes of this study was to propose a theoretical model of WOM motivations to explicate individuals' negative WOM to an issue beyond valence-neutral information forwarding behaviors included in the STOPS model. The results of this study showed that customers' situational motivation in problem solving was strongly associated with all seven word of mouth motivations, indicating that issue-specific motivation to learn more about the situation can trigger WOM motivations about the situation and against the perpetrator of the situation. However, not all of this WOM motivation translates to negative WOM behavior, as is discussed next.

We found that of the seven WOM motivations included in this study based on prior scholarship, only three (altruism, vengeance, and venting) were positively associated with negative WOM, while sense-making negatively predicted negative WOM. This finding indicates that cases of corporate misconduct may trigger other-serving motivations among customers (altruism), and motivate them to warn others about the deeds of the company. This

finding is in line with previous research on customers' complaint behavior and motivations (Bach & S. Kim, 2012; Sundaram et al., 1998). Vengeance too was a predictor of negative WOM, and this finding coupled with altruism indicates that not only do customers engage in negative WOM against a company to punish it, but also to get others to punish it, even though they may report doing so from the standpoint of helping others (altruism).

Our findings also support Romani et al.'s (2013) notion of destructive actions as well as Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp's (2010) desire for revenge (2010). Venting, i.e., expressing negative emotions such as anger, is one of the most common behaviors in the context of product/service failure and customer dissatisfaction. However, as the alleged gender discrimination does not directly affect customers' product/service experience, this venting motivation may be explained by expectation violation theory (Burgoon, 1993). People have certain expectations of corporations and violation of such expectations creates a dilemma in their minds, which in turn triggers negative emotional responses (S. Kim et al., 2019).

What factors may drive motivations that are more reflective rather than emotional regulation motivations (i.e., vengeance and venting) may be a worthy area of future exploration. Previous research has found that vengeance as a WOM motivation operates most powerfully when related to consumption experiences (e.g., Sundaram, Mitra & Webster, 1998), i.e., product and/or service failures. The specific corporate conduct described in this study was one where the respondents remained unaffected (i.e., not direct victims of gender discrimination), and therefore, see vengeance as an emotional regulation device. However, could a positive prior consumer-corporate relationship decrease emotional regulation motivations and increase reflection? Or are there individual-level factors, such as moral orientations, consumers' expectations of business, and so on, that may influence different types of motivations? Future research may seek to understand the answers to these questions.

Interestingly, we found that consumers who wanted to process the situation and make sense of it were less inclined to talk negatively about the company. Sense making as a motivation, i.e., consumers' desire to understand a specific situation (in this study a corporate misconduct) and to process their feelings about the issue (Rimé et al., 1992) and its perpetrator, was negatively associated with negative WOM behaviors. This finding indicates that not all customers are motivated to harm or punish the company. In fact, customers' desire to reflect on the issue and make sense of it reduced their intentions to talk negatively about the company. This finding may indicate that when faced with allegations of corporate misconduct, corporations may want to adopt the strategy of clarifying rumors and providing customers with information proactively to help them process the situation (Horbach, Breit, & Mamelund, 2018). Provision of clarifying information directly from the source, i.e., the company, may help accelerate customers' sense-making process and reduce the likelihood of negative WOM from these customers.

Additionally, emotional support seeking as a motivator was found to be a predictor of negative WOM behavior. Although customers are not directly affected by the specific case of corporate misconduct, the allegations of workplace gender discrimination may offend their moral sensibilities, which may drive them to try to find comfort simply by talking about the case with others. It is important to note here that the data for this study were collected prior to the momentum gained by the #metoo movement, so workplace gender discrimination was not necessarily an issue that has been paid attention to at the societal level, making this finding even more meaningful.

