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“Don’t buy” or “do not buy”? How negation style in online reviews influences consumer product evaluations

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ABSTRACT

We investigate how different negation styles – that is, contracted (e.g., “isn’t”) versus full negations (e.g., “is not”) – in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) influence consumers’ evaluations of and willingness to pay for target products. We find that consumers evaluate products more positively when reviews contain contracted negations, as compared to full negations. This occurs because consumers perceive a reviewer who uses contracted negations as warmer and thus more competent than one who uses full negations; these positive perceptions increase consumers’ product evaluations. This research identifies a novel social pathway underlying consumers’ information processing in reviews and highlights the social aspects of eWOM.

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in the form of online reviews, blogs, or forums has significantly altered the decision-making process (Berger, 2014; Dellarocas, 2003). Consumers are increasingly likely to consult eWOM prior to purchasing a product or service (BrightLocal, 2018): 86% of consumers report that they read and base purchase decisions on reviews, making this the second most influential form of WOM, behind only WOM from family and friends (Nielsen, 2015). Further, the ubiquity of mobile devices means that reviews can influence consumers at any point in the choice process – even after they have entered the checkout line (IntelliAd, 2014). This influence occurs across a variety of choice contexts, including airlines, books, restaurants, hotels, and stocks (Guernsey, 2000).

Given their strong impact on consumer purchase behavior and on firm sales and profits (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas et al., 2007), businesses have begun to harness reviews as a marketing tool. Many companies encourage consumers to post reviews after purchasing, either on their own websites or on third-party websites (Dellarocas, 2003). Amazon now offers over 140 million reviews (McAuley & Yang, 2016), and has invested significant resources in managing the availability and credibility of these reviews (Perez, 2016a, 2016b). Given their pervasiveness and impact on consumers and firms, it is critical to understand what characteristics of reviews affect consumers’ product judgments, and how and why they do so.

Prior research has shown that valence (e.g., star ratings; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas et al., 2007), volume (i.e., number of reviews; Dellarocas et al., 2007; Duan et al., 2008), and linguistic content (i.e., what is said; Moore, 2012; Yin et al., 2014) are critical characteristics of reviews that affect consumers’ product judgments and choices. The current research focuses on a novel characteristic of reviews: linguistic style, or *how* things are said, and explores its effects on consumers’ perception of reviewers and product evaluations. Although little research in eWOM has examined this aspect of review content, the majority of linguistic communication consists of style words (e.g., articles, contractions) rather than content words (e.g., emotion words; Pennebaker, 2011). Further, linguistic style words can provide deep insight into individual psychological processes such as felt emotions and personality traits, and into interpersonal processes such as social skills and relationships (Pennebaker, 2011; Pennebaker et al., 2003). Thus, the current paper examines linguistic style as a potentially critical characteristic of eWOM.

To do so, this research focuses on negations, a prevalent and important aspect of linguistic style (Tottie, 1991). Negations disconfirm or falsify assertions (Horn, 1989) and can be presented stylistically as contractions (e.g., “isn’t”) or as full negations (e.g., “is not”). On eWOM platforms, negations provide important information about products or services (Herr et al., 1991; Yaeger-Dror et al., 2002). Specifically, they convey negative information, which is valued by review readers

and is more influential than positive information (Chen & Lurie, 2013; Sen & Lerman, 2007). Thus, it is important to understand how negation style – via which negative content is delivered – affects those reading reviews.

This paper demonstrates that although contracted and full negations carry the same semantic meaning (i.e., they both deliver negative information), the use of contracted negations (e.g., don't) leads to relatively more positive product evaluations than the use of full negations (e.g., do not). We argue that this effect is driven by consumers' inferences about reviewers' characteristics, such that consumers more positively evaluate reviewers who use contracted negations. In social contexts such as online reviews, agreement is preferred and overt disagreement is avoided (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Yaeger-Dror, 1997). This "social agreement principle" favors contracted negations (e.g., isn't), which minimize the degree of overt disagreement, over full negations (e.g., is not), which stress negatives (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Consistent with this principle, the current research builds on social perception theory, which concerns how individuals form impressions and make judgment about others (Asch, 1946; Rosenberg et al., 1968), to argue that reviewers who use contracted (vs. full) negations are viewed as warmer and therefore as more competent. Ultimately, the positive reviewer perceptions that come from using contracted negations positively affect consumers' evaluations of reviewed products. We further examine willingness to pay as a behavioral intention outcome and find a similar effect, where contracted negations increase consumers' willingness to pay for a reviewed product.

In demonstrating these effects, this research provides several theoretical and practical contributions. First, it broadens the scope of eWOM research by providing a novel examination of linguistic style, or *how* things are said, in reviews. The current findings suggest that subtle changes in negation style can change consumers' perceptions of reviewers and thus their evaluations of target products.

Second, this work enhances our understanding of the social aspects of eWOM (Hamilton et al., 2014; Vasquez, 2014). Moving beyond a simple information-provision role for eWOM, this research shows how negation style in reviews serves as a social cue to change consumer perceptions about reviewers, and thus their product evaluations. Using social perception theory, we identify the process by which consumers make inferences about review writers. Specifically, in this context, we demonstrate that a halo effect occurs between warmth and competence, such that warmth perceptions positively influence competence perceptions, which in turn positively affect product evaluations. In doing so, this work

reveals a dynamic relationship between warmth and competence perceptions in different social contexts, stimulating future research on the roles of social perception in eWOM.

Third, the current paper contributes to the negations literature. While previous research has focused on the cognitive processing of full negations versus affirmations (Beukeboom et al., 2010), the current research identifies a social mechanism that underlies the processing of different negation styles.

Finally, this research offers important implications for marketers. Since customers are likely to include negative information in reviews (Hamilton et al., 2014) and since negative information is important to review readers (Sen & Lerman, 2007), companies may wish to highlight the social nature of reviews to benefit from the positive effects of contracted negations (e.g., "isn't").

