You're not yelping your case: the unexpected social consequences of word of mouth

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore whether people's intuitions regarding the social consequences of word of mouth (WOM) match the actual consequences. The authors investigate the expectations people have about how sharing WOM (positive or negative) will change others' perceptions of them and then compare these expectations to the actual impact of WOM.

Design/methodology/approach – Six studies were conducted. Study 1 predicted how sharing their experiences with various products or services would change others' opinion of them. Studies 2a/2b contrasted participants' intuitions about the potential social consequences of sharing WOM with the consequences. Studies 3a/3b and 4a/4b tested for the hypothesized mediating mechanism. Studies 5a/5b focused on negative WOM and used participants' own reviews to compare intuitions with impact. Study 6 explored whether considering one's own consumption experience mitigates the negative social impact of WOM.

Findings – Consumers expect positive WOM to improve perceptions as it conveys only positive cues about the communicator (i.e. helping intentions and a positive personality). Negative WOM is expected to have neutral impact, as it conveys mixed cues (i.e. helping intentions but a negative personality). In contrast, the authors show that sharing negative WOM tends to be quite detrimental, whereas sharing positive WOM has little impact. People are largely unaware of these effects.

Research limitations/implications – The research contributes to the literature on WOM and social transmission by comparing people's intuitions about the social consequences of WOM with its actual consequences. The authors acknowledge that they used mostly WOM messages that were pre-written (vs spontaneously generated by participants). This may have constrained the generalizability of the results. Several potential moderators remain to be investigated, such as the role of message extremity, the interpersonal closeness between communicator and receiver, whether the WOM was solicited vs spontaneous, online vs offline, etc.

Practical implications – Greater effort is needed to raise consumers' awareness about the gap between their expectations and the actual social consequences of WOM. Furthermore, marketers responsible for designing product review opportunities should be encouraged to provide consumers with more flexible options, such as the ability to easily remove an online review. Finally, consumers transmitting negative WOM in particular should be aware that their negative tone may compromise the persuasiveness of their message by making the receiver more vigilant and thus less receptive.

Originality/value – The authors are the first to directly contrast people's intuitions about the social consequences of WOM with its consequences. Unlike the previous literature, the authors investigate people's intuitions directly, and investigate the consequences of positive and negative WOM by comparing them to a neutral no-WOM condition. They also shed light on the specific personality traits people infer from WOM.

Keywords Word of mouth, Consumer reviews, Social perceptions

Paper type Research paper

Consumers routinely pass on information about their consumption experiences and those of their friends to other people, a phenomenon referred to as word-of-mouth (WOM) (Anderson, 1998; Westbrook, 1987). Billions of conversations about brands take place every day (Keller and Libai, 2009), a phenomenon further magnified by the rapid rise of online review websites, platforms, and communities (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). Given its practical implications, a wide range of studies have focused on identifying the causes of WOM (Berger, 2014; Keiningham *et al.*, 2018) and its consequences for businesses (Chen and Lurie, 2013; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Chintagunta *et al.*, 2010; Dubois *et al.*, 2011; Godes and Mayzlin, 2009; Trusov *et al.*, 2009). Surprisingly, however, little is known about the interpersonal consequences of this everyday behavior.

In the current research, we examine consumers' intuitions regarding the social impact of WOM and contrast these with its actual impact. We find that, on average, consumers expect sharing positive WOM to favorably impact how others see them, whereas sharing negative WOM is expected to be harmless. Contrary to these expectations, we show that in the typical consumption situation, sharing positive WOM does little to improve social perceptions, whereas the interpersonal impact of sharing negative WOM can be quite detrimental.

We believe that our findings are important for several reasons. First, growing evidence points to self-enhancement, or the desire to be seen positively by others (Berger, 2014) as one of the main drivers of WOM. People seem to believe that sharing their consumption experiences, and in particular their positive experiences, will influence favorably how others see them. In fact, one in four online reviews is reported to contain self-enhancing assertions (Otterbacher, 2011). A long stream of research on heuristics and biases, however, suggests that people's intuitions are often wrong (Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999; Gilovich *et al.*, 2002; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). It is important, therefore, to establish the accuracy of people's intuitions by comparing them directly with the actual impact of WOM on social perceptions. Second, the proliferation of online customer review sites and social media platforms has made it very easy for consumers to share their consumption experiences with others (Dunn and Dahl, 2012). As a result, more and more consumers choose to share WOM and many choose to do so in open public forums. It is important to demonstrate that this common behavior can have some unintended negative consequences for the communicator. And lastly, the persuasion impact of WOM depends to a large extent on the receivers' perceptions of the communicator. People tend to be vigilant against the persuasion attempts by people of whom they form negative impressions (Kirmani and Zhu, 2007; Main *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, it's important for consumers who choose to share negative WOM to be aware that they may inadvertently compromise the persuasiveness of their message by negatively influencing people's impressions of them.

Theoretical background

Consumers share information for a variety of reasons: from a desire to help others to a need to regulate one's own (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Most theories of consumer motivation, however, have highlighted the crucial role played by social concerns (Barasch and Berger, 2014; Berger, 2014; Cheema and Kaikati, 2010; De Angelis *et al.*, 2012; Dubois *et al.*, 2016; Sundaram *et al.*, 1998). In particular, WOM behavior seems to be driven to a large extent by the motive to self-enhance, that is, to improve how other people see you (Berger, 2014) and protect their image (Zhang *et al.*, 2013). This suggests that people often share WOM because they believe that it will favorably impact their social image.

Given that a significant share of WOM is driven by the desire to favorably impress others, it is important to establish whether indeed transmitting WOM has the intended effect on social impressions. In this research, we focus on one aspect of WOM – its valence – and

investigate how communicators' intuitions regarding the social consequences of transmitting positive and negative WOM compare with WOM's actual impact on receivers. We begin by reviewing the existing literature on WOM intuitions and impact, and then outline our reasoning for the hypothesized gap between the two.

Intuitions about the interpersonal consequences of word of mouth
What are people's intuitions regarding the interpersonal consequences of sharing WOM? Even though no prior research has explicitly investigated this question, insights can be gleaned from research on the antecedents of WOM. This research shows that people often share WOM with the goal of creating favorable impressions. For example, people tend to share information about their own positive consumption experiences but transmit information about others' negative consumption experiences (De Angelis *et al.*, 2012). They are also more likely to share self-flattering information when communicating with multiple people (where the focus is more on the self), compared to when communicating with a single person (where the focus shifts to the other; Barasch and Berger (2014)) and when communicating with distant others rather than close others (Chen, 2017; Dubois *et al.*, 2016). Self-enhancement also leads people to talk about novel, unique, or surprising products, possibly because doing so reflects more favorably on them, making them look more interesting or knowledgeable (Berger and Iyengar, 2013; Berger and Milkman, 2012; Berger and Schwartz, 2011).

Particularly revealing with regards to people's intuitions is research on the valence of WOM. People typically prefer to share positive rather than negative product reviews (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; East *et al.*, 2007) and to talk about their positive experiences and avoid sharing their negative experiences (Barasch and Berger, 2014; Berger and Milkman, 2012; Gonzales and Hancock, 2011). Part of the reason for this prevalence of positive reviews is purely objective, i.e. most of consumer experiences tend to be satisfactory. However, researchers have suggested that it is also due to people's beliefs that positive consumption episodes convey something favorable about them, such as the ability to make good product choices (Richins, 1984; Wojnicki and Godes, 2008). People may also believe that bearers of good news are viewed more favorably than bearers of bad news (Bell, 1978; Nisbett and Wilson, 1977), and that good news may improve the receivers' mood (Berger and Milkman, 2012). People also tend to temper their critical reviews with qualifiers, also known as dispreferred markers (Hamilton *et al.*, 2014), which further suggests that people may hold the intuition that spreading negative WOM may reflect poorly on them.

But negative WOM may also be expected to bring interpersonal benefits in some situations. For example, people are more likely to spread negative WOM when they want to be perceived as unique or knowledgeable or convey that they have novel and interesting opinions (Cheema and Kaikati, 2010; Moe and Schweidel, 2012). For example, Moe and Schweidel (2012) showed that highly involved participants in an online forum were more likely to post critical content in an attempt to differentiate and establish themselves in the community by offering more negative opinions designed to attract the attention of others. This is consistent with research suggesting that negative critics are seen as more intelligent and knowledgeable, even if less likeable (Amabile, 1983) and that people may be aware of this association. Consumers are also more likely to spread negative WOM when it concerns distant others (De Angelis *et al.*, 2012; Kamins *et al.*, 1997). In the latter case, consumers may have the expectation that negative WOM would improve their image by making them look superior by comparison (Berger, 2014).

