

**UNIVERSITY OF MEDICINE AND PHARMACY OF CRAIOVA
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PHD THESIS

THE ROLE OF eWOM COMMUNICATION IN HEALTH CARE MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING

ABSTRACT

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Key words: health, marketing, management, communication, virtual communication, eWOM communication, online communities, POC, negative emotions.

INTRODUCTION

*As **John Dalli**, European Commissioner for health and consumers protection, used to say in 2011, “Health has an important role in the life of each and one of us. The European Union plays an important part, sustaining the national governments in their efforts to maintain the population active and healthy for their entire lifecycle. The pressure on the health systems will grow due to some severe austerity measures and an old population. That is why, we have to improve the use of resources, which can prove to be valuable in the process of improving the health state of the population and maintain the efficiency and sustainability of the health systems, without maximizing the budgets allocated to health...health means wellbeing. A healthy population can lead to a viable economy. The health sector itself represents an engine of the economic growth, an important element in research and development, but also an important employer. That is why, a careful attention must be given to prevention and to the promotion of a longer, more active, healthy life by approaching the health determinants in the lifecycle, in other words...a better lifestyle in order to grow old beautifully... Moreover, a special care should also be given to innovation in the health field. New technologies in health, such as e-health, can contribute to a high quality act of patients care as far as health is concerned, in the same time maintaining the efficiency and sustainability of the health systems”. (Vladescu. C, Busoi. C, 2011)*

CHAPTER I. THE HEALTH CONCEPT

The health state was defined as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (the World Health Organization, 1948). Most of the existent definitions highlight the fact that health represents the result of the actions that produce it, such as nutrition, the immunization with the purpose of preventing diseases or the medical treatment in order to cure different affections.

Modern people affirm that health has some important dimensions: *emotional, intellectual, physical, social, spiritual*, each of them contributing to the wellbeing of a person. In order to maintain a good health state, these 5 dimensions must be placed on the positive axis of the life of a person.

The individual health is the basis of the *public health* concept. The purpose of the public health services is to train the members of the community to maintain and promote a healthy lifestyle, the main objective being the disease prevention.

The health dimensions can be influenced by some *factors: access to a competent medical health care system and sanitary education; environment factors; hereditary factors.*

The most important influence is given by lifestyle, which refers to the *overall way a person lives— attitudes, habits and behaviors in daily life.*

There are two types of elements which characterize the lifestyle: *sanogenetic* (which promote and strengthen health) et *pathogenic* (which represent the cause and risk factors)

The components of the lifestyle such as *work, recreation, feeding, problems solving, etc.*, consist of general behavior typologies.

The lifestyle presents the following variables: *sex, income, multifactorial demographic segmentation, psychographic segmentation, social class, etc.*

The *needs* of health care are situated at the base of *health care request*. The factors that influence the request of health care are the following: their price, the price of other goods, the individual income, age, family habits, educational level.

The main types of *health needs* are the following: *the perceived need* – what the patient appreciates that he needs; *demande need* – what the patient asks from a supplier of health care services; *normative need* – what a professional considers that a patient needs; *comparative need* – appears at the level of a population from the needs observed in other populations.