Below, we review relevant literature on eWOM to develop our hypotheses and then present four experiments that test our hypotheses. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings along with limitations and directions for future research.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

The social nature of eWOM

eWOM is a vital source of information for consumers because they present other consumers' candid opinions about a product or service (Berger, 2014; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Dellarocas, 2003). eWOM is particularly valued because it provides negative information, which is perceived as more diagnostic and more influential than positive information (Chen & Lurie, 2013; Herr et al., 1991; Sen & Lerman, 2007). Since negations can be presented as contractions or as full negations (Yaeger-Dror et al., 2002), it is important to understand how such variations in negation style affect consumers.

Research in sociolinguistics shows that context influences the use of different negation styles (Finegan, 2008; Yaeger-Dror, 1997). Informative contexts such as news lead to greater use of full (vs. contracted) negations, while social contexts such as conversations lead to greater use of contracted (vs. full) negations (Yaeger-Dror, 1997). Reviews are embedded in a social context: review writers strive to provide useful information to others in order to be helpful (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Moore, 2015), conform to conversational norms (e.g., Kronrod & Danziger, 2013), and garner favorable impressions from others (Berger, 2014; Hamilton et al., 2014; Naylor et al., 2011). Further, reviewers often explicitly interact and engage in "conversation" with readers by

using second-person pronouns (e.g., “I urge *you* to buy this product”) or interactive discourse markers (e.g., *ok, well, you know*; Vasquez, 2014). These findings suggest that reviews function in a social context.

In such social contexts, the social agreement principle, which denotes that agreement is preferred and overt disagreement is proscribed, guides communication. Specifically, individuals alter the content and style of their communication to conform to this principle in relevant contexts, because they are motivated to maintain the perception that they are liked, respected, and approved of by others (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Pomerantz, 1984). Thus, in social contexts, individuals attempt to minimize the extent to which they disagree with others. To do so, they adapt their speech styles to prioritize agreement by employing token agreement (e.g., “Yes, but . . .”), hedging negative opinions (e.g., “I kind of think . . .”; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hamilton et al., 2014), or using contracted negations (Yaeger-Dror, 1997) when voicing negative opinions. Critically, prior research has suggested that communicators who follow the social agreement principle are judged more positively than those who do not (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hamilton et al., 2014).

Below, we outline how the use of contracted versus full negations in reviews might affect consumers’ perceptions of reviewers, product evaluations, and willingness to pay for a target product.

Negation style, reviewer perceptions, and product evaluations

When reading reviews, consumers are not merely learning about products; they also assess the credibility and value of the information presented by making inferences about the reviewer (Moore & Lafreniere, 2020; Schlosser, 2011; Tang et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2014). Since little explicit information about reviewers is provided online (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006), consumers are likely to use other cues, such as reviewers’ linguistic style, to draw such inferences (Asch, 1946; Dick et al., 1990; Pennebaker et al., 2003) and judge reviewers (Naylor et al., 2011).

Specifically, building on social perception theory (Asch, 1946; Rosenberg et al., 1968), this paper examines how negation style affects consumers’ inferences of reviewers’ warmth and competence. We focus on these two factors because they play critical roles in driving social judgments – indeed, they capture the most variance in social perceptions (Fiske et al., 2007; Wojciszke & Klusek, 1996; Yzerbyt et al., 2008). Warmth judgments reflect individuals’ perceptions of others’ intentions as positive or negative, and competence judgments

reflect individuals’ perceptions of others’ efficacy (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2007).

Our basic prediction is that reviewers who use contracted negations will be judged more favorably than those who use full negations. Because contractions (e.g., “isn’t”) minimize disagreement, they better fit the social agreement principle than full negations (e.g., “is not”), which emphasize overt disagreement. For example, review readers may respond negatively to writers who directly express negative opinions using full negations if these opinions derogate something that readers view as positive. This is because overt disagreement could threaten a readers’ face, or their public image as someone who is liked, respected, competent, and approved of by others (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, building on the personality impression literature (Rosenberg et al., 1968; Wishner, 1960) and the social agreement principle (Yaeger-Dror, 1997), the use of full negations is likely to threaten the readers’ face and decrease the likability of reviewers by making them appear cold or disagreeable. In contrast, the use of contracted negations softens such potential disagreement and is likely to mitigate the social costs of raising negative opinions. This should increase the likability of reviewers by signaling that they are trying to be warm and polite, even when expressing negative opinions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, we hypothesize that the use of contracted (vs. full) negations will lead reviewers to be perceived as warmer (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hamilton et al., 2014; Yaeger-Dror, 1997; Yaeger-Dror et al., 2002).

H1a: The use of contracted (vs. full) negations will increase the perceived warmth of a reviewer.

Further, as a reviewer’s perceived warmth increases, we predict that their perceived competence will also increase. This prediction is based on a halo effect between warmth and competence. Regarding the relationship between perceptions of warmth and competence, prior work has shown mixed findings: while some work shows a positive relationship (Judd et al., 2005; Rosenberg et al., 1968), other studies have found a negative relationship (Aaker, Vohs & Mogilner, 2010; Judd et al., 2005).

A close examination of this prior work suggests that whether warmth and competence are positively or negatively related depends on the objects being judged (Yzerbyt et al., 2008). Specifically, in contexts where a single target (i.e., a reviewer) is judged, warmth and competence are positively related and show a halo effect (Judd et al., 2005; Rosenberg et al., 1968; Yzerbyt et al., 2008), whereas in contexts where two targets are

comparatively judged, warmth and competence are negatively related and show a compensatory effect (Yzerbyt et al., 2008). For example, Rosenberg et al. (1968) found a substantial positive correlation between warmth and competence when a single individual was judged; that is, if people judged someone as relatively warm and friendly, they also tended to see that person as relatively competent. However, when two social targets were comparatively judged, a target described more positively on one dimension was judged more negatively on the other dimension, relative to the other target. For example, Judd et al. (2005) found that when participants were asked to form impressions of two individuals who were described as being high or low in warmth, participants viewed the high-warmth target as less competent than the low-warmth target.