People may also expect that sharing negative WOM will make others see them as more helpful and caring. Concern for others is one of the major drivers of WOM (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004)

and consumers often engage in negative WOM as a way to prevent others from having to go through the same negative experience (Sundaram *et al.*, 1998). Negative information also helps people preserve social bonds (Dunbar, 1996) by waring others about potential problems with products and services. It is possible that people are aware of the association between negative WOM and helpfulness and may expect others to see them as more caring if they share their negative consumption experiences.

In sum, the literature on the antecedents of WOM suggests that people often engage in it with the goal to self-enhance and that they expect sharing WOM to have an overall favorable effect on others' impressions. This is particularly true for positive WOM, but negative WOM may also play an instrumental role by enhancing perceptions of expertise as well as helpfulness and concern for others.

The interpersonal consequences of sharing word of mouth
How do people's positive expectations about the social impact of WOM stack up against reality? Although there is substantial research on how WOM impacts sales and product evaluations, less is known about the impact of WOM on perceptions of the communicator. Packard *et al.* (2016) studied the impact of boastful WOM on social perceptions. They showed that immodest self-presentations can either hurt or enhance social perceptions, depending on the perceived trustworthiness of the source. In the presence of low trust cues, boastful WOM led to increased vigilance about the motives of the communicator. But in the presence of high trust cues, boastful WOM had a favorable effect, by boosting perceptions of expertise. Hamilton *et al.* (2014) showed that communicators of negative WOM were liked more when they tempered their negative product reviews with linguistic markers, warning receivers that negative information is coming or acknowledging it has been said.

With the exception of Packard *et al.* (2016) and Hamilton *et al.* (2014), most of the research on the social consequences of WOM has focused on comparing the impact of positive WOM with that of negative WOM. An early study by Folkes and Sears (1977) found that individuals who gave predominantly negative evaluations of a range of stimuli (politicians, cafeteria worker, cities, movies, and college courses) were rated less favorably than individuals who gave predominantly positive evaluations. Similarly, individuals who gave an extremely negative review of a book were rated as less likeable and kind than individuals who gave an extremely positive review (Amabile, 1983). More recently, Forest and Wood (2012) observed that self-disclosures with high negative content and low positive content elicited unfavorable responses on social media platforms. A related exploration into the social impact of rumors – a specific type of WOM – revealed that transmitting negative product-related rumors generated less liking for the communicator, relative to transmitting positive rumors (Kamins *et al.*, 1997). These findings are broadly consistent with the literature on person perception: individuals who evaluate objects and people negatively are rated as less likeable and kind than individuals who give positive evaluations (Amabile, 1983; Bergsieker *et al.*, 2012; Carraro *et al.*, 2010; Gawronski and Walther, 2008). People use others' judgments as cues to their personality characteristics and disliking things or people is typically associated with socially undesirable personality traits such as disagreeableness or emotional instability (Gawronski and Walther, 2008).

In summary, the existing evidence suggests that negative WOM should have a less favorable impact on perceptions of the communicator than positive WOM. However, as existing research has mostly compared the impact of negative WOM with that of positive WOM, it is difficult to conclude with certainty whether, relative to a *neutral-valence* baseline, sharing negative WOM damages perceptions, sharing positive WOM improves perceptions, or whether both occur simultaneously.

In this research, we address this gap by examining the social consequences of positive and negative WOM relative to a control no-WOM condition. More importantly, we contrast these consequences with people's expectations about the impact of WOM. We hypothesize that the actual interpersonal benefits of sharing positive WOM would be significantly smaller than the anticipated ones, whereas the downside of sharing negative WOM would be larger than anticipated. The next section provides the rationale for these predictions.

Intuitions vs impact: the role of baseline impressions
We base our contention that people generally overestimate the interpersonal benefits of sharing positive WOM and underestimate the damage caused by sharing negative WOM on three findings in the behavior sciences:

(1) people typically hold positive views of others;

(2) additional positive information has relatively little impact on overall impressions as people tend to average – rather than sum – cues of similar valence into summary judgments, whereas; and

(3) additional negative information has a relatively strong detrimental impact on overall impressions because it is rarer, and because cues that disconfirm expectations are more informative than those that confirm expectations.

People are typically unaware of these effects. We detail these theoretical underpinnings hereafter.

Normatively speaking, one should expect people to have a neutral view of others until some positive or negative cues are presented. It turns out that, whereas people have neutral views of abstract or unspecified targets, they tend to form positive views of concrete individuals even when they know almost nothing about them – a phenomenon known as the person positivity bias (Sears, 1983). Individual members of various groups are evaluated significantly more favorably, on average, than the group they belong to (Sears, 1983). It also takes minimal information for people to form a positive view of a concrete individual (Alicke *et al.*, 1995; Klar and Giladi, 1997).

The literature on the antecedents and consequences of WOM reviewed earlier suggests that sharing positive WOM conveys primarily desirable traits about the communicator, whereas sharing negative WOM conveys both desirable and undesirable traits (e.g. the person may be helpful and more discerning, but also less likeable). If people typically view others in a positive light, the impact of an additional positive cue (e.g. the person is helpful) should be relatively small. Indeed, many studies on impression formation show that people tend to follow an averaging strategy when making judgments based on multiple attributes. Adding mildly favorable information often dilutes the impact of highly favorable information (Anderson, 1965; Eagly and Chaiken, 1995; Troutman and Shanteau, 1976; Yadav, 1994). Therefore, unless they provide a sharp contrast with people's pre-existing impressions of another person (e.g. because that person was previously disliked), most positive cues people derive from positive and negative WOM (e.g. likeable, easy-going, helpful, or intelligent) are unlikely to influence their overall positive perception of the person. Furthermore, people in general value positive information less than negative information because it is more common and therefore less diagnostic (Baumeister *et al.*, 2001; Rozin and Royzman, 2001).

In contrast, because pre-existing impressions or expectations of others are typically positive, negative cues people derive from negative WOM (e.g. pickiness, neuroticism) are more likely to influence their overall perception of others. This is consistent with findings

that, relative to positive traits, negative traits are more heavily weighted in person perception (Fiske, 1980; Skowronski *et al.*, 1998). Negative information in general carries more weight than positive information of the same magnitude (Baumeister *et al.*, 2001; Rozin and Royzman, 2001) because it is rarer and more surprising, and thus more diagnostic (Scott and Tybout, 1981). Of course, the negativity of a product review may be entirely justified and objective (i.e. the product was truly sub-standard); however, reviews typically include an evaluative element that may be used to judge the reviewer in addition to the product being reviewed.

Importantly, we expect that most people will overestimate the benefits of engaging in positive WOM and underestimate the downsides of engaging in negative WOM. This is because, first, people are generally unaware of the person-positivity bias (Sears, 1983). For example, even though participants in the Sears (1983) studies evaluated individual professors and politicians more favorably than professors and politicians in general, their guesses as to how other students would evaluate these individuals, as well as how they themselves would evaluate them, were markedly lower than the actual evaluations, revealing that participants were unaware of their positivity bias. We expect, therefore, that when predicting the social impact of WOM, people would not realize how favorable their baseline impressions of the WOM communicator are. As a result, they would overestimate the positive impact of the favorable cues conveyed by positive WOM and underestimate the negative impact of the unfavorable cues conveyed by negative WOM. Note that we expect people to underestimate the impact of negative WOM regardless of whether they themselves or someone else is the communicator. This is because, as mentioned earlier, people are unaware of the person-positivity bias in themselves, as well as in others (Sears, 1983).

Second, this is because people are generally unaware of how holistic information processing can be. Weaver *et al.* (2012) found that while participants actually used an averaging strategy to make summary judgments, most of them predicted an additive information-processing style, mistakenly believing that adding more information of the same valence – regardless of its extremity – would result in better evaluations.

In general, people are often unaware of cognitive biases, and they may continue to display them even when presented with contradicting information. For example, heuristics based on highly accessible and easy to process cues can be quite resistant to the presence of objective information that challenges their applicability (Chen *et al.*, 1999; Keren and Teigen, 2001; Price and Stone, 2004). This is because people generally tend to strike a balance between the goals of minimizing cognitive effort and achieving accuracy. As long as cues are deemed to produce sufficiently accurate judgments, they predominate over less salient or more difficult to process information (Chen *et al.*, 1999). In the case of WOM, cognitive biases may be even harder to correct because consumers rarely receive feedback about their own WOM and how it has affected the other person's impressions of them.

Schematically, the findings outlined above suggest that a person might implicitly consider that others start with a neutral impression and that sharing positive WOM, which signals positive traits, will result in favorable social consequences. On the other hand, sharing negative WOM, which signals both negative and positive traits, will result – through an additive process – in little social consequences. In reality, the initial impression is likely to be positive and sharing positive WOM will bring little change. However, sharing negative WOM which signals both negative and positive traits, will result – through an averaging process – in detrimental social consequences for the transmitter.