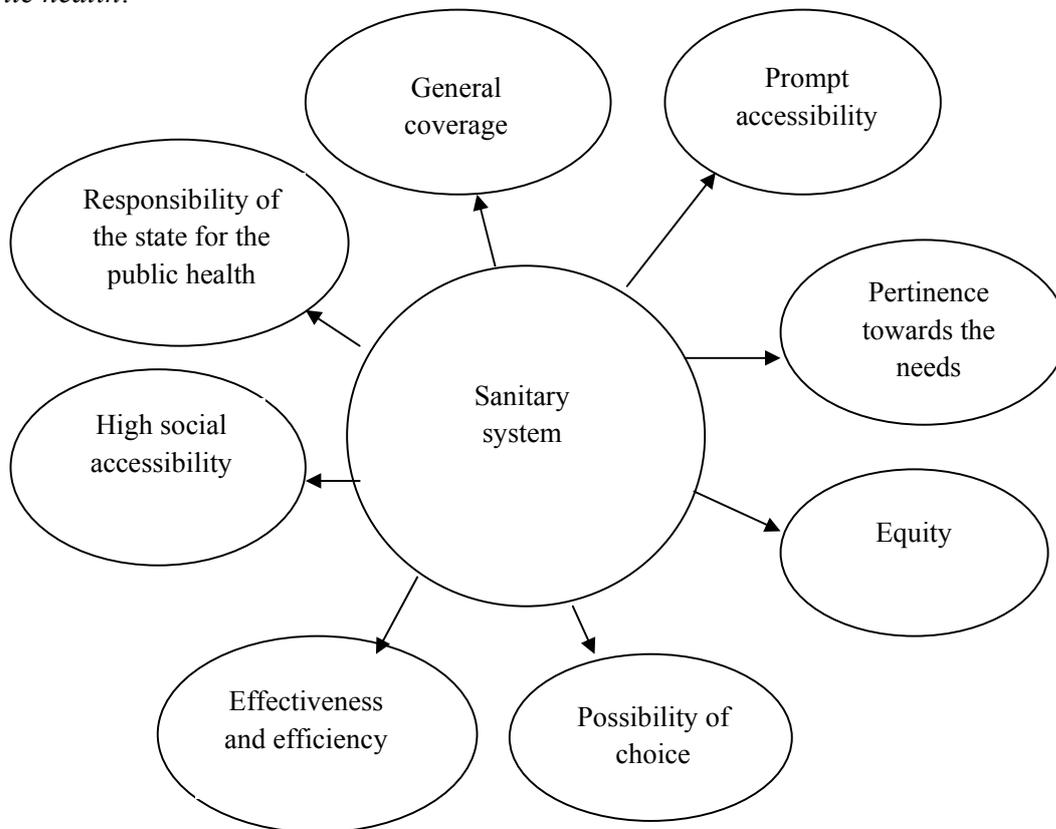
CHAPTER II. THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

The health system represents the sum of all the health organizations that make it up. These are different from the point of view of the organizational structure, logistics, intended purpose, organizational culture, but *the patient* represents their common denominator.

The health organizations are structured systems of interaction with the purpose of promoting, maintaining and improving the health state of the population, of different professional categories. They may be hospitals, diagnostic and treatment centers, clinics, dispensaries, medical offices, medical laboratories, rescue stations, etc.

The health system is directly dependant on funding – on the percent allocated from GDP – which is designed for the discovery of diseases in early stages, diminishing morbidity rates and optimizing the cost-efficiency relationship.

The main *conditions* which must be met by a performing health system refer to the following: *general coverage; prompt accessibility; pertinence to the needs; equity; possibility of choice; efficacy; high efficiency; wide social accessibility; responsibility of the state towards the public health.*



The characteristics of a performing sanitary system

CHAPTER III. THE HEALTH CARE MANAGEMENT

Management is the tool through which all the social, economical, technological, political and human changes can be rationally organized and spread in the social body ensemble. Management is dominated not only by intuition but also by reason, being not only under the incidence of art but also of science, this being the one that organizes and structures the practical actions in a coherent set of concepts and investigation tools.

Management is defined as the process of projecting and maintaining an environment in which the persons who work together efficiently meet selected and well-defined purposes.

The content of the notion of management targets the accuracy of the *processes ensemble, actions, functions, etc.*, which allows the coordination of results and the achievement of the organizational purposes.

The health care management can be defined as “a leading process of a system or of a health organization so that the human and material resources can be used in a more rational manner, with the purpose of achieving the objective – the patients’ health”.

The health care management must have a modern long-term strategic vision due to the necessity of permanently reporting to the requests and conditions of the real reference environment in which the hospital/ clinic functions.

The management strategies have the role of concentrating the efforts and allowing the coordination of the activities, channelizing the human energies, using the material resources, reducing incertitude, giving coherence to actions and promoting efficiency.

Medical management must have a modern long-term strategic vision due to the necessity of permanently reporting to the requests and conditions of the real reference environment in which the hospital functions.

In order for a sanitary organization to always adapt to a constantly evolving market it must be preoccupied, besides satisfying the patient, by realizing the strategic planning, defining and managing the activities in which it chose to invest.

As a result, the success of each organization depends on the *efficient management of these relationships and on the adequate capitalization of the resources offered by each key stakeholder so that, each group to receive the benefits which it looks for and obtain them from this relationship.*

CHAPTER IV. HEALTH CARE MARKETING

Marketing has an overwhelming importance for modern market economies. Marketing leads to avoiding traps and temptations from the perspective of the requirements imposed by the market economy; it highly contributes to the flexibility and adaptability of the organization in the socio-economic environment.