Thus, in an eWOM context, where a single reviewer is evaluated, we predict that a reviewer who is perceived as warmer will also be perceived as more competent. However, we do not predict that competence will increase perceptions of warmth, due to the primacy of warmth over competence (Wojciszke, 2005). Because individuals are more sensitive to warmth and are quicker at making warmth judgments than competence judgments (Wojciszke, 2005; Ybarra et al., 2001), warmth will be more likely to be judged first, before competence, and will therefore affect perceptions of competence.

H1b: Perceived warmth will have a positive impact on the perceived competence of a reviewer.

Lastly, it is predicted that these favorable impressions of reviewers will sequentially spill over to perceptions of the reviewed product (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Hamilton et al., 2014). Specifically, increased perceived competence will positively affect consumers' product evaluations. We base this prediction on the source credibility model (Hovland et al., 1953) and a positive transfer between a reviewer's and a reviewed product's personalities (Hamilton et al., 2014). First, the source credibility model suggests that a communicator's credibility positively transfers to the perceived effectiveness of the message (Sternthal

et al., 1978). Research in marketing has applied this model to explain why the use of celebrities in advertisements can be effective. It has shown that celebrities' positive characteristics, such as credibility and trustworthiness, spill over to products, increasing consumers' purchase intentions and brand perceptions (Erdogan, 1999). In particular, supportive of our prediction, prior research has found a positive spill over from evaluations of a reviewer to evaluations of reviewed products. Specifically, Hamilton et al. (2014) find that when reviewers use "dispreferred markers", which soften negative opinions by using phrases such as "I'll be honest", this increases their likability and competence. These perceptions positively transfer to consumers' evaluations of the reviewed product. Thus, we hypothesize as follows:

H1c: The perceived competence of a reviewer will have a positive impact on consumers' product evaluations.

In short, taking H1a-c together, we predict that negation style in reviews (contracted vs. full negations) will impact consumers' product evaluations, and that it will do so in a sequential process, via increased perceptions of reviewer writers' warmth and competence (Figure 1).

Furthermore, we explore how contracted negations directly affect consumers' willingness to pay. Previous research has shown that linguistic politeness strategies that soften negative opinions and disagreement can positively affect consumers' product evaluations and willingness to pay (Hamilton et al., 2014). Thus, we predict that the use of contracted negations, which minimize disagreement and argumentation, will have a direct, positive effect on product evaluations and willingness to pay for a reviewed product.

H2a: The use of contracted (vs. full) negations will have a more positive impact on consumers' product evaluations.

H2b: The use of contracted (vs. full) negations will have a more positive impact on consumers' willingness to pay for a target product.

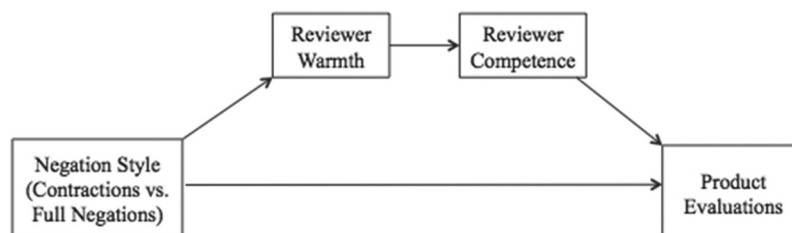


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Alternative explanations

Although we suggest that the positive effect of contracted negations (vs. full negations) on product evaluations is driven by favorable perceptions of the reviewer, three alternative explanations could account for this effect: negation strength, typicality, and fluency. First, while negation styles deliver the same negative information, contracted negations, with their lexical reduction of “not” (Yaeger-Dror, 1997), could reduce negation strength; this may lead to more positive product evaluations than full negations. Second, contracted negations could increase product evaluations because contracted negations are more typical and expected in natural language use than full negations. That is, enhanced typicality may lead to more favorable product evaluations (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013; Ling & Baron, 2007). Lastly, contracted negations could increase product evaluations because they are processed more fluently or easily than full negations (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Alter et al., 2007). Each of these three potential explanations is tested in the following studies.

Overview of studies

This paper tested these hypotheses and alternative explanations across four experiments. Experiment 1a explored whether the use of contracted negations led to more positive product evaluations than the use of full negations (H2a), using an online review of a digital camera. Experiment 1b replicated this main effect using a hotel review. A posttest using stimuli from Experiment 1b tested negation strength as an alternative explanation. Experiment 2 examined the basic effect using the additional dependent variable of willingness to pay for the reviewed product (H2b), and tested processing fluency (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009) and typicality of negation style (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013) as alternative explanations. Experiment 3 examined the extent to which contracted negations alter consumers’ perceptions of reviewers’ warmth and competence, and tested whether these perceptions *sequentially* mediate the effect of negation style on product evaluations (H1a, H1b, and H1c).

Experiment 1a

Method

Experiment 1a tested whether the use of contracted versus full negations in online reviews affected consumers’ product evaluations. Undergraduates ($N = 84$; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.9$, $SD = 2.34$; 51% female) participated in exchange for partial course credit. Upon arriving at the lab, participants were told that they would be completing a product evaluation task. They were randomly assigned

to one of three conditions: (1) contracted negation, (2) full negation, or (3) affirmation. We included the affirmation condition to ensure that participants in both negation conditions attended to and processed the negations.

Participants then read three separate quotes that were allegedly excerpted from real online reviews about a digital camera (see Appendix A). The quotes were identical save for the negation style manipulation. One quote about the camera’s ease of use varied in whether it contained a contracted negation (“it wasn’t easy to use”), a full negation (“it was not easy to use”), or an affirmation (“it was easy to use”). The other two quotes contained no negations and presented neutral information about the camera.

After reading the quotes, participants evaluated the camera using two items (1 = *very bad*, 7 = *very good*; 1 = *very unfavorable*, 7 = *very favorable*), rated how interested they were in a digital camera (1 = *not interested at all*, 7 = *very interested*), and reported their prior use of a digital camera (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*). Following prior work, we included these latter two variables as covariates in our analysis, due to their influence on attention to the review and on product judgments (Grant et al., 2004; Mayo et al., 2004; Zaichkowsky, 1985) and their conceptual relationships with the dependable variable of interest (Meyvis & Van Osselaer, 2018). The measurement items are shown in Table 1.