Next, we present six studies that test our hypotheses. Study 1 tests people's intuitions about the social implications of sharing WOM. Studies 2A and 2B contrast these intuitions with receivers' actual impressions, showing a significant gap between people's mostly

optimistic expectations and the actual impact of WOM on receivers. Studies 3A and 3B replicate these effects and also delve into the underlying mechanism by manipulating baseline impressions. Studies 4A and 4B provide additional insights about the underlying mechanism by measuring perceptions about personality traits and showing their impact on evaluations. Taking a more naturalistic approach, Studies 5A and 5B use participants' own reviews to replicate the unanticipated negative effect of negative WOM. Finally, Study 6 shows that the negative impact of WOM is mitigated when receivers are asked to consider their own experience as consumers.

Study 1

We begin our investigation by examining people's intuitions regarding the interpersonal consequences of WOM. Even though our main interest is the comparison between intuitions and impact, we first wanted to focus on intuitions since we felt that this is an area that has received relatively little attention. Specifically, prior research has studied intuition mostly indirectly, via measures of the antecedents and characteristics of WOM. Therefore, it would be insightful to obtain more conclusive evidence about people's intuitions before proceeding to contrast them with the actual interpersonal consequences of WOM.

In this study, we asked participants to imagine various scenarios in which they shared WOM with another person and to indicate how the WOM would impact the other person's impression of them. We also ask them to explain their reasoning to gather greater insight into their thought process.

Method

Seventy-three participants from Mechanical Turk completed this study in a 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) $\times$ 4 (context: laptop vs vacuum cleaner vs holiday vs scholarship) mixed-subjects design, in which the first factor was manipulated between-subjects. Details of all scenarios are presented in Appendix 1. Participants were asked to imagine that they shared their experience with a product or service with another person. For example, in the negative laptop scenario, the participant had to imagine that they described a disappointing laptop purchase experience. After reading the scenario, participants indicated their intuition regarding how delivering WOM would impact the other person's perception of them on a seven-point scale (-3: less favorable/more negative, 3: more favorable/more positive; $\alpha =$ 0.96). Then, participants explained their reasoning through an open-ended question.

Results and discussion

As shown in Table I, in all conditions, participants expected sharing WOM to make the other person evaluate them more favorably. In addition, separate t-tests showed that participants expected positive WOM to have a more favorable impact than negative WOM in the laptop ($t(71) = 3.27$, $p < 0.01$), holiday ($t(71) = 2.46$, $p < 0.05$) and scholarship scenarios

Context	Positive	Negative	
Laptop	1.86 (1.03)**	0.95 (1.34)**	
Vacuum cleaner	1.83 (1.10)**	1.58 (1.32)**	
Holiday	1.86 (1.06)**	1.16 (1.34)**	
Scholarship	2.17 (0.87)**	0.89 (1.53)**	**Table I.** Favorability measure
Note: **Indicates significantly different from neutral point at $p < 0.001$			(Study 1)

(t(71) = 4.36, p < 001). No difference between positive and negative WOM was expected in the vacuum cleaner scenario (t(71) = 0.89, p > 0.30).

We proposed that when considering the impact of sharing negative WOM, individuals may make two types of inferences: a positive one related to being helpful and honest, and a negative one related to being negative or discontent. To provide a systematic analysis of the drivers of participants' intuitions, we had independent coders examine the open-ended responses and classify each in one or more of the eight categories:

(1) helpful information;

(2) unhelpful information;

(3) positive inferences about the transmitter;

(4) negative inferences about the transmitter;

(5) positive emotional impact on the receiver;

(6) negative emotional impact on the receiver;

(7) no effect; and

(8) other.

We asked a separate group of Mechanical Turk participants to read the responses and classify them. Each set of responses was presented to three coders. Coders first read brief explanations about each category and then read and classified each response. Responses could be classified in more than one category. We considered that a response would be of a certain category if any of the three coders had made the corresponding classification.

In the positive WOM condition, 52.5 per cent of responses were classified as a positive inference, while only 1.4 per cent were viewed as a negative inference. In the negative WOM condition, there were 46.5 per cent positive inference classifications compared to 21.3 per cent negative inferences. Although the difference between positive and negative inferences is much larger in the positive WOM condition, in both, participants expected more positive than negative inferences. In addition, both positive and negative WOM were much more likely to be viewed as more helpful than unhelpful. In sum, even in the negative WOM condition, participants expected others to make positive inferences and view the information as helpful. Details for all measures and categories are presented in Table II.

One potential reason for the observed optimistic intuitions about the impact of negative WOM may be an implied closeness between the WOM communicator and the receiver (they were always described having a one-on-one conversation). Indeed, research has shown that when communicating one-on-one (i.e. "narrowcasting," Barasch and Berger (2014) and with close others (Dubois *et al.*, 2016), consumers focus more on providing useful information rather than trying to look good. It is possible that in this case, consumers expect the receiver to recognize their helping intentions and give little weight to negative inferences. In contrast to Study 1, in the rest of our studies we consider online reviews – a broadcasting rather than narrowcasting situation – and contrast consumers' intuitions to impact.

Studies 2A and 2B

In Studies 2A and 2B, we first measure participants' expectations regarding the impact of WOM on social impressions (2A) and then examine actual impact (2B). We predict that participants will overestimate the favorable impact of positive WOM and underestimate the damaging impact of negative WOM.

Context	Positive inference (%)	Negative inference (%)	Helpful (%)	Not helpful (%)	Positive impact (%)	Negative impact (%)	No difference (%)	Other (%)
Negative review								
laptop	29.73	21.62	43.24	16.22	24.32	8.11	13.51	8.11
vacuum	70.27	18.92	59.46	48.65	75.68	21.62	10.81	0.00
holiday	39.47	7.89	34.21	13.16	34.21	21.05	18.42	10.53
scholarship	44.74	36.84	57.89	15.79	52.63	42.11	5.26	0.00
average	46.05	21.32	48.70	23.45	46.71	23.22	12.00	4.66
Positive review								
laptop	44.44	0.00	38.89	0.00	38.89	0.00	19.44	13.89
vacuum	61.11	0.00	63.89	58.33	75.00	2.78	30.56	0.00
holiday	36.11	2.78	69.44	2.78	16.67	2.78	13.89	16.67
scholarship	68.42	2.63	65.79	15.79	55.26	2.63	28.95	5.26
average	52.52	1.35	59.50	19.23	46.45	2.05	23.21	8.95

Notes: percentages refer to frequency with which a respondent indicated that particular category according to at least one of the coders. Each response could be classified in multiple categories, so lines add to more than 100%

Table II.
Explanations for the
predicted impact of
transmitting WOM
in Study 1

Method and results of study 2a (intuition)
Participants were 83 members of Mechanical Turk (M_{age} = 33.31, 44 per cent women) who were assigned to one of two conditions: positive WOM vs negative WOM. Participants in the positive (negative) WOM condition were asked to imagine that they had a good (bad) experience with a restaurant and decided to share it on TripAdvisor. Details about the experience are provided in Appendix 2. Participants were asked to indicate whether they expected that sharing this information would change people's perception of them. Specifically, they indicated the extent to which sharing this information would make them more/less likable, and be perceived more/less favorably and positively (−3: Much less, 0: Equally, 3: Much more; α = 0.89). Results showed that participants expected sharing the positive restaurant experience to make others view them more positively (M = 1.45, $t(41)$ = 9.30, $p < 0.001$), whereas they expected sharing the negative experience to have no impact on perceptions ($M = -0.17$, $t(39) = 0.99$, $p > 0.15$).

Method and results of Study 2 b (impact)
Consumer profile. To measure impact, we had to first measures participants' baseline impressions of the WOM communicator. For this purpose, we created a fictitious consumer profile using information of the type that is commonly found in user profiles on websites like TripAdvisor. The profile read:

> Ashley B.T. is 39 years old and has been a member since 2010. She lives in Minnesota. She has written 3 reviews and provided 8 ratings. She has posted in forums 20 times and has contributed with 10 photos.

We pre-tested this profile with 35 participants. Using four seven-point scales (1-Strongly disagree, 7-Strongly agree), participants indicated the extent to which the profile was typical and usual (r = 0.84), as well as atypical and unusual (r = 0.81). There was agreement that the profile was typical/usual (M = 5.20, $t(34)$ = 7.95, $p < 0.001$) and not atypical/unusual (M = 3.07, $t(34)$ = 4.01, $p < 0.001$). Indeed, of the 35 participants, only one disagreed that that the

profile was typical/usual. Further, and in line with the person-positivity effect, even though the profile contained little information, participants considered the profile to be positive ($M = 4.54$, $t(34) = 3.27$, $p < 0.01$) and not negative ($M = 3.48$, $t = 2.31$, $p < 0.05$).

