

We'll Be Honest, This Won't Be the Best Article You'll Ever Read:  
The Use of Dispreferred Markers in Word-of-Mouth Communication

RYAN HAMILTON

KATHLEEN D. VOHS

ANN L. MCGILL\*

(Forthcoming, *Journal of Consumer Research*)

\* Ryan Hamilton, Assistant Professor of Marketing, Emory University, Goizueta Business School, 1300 Clifton Road, Atlanta, GA 30306 (ryan\_hamilton@bus.emory.edu). Kathleen D. Vohs, Associate Professor of Marketing and Land O' Lakes Professor of Excellence in Marketing, University of Minnesota, Carlson School of Management, 3-150 321 19<sup>th</sup> Ave S., Minneapolis, MN 55455 (kvohs@umn.edu). Ann L. McGill, Sears Roebuck Professor of Marketing and Behavioral Science, University of Chicago, Graduate School of Business, 5807 South Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637 (ann.mcgill@chicagoGSB.edu). The authors thank Rowella Kuijpers, Nick Michalak, and Thao Ha for their assistance in data collection and Boaz Keysar for support. The authors also thank Quinn Warnick for his valuable feedback. The second two authors thank a very tedious cocktail party for providing the inspiration for this research project.

### Contribution Statement

This research contributes to the growing body of work on word-of-mouth communications. Most of the work to date on the persuasiveness of word-of-mouth communications has focused on the content of the message (Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991; Chen and Berger 2013) or the characteristics of the communicator (Cheema and Kaikati 2010; Forman, Ghose, and Wiesenfeld 2008). Our work is novel in that it focused on how communicators phrase their messages. We focused in particular on one type of conversational technique: dispreferred markers. These phrases warn or acknowledge negative information that could threaten the face of the communicator or the receiver. We showed that dispreferred markers influence a receiver's evaluations of the communicator's credibility (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994; Hovland and Weiss 1951) and likability (Cialdini 2007; Roskos-Ewoldsen and Fazio 1992). Perhaps even more relevant to marketers is the possibility that the use of dispreferred markers in reviews might make people willing to pay more, and even make the brand seem more likable and more sincere, than if the marker was not used.

## Abstract

Consumers value word-of-mouth communications in large part because customer reviews are more likely to include negative information about a product or service than are communications originating from the marketer. Despite the fact that negative information is frequently valued by those receiving it, baldly declaring negative information may come with social costs to both communicator and receiver. For this reason, communicators sometimes soften pronouncements of bad news by couching them in dispreferred markers, including phrases such as, “I’ll be honest,” “God bless it,” or “I don’t want to be mean, but...” The present work identified and tested in five experiments a phenomenon termed the dispreferred marker effect, in which consumers evaluate communicators who use dispreferred markers as more credible and likable than communicators who assert the same information without dispreferred markers. We further found that the dispreferred marker effect can spillover to evaluations of the product being reviewed, increasing willingness to pay and influencing evaluations of the credibility and likability of the evaluated product’s personality.

*I'll be honest... these are cheaply made sunglasses. That being said, they do what you want sunglasses to do.*

Mike, writing an Amazon.com review of HD Vision Ultra Sunglasses

*I don't want to be mean, but the food just wasn't any good. Not a bit. I ate it, but that was because I paid so much for basically a Taco Bell knockoff.*

Jody B., writing a Yelp.com review of The Taco Stand, Watkinsville, GA

*It's like a blend of Vanity Fair and Good Housekeeping - that is, if Good Housekeeping were remotely smart, which it's not, god bless it.*

Debra M., writing an Amazon.com review of *Australian Women's Weekly*

Consumers frequently seek refuge from the carefully crafted messages of professional marketers by seeking out the unvarnished opinions of other consumers. Word-of-mouth communication is valuable because it is presumed to be less biased than communications from those with a vested interest in cultivating certain attitudes or behavior (Brown and Reingen 1987; Friestad and Wright 1994; Godes and Mayzlin 2004). In part, the opinions of other consumers are appreciated because they are more likely to include negative information about a product or service than one could find in formal marketing communications. This information is sought after because negative information tends to be more diagnostic and influential than positive information in communication (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer and Vohs 2001; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991; Richins 1983). In some instances, mildly negative information can even result in more positive overall assessments of a product (Ein-Gar, Shiv and Tormala 2012).