Results

Prior to testing the effect of negation style on product evaluations (H2a), the two evaluation items ($\gamma = .76$) were combined into an overall score. Then, using the affirmation condition as a reference, we dummy coded the three conditions to compare the affirmation condition with the two negation conditions. A regression analysis was conducted with the average product evaluation as a dependent variable, and prior use of and interest in a digital camera as covariates. Participants who read the reviews with the contracted or full negations evaluated the camera less positively ($M_{\text{contraction}} = 4.23$, $SD = 1.23$; $M_{\text{full negation}} = 3.91$, $SD = .89$) than those who read the review with the affirmation ($M_{\text{affirmation}} = 5.00$, $SD = .89$; $t_{\text{contraction vs. affirmation}}(79) = 2.50$, $p < .05$; $t_{\text{full vs. affirmation}}(79) = 4.69$, $p < .001$), confirming that participants attended to both negations.

Next, using the full negation condition as a reference, we dummy coded the three conditions to compare the full and contracted negation conditions. Importantly, participants who read the review with the contracted negation evaluated the camera more positively than those who read the review with the full negation ($t(79) = 2.06$, $p < .05$).

Table 1. Measures.

Measure	Experiments	Scale Items
Product/hotel evaluation	1a, 1b, 2, 3	Overall, the camera was: Overall, the hotel was: (1 = very bad/very unfavorable, 7 = very good/very favorable) How much would you like to buy this camera? (1 = not at all, 7 = very much)
Willingness to pay	2	How much would you be willing to pay for the camera? Within the price range of \$70 – \$150, please use the slider below to indicate the price you are willing to pay for this camera.
Prior camera use	1a, 2, 3	Have you ever used the Kodak digital camera C1530? (1 = Yes, 0 = No)
Camera interest	1a, 2, 3	How interested are you in using a digital camera? (1 = not interested at all, 7 = very interested)
Importance of camera features	2, 3	How important are the following features when you evaluate a digital camera? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease of Zooming In and Out • Ability to Take Stills and Videos with the Same Camera (1 = not important at all, 7 = very important)
Importance of hotel features	1b	How important are the following features when YOU choose a hotel to stay at? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility of parking to the room • Breakfast included (1 = not important at all, 7 = very important)
Previous hotel experience	1b	How much experience do you have with hotel stays? (1 = None or very little, 7 = a lot)
Reviewer warmth and competence perceptions	3	Based on the review you read, please rate the reviewer on the following dimensions. (1 = not warm at all, 7 = very warm) (1 = not knowledgeable at all, 7 = very knowledgeable)
Typicality and fluency of contracted negations versus full negations	2	How <i>typical</i> do you think contracted negations (e.g., isn't, don't, can't) are in online reviews?/How <i>typical</i> do you think non-contracted negations (e.g., is not, do not, cannot) are in online reviews? (1 = not typical at all, 7 = very typical) Please indicate how "readable" the following sentences are. "The video menu on the camera wasn't (vs. was not) working properly." (1 = very difficult to read, 7 = very easy to read)
Star rating	1b	How many stars (out of five) do you think the reviewer would give to this hotel? (1 = one star; 5 = five stars)
Negation strength	1b posttest	To what extent was this review negative or positive? (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive); How strongly negative or positive was the content of this review? (1 = very strongly negative, 7 = very strongly positive) Please indicate how negative each of the following sentences sounds to you. "The parking was not (wasn't) close to the room." "Breakfast was not (wasn't) included." "We could not (couldn't) open the windows." "This is not (isn't) the fanciest hotel." (1 = not negative at all, 7 = very negative)

Discussion

These findings demonstrate that negation style affects product evaluations. Participants evaluated a camera more favorably when the review contained negations that were stated as contractions rather than as full negations, supporting H2a. Experiment 1b replicates this effect in the context of a hotel review.

Experiment 1b

In contrast to Experiment 1a, Experiment 1b used a single, mixed review that contained both positive and negative information, which is a more realistic representation of reviews (Crowley & Hoyer, 1994; Rucker et al., 2008). In addition, while Experiment 1a used only one type of verb in its negations (e.g., was), Experiment 1b included several different negated verbs (e.g., was, could, is). This experiment also examined whether full versus contracted negations communicate the same semantic content in terms of negativity. Thus, participants were asked how many stars they thought the reviewer would assign to the hotel; we do not expect this star rating to differ across conditions if

both negations deliver the same semantically negative content.

Method

Participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk ($N = 305$; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.05$, $SD = 10.48$; 46.1% female) were randomly assigned to one of two negation-style conditions (contracted vs. full). Participants read a six-sentence mixed review about a hotel stay. Reviews were identical across conditions except for four sentences, which contained either contracted or full negations. Two of the negation sentences referred to specific features of the hotel room (e.g., "The parking wasn't/was not close to the rooms.") and two presented overall statements about the hotel (e.g., "This isn't/is not the fanciest hotel in the world.;" see Appendix B). The other sentences in the reviews presented neutral or positive information.

After reading the reviews, participants evaluated the hotel using two items (e.g., 1 = *very unfavorable*, 7 = *very favorable*; 1 = *very bad*, 7 = *very good*) and how many stars out of five they thought the reviewer would give to this hotel. Participants also reported how important the negated attributes of the hotel were to them (1 = *not at*

all important, 7 = very important) and their experience with hotel stays (1 = none or very little experience, 7 = a lot). Since these preexisting individual differences influence participants' hotel judgments (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Grant et al., 2004; Meyvis & Van Osselaer, 2018), they were included as covariates in an analysis. All measurement items are shown in Table 1.

Results

First, an ANOVA analysis was conducted to predict star-ratings; there were no significant differences across conditions ($M_{full} = 3.26$, $SD = .59$, $M_{contraction} = 3.32$, $SD = .59$, $p = .39$).