Main study. Participants were 126 members of Mechanical Turk ($M_{age} = 33.21$, 41 per cent women) who were assigned to one of three conditions: control vs positive WOM vs. negative WOM. They were first presented with the profile of Ashley, a typical TripAdvisor user. Next, those in the positive (negative) WOM condition read the same positive (negative) review she had posted (same review used in 2A). Participants in the control condition simply read that Ashley's most recent review was about a restaurant in Barcelona without actually seeing the review. We measured participants' perceptions of Ashley using three seven-point bipolar items (negative/unfavorable/dislike, positive/favorable/like, $\alpha = 0.90$).

To examine the impact of WOM, we first considered perceptions of the reviewer (Ashley) in the control condition, where participants were presented with only minimum profile information and no reviews. In line with results of the pre-test and the person positivity bias, we found that participants had a positive view of Ashley ($M_{control} = 5.20$, $t(40) = 8.31$, $p < 0.001$ – relative to 4, the neutral point). A positive review caused a modest significant improvement to evaluations ($M_{positive} = 5.70$, $F(1, 80) = 4.58$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.48$). Importantly, a negative review caused a large drop in evaluations ($M_{negative} = 3.97$, $F(1, 80) = 28.38$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.19$).

Discussion
Results from Studies 2 A and 2B are in line with our predictions. Participants anticipated posting a positive restaurant review on TripAdvisor to make others see them a lot more favorably and posting a critical one to cause no harm. However, the observed pattern differed markedly from these intuitions; relative to a no-review condition, people liked the TripAdvisor reviewer only a little bit more when she posted a positive review and a lot less when she posted a critical review. One could argue that we obtained these results because the negative review was more extreme or more emotionally charged than the positive review. To rule this out, we asked both participants in the intuition conditions and those in the impact conditions to indicate their perceptions of the review using seven-point bipolar items (negative/positive, subjective/objective, uncommon/common, irrelevant/relevant). The positive review was considered more positive than the negative one ($M_{positive} = 6.02$ vs. $M_{negative} = 2.70$, $F(1, 161) = 267.10$, $p < 0.001$), but it is interesting to note that the positive review was also perceived as more extreme than the negative review ($F(1, 161) = 12.84$, $p < 0.001$). While the positive review was 2.02 points above the neutral point (4), the negative review was only 1.30 points below the neutral point. In other words, the positive review was very positive, while the negative review was mildly negative. Despite this difference in intensity, the impact of the negative review was still larger than the impact of the positive review.

Studies 3A and 3B
We have argued that the discrepancy between intuitions and impact occurs because impact depends on initial impressions, which tend to be favorable, but people's intuitions are insensitive to these initial impressions. In other words, they mistakenly believe that a positive (or negative) WOM would have the same impact regardless of how the target is initially perceived. In Studies 3A and 3B we seek more direct evidence for this explanation by manipulating baseline impressions of the WOM communicator. Specifically, we asked participants to read a "my typical day" description, presumably written earlier by the WOM communicator, so participants could form initial impression of him. The description was

written in either neutral or negative terms. We expected that a neutral description would lead to positive baseline perceptions due to the person positivity bias. We expected consumer to not incorporate baseline impressions when making predictions, but to be influenced by them when judging a target.

Consumer profile
The profile was manipulated by presenting participants with a description presumably written by the WOM communicator. In the positive profile condition, Leo, the target person, wrote a neutral description of his day. We intentionally did not use a positive description since we expected that a neutral description would already lead to a positive impression due to the person positivity bias. A pre-test ($N = 27$) confirmed that the description of Leo's day was considered neutral ($M = 4.15$, $t(26) = 0.84$, $p = 0.40$; 1-Negative, 7-Positive). In contrast, in the negative profile condition, the description of his day was markedly negative ($N = 31$, $M = 1.76$, $t(30) = 14.07$, $p < 0.001$; 1-Negative, 7-Positive). Both descriptions are presented in Appendix 3.

Method and results of study 3A (intuition)
Participants were 141 members from Mechanical Turk ($M_{age} = 32.08$, 37 per cent women), who were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (initial description: negative vs. positive) × (WOM: negative vs. positive). They were presented with a description of Leo's day and indicated their impression of him using a five-point smiley face scale. Although we were only interested in predicted change, it was important to allow participants to express their initial views, minimizing the risk that they would try to convey their initial views through the predicted change questions (Gal and Rucker, 2011). After this, participants were asked to imagine that Leo had posted a hotel review on TripAdvisor (presented to them) and indicate how this would make them feel about Leo on three seven-point bipolar items (-3: less favorably, more negatively, less likable; 3: more favorably, more positively, more likable; $\alpha = 0.95$).

An ANOVA on their intuitions about WOM revealed main effects for profile and review, but no interaction. Not surprisingly, a positive review was expected to have a more positive impact ($M_{pos\text{-}WOM} = 1.55$ vs $M_{neg\text{-}WOM} = -0.17$, $F(1, 139) = 75.60$, $p < 0.001$). Further, replicating the results of Study 2 A, while participants expected a positive impact for the positive WOM ($t(71) = 5.55$, $p < 0.001$), they expected no impact for the negative WOM ($t(60) = 0.98$, $p = 0.33$). The main effect for profile reflected an expectation to feel more favorably toward the person who had provided a neutral description of his day (positive profile) regardless of the specific review ($M_{pos\text{-}profile} = 1.89$ vs $M_{neg\text{-}profile} = 1.49$, $F(1, 139) = 4.25$, $p < 0.05$). Importantly, the fact that there was no interaction ($F(1, 139) = 0.27$, $p > 0.60$) indicates that participants did not adjust their expectations to the different baselines (Figure 1). In other words, they expected
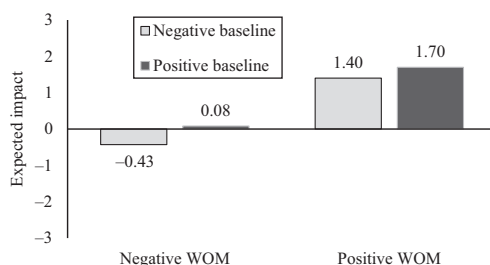

Figure 1.
Expected impact in
perceptions following
word-of-mouth
(Study 3 A)

a review to have the same impact regardless of how they felt about the target person, as we hypothesized.

Method and results of study 3B (impact)
Participants were 206 members from Mechanical Turk (M_{age} = 32.88, 42 per cent women), who were randomly assigned to one of six conditions (profile: negative vs positive) $\times$ (review: control vs negative vs positive). In the positive (negative) conditions, participants were presented with Leo's day description followed by a positive (negative) review and indicated their impressions of him using the same seven-point items of Study 2B (negative/unfavorable/not likable; positive/favorable/likable). In the control condition, they evaluated Leo without any review and did not answer any review related question. Hotel reviews are presented in Appendix 4.

A 2×3 ANOVA on evaluations of the target person revealed main effects for profile ($F(1, 200)$ = 25.55, $p < 0.001$) and review ($F(1, 200)$ = 35.20, $p < 0.001$) qualified by an interaction ($F(1, 200)$ = 5.93, $p < 0.01$). When the initial profile involved a neutral description, participants had a positive impression of Leo ($M_{control}$ = 5.30, $t(30)$ = 6.71, $p < 0.001$ – compared to midpoint of scale). A negative review had large impact on evaluations ($M_{negative}$ = 3.98, $F(1, 98)$ = 22.10, $p < 0.001$), whereas a positive review had a small and non-significant impact ($M_{positive}$ = 5.69, $F(1,98)$ = 2.01, $p = 0.16$). When the initial profile had a negative description of Leo's day, participants evaluated him negatively in the absence of a review ($M_{control}$ = 3.51, $t(34)$ = 1.92, $p = 0.06$). A negative review had no impact on evaluations ($M_{negative}$ = 3.41, $F(1, 102)$ = 0.09, $p > 0.60$), whereas a positive review had a large positive impact ($M_{positive}$ = 5.32, $F(1, 102)$ = 28.17, $p < 0.001$). Figure 2 illustrates these results.

Discussion
We setup Studies 3A and 3B to provide more insight into the mechanism underlying the discrepancy between consumers' intuitions and the actual impact of WOM. Our results show that regardless of initial impressions of the communicator, participants expected positive WOM to have a favorable impact and negative WOM to have no impact. This is consistent with our prediction that when predicting the impact of WOM, people are insensitive to their current impressions of the target and use a neutral reference point for their estimations. In reality, however, the impact of WOM depends on the impression people already have of the target. This is supported by our finding that when initial impressions were positive, positive WOM did not change evaluations, but negative WOM had a significant negative impact. When initial impressions were negative, negative WOM did not change impressions, but positive WOM had a significant favorable impact. We reason that
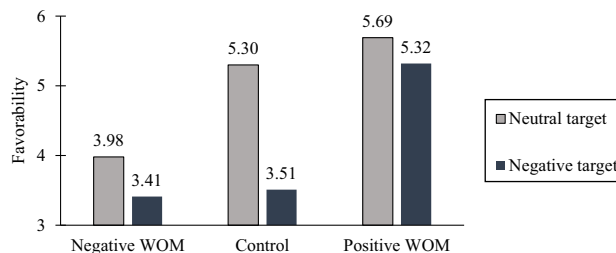

Figure 2.
Perceptions of target (Study 3B)

this is because cues that are consistent with one's initial impressions have much less impact on social impressions than cues that are inconsistent.

