Investigating the Impact of Virtual Communities on the Reputation of Romanian Health Care Organizations. 
A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract: - The objective of this paper is to investigate the impact of electronic word-of-mouth messages from a health care virtual community on a health care organization’s activity and to discover whether the online reputation formed on a patient oriented community is monitored by the marketing specialists. We interviewed 6 health care marketing specialists from Romania that have the greatest market shares in Bucharest to find answers to our research objective. Even if it was more of an exploratory research, the interviewer followed some guidelines to conduct the study. The results showed that the health care marketing specialists know what electronic word of mouth means but they do not monitor the health care forums.

Key-Words: - health care services, online reputation, patient oriented communities, electronic word of mouth, eWOM, virtual communities

1 Introduction
Daily, organizations enter the markets without knowing they will survive; therefore, managers should adopt a creative perspective when targeting consumers. Most of the times, even if an approach is innovative, it can be easily copied by the competition. However, consumers distinguish the services offered by companies after the messages launched by the organizations, as parts of the Marketing Communication policies. Duncan & Moriarty [1] indicated that a message might be the outcome of several characteristics of the original source especially in the case of services. Accordingly, there are planned messages, which are sent through controlled channels; services messages, which are the results of a service delivery process, of an interaction between a provider and a consumer, of the appearance and attitude of the personnel, the equipment used, and, the unplanned messages which are the outcomes in the form of indirect feedbacks of consumers’ experiences.

On today’s markets, specialists (e.g.[2]-[4]) concluded that, in order to implement an efficient and effective strategic marketing approach, an organization that is service oriented, has to adopt an
Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) perspective. Furthermore, the main objective that would motivate an organization to adopt an IMC strategy is the management of its image [5]. Furthermore, many experts in Marketing Communications believe that in order to determine the image of an organization, it is recommended, first, to analyse the reputation (e.g. [6]). According to Herbig & Milewicz [7], reputation is represented by an “estimation over time of an attribute of an entity”, suggesting that it is a “barometer” of the past actions and experiences of other people with the organization.

The general image of an organization, on one hand, consists of one dimension, which is made up of past feelings, beliefs and attitudes, that is, the past dimension, and, on the other hand, the other dimension, called the present dimension, which encompasses feelings, beliefs and attitudes of consumers in the present time. The past dimension consists of the reputation, which was at a given time, a present image that evolved into a formed image in the minds of the consumers, whereas the present dimension consists of an already known image that would, eventually, evolve into a formed image. The past formed image and the present formed image would define the general image (figure 1).

The interest in reputation has grown specifically in the context of the development of the new communication technology, that is, the online environment [8]. Many studies focused on the research of online reputation, considering it an unofficial organizational communication, not as a part of the marketing communication strategy of an organization [9]. Therefore, the online reputation is created more on experiences with the help of the internet and gathered narratively [10].

![Figure 1: The general image of an organization (adapted from [24])]
respondents would have had the intention to purchase a health care service based on the eWOM messages read on a dedicated online community, while 27.60% denied being tempted to purchase a health care service based on the eWOM messages [24].

Despite the fact that health care services have been researched several times from different perspectives, in Romania, there is not enough transparency when it comes to health care organizations offering information about certain activities. Therefore, the objectives of this paper are:

1. To study the impact of eWOM messages from a health care virtual community on an organization’s activity;
2. To investigate whether the online reputation formed on a health care virtual community is monitored by the marketing specialists.

2 Material and Methods
One organizational variable, which is influenced by the sum of eWOM messages on a health care virtual community, is the reputation of a physician and implicitly the reputation of the organization the physician represents.

We believe that the most suitable approach to assess the outcomes to our objectives is the structured interview as it offers anonymity and confidentiality [21]. We used the information interview as the sample consisted of specialists, namely managers who have key positions in Marketing Communication Departments of health care organizations in Romania. The health care organizations appeared in a list of both private and public health care units, which were assumed to deliver high quality services as well as being properly equipped, according to the report published by the Romanian Ministry of Health in 2011 [23].

Based on a theoretical sampling, we selected 26 health care organizations. Consequently, we have sent the persons in charge an e-mail inviting them to take part in the study. Some (11) rejected the invitation motivating that their marketing strategies are confidential and others (9) did not answer at all to our invitation. Therefore, our sample consisted of 6 specialists who represented only the private health care organizations.

The structured interviews took place one week in July 2012, in the offices of the health care marketing specialists between the hours scheduled by them, after confidentiality agreements were signed. Furthermore, the structured interviews did not last more than 45-50 minutes and the researcher who interviewed the respondents followed the interview guidelines that can be found in the Annex.

3 Findings
All participants knew what eWOM represented, defining it as an “online form of communication” or a form of “communication through internet” between two or more persons, which can be encountered in any field; some experts even have mentioned health care.

Most respondents indicated that eWOM cannot affect health care services in Romania because of several reasons such as the lack of money due to the fact that health care consumers still depend on the national insurance companies and their coverage expenses in public health care services.