Second, to test H2a, the two product evaluation items were averaged to create an overall score ($\gamma = .81$). We conducted a one-way ANOVA analysis with the negation condition (contracted vs. full) as an independent variable, the importance of negated hotel features and previous hotel experience as covariates, and the average hotel evaluation as a dependent variable. The results revealed that participants evaluated the hotel more favorably when they read the review with contracted negations ($M = 5.30$, $SD = .63$) than when they read the review with full negations ($M = 5.12$, $SD = .92$; $F(1, 298) = 3.90$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Using a hotel review instead of a camera review, Experiment 1b replicated the finding that negation style affects consumers' evaluations. Consistent with Experiment 1a, reviews with contracted negations led to more positive hotel evaluations than those with full negations. However, star-ratings assigned to the hotel did not differ by condition, suggesting that different negation styles may communicate the same semantic content.

Nevertheless, the use of star-ratings to test negation strength as an alternative explanation has limitations. First, we asked participants to indicate how many stars they thought the reviewer would assign to the hotel. However, there may be differences between the stars that participants themselves would assign to the hotel and the stars that participants believe the reviewer would assign to the hotel. In other words, star-ratings from participants' perspectives and those from the reviewer's perspective may involve different cognitive processes that could induce different responses. Second, star-ratings may be imperfect in measuring product or service effectiveness, as research has found that there is a disconnect between objective product quality and the use of star-ratings as an indicator of objective product quality (De Langhe et al., 2016).

To address this issue, we conducted a posttest focused on negation strength. Participants were recruited from Prolific Academic ($N = 212$; $M_{age} = 33.77$, $SD = 12.17$; 52.6% female) and randomly assigned to one of two negation-style conditions (contracted vs. full). Participants read the same mixed review about a hotel as used in Experiment 1b. After reading the reviews, participants indicated to what extent the review was negative or positive (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive) and how strongly the content of the review was negative or positive (1 = very strongly negative, 7 = very strongly positive). Then participants evaluated how negative each of the four negated sentences used in the review sounded to them (e.g., "The parking was not close to the room"; 1 = not negative at all, 7 = very negative). ANOVA analyses revealed that there were no significant differences in terms of review content negativity ($M_{full} = 5.77$, $SD = .73$, $M_{contraction} = 5.72$, $SD = .93$, $F(1, 210) = .14$, $p = .71$). Strength of the review negativity also did not differ across conditions ($M_{full} = 5.67$, $SD = .78$, $M_{contraction} = 5.60$, $SD = .90$, $F(1, 210) = .22$, $p = .63$). That is, participants did not perceive the review that contained full negations as more negative than the review that contained contracted negations. We also compared negation strength of full versus contracted negation sentences. Prior to analysis, the four negated sentences used in the review were averaged to create an overall score ($\alpha = .75$). A one-way ANOVA analysis showed that there were no significant differences in negation strength across conditions ($M_{full} = 4.67$, $SD = .98$, $M_{contraction} = 4.47$, $SD = 1.0$, $F(1, 210) = 2.13$, $p = .15$).

The posttest improved our measure of negation strength and tested negation strength using review content and negated sentences. Analyses revealed no significant differences in terms of negation strength between full and contracted negations, which indicates that negation styles carry the same semantic meaning.

Experiment 2

We conducted Experiment 2 to test H2 using a different dependent variable. Specifically, this experiment measured both evaluations of (H2a) and willingness to pay for the reviewed product (H2b). Further, this experiment measured both the typicality and fluency of contracted and full negations to test whether they could account for the main effect (H2a). Similar to Experiment 1a, participants read a review about a camera and evaluated the reviewed product. However, this study used a single, mixed review that included positive and negative information.

Method

Participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk ($N = 295$; $M_{\text{age}} = 34$, $SD = 11.3$; 46.1% female) were randomly assigned to one of two negation-style conditions (contracted vs. full). Participants read a six-sentence mixed review about a digital camera. Reviews were identical across conditions except for three sentences, which contained either contracted or full negations. Two of the negation sentences concerned specific features of the camera (e.g., "The video menu wasn't/was not working properly.") and one presented an overall statement about the camera ("It wasn't/was not the best camera."); see Appendix C). The other three sentences in the reviews presented neutral or positive information.

After reading the review, participants rated the camera on favorability, likability, and purchase interest (7-point scales; $\alpha = .84$), and reported their willingness to pay for the camera using a sliding scale ranging from 70 USD to 150 USD. Next, participants rated how typical they thought both contracted and full negations were in reviews (1 = *not typical at all*, 7 = *very typical*) and rated the fluency of the contracted and full negation sentences from the review (e.g., how readable was this sentence?; 1 = *very difficult to read*, 7 = *very easy to read*; Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Alter et al., 2007). Participants also rated the degree to which each negated feature of the camera was important to them (1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *very important*) and their prior use of cameras (Aaker & Keller, 1990; see Table 1 for all measurement items); these items were included as covariates.

Results

Consistent with the findings of previous experiments, a one-way ANOVA analysis showed that participants evaluated the camera more positively when they read the review with contracted negations ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.07$), as compared to full negations ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.03$; $F(1, 289) = 4.00$, $p < .05$). In addition, in the contracted negation condition, participants were willing to pay more for the camera ($M = 84.64$ USD, $SD = 14.23$) than those in the full negation condition ($M = 81.41$ USD, $SD = 13.73$; $F(1, 289) = 3.90$, $p < .05$).

Contracted negations were perceived to be more typical than full negations (typicality: $M_{\text{contracted}} = 5.79$, $M_{\text{full}} = 4.37$, $p < .05$).¹ Contracted negations were also

perceived to be more fluent to read than full negations ($M_{\text{contracted}} = 5.86$, $M_{\text{full}} = 5.72$, $p = .06$). However, neither of these variables mediated the effect of negation style on product evaluations (Hayes, 2013; Model 4; typicality CI: $-.007 - .073$; processing fluency CI: $-.003 - .065$).