Study 3B shows that when initial impressions are negative, positive WOM can help and negative WOM does not hurt. However, we expect in most situations initial impressions to be positive. This is obviously the case when we hear WOM from friends and close others, but this is often the case even when we hear WOM from strangers (positivity bias; Sears, 1983). Therefore, we expect that in most cases, transmitting positive WOM is likely to bring few social benefits, whereas transmitting negative WOM is likely to cause damage.

Studies 4A and 4B

Our results so far suggest that negative WOM tends to have a negative impact on one's image, but individuals do not anticipate this. Conversely, although positive WOM has a positive impact, it is smaller than what people expect. We have argued that sharing WOM indicates positive traits, like honesty and helpfulness. However, what consumers fail to realize is that positive traits are generally assumed in others (Alicke *et al.*, 1995; Klar and Giladi, 1997) and therefore the positive traits the WOM behavior may convey do not significantly improve perceptions. On the other hand, the negative traits which sharing WOM may convey (such as being picky or too critical) can significantly hurt the communicator because they are not expected. In studies 4A and 4B, we explore the specific personality traits people expect WOM to signal, as well as the traits people actually infer when receiving WOM from others. Further, we examine how WOM influences overall perceptions through different personality traits.

Method and results of Study 4 A (intuition)

Participants were 82 members from Mechanical Turk (M_{age} = 36.62, 40 per cent women), who were randomly assigned to a negative or a positive WOM condition. Participants were presented with the WOM conveyed by a target person named Leo in response to a friend's question about a restaurant. Half of the participants then indicated how they expected receiving this WOM to impact their impression of Leo ("It would have no impact," "I would feel more favorably toward Leo," "I would feel less favorably toward Leo," randomized), as well as what kind of personality traits it signaled: honesty, helpfulness, positivity, a joyous personality, negativity, a discontent personality (1-very little, 7-very much; all traits presented in random order). The other half of participants answered the traits question first and then predicted the impact.

In the positive WOM condition, 22 of the 41 participants expected the WOM to positively change their perceptions of the target, and 19 expected no change. No one expected a positive review to have a negative impact.

In the negative WOM condition, 30 of the 41 participants (73 per cent) expected the negative WOM to have no impact on impressions, five expected a positive impact, and six predicted a negative impact. Thus, on average, participants expected that sharing the negative WOM would have no influence on how they would view the target person. Refer to Table III for means of all individual traits. To illustrate the relative predicted impact of the two routes (the positive one, through increased honesty and helpfulness, and the negative one, through decreased positivity and joyfulness and increased negativity and discontent), we combined helpfulness and honesty into one variable, and the other four measures into another (after reverse coding negativity and discontentment; see factor analysis below). Negative WOM was considered a strong signal of honesty and helpfulness (M = 5.45, $t(40)$ = 8.77, $p < 0.001$, d = 2.77 – relative to midpoint of the scale), but a much smaller signal of negativity or lack of positivity (M = 3.43, $t(40)$ = 3.31, $p < 0.01$, d = 1.05 – relative to

midpoint of the scale). Thus, similar to the positive WOM, the negative one indicated positive traits such as honesty and helpfulness, but also signaled some negative traits.

Method and results of Study 4B
Participants were 120 members from Mechanical Turk (M_{age} = 34.33, 38 per cent women), who were randomly assigned to one of 3 conditions: control vs. negative WOM vs. positive WOM. Participants in the impact conditions first read the neutral description of Leo's day used in Study 3 b. Then, they indicated the extent to which they believed Leo had each of six traits (same as in Study 4A, in random order; 1-very little, 7-very much). This was a measure of baseline beliefs about the target. After this, participants were presented with the (positive/negative) review provided by Leo in response to a friend's request. At this point, participants evaluated the target person again on the same traits and provided an overall evaluation (negative/unfavorable/dislike, positive/favorable/like). Participants in the control condition completed the personality measures and then indicated their overall impressions of Leo.

Before receiving the positive WOM, initial impressions of the target were generally positive ($M_{control}$ = 5.20) and became even more positive after receiving the positive WOM ($M_{positive}$ = 5.75; $F(1, 79) = 4.96, p < 0.01$). Refer to Table IV for means of all individual traits, before and after receiving positive WOM. Thus, transmitting positive WOM improved judgment about all aspects of personality, but because they were already assumed to be positive the impact was significant, but not large.

Results for the negative WOM are more nuanced. Before receiving the WOM, judgments about each of the six traits were overall positive (see Table IV). However, after reading the negative review, perceptions about honesty ($F(1, 39) = 13.43, p < 0.001, d = 1.17$) and helpfulness ($F(1, 39) = 3.10, p < 0.10, d = 0.57$) increased, whereas perceptions about positivity ($F(1, 39) = 50.17, p < 0.001, d = 2.27$) and joyfulness ($F(1, 39) = 26.10, p < 0.001, d = 1.64$) dropped substantially. Similarly, perceptions about negativity ($F(1, 39) = 39.91, p < 0.001, d = 2.02$) and discontentment ($F(1, 39) = 14.76, p < 0.001, d = 1.23$) increased by a

Personality trait	Positive WOM (n = 41)	Negative WOM (n = 41)
Honesty	5.39 (1.01)	5.63 (1.13)
Helpfulness	5.82 (1.22)	5.27 (1.32)
Positivity	5.75 (0.98)	3.12 (1.50)
Joyful personality	5.17 (0.92)	3.07 (1.19)
Negativity	1.72 (1.0S8)	4.29 (1.52)
Discontent personality	1.80 (1.23)	4.20 (1.45)

Table III.
Means and standard deviations for traits signaled by WOM in Study 4a

Personality trait	Before positive WOM (n =40)	After positive WOM (n = 40)	Before negative WOM (n = 40)	After negative WOM (n = 40)
Honesty	5.20 (1.26)	5.93 (0.97)	5.15 (0.92)	5.78 (1.12)
Helpfulness	4.35 (1.18)	5.85 (1.21)	4.43 (0.94)	4.88 (1.56)
Positivity	4.83 (1.22)	6.03 (0.89)	4.85 (1.02)	3.25 (1.21)
Joyful personality	4.28 (1.45)	5.55 (0.99)	4.15 (0.98)	3.10 (1.17)
Negativity	2.45 (1.06)	1.73 (0.72)	2.65 (1.29)	4.20 (1.47)
Discontent personality	2.73 (1.26)	1.70 (1.09)	2.68 (1.30)	3.58 (1.48)

Table IV.
Means and standard deviations for evaluations of target before and after WOM in Study 4b

large amount. Thus, in this case, there was an increase in positive traits associated with the act of sharing WOM, but this change was relatively small, while the negative effects on other traits were much larger. As result, negative WOM had a large negative impact relative to the control condition ($M_{negative} = 4.48$ vs. $M_{control} = 5.20$, $F(1, 79) = 6.95$, $p < 0.01$) – a result that conflicts with the intuitions presented in Study 4a.

A factor analysis revealed a two-factor solution: 1: honesty/helpfulness and 2: positivity/joyfulness/negativity/discontentment. Therefore, we averaged honesty and helpfulness into one variable, and the other measures (after reverse-coding the negative items) into another, referred to as positivity index.

We used PROCESS (Hayes 2013) Model 4, to test for mediation comparing control and negative conditions. As hypothesized, we found a positive effect of negative WOM through helpfulness and honesty (indirect effect: $b = 0.20$, $95\%CI = [0.03, 0.48]$), but this effect was small compared to the negative impact through the positivity index (indirect effect: $b = -0.97$, $95\%CI = [-1.45, -0.62]$). Including these indirect paths eliminated any direct effect of negative WOM on overall perceptions (direct effect: $b = 0.06$, $95\%CI = [-0.46, 0.58]$). In sum, the improvement in honesty and helpfulness was not enough to compensate for the associations with negative content. Figure 3 provides a visual representation for these effects.

We also ran a mediation analysis for the impact of positive WOM relative to control, but because positive WOM only signals positive traits, we find that any of these measures fully mediates the impact of WOM on evaluations. This contrasts with the pattern obtained for negative WOM in which we only obtained full mediation when we had both traits that improved and traits that worsened perceptions.