The specific marketing elements are the following: customer orientation, marketing integration in the activity of the organization and the emphasis on profitability.

Marketing orientation is made through the identification, the supervision and the anticipation of the demands and needs of clients, the ability to adapt; creative spirit for renewal and modernization; systemic vision; maximum efficiency.

Marketing orientation of an organization should have the following characteristics: responsiveness to external environment; the identification, the supervision and the anticipation of the demands and needs of clients, the ability to adapt; creative spirit for renewal and modernization; systemic vision; maximum efficiency.

The main reason of adopting the marketing principles in the frame of health care marketing can be found in the objectives of the reform of the health care system.

The evolution of health care marketing is an ongoing process; the pressure coming from the microenvironment, the technological level, the demographic environment and the society perception have led to the expansion of health care services. The social and demographic changes, as well as the improvement of the technological level are main factors that have opened the doors for the integration of new reliable services.

The creative and dynamic strategies are the ones that identify new and improved methods in order to satisfy the target clients.

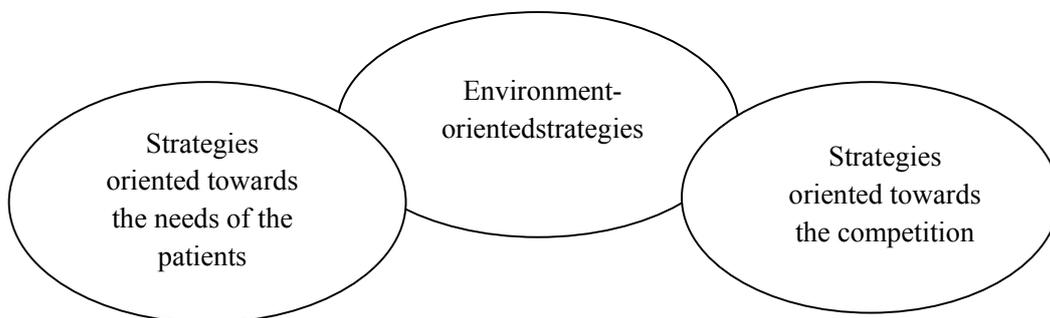
In health care services, the nucleus of the marketing strategy is represented by the quality of services, that comes from the following: correctness, promptitude, the professionalism of the staff, kindness towards clients. The implementation of a coherent strategy, as well as the definition of the value system represents a priority for any organization that seeks for excellent health care services.

The successful organizations from the health care area have a precise, competitive strategy that stimulate them and which finally defines the provided health care service.

The marketing strategy in health care system represents the attitude of the sanitary organization towards the marketing environment and, at the same time, the behavior related to its components. The strategic approach of the health care marketing strategy and the adaptation of the organization to the environment involve market segmentation, choosing of the target market, market-positioning services and marketing strategy development.

Acquiring marketing skills and client understanding are necessary for a proper encounter with the client's needs, in order to identify their needs and wishes and build the trust that will determine the acceptance of the solution, in an European style (improvement of citizens health security, spreading health knowledge, health promotion). All these are made in order to offer an efficient answer to health threats, a support in disease prevention, an increase in cooperation between the sanitary systems.

As far as marketing services are concerned, social marketing campaigns are not successful because they are made only for either ill or healthy people, and have an informative role on adopting a certain behavior. A possible solution could be the inclusion of as many individuals as possible, by applying public marketing objectives.



Strategies that emphasize the marketing strategy

What should also be mentioned is that for health care organizations, whose activity involves direct relationship with the patients, the first line staff and the environment have a decisive relevance in the frame of distribution service system, determining the image of the organization among target customers.

CHAPTER V. WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION AND HEALTH CARE SERVICE

The usual consultation in health care services suffered many changes along with the access of patients to virtual communities, known also as online communities. A virtual community, in general, works as a reference group, being linked to online word-of-mouth (eWOM) and in fact, being considered a warehouse of information. Online word of mouth (eWOM) is defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual and formal consumers about the product of a company, to whom have access many other consumers and organizations on the internet”. More specifically, virtual communities in health care services are known as patient online communities (POC) or as health care virtual communities, which offer health care consumers the opportunity to obtain technical or practical support information, in the shape of “virtual” second opinions or emotional support.