Discussion

Experiment 2 showed that reviews with contracted (vs. full) negations led to increased product evaluations and also greater willingness to pay for the reviewed product. In addition, this study found no support for typicality and fluency as alternative explanations of our main effect.

Experiment 3

Experiment 3 tested H1, the impact of negation style on consumers' perceptions of reviewer warmth and competence, and examined whether these perceptions sequentially mediated the effect of negation style on product evaluations.

Method

Participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk ($N = 365$; $M_{\text{age}} = 33.97$, $SD = 11.64$; 44.4% female) were randomly assigned to one of two negation-style conditions (contracted vs. full). Participants read the same mixed review about a camera as in Experiment 2. After reading the reviews, participants evaluated the camera using two items (e.g., 1 = *very unfavorable*, 7 = *very favorable*; 1 = *very bad*, 7 = *very good*) and rated their perceptions of the reviewer's warmth (1 = *not at all warm*, 7 = *very warm*) and competence (1 = *not at all knowledgeable*, 7 = *very knowledgeable*; see Table 1 for all measurement items).

Results

Product Evaluation

The two product evaluation items were averaged to create an overall score ($\gamma = .86$). An ANOVA analysis revealed that participants evaluated the camera more favorably when they read the review with contracted negations ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.10$) than when they read the review with full negations ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.20$; $F(1, 359) = 3.79$, $p = .052$).

¹In addition to this subjective measure of the typicality of using contracted negations, we also tested the prevalence of contracted negations differently, using an existing corpus of Amazon book reviews ($N = 200$; Moore, 2015); this can serve as an objective measure of how typically contracted negations are used in reviews. The total number of negations was counted and coded as either contracted or full negations. Contracted negations comprised 77.5% of the negations, confirming that they are more prevalent and common than full negations.

Reviewer Perceptions

Supporting our hypotheses about reviewer perceptions, participants in the contracted negations condition evaluated the reviewer as warmer ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.10$) than those in the full negation condition ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.21$; $F(1, 363) = 3.81$, $p = .05$); those in the contracted condition also viewed the reviewer as more competent ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.26$) than those in the full negation condition ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.41$; $F(1, 363) = 3.94$, $p < .05$).

Mediation

To test whether reviewer warmth and competence sequentially mediated the effect of negation style on product evaluations, a bootstrapping analysis was conducted (Hayes, 2013; PROCESS Model 6). Warmth and competence were significant serial mediators of the effect of negation style on product evaluation (indirect effect = .01, $SE = .008$, $CI: .001$ to $.035$; see Figure 2). Specifically, the use of contracted negations increased perceptions of reviewers' warmth (H1a, $\beta = .24$, $p = .05$), warmth perceptions increased perceptions of reviewers' competence (H1b, $\beta = .41$, $p < .01$), and competence perceptions increased product evaluations (H1c, $\beta = .11$, $p < .05$). However, the sequential mediation was not significant when the order of the two mediators was reversed (indirect effect = .003, $SE = .006$, $CI: -.007$ to $.020$), providing evidence for the proposed process model.

Discussion

Experiment 3 showed that negation style affects consumers' perceptions of reviewers, and therefore their evaluations of the reviewed product. Participants viewed a reviewer who used contracted negations as warmer and thus as more competent than one who used full negations; reviewer competence increased product evaluations. This effect of reviewer competence on product evaluations suggests that perception of reviewer competence can positively spill over to a reviewed product, increasing evaluations of the product. Furthermore, the

finding that these perceptions sequentially mediated the effects of negation style on product evaluations demonstrates the predicted positive halo effect between warmth and competence and the primacy of warmth (Cuddy et al., 2008; Rosenberg et al., 1968; Yzerbyt et al., 2008). Additional analysis of the reversed mediation between competence and warmth did not reveal a significant effect, which further supports our prediction that the warmth judgment was made before the competence judgment.

General discussion

eWOM generated by consumers (e.g., Amazon, Google, Trip Advisor, Yelp) has a significant impact on companies. A recent consumer study suggests that 86% of consumers read reviews, and 91% of them trust reviews as much as they trust personal recommendations from their friends and relatives (BrightLocal, 2018). With easy access to consumer reviews and visible ratings via the Internet and smartphone apps, the influence of eWOM on consumer decisions is likely only to increase (Chen, 2019); thus, eWOM provides important implications for companies' marketing strategy and company profitability.

In particular, reviews are valued by consumers because they provide negative information, which carries more diagnostic and influential value than positive information (Chen & Lurie, 2013; Herr et al., 1991; Sen & Lerman, 2007). Building on the importance of negative information in reviews, the current research examines how negation style, via which negative information is delivered, affects perceptions of reviewers, product evaluations, and willingness to pay. This research shows that the use of contracted (vs. full) negations increases consumers' product evaluations because such negations better fit the social agreement principle, which leads to more favorable impressions of the reviewer. Specifically, the findings suggest that reviewers who use contracted negations are perceived as warmer and thus more competent, which supports the primacy of warmth

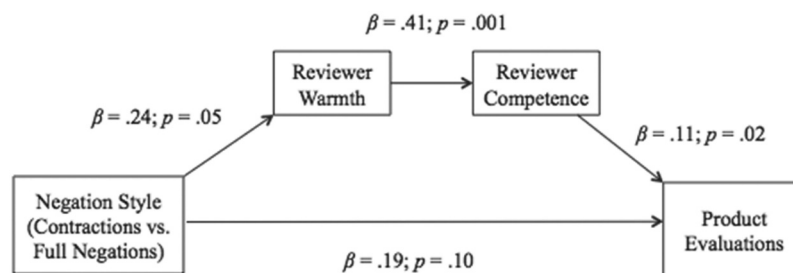


Figure 2. Serial mediation results for experiment 3.

and a halo effect of warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2008; Judd et al., 2005). Consistent with the source credibility model (Hovland et al., 1953), we find that increased reviewer competence positively spills over to evaluations of the reviewed product. In addition, our results indicate that the use of contracted negations positively affects consumers' willingness to pay for a reviewed product. Further, we find no support for the prediction that negation strength, typicality of negation styles, or processing fluency underlies the contracted negation effect. Finally, the current findings are robust to changes in review context from a camera to a hotel, to the use of different negated verbs (was, could, is), and to whether the negations were embedded in a neutral review or in a mixed (positive and negative) review.