Discussion
The goal of Studies 4A and 4B was to examine the predicted and actual impact of WOM on specific personality traits. Participants expected transmitting positive WOM to increase perceptions of positive traits such as honesty, helpfulness, and being positive and content. They expected negative WOM to also be a strong signal of positive traits such as honesty and helpfulness, and only a weak signal of negative traits such as being negative or discontent. When participants took the perspective of WOM receivers, however, the pattern was different. We found that positive WOM increased perceptions of positive traits, as predicted, but the impact of negative WOM differed from predictions. Whereas sharing negative WOM increased somewhat perceptions of honesty and helpfulness, it also brought about a much stronger increase in perceptions of negative traits such as being negative and discontent. Overall, the downside of sharing negative WOM was significantly larger than its benefits.

Studies 5A and 5B
In our intuition studies so far, participants were asked to imagine that they had written a review. The use of hypothetical scenarios is common practice in marketing research, but one
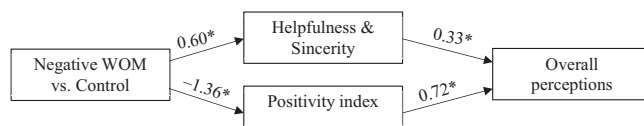
Note: *$p < 0.05$

Figure 3.
Impact of negative
WOM on overall
perceptions
(Study 4B)

may wonder whether the same pattern would be observed when people are given the opportunity to generate their own reviews. To assess the external validity of our findings, in Study 5 we asked participants to write their own reviews, based on real-life consumption experiences, and then we had other participants read these reviews. Because, negative WOM is where we observe the most interesting discrepancy between predictions and impact, we focus only on this condition in this study. We test the intuitions of both those communicating WOM and those receiving it. We predict that negative WOM will have a negative impact, but that both communicators and receivers of WOM will underestimate its magnitude as they fail to consider the positivity bias.

Method and results of Study 5A (intuition)
We asked 70 members of Mechanical Turk (M_{age} = 33.31, 33 per cent women) to think back to an instance in which they had a bad consumption experience. They were asked to write down the name of the provider, indicate when it happened, how upset they were (1-Not at all, 7-Very upset), give a letter grade to the experience (A, B, C, D, F), and write a review as if they would post it on a consumer reviews website. On the next screen, they were asked to provide their age, gender and state where they lived – information which was presumably required to complete their online profile - and indicate how someone would perceive them after seeing this profile and reading their review (1-Negative/Not favorable/Not nice, 7-Positive/Favorable/Nice). Then, using the same scales, participants indicated how they thought someone would evaluate them without reading the review, based on their online profile only. Finally, participants indicated how often they posted online reviews (1-Never, 5-Always).

We eliminated six participants for the following reasons: one did not provide a review, one just wrote a single word, one referred to a completely positive experience (rated as "A"), two thought they were supposed to write a review about the study itself, and one answered "1" to every scale item in the study.

On average, participants indicated they were quite upset (M = 5.46) with the negative consumption experience and gave it a poor grade (M = 1.62, between a "D" and an "F"). They expected others to be mildly positive toward them and that sharing their review would not significantly impact these perceptions (M_{review} = 4.41 vs. $M_{no\text{-}review}$ = 4.59, $F(1, 63)$ = 1.75, p = 0.19, d = 0.17).

Method and results of study 5B (impact)
We used the reviews and profiles generated in Study 5 A to create the stimuli. Participants were 206 members of Mechanical Turk (M_{age} = 33.53, 41 per cent women) who completed this study for a payment and were randomly assigned to a control or a negative WOM condition. Participants in the control condition simply read a randomly selected profile of one of the participants in part A, which contained only the age, gender and state where the participant lived. Respondents in the WOM condition saw a profile of a randomly selected previous participant, as well as the review the participant had written. All participants then evaluated the target person using the same seven-point scales as those used in part A. Participants in the WOM condition were also asked to indicate how they thought they would have evaluated the target if they had not seen his or her review.

As depicted in Figure 4 and in contrast to Study 5A results, evaluations of the WOM communicators were significantly lower when participants saw both the target's profile and the negative review, relative to when they only saw the profile ($M_{control}$ = 5.02 vs. M_{WOM} = 4.08, $F(1, 204)$ = 28.59, p < 0.01, d = 0.75). A within-subjects comparison in the WOM condition indicates that WOM receivers predicted that their evaluations of the WOM
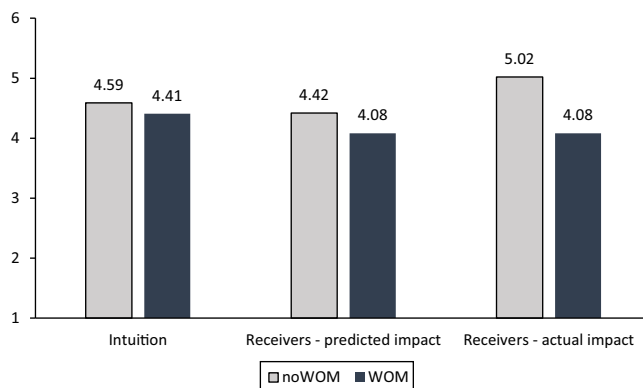
Figure 4.
Expected and actual
impact of negative
WOM (Studies 5a/5b)

communicators would have been somewhat more favorable had they not seen the negative review ($M_{\text{WOM}} = 4.08$ vs. $M_{\text{No-WOM}} = 4.42$, $F(1, 104) = 6.43$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.26$). However, the predicted negative impact of the review was about three times smaller than the actual impact, as target evaluations in the control condition were even higher than what participants expected they would have been without the negative review ($M_{\text{control}} = 5.02$ vs. $M_{\text{No-WOM}} = 4.42$, $F(1, 204) = 14.24$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.53$).

Discussion
Studies 5A and 5B make two important contributions to our investigation. First, they replicate the previously observed difference between prediction and impact of negative WOM, extending it to a situation where participants generate their own WOM. Second, they show that although WOM receivers derogate those who share negative WOM, they underestimate its negative impact.

Study 6
Results from all our studies so far indicate that negative WOM can have quite damaging consequences for the communicator, but that people in general fail to predict this. A question then arises:

Q1. Given that WOM is such a common-place phenomenon, why are consumers so prone to judge others based on a single piece of WOM? And are there ways to mitigate the negative social impact of negative WOM?

To examine this issue, we turn to a well-established phenomenon in social psychology, namely the correspondence bias Gilbert and Jones, 1986). This bias represents people's tendency to over-emphasize dispositional explanations for observed behaviors, while not giving enough weight to circumstances or situational explanations (Gawronski, 2004; Gilbert and Jones, 1986; Gilbert and Malone, 1995; Jones, 1990). In the context of WOM, it is reflected on one's tendency to attribute a negative (or positive) WOM to the consumer's personality rather than the experience or the product (Chen and Lurie, 2013). An interesting aspect of this bias is that individuals make this attribution for others, but not for themselves. In other words, when judging our own behavior, we are fully aware that we are often strongly influenced by the context, and not just by our own personality. In other words, we do not consider our evaluation of a movie is bad to reflect our negative personality, but

rather that the object of the evaluation was bad. In the study hypothesize that making consumers reflect on their past positive or negative experience with products would make them de-emphasize the value of such cues to judge others. In other words, it would decrease their correspondence bias.

Method
One-hundred and fifty-eight participants from Mechanical Turk completed this study for a payment. They were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (valence: positive vs negative) × 2 (control vs reflection) between-subjects design.

Participants read either a positive or a negative restaurant review ostensibly posted by a consumer on Urban Spoon (Appendix 5). Participants in the reflection condition were asked to reflect upon a situation in which they had a similarly positive (negative) restaurant experience. First, they indicated whether they had posted a review when it had happened (yes/no) and then they briefly explained why. Next, they indicated their perceptions about the consumer. Participants in the control condition were first asked to rate the consumer and only then to reflect on their past experiences. In this study, our measure of favorability involved some concrete actions (e.g. "John would be a look company for a lunch out," "I could be friends with John") rather a general abstract perception. We did not include an initial description of the target because we were not trying to isolate the effect of reviews as we did in our previous studies.