Among the seven motivations explored in this study, entertainment and self-enhancement as motivators are worth further research. People are motivated to talk about situations such as the one included in this study to their social networks (online and offline) as social currency. As literature has indicated, controversial topics (Chen & Berger, 2013) or

surprising things (Berger & Milkman, 2012) are more likely to be shared by those attempting to entertain their social networks, a finding echoed in this study. Self-enhancement is a fundamental motivation that drives humans (Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 1993) as people like to be perceived positively by others (Berger, 2014). As a result, they may want to share advice or opinions that they believe will garner a positive reception from their audiences, i.e., social networks, and, thereby, positive impressions. In the case of word of mouth about corporate misconduct, people may want to talk about it to make themselves seem knowledgeable about the case and want others to perceive them as experts on the topic. However, those motivations did not lead to negative WOM behavior in this study. This non-significant finding may indicate that although self-enhancement and entertainment may work as motivators for WOM in general, in the case of situations where the individual has a prior (transactional) relationship with the entity accused of misconduct they may not necessarily be important. In other words, self-enhancement and entertainment-related motivations may not necessarily translate to intentions to harm an organization's reputation. Future studies may seek to understand whether this finding translates to individuals who are not customers of an organization accused of misconduct, as the lack of a prior relationship with the organization may factor into their motivations.

Although H4 and H5, which posited relationships between consumer outrage and four types of WOM motivations (i.e., vengeance, emotional support, venting and sense-making) and negative WOM behaviors were not supported, possibly due to the inclusion of situational motivation in the model, the dynamics among situational motivation in problem solving, customer outrage and WOM motivations make for interesting implications. H3 predicted a positive relationship between situational motivation in problem solving and the seven WOM motivations. All seven WOM motivations were found to be significantly associated with situational motivation in problem solving. This finding addresses the gap that the situational

theories so far have not been able to explain the intermediary processes between situational motivation and valenced information behavior (e.g., Vasquez & Taylor, 2001). This finding indicates that situation-specific cognitive and epistemic readiness to make problem-solving efforts, i.e., situational motivation in problem solving can drive individuals' behavioral motivations, providing more specification/context for individuals' valence-specific behavior. Customers are motivated to talk about corporate misconduct to satisfy their self-motive, such as self-enhancement, as well as other-serving motives, i.e., altruism, all of which are underpinned by situation specific motivation in problem solving. The findings from our study are in line with Alexandrov et al.'s (2013) proposition that people are motivated to engage in WOM to satisfy their personal and social needs. Given the important role played by situational motivation in the STOPS, indeed, scholars have used situational motivation as a proxy for the three perceptual variables (e.g., Krishna, 2017; 2018), identifying how situational motivation interacts with WOM motivations adds another layer to our understanding of the problem solving process.

Another explanation for the relatively meager role of outrage found in the findings may be the nature of Singaporean consumers. As Sriramesh, Moghan and Wei (2007) found, Singaporean consumers are generally less likely to engage in complaining and negative WOM behaviors for a variety of reasons. Not only do they not want to be perceived as trouble makers to organizations, they also are less likely to engage in negative WOM because they do not want to dredge up the outrage caused by the offender (Sriramesh et al., 2007). This desire to let anger dissipate and move may be a function of culture (Sriramesh et al., 2007) and may explain why outrage was found to influence neither WOM behaviors nor WOM motivations.

### **5.1. Limitations**

This study has a few limitations. First, the scales used to measure word-of-mouth motivations were not exhaustive. Further work is needed to improve upon the scales utilized

in this study, and particularly account for how different motivations can be operationalized in the context of negative and positive word of mouth. Second, the proposed theoretical model should be tested in different contexts to validate our contentions. Additionally, the findings articulated in this study are limited to the population of Singaporean users on Qualtrics, and should be interpreted carefully in that light. Sriramesh, Morgan, and Lim (2007) found that Singaporean consumers rarely exhibit activist behavior due to their collectivistic culture. These consumers find complaining a very troublesome behavior for themselves as well as for retail managers who should handle their complaints. They do not want to be perceived as “overt activists” (Sriramesh et al., 2007, p. 320) in their society, where activism is highly discouraged. Furthermore, they are skeptical and apathetic about organizations’ management of complaints (Sriramesh et al., 2007). These consumer insights are worth re-visiting for future research. This may indicate that Western societies with individualistic culture could have different patterns of consumer outrage, WOM motivations, and negative WOM behavior.