Furthermore, some specialists consider eWOM messages useless and most of them do not give special attention to them. Some experts motivated that it was not their job to monitor POCs. Indeed, if they were not interested to monitor eWOM then they would not have the necessary mechanisms to perform it.

Some respondents agreed that there was a rational link between reputation and eWOM but they did not know how to demonstrate it and implicitly to measure it. In addition, most specialists knew that POCs exist in the online Romanian environment.

Moreover, most respondents agreed that it was not their job to “punish” a physician who has negative eWOM feedbacks related to his/her service delivery on Romanian POCs, and that no physician would check POCs related to their service delivery because “it is like distrusting your professional training”. Still, most experts considered that reputation might affect the profitability of a health care organization in number of patients, but some said that even if reputation might affect the profitability, the impact would be too low to be taken into consideration.

Out of all marketing specialists, only one admitted that for three months he had monitored certain health care discussion boards but he did not know what would be the outcome of his monitoring. He strongly believed that health care organizations should monitor POCs if “they truly want to apply marketing in health care services”.

4 Discussion
Information obtained, theoretically, cannot be generalized [21] despite the fact that, practically,
our results might be applied to most Romanian health care organizations that activate in the private sector. Although the number of participants interviewed was low, most respondents were marketing specialists who represented health care organizations with the highest market share in Romania.

Organizations should get involved in the online communities by providing relevant and complete information about them in an active manner. Still determining the quality of the online posts is difficult due to the fact that consumers are aware of the marketers’ tricks in influencing eWOM, namely by compensating consumers to review products or services or even post on their own positive reviews [26]. Moreover, owing to the intangibility, the evaluation of the outcome cannot be performed before the consumption experience, leading to a higher perceived risk by consumers and making them more dependable on the interpersonal influence of eWOM and virtual communities. Even if, in some aspects, health care services are similar to other services, there are several characteristics which are reflected in the online virtual consumer behaviour. More precise, in service fields such as restaurants (e.g., [27]) or tourism (e.g., [28]), the presence of opinion leaders is easily observed. Furthermore, for these type of businesses, specialists (e.g., [26]-[29]) advice managers to integrate in their marketing strategies the opinion leaders because the information gets effectively transmitted as they take part actively in the promotional process and, at the same time, they are empowered to disseminate a clear image to potential clients. In contrast, in POCs, as noted earlier, the eWOM is unintended transmitted, suggesting that the comments of opinion leaders should not be used as advertising. However, we expect our findings to provide some insight for organizations in order to help them better manage their consumers. As such, we recommend health care managers to actively monitor some well-known consumer forums because thousands of various opinions are published each day and some might offer valuable and useful feedbacks which combined with marketing strategies would have greater positive outcomes. Another method to keep track of an online reputation, especially in the case of health care services, is for organizations to establish their own consumer discussion zones. The new consumer communication channels should be similar to forums but differently administered. In this way, organizations would build more interactive relationships with their consumers and have the opportunities to diminish an undesired “noise” or stop the usage of advertisements that are not in their favour. In addition, in our opinion, the results of the structured interviews were coherent and plausible and we claim them to be accepted as “seemingly true” [22].

To conclude, we believe that our findings are relevant for the Romanian private health care organizations. Most health care marketing specialists do not take into account the eWOM messages on POCs and implicitly do not monitor the reputation of a physician or the reputation of their health care organizations even if they have imagined a rational link between the reputation concept and POCs.

References:
Please read the following paragraph written by Robert Moran in one of his articles:

"Today consumers rate sellers on eBay, restaurants on Yelp, and local companies on Angie’s List, providing detailed product reviews online. Job hunters and employees can read and rate employers on Glassdoor.com. College students rate their professors on ratemyprofessor.com. Neighbors and friends can view each other’s reputations (and their own) at honestly.com. And Facebook’s more than 800 million users can endorse a product or organization by “liking” it. Soon we will also rate corporations on their behavior and have real-time mobile access to the aggregated, stakeholder-generated reputation scores of nearly every corporation on the planet. We will use this information to reward and punish companies by buying their products or spurning them. We will have entered into a completely new era of corporate reputation, one in which reputation is radically transparent and extremely valuable."

1. What do you think electronic word-of-mouth means?
2. Do you think this concept might be applied in any field?
3. How can electronic word of mouth affect health care services?
4. You, as a representative of the “X” health care organization, take into account the effects produced by electronic word of mouth?
5. Do you have any mechanism that would measure the influence of electronic word of mouth on your health care organization?
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Annex - The Interview Guide [24]

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- What do you think about reputation and health care services?
- Are there in Romania websites where information about the service deliveries of certain health organizations are described?
- How would you punish a physician that has considerable negative opinions regarding his service delivery?
- Do you think physicians check health care websites where opinions of their patients are posted?
- How can a bad reputation affect the profitability of a health care organization?