Results and discussion
We ran an ANOVA using valence and reflection order as factors and participant's posting behavior (had posted vs not) as a covariate. We found a main effect for valence ($F(1, 153) = 58.57$, $p < 0.001$), no effect for reflection order ($F(1, 153) = 0.03$, NS), the predicted interaction ($F(1, 153) = 20.17$, $p < 0.001$) as well as an effect for posting behavior ($F(1, 153) = 27.28$, $p < 0.001$). Further analyses indicate that when the consumer provided a negative review, reflecting on past experiences increased evaluations (negative: $M_{Not\text{-}reflected} = 3.35$ vs. $M_{reflected} = 4.14$, $F(1, 153) = 11.41$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, when the consumer provided a positive review, reflection decreased evaluations (positive: $M_{Not\text{-}reflected} = 5.18$ vs. $M_{reflected} = 4.60$, $F(1, 153) = 6.36$, $p < 0.01$). As shown in Figure 5, directing participants' attention to their own consumption experiences reduced how much they were influenced by the WOM content when forming impressions of the target. We note that the pattern of results does not change without the covariate. The influence of WOM valence remained significant, but it dropped considerably ($d_{control} = 1.28$ vs. $d_{reflection} = 0.32$).

Sixty-two per cent of participants indicated that they had posted similar reviews before. This answer was not influenced by condition (all $p > 0.20$). Those that did had a more
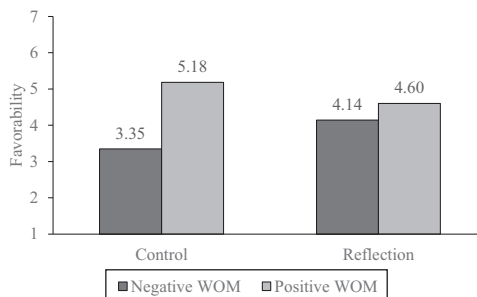

Figure 5.
Impact of WOM after reflection on one's own behavior (Study 6)

positive view of the consumer (M_{Posted} = 4.64 vs $M_{Not\text{-}posted}$ = 3.84). It seems that consumers who have posted reviews value more this behavior and are thus more positive toward those who also share online reviews. This is consistent with the perception that sharing word of mouth is a desirable behavior as it is helpful to others.

General discussion

Word-of-mouth has long been a key vehicle for sharing consumption-related experiences. In recent years, with the rise of online platforms such as consumer review sites and blogs, WOM has become one of the most trusted sources of product information for many consumers (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). While consumers may engage in WOM for a variety of reasons, WOM is often seen as an opportunity for the consumer to create a favorable impression among strangers, or to enhance an already positive impression among familiar others. It is not clear, however, to what extent WOM achieves these interpersonal goals. Does sharing our consumption experiences with others really enhance their opinion of us as much as we expect it to? And when may this not be the case?

The present research addresses these questions by comparing peoples' intuitions about the interpersonal consequences of WOM with the actual outcomes. In a series of six studies, we show that people often overestimate the benefits of positive WOM and underestimate the downsides of negative WOM. In Study 1, participants were asked to predict how sharing their experiences with various products or services (e.g. laptop, a vacuum cleaner, a holiday and a university program) would change others' opinion of them. Participants in the positive WOM condition expected an improvement, and those in the negative WOM condition expected either no change, or a small improvement in perceptions. In contrast, when participants assumed the role of WOM recipients, the pattern was reversed (Studies 2 A and 2B). Reading a positive restaurant review from an online reviewer caused little change to perceptions of the reviewer, but reading a negative review led participants to view him or her in a more negative light. Studies 3 A and 3B replicated this pattern and shed light on the underlying mechanism. Manipulating the favorability of the baseline profile of the WOM communicator changed significantly the effect of WOM but only in the impact conditions. In those conditions, when the baseline profile was clearly negative, positive WOM improved perceptions, whereas negative WOM had no significant effect. In the intuition conditions, the pattern remained unchanged. These results are consistent with our argument that people predict WOM's impact relative to a neutral baseline, but in reality they integrate it into existing perceptions. Studies 4A and 4B provided additional insight into the mechanism by comparing WOM intuitions and impact regarding specific personality traits. Whereas sharing positive WOM signaled only positive traits, sharing negative WOM signaled both positive and negative traits, but the impact of the negative ones was stronger as they were less consistent with initial impressions and expectations. Participants did not expect these effects when making predictions. Studies 5A and 5B confirmed the external validity of our findings by replicating the previous findings using product reviews reflecting participants' own real consumption experiences. Finally, Study 6 showed that the negative impact of WOM is mitigated when receivers are asked to consider their own experience as consumers.

Theoretical contributions

This paper contributes to the research on WOM and social transmission in several ways.

First, we believe this research is the first to compare people's intuitions about the social consequences of WOM with its actual consequences. Our finding that people's expectations are more optimistic than the reality is consistent with the rich literature on cognitive biases (Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974), and in particular with research

showing that people often hold a rosy view, especially when it comes to the self (Alicke and Govorun, 2005; Armor and Taylor, 2002; Weinstein, 1980).

Second, we contribute to the WOM literature by investigating directly people's intuitions about the consequences of WOM. Evidence about these intuitions so far has been mostly indirect, based on people's self-reported reasons for sharing, the content of the WOM messages, or the medium through which people choose to share (Berger, 2014, for a review). We test intuitions directly, asking participants to indicate the extent to which sharing their consumption experience would change others' perception of them. Our findings are in line with a self-enhancement motivation for WOM. We find that people generally are quite optimistic about the social impact of WOM. They expect sharing WOM to enhance how others see them, without any significant downsides.

Third, we contribute to the literature on the social consequences of WOM. This literature has shown that people who share positive WOM are liked more that those who share negative WOM (Amabile, 1983; Bergsieker et al., 2012; Carraro et al., 2010; Forest and Wood, 2012; Gawronski and Walther, 2008). Most of the existing research, however, has compared the impact of positive WOM with that of negative WOM, which prevents one from concluding whether, relative to a neutral-valence baseline, sharing negative WOM damages perceptions, sharing positive WOM improves perceptions, or whether both occur simultaneously. We address this limitation by examining the social consequences of positive and negative WOM relative to a control no-WOM condition. In contrast to previous findings, we show that whereas engaging in positive WOM has little impact on social impressions, engaging in negative WOM can have significant damaging consequences for consumers, decreasing how much other people like them.

Our research also sheds light on the specific personality traits people infer from sharing WOM. Positive WOM is associated with positive traits (e.g. likable, helpful, positive, etc.), whereas negative WOM is associated with both positive traits (e.g. honest, helpful) and negative traits (critical, negative, etc.). As demonstrated in Studies 3A and 3B, unless initial impressions of the communicator are already negative, the negative traits associated with negative WOM outweigh the positive ones.

Finally, previous research on the impact of negative WOM has shown that negative product reviews have stronger effect on sales and product evaluations than positive product reviews (Basuroy et al., 2003; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). In this research, we show that, in the typical scenario, negative reviews also have a stronger effect on perceptions of the communicator, relative to positive reviews.

Practical implications
This paper has a number of practical implications for the millions of individuals who share their product opinions on various online platforms, as well as for marketers in charge of designing product review opportunities and social media campaigns. Researchers so far have largely been concerned with the harmful impact of negative product WOM for companies, but our findings suggest that the impact for person impression management might be just as damaging, even though people do not seem to be aware of it. This raises the intriguing possibility that online WOM needs be thought of as potentially sensitive personal information, similar to information about one's health or financial records. Consumers are often unaware of the consequences of the information they choose to share (Acquisti et al., 2015). Our findings suggest that greater effort is needed to raise consumer awareness and that perhaps marketers responsible for designing product review opportunities should be encouraged to provide consumers with more flexible options, such as for example the option to easily edit or remove an online review.

Furthermore, the persuasion impact of WOM depends to a large extent on the receivers' perceptions of the communicator. Previous research has shown that certain message cues can make receivers more suspicious by increasing the salience of manipulative intent, and thus reduce the persuasiveness of the message (Kirmani and Zhu, 2007; Main *et al.*, 2007). If critical reviews signal negative cues about the communicator, it is possible that they may also make the WOM receiver more vigilant and thus inadvertently compromise the persuasiveness of the message.

Limitations and future research
This section discusses some limitations of our research that also provide exciting opportunities for further exploration.

With the exception of Studies 5A and 5B, we did not let participants write their own WOM but presented them, instead, with written reviews and asked them to imagine that they wrote the reviews themselves. This was done to maintain tighter experimental control and minimize the risk of confounds, but we acknowledge that it constrains the generalizability of our results. It is possible that, if given the chance to write their own WOM, participants could have focused on different aspects of the consumption experience, or used communication tools such as expressions, gestures, or different tone and language, to soften the negative reviews, or perhaps further enhance the positive reviews. There is, in fact, evidence that when sharing negative information, people use the so-called "dispreferred markers," with the goal to soften the negativity of the information (Hamilton *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, even though we used both on-line and off-line WOM in our studies, the online and offline messages were written by us and this may have obscured differences between the two types of WOM that would have materialized had we given participants the opportunity to say (vs write) their own WOM messages. Previous research has shown that online messages tend to offer better opportunities for the pursuit of self-enhancement goas, as they present the communicator with more time to construct the message (Berger and Iyengar, 2013).