Future research may also want to reconsider pre-vignette brand attitude not as a control variable but as a moderator in the analysis. Although such analyses were beyond the scope of the current investigation, one may reasonably argue that those with a prior negative brand attitude may react more vociferously to the issue than those with a prior positive brand attitude. On the other hand, those with prior positive attitudes may display even more outrage at the company for perceived betrayal of trust, and react more negatively than those with prior negative attitudes. Indeed, the small but significant relationship between pre-vignette attitudes and negative WOM found in this study supports this argument. Future studies should further explore these contentions. Furthermore, the terms brand, company, and corporate brand are used interchangeably in this manuscript, primarily for better flow. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study provide a strong starting point for further investigations of public behavior related to various issues and transgressions by corporations.

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## Tables

Table 1

*Ethnicity distribution of the sample*

Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent
Chinese	386	83.7
Malay	24	5.2
Indian	32	6.9
Other	19	4.1
Total	461	100

Table 2

*Education attainment of the sample*

Education attainment	Frequency	Percent
University degree or higher	245	53.1
Polytechnic diploma	104	22.6
ITE or other vocational certificate	25	5.4
Junior College (A Level)	24	5.2
Secondary O or N level	60	13.0
Primary school (PSLE)	2	.4
No formal qualification	1	.2
Total	461	100.0

Table 3

*Measurement items for WOM motivations*

	Items	Mean	SD	Factor Loadings
<b>Self-enhancement</b> $\alpha = .917$	I would be motivated to share my opinions about this issue to sound more intelligent.	3.19	.928	.883
	I would be motivated to share my opinions about this issue to sound like an expert on this issue.	3.02	.918	.889
	I would be motivated to talk about this situation as it will make me sound smart	3.19	.915	.887
<b>Entertainment</b> $\alpha = .882$	I would be motivated to talk about this issue with others for entertaining conversation	3.14	.967	.728
	I would be motivated to talk about this issue with others because it is surprising	3.21	.930	.821
	I would be motivated to talk about this issue with others because it is interesting	3.25	.900	.838
	I would be motivated to talk about this issue with others because it is controversial	3.38	.880	.855
<b>Venting</b> $\alpha = .914$	I would be motivated to express anger about this situation to feel better	3.11	.970	.891
	I would be motivated to express anger about this issue to feel relieved	2.00	.976	.900

	I would be motivated to vent to my anger	2.96	.957	.858
<b>Vengeance</b> $\alpha = .955$	I would be motivated to say negative things about this company to punish it	2.76	1.018	.934
	I would be motivated to say negative things about this company to take revenge against it	2.58	.963	.917
	I would be motivated to say negative things about this company to give it a hard time	2.70	1.012	.957
<b>Altruism</b> $\alpha = .924$	I would be motivated to share information about this issue with others to help them	3.39	.869	.861
	I would be motivated to share information about this situation with others to help them make better decisions about this brand in the future	3.35	.908	.932
	I would be motivated to share information about this situation with others to help them avoid a negative experience with the brand in the future	3.38	.930	.901
<b>Sense-making</b> $\alpha = .921$	I would be motivated to talk about this situation to better understand how I feel about this issue	3.27	.935	.873
	I would be motivated to talk about this issue to make sense of it	3.32	.899	.923
	I would be motivated to talk about this issue to make sense of what is happening and why	3.38	.914	.886
<b>Emotional Support</b> $\alpha = .934$	I would be motivated to talk about this issue as it will comfort me	3.17	.905	.924
	I would be motivated to talk about this issue as it will give me consolation	3.14	.909	.935
	I would be motivated to talk about this issue to get emotional support from people I know	3.17	.926	.871