Contributions to word-of-mouth research

This research contributes to the literature on WOM by extending the scope of prior research on reviews. While previous research has mainly focused on linguistic content, or *what* is said (Chen & Lurie, 2013; Moore, 2012), our work focuses instead on linguistic style, or *how* things are said. We show how slight variations in negation style ("isn't" vs. "Is not") can change consumers' perceptions of reviewers, which in turn affect their product evaluations. In doing so, this work highlights the social nature of online reviews and sheds light on a novel social mechanism that underlies consumers' review information processing and product judgment. By delineating the social pathway that operates in eWOM, this research contributes to a better understanding of personality impression formation and social judgment in the context of anonymous reviews.

Contributions to negation research

Expanding the negations literature in sociolinguistics, this research investigates how negation style (contraction vs. full negations) generates differences in reviewer perceptions and product evaluations. While prior research on negations has primarily focused on understanding the antecedents of negation style, such as the contexts in which different styles are used (Yaeger-Dror et al., 2002), this work enhances our understanding of the consequences of using different negation style in eWOM. In addition, this research offers a more contextualized understanding of the effect of negation styles on consumers. Previous consumer research on negations has focused on the cognitive processing and comprehension of full negations (e.g., "is not good") versus affirmations ("is good"; Carpenter & Just, 1975; Grant et al.,

2004). In contrast, we argue and show that contracted and full negations, while carrying the same semantic meaning, differentially affect consumer perception and judgment. By doing so, our research presents a more nuanced understanding of negations in consumer research.

Contributions to warmth and competence research

This research contributes to the literature on warmth and competence by empirically testing the dynamic relationship between the two dimensions. Warmth and competence have been identified as the two fundamental dimensions in social judgment (Judd et al., 2005); however, experimental work that tests the relationship between warmth and competence has been limited (Yzerbyt et al., 2008). Our research tests the relationship between warmth and competence and lends support to the primacy of warmth (Cuddy et al., 2008) and the halo effect (Judd et al., 2005). Specifically, in the social context of eWOM, where a single reviewer is evaluated, we observe that warmth judgments are primary: warmth is judged before competence and warmth positively affects competence judgments, but not vice versa. By providing evidence of how warmth and competence judgments are made and influence one another, this research contributes to a better understanding of the complex connections between warmth and competence.

Taken together, our four experiments (summarized in Table 2) demonstrate that linguistic style (how things are said) matters, over and above linguistic content (what is said) in eWOM. The results indicate that negation style should be considered, in order to better understand the rich dynamics underlying how eWOM affects consumers' information processing, as well as their reviewer and product judgments.

Practical implications

The current research provides practical implications for marketers in terms of review management, review helpfulness, and reputation management strategies. While negative reviews may have undesirable effects on companies, they are inevitable: consumers are likely to include negative information in their reviews when they share their opinions about the product. Thus, such customer feedback must be managed. The current research provides guidance on how companies can benefit from reviews even when negative information is shared.

First, this research shows that the use of contracted (vs. full) negations enhances product evaluations because it better fits the social agreement principle. Thus, firms may wish to emphasize the social aspects of reviews to further

encourage the use of contracted negations and to build a warmer and more polite customer base, and to build social connections among reviewers, and between the company and reviewers. To do so, firms could 1) highlight the review writers' potential audience to make the social agreement principle salient (e.g., "10 people are reading reviews about this product right now"); 2) emphasize the interactive nature of reviews in their instructions to review writers to facilitate the use of informal language such as contractions (e.g., "pretend you're talking to a friend"; Yaeger-Dror et al., 2002); or 3) model the use of informal and friendly language in their communications to encourage customers to use similar language (e.g., "we can't wait to hear from you!").

Second, companies may enhance their product and brand perceptions via a positive spillover of reviewer perceptions to the reviewed product. Our research shows that the use of contracted negations makes reviewers appear warmer and thus more competent; these favorable perceptions spill over to evaluations of the product being reviewed. Thus, firms are likely to see benefits accrue to their products and brands when customer reviews use contracted negations.

Third, negation style may serve as a useful tool to increase review helpfulness, which would benefit both companies and consumers. For example, if firms facilitate the interactive and social nature of reviews by encouraging the use of contractions, in line with the social agreement principle, reviewers may feel more comfortable sharing their honest opinions, or may be motivated to provide more detailed feedback to help other consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Such interactive and authentic reviews would be a valuable source of feedback for firms (Chen, 2019), and could improve consumers' purchase decisions.

In applying the positive effect of contracted negations, it would be also helpful for companies to display an authentic commitment to continuous improvement based on consumers' reviews. Modern consumers are increasingly searching for authenticity and trustworthiness from companies (Fertik, 2019), which signal whether companies have positive intentions toward consumers (Aaker et al., 2010). By communicating how and why interactive reviews can help companies understand customers' real needs and further improve their businesses, firms can show their positive intentions toward consumers; this should enhance perceptions of their authenticity and credibility (Isaac & Grayson, 2017).

Limitations and future research

This paper is not without limitations, which can provide potential avenues for future research. First, our research focuses on consumers, that is, review readers, by examining how reviewers' use of different negation styles alters consumers' perceptions of the reviewers, evaluations of products and willingness to pay. Although we explain that contracted negations are preferred due to their better fit with the social nature of reviews, we did not explore reviewers' motivations for using contracted versus full negations. While full negations do not comply with the social agreement principle, reviewers' motivations for using full negations might be well intended, for example, to deliver critically essential information to other consumers or to help others make right purchase decisions. Such knowledge of reviewers' motivations may change consumers' perceptions of reviewers.