In addition, we did not vary whether the WOM was solicited or given spontaneously. Sharing negative WOM in response to a request could highlight the helping aspect and downplay the negativity aspect (e.g. "I am glad you saved me from a bad decision!"). In contrast, sharing negative WOM "out of the blue," without a request or context, may do the opposite. The interpersonal closeness between the WOM communicator and the receiver could also play a role. In our studies, a relatively low interpersonal closeness was assumed. However, one can imagine that the impact of negative WOM, for example, would be significantly smaller if the communicator and the receiver knew each other well. The timing of the WOM can also be influential. Negative WOM that is shared before a decision is made can be helpful, but one that is shared after, may be considered just spiteful. The extent to which the WOM coincides with receivers' expectations can also be relevant, as unsolicited advice contrary to one's preference can lead to reactance effects (Fitzsimons and Lehmann, 2004).

In our studies, we tried to maintain the extremity of the positive and negative WOM messages comparable. However, a different pattern of results could be obtained if the messages were extremely positive or negative. One could image that a message that is too positive or slick could even have a negative impact, by raising suspicions about the credibility and motives of the communicator.

In summary, there are a number of factors that could potentially moderate the pattern of results obtained in our studies. While these present exciting opportunities for future research, we stress that the focus of our investigation is on the discrepancy between

intuitions and impact, rather than aspects that may affect reactions to WOM. While the aspects listed above might have an impact on reactions to WOM, it is not clear whether they would differentially affect the gap between intuitions and impact.

We have relied on inferential processes to explain both consumers' intuitions about WOM, as well as its actual impact. This is consistent with research in social psychology that has examined the impact of what people say on how others perceive them (Bergsieker *et al.*, 2012; Gawronski and Walther, 2008; Palmeira, 2015; Wakslak *et al.*, 2014). In addition to this mechanism, it is possible that associative processes outside consumers' awareness may also play a role. For example, Skowronski *et al.* (1998) showed that people can take on the traits that they describe in others. In their studies, participants saw photographs of people who had presumably provided descriptions of an acquaintance. When participants saw again the photos of the communicators sometime later, they were more likely to think the communicators had the personality traits of the acquaintance they had described earlier. Similar association-mediated effects have been observed in studies on stigmatization, which show that negative impressions about a stigmatized person often spill over to non-stigmatized people simply due to the presence of the first (Argo and Main, 2008; Hebl and Mannix, 2003; Mehta and Farina, 1988). Thus in addition to inferential processes, it is plausible that WOM may affect perceptions of communicators through associative processes.

Finally, although our studies cover a broad range of products and services, we did not systematically examine how different categories of WOM (e.g. novel product vs classic product or product for which the receiver has some prior expectations vs no expectations) might exacerbate or mitigate the present findings. For example, research has shown that negative WOM is less damaging for well-known brands, because in those situations consumers are more likely to make negative attributions about the reviewer rather than the target brand (Laczniak *et al.*, 2001). Future research can investigate the moderating role of these and related product cues.

Concluding comments

Most of us tend to hold optimistic expectations about the impression our consumption experiences make on other people. We anticipate that sharing positive consumption stories will favorably impress others and that passing over negative ones will be at least helpful and, thus, socially harmless. This research demonstrates that in reality, the pattern is the opposite: Our positive reviews have little interpersonal consequences but our negative ones can dramatically change how others see us for the worse.

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Appendix 1 – Scenarios used in study 1

Laptop
Negative word of mouth

Peter is thinking about purchasing a new laptop, but he is waiting for it to go on sale. He has just heard that one of the major electronics stores is offering the laptop for a great discount and he mentions this to you. You happen to have that same laptop but you are not happy with it. You tell Peter that the laptop is very disappointing.

Positive word of mouth

Peter is thinking about purchasing a new laptop, but he is waiting for it to go on sale. He has just heard that one of the major electronics stores is offering the laptop for a great discount and he mentions this to you. You happen to have that same laptop and you are happy with it. You tell Peter that the laptop is very good.

Vacuum cleaner
Negative word of mouth
Mary is planning to buy a new vacuum cleaner and she has come across a brand she does not know, so she asks you whether you are familiar with it. You purchased the same model two years earlier, and you did not like it at all. You tell Mary that the product is bad and that you have given up on it after a lot of frustration.

Positive word of mouth
Mary is planning to buy a new vacuum cleaner and she has come across a brand she does not know, so she asks you whether you are familiar with it. You purchased the same model two years earlier, and you like it very much. You tell Mary that the product is great and that you are very satisfied with its performance.

Holiday
Negative word of mouth
Your friend John is thinking about going on a beach vacation. He is considering a few destinations and asks you whether you have been to any of them. It turns out that you have been to one of the places, but you had a bad experience. You tell John about it and recommend against going there.

Positive word of mouth
Your friend John is thinking about going on a beach vacation. He is considering a few destinations and asks you whether you have been to any of them. It turns out that you have been to one of the places, and you had a great experience. You tell John about it and recommend going there.

Scholarship
Negative word of mouth
Your classmate Lisa tells you that she is considering applying for a scholarship to several universities to study abroad. She tells you which universities she is thinking of applying to. You went on a similar program to one of the universities the year before, but you thought the experience was disappointing. The foreign university was quite different from what you expected, with large classes of hundreds of students and little contact with faculty. You share your experience with Lisa.

Positive word of mouth
Your classmate Lisa tells you that she is considering applying for a scholarship to several universities to study abroad. She tells you which universities she is thinking of applying to. You went on a similar program to one of the universities the year before, and you thought the experience was great. The foreign university was better than what you expected, with small classes and very approachable faculty. You share your experience with Lisa.

Appendix 2 – Reviews used in Study 2

Positive word of mouth
"I found this restaurant on the internet and booked a table for Easter Sunday night as all my family would be there together. Fortunately, we got a great table with a view of the ocean. The waiter we had seemed to know well the plates and gave us some inspiring recommendations. I have to say that the food was extraordinary, so I would recommend it."

Negative word of mouth

"I found this restaurant on the internet and booked a table for Easter Sunday night as all my family would be there together. Unfortunately, we got a bad table with no view of the ocean. The waiter we had did not seem to know well the plates and gave us some uninspiring recommendations. I have to say that the food was quite ordinary, so I would not recommend it.

Appendix 3 – Target person's own description of his day in Studies 3a/3b

Neutral description

Yesterday was a normal day. I woke up about 8 a.m. I had milk and toast for breakfast. I got ready for work and walked to the subway station. I waited for a couple of minutes and took the subway to downtown. I had a meeting in the morning and another one in the afternoon. I left at 6 p.m. and went to the gym. I did some weights and a boxing class. I got home about 8 p.m., had quick dinner, watched some TV and went to bed.

Negative description

Yesterday was another boring day. I woke up about 8 a.m. I had milk and toast for breakfast. I got ready for work and walked to the subway station, which was crowded as always. I waited for a couple of minutes in the middle of some people who do not seem to shower very often. Then I took the subway to downtown. I had a tedious meeting in the morning and completely useless one in the afternoon. I left at 6 p.m. and went to the gym, which was filled with people more interested in showing off than exercising. I did some weights and a boxing class. I got home about 8 p.m., had quick dinner, watched some TV and went to bed.

Appendix 4 – Online reviews used in Studies 3a/3b

Positive word of mouth

"This hotel is great. The room was very clean; the staff was quite friendly and seemed to care about the guests. Our window opened to the front of the building, so there was a good flow of air coming in. These were hot summer days, but the air conditioning was working nicely, so the room was quite pleasant. This is a really nice hotel."

Negative word of mouth

"This hotel is terrible. The room was filthy; the staff was unfriendly and did not seem to care about the guests. Our window opened to the side of another building, so there was no air coming in. These were hot summer days and the air conditioning was not working at all, so the room was quite hot. This is a really bad hotel."

Appendix 5 – Stimuli used in Study 6

Below is the review of a restaurant (The Seamstress) posted by a consumer (John W.) on Urban Spoon.

Positive review

"Visited the Seamstress for the first time a couple of nights ago and I have to say I was really impressed. A very interesting restaurant, and not as expensive as I expected. The dish I ordered was beautifully presented and absolutely delicious. Service was great, atmosphere was cozy: a great experience overall."

Negative review

"Visited the Seamstress for the first time a couple of nights ago and I have to say I was not at all impressed. Just another place that offers mediocre food, and much more expensive than I expected. The meat I ordered was so dry it was nearly inedible. The waiter was friendly but took forever to bring our order. The place was noisy and crowded. Overall, a disappointing experience."

Measures

Please indicate the extent to you which you agree with following statement (1-Strongly disagree, 7-Strongly agree): It would be nice to meet John; it would be interesting to talk to John; John would be good company for a lunch out; I could be friends with John; overall, I have a good impression of John.

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