The health care field is the one in which most patients choose their physicians based on their reputation. A study conducted on a sample of 183 Romanian women revealed that the most important variable in selecting a health care provider is the reputation (95.30%), followed by the reputation of the health care unit (39.40%). In addition, the same study indicated that 70.90% from the selected sample have had the intention to buy a health care service based on the eWOM messages encountered in online communities dedicated to health care problems, while 27.60% responded with a negation to go to a consultation. The eWOM message is defined as an experimental representation of reality, expressed through positive, negative statements or a combination of both using a variety of instruments specific to the online environments such as forums, emails, chat-rooms, discussion boards, blogs, reviews, ratings and so on. However, in health care services the most encountered instrument is the forum.

It is already known that eWOM is the most encountered post consumption behavior. The vast majority of studies reached the conclusion that the online decision making process of a consumer is similar to the offline one, and it consists of the following stages:

- Problem recognition;
- Information search;
- The evaluation of alternatives;
- The buying decision;
- The post consumption evaluation.

CHAPTER VI. WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION IN A HEALTH CARE CAMPAIGN

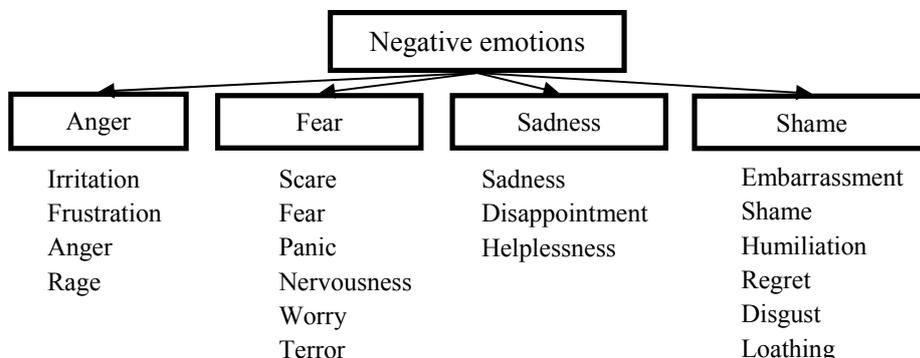
As was mentioned before, the most encountered channel for sending information of eWOM type in health care services, are *virtual communities*.

A virtual community is a reference group, which is linked to eWOM through the information provided and works as an information container.

In health care services, for most consumers who are sick and search online for information, virtual communities have a more significant role; they provide patients the chance to obtain practical and support information such as second “virtual” opinions, because the internet is perceived as an environment in which people can share emotions and relieve them from feeling lonely with the help of the established relations in the community, at the same time being considered “real, practical and vital”.

The role of emotions in services is to understand the consumer experiences and their behavior as well. Emotions are everywhere, and generally speaking, in marketing they influence the information processing, measure the stimuli consequences used in marketing, mediate the behavioral intentions and measure the consumers’ well being.

In this thesis, are only discussed and analyzed the *negative emotions*, because they represent the most complex ones and most frequently researched. The objectives of this manuscript were to identify a set of negative emotions that are especially encountered in the Romanian health care services and the investigation of the structure of the negative emotions in health care services. In order to achieve the above-mentioned objectives, first it was established a set of negative emotions and then a graphic dimension visualization.