Table 4

*Reliability estimates for tested variables*

Variable	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE
Situational Motivation	3	.768	.548
WOM Motivation – Self-enhancement	3	.917	.737
WOM Motivation – Emotional Support	3	.934	.804
WOM Motivation – Venting	3	.913	.748
WOM Motivation – Sense-making	3	.921	.801
WOM Motivation – Vengeance	3	.954	.878
WOM Motivation – Entertainment	4	.882	.660
WOM Motivation – Altruism	3	.924	.808
Negative WOM	3	.889	.707
Information Forwarding	3	.793	.643
Customer Outrage	3	.924	.799
Pre-Vignette Brand Attitude	3	.907	.766

Figures

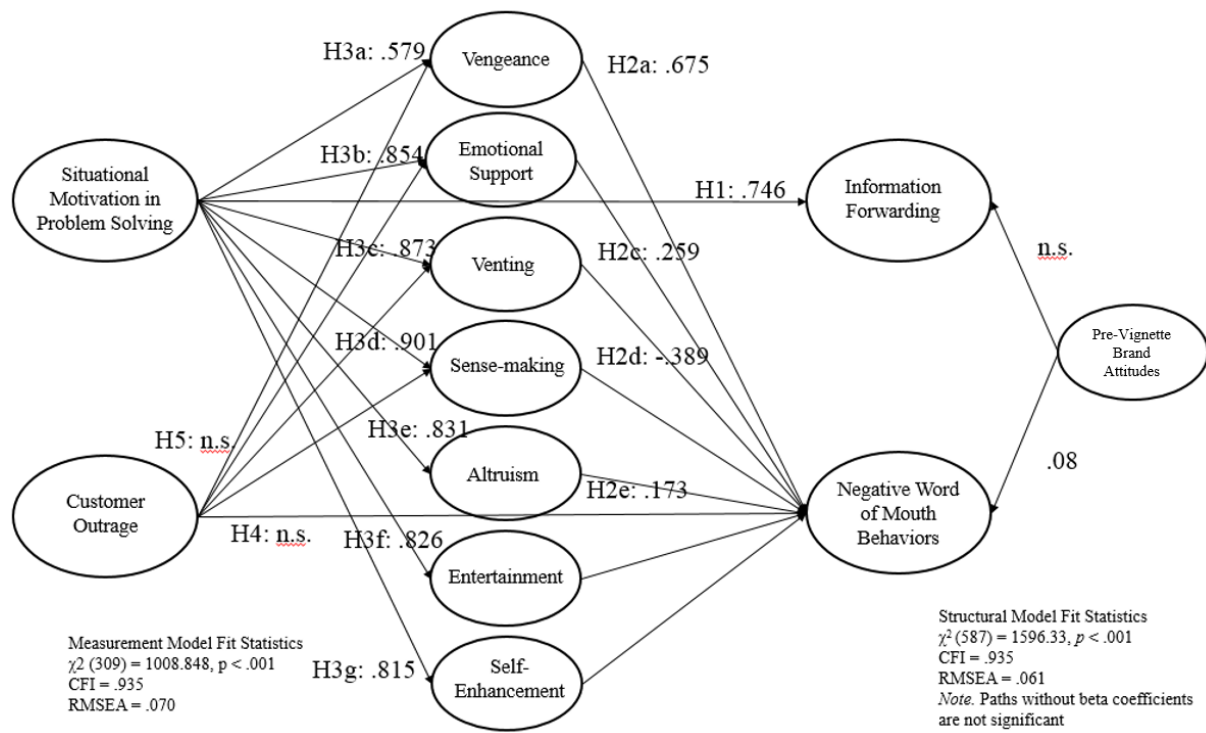


Figure 1. Structural model with results