Second, we show that the positive effect of contracted negations on product evaluations is rooted in favorable perceptions of reviewers, grounded in the social nature of reviews. We find that contracted and full negations do not differ in their negativity, which suggests they deliver the same semantic meaning, at least in the current context. However, the semantic meaning of negations may be intrinsically associated with their negation styles. In our experiments, we tested negation strength by assessing overall review content as well as the negated sentences themselves, but there may be other ways to measure the semantic meaning of negation styles. Further, in other settings, it may be more difficult to make a clear distinction between negation content and negation style.

Beyond addressing these limitations, the current research offers several additional pathways for future work. First, the robustness of these findings could be explored in other contexts. The effects of negation style ought to vary with the importance of the social agreement principle. For example, in contexts where social

Table 2. Summary of results (DV = product/hotel evaluations).

	Experiment 1a t-value	Experiment 1b F-value	Experiment 2 F-value	Experiment 3 F-value
Main effect				
Full negations (vs. contractions)	-2.06**	3.90**	4.00**	3.79*
Affirmation (vs. Contractions)	2.50**	-	-	-
Camera Use	-.80	-	3.51*	.30
Camera Interest	3.46***	-	4.71**	.21
Video function	-	-	.42	3.13*
Zoom function	-	-	5.31**	2.10
Hotel experience	-	1.18	-	-
Parking	-	.41	-	-
Accessibility	-	-	-	-
Breakfast	-	4.23**	-	-
Inclusion	-	-	-	-

Note: *** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .05$, * $p < .10$.

* Insignificant covariates were included due to their conceptual relationships with dependent variables of interest, as suggested and used in previous research (Grant et al., 2004; Meyvis & Van Osselaer, 2018).

agreement is less critical – such as when the need for information is salient (Yaeger-Dror, 1997), or when disagreement is preferred (e.g., debates; Clayman, 2002) – full negations may be favored, thus mitigating the positive effects of contracted negations on judgments. Similarly, the effects of negation style could be explored in commercial contexts such as advertising (e.g., “you won’t/will not regret it”). Since consumers view advertising with some skepticism (Friestad & Wright, 1994), the use of contracted negations may be viewed as a persuasion tactic rather than as a genuine attempt to conform to the social agreement principle. If so, consumers might evaluate ads with contracted negations less positively than those with full negations.

Second, the importance of negation style as a social cue could be investigated in the presence of other information about reviewers (e.g., profile pictures, names, or demographic information; Naylor et al., 2011). Given additional social information about reviewers, inferences about their use of different negation styles may be less diagnostic, and the effects observed in this work may be attenuated. Alternately, the inferences consumers make about negation style may interact with other social information to affect their judgments. For example, reviewers who share demographic similarities with readers might be viewed as warmer (Packard et al., 2016), and these effects might be strengthened if the reviewer uses contracted negations.

Third, the positive effect of contracted negations demonstrated in eWOM may extend to other contexts where companies communicate with their customers. Since most firms’ responses involve formulaic styles, which may be suboptimal (Zhang & Vásquez, 2014), companies using different negation styles may positively moderate the effect of their responses to customers (Moore & Lafreniere, 2020). For example, when companies respond to customers’ complaints or communicate negative information, firms could potentially enhance their warmth and competence perceptions by using contracted negations rather than full-negations.

Finally, future research could focus more broadly on how other linguistic style factors affect consumer choice. While this research is concerned with *not*-negations (e.g., “is not” vs. “isn’t”), which comprise the vast majority of English language negations (Tottie, 1991), there are also *no*-negations (e.g., nowhere, never) and affixal negations (e.g., *imperfect*, *nonfunctional*). More generally, beyond negations, there are other forms of contractions (e.g., I am vs. I’m, you will vs. you’ll). Further, there are other aspects of linguistic style, such as variations in pronoun use (I vs. we; Packard et al., 2018; Pennebaker, 2011), article use (e.g., the), and conjunction use (e.g., with; Patrick & Haws, 2014). It would be worth exploring how and why

other variations in linguistic style influence consumers as they gather information about products.

To conclude, this research offers novel insight into the relationship between linguistic style and consumer judgments in eWOM, and identifies the psychological process that underlies this relationship. Going beyond *what* is said, it shows that *how* things are said can influence consumers’ perceptions of reviewers and their evaluations of reviewed products.

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Appendix A. Stimuli for experiment 1a: Kodak digital camera review

To see an image of the Kodak digital camera for experiment 1a, please visit: <https://www.amazon.com/Kodak-C1530-Digital-Camera-Black/dp/B004MB4FEU>

“I bought this camera just before going on a trip out of country. This camera was not (wasn’t, was) easy to use.”

“I got this camera because I needed to take photos of my work. The charger and batteries came in the same Kodak box with the camera.”

“I purchased this camera because I accidentally broke my previous camera during my nephew’s High School graduation. This camera has 3.0 in. bright LCD and 3X optical zoom lens.”

Appendix B. Stimuli for experiment 1b

Hotel Review: Howard Plaza Hotel

“We stayed at this lovely hotel for three nights while we were on vacation. The hotel is right at the bottom of Houston St where it gets quieter and prettier near the Park.

We had a pleasant corner unit with lots of light, but it overlooked a busy street, so we could not (couldn’t) open the windows.

The room was nice and clean. But the parking was not (wasn’t) close to the rooms, which was not (wasn’t) convenient. Breakfast was not (wasn’t) included.

Overall, this is not (isn’t) the fanciest hotel in the world, but it is reasonably priced and has a good location.”

Appendix C. Stimuli for experiment 2: SONY digital camera review

To see an image of the SONY digital camera for experiment 2, please visit: <https://www.amazon.com/Sony-DSCW830-Digital-Camera-2-7-Inch/dp/B00HNJWUC2>

“I purchased this camera because I wanted to replace an old camera.

The charger and batteries came in the same box with the camera, which was handy. When I took photos, though, it was not (wasn’t) easy to zoom in and out.

I did like that I could take stills and videos with the same camera, but the video menu on the camera was not (wasn’t) working properly.

Overall, it is not (isn’t) the best camera in the world. But it is reasonably priced, and the straightforward features make it a good one to start with.”