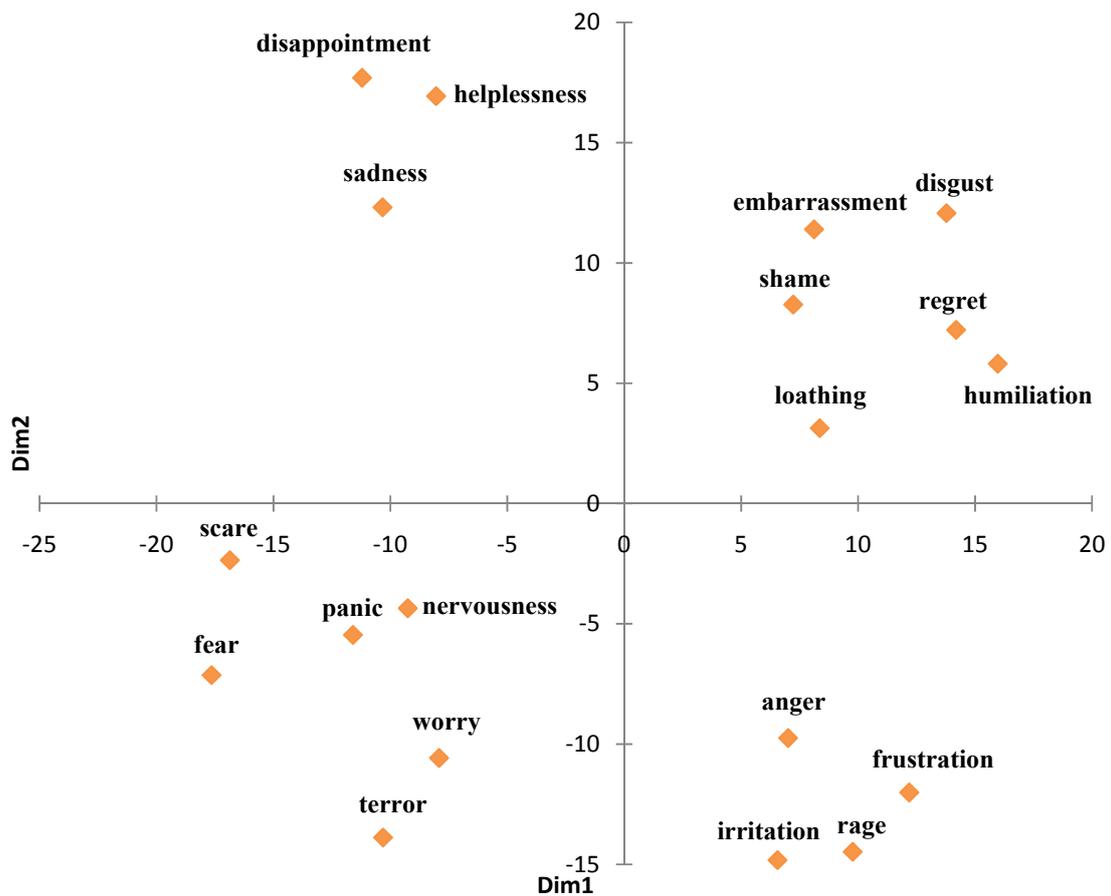


The classification of negative emotions

From 183 respondents more than a half (52.47%) had ages between 25 and 34 years, the vast majority (82.63%) had university degrees and some of them were married (43.76%). Moreover, a part of the women had technical jobs (30.09%) while others had managerial positions (28.28%). Most participants went to the consultations they have talked about on the forum for routine check-ups (73.25%) and for analysis (18.85%).

The emotions which were most frequently felt when posting negative eWOM messages were terror (65.5%), worry (63.9%), embarrassment (61.7%) and shame (61.2%), while the least frequently felt emotions were scare (30.1%), disappointment (32.8%), anger (38.8%) and rage (42.6%).

The negative emotions were converted into proximities by using the Euclidean distance. Therefore, the dissimilarities between the variables constructed a geometric configuration in a dimensional space as shown in the figure.



The geometric distribution of negative emotions

CHAPTER VII. CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed several *results*, as it follows:

- ❖ Firstly, emotions are complex, as such, consumers feel more than one emotion at a certain moment;
- ❖ Secondly, the study emphasizes the fact that the negative emotions might be categorized into groups, based on a certain model. Also, the study validated five categories of latent emotions in the Romanian health care services such as:
 - Shame
 - Sadness
 - Fear
 - Anger
 - Specific emotions.
- ❖ Thirdly, the study confirmed that another criterion should be included, specifically in health care services- the intensity of emotions, which was applied until now only in advertising.

The most important fact is that the eWOM behavioral intentions should be of great interest to services managers, not only as a motivation that stands behind the perspective but also from an advanced emotional definition.

The online environment, as was mentioned before, through its unique characteristics, offers interaction opportunities between potential patients. The internet facilitates the communication between them, generating a series of behaviors and a variety of benefits.

It is generally accepted that WOM has always had a fundamental role in shaping attitudes and behaviors of individuals, and implicitly, had an influence on the decision making process of the people who bought a service or a product.

The emergence of technology brought also an increase in WOM in the online environment, more specific, of eWOM which is the most encountered post consumption behavior. In the health care services, the access to information in the online environment made patients be more careful at their needs and their wants so as the result materialized in a rigorous selection of service providers.

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