Similarly, advertisements with two-sided appeals can be more persuasive than ads that include only positive messages (Crowley and Hoyer 1994; Rucker, Petty and Brinol 2008).

Despite the fact that negative information is valued, consumers sometimes temper their negative pronouncements in product evaluations. Instead of averring negative opinions directly, consumers often couch negative information in phrases like “I’ll be honest,” “God bless it...,” “Don’t get me wrong...,” “Bless its heart...,” or “I don’t want to be mean, but...” These phrases are known in linguistics as discourse markers of dispreferred responses, or just dispreferred markers for short (Fraser 1990; Holtgraves 1997; Jucker 1998). Dispreferred markers are common in everyday conversations across the globe. In Chinese, the characters 嗯 and 这个 serve a similar purpose; Dutch speakers say, “*Ik wil niet zeuren, maar...*” (“I will not complain, but...”). These markers do not affect the truth of the message, or affect its referential or denotative meaning. Instead they serve as an emotive signal, acknowledging the potential for social awkwardness or disagreement in the conversation (Holtgraves 2000; Jucker 1993). This research explored the proposition that the use of dispreferred markers has the potential to influence consumers’ judgments and behavior.

This paper reports five experiments that investigated consumers’ reactions to dispreferred markers in the context of word-of-mouth product reviews. Our work identified a phenomenon that we have termed the dispreferred marker effect, in which consumers evaluate communicators who use dispreferred markers as both more credible and more likable than communicators who assert the same information without using dispreferred markers. We further found that the dispreferred marker effect can spillover to evaluations of the product being reviewed, increasing willingness to pay, and influencing evaluations of the personality of the product being reviewed.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *Inferences from word-of-mouth communications*

Opinions are not all equally informative. For example, the evaluations of experts or of those with similar preferences tend to be especially valuable, where the opinions of novices and of people with different tastes should be objectively less useful (although see Fazio [1979] and Kruglanski and Mayseless [1990] for conditions in which opinions of dissimilar others are useful). When consumers receive word-of-mouth communications about a product or service from someone they know well, they can weight that opinion accordingly. However, the product reviews consumers have available to them often come from strangers. In impoverished relational contexts such as online customer reviews or making idle chit-chat with an anonymous fellow shopper, how can consumers draw inferences about the value of the opinions that come their way?

When they do not have all the information they want, consumers tend to draw inferences, whether about other people (Asch 1946; Fiske et al. 1999; Kahneman and Frederick 2002) or products (Kivetz and Simonson 2000), using whatever scraps of information they can find to help them interpret the information at hand. For instance, when reading online reviews, consumers are more strongly influenced by reviews written by those who are geographically proximal (Forman, Ghose, and Wiesenfeld 2008). This suggests that consumers are even willing to use a communicator's hometown to draw inferences about the usefulness of his or her word-of-mouth communications.

Research on persuasion has demonstrated that two characteristics of the communicator — likability and credibility — are particularly important in influencing the way that people evaluate

persuasive messages like product reviews. Likability includes the traits of friendliness, warmth, thoughtfulness, and caring (Cialdini 2007; Roskos-Ewoldsen and Fazio 1992). Credibility has two dimensions: Is the communicator trustworthy and is she an expert? (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994; Hovland and Weiss 1951). The former involves assessing whether there are biases in the communicator's assertions, and culminates in trait judgments such as honesty and trustworthiness. The latter involves the validity of the communicator's assertions, and culminates in judgments such as discernment and intelligence. Consumers' evaluations of the credibility and likability of word-of-mouth communication sources is the focus of the present research.

In this research, we suggest that one of the ways consumers make inferences about those who offer word-of-mouth reviews of products and services is by evaluating the language they use to communicate their opinions. In particular, we examine the use of dispreferred markers as a means of inferring how likable and credible a communicator is likely to be.

#### *Using dispreferred markers to infer likability and credibility*

Dispreferred markers signal that the communicator is about to mention, or has just mentioned, something unpleasant, negative, or argumentative (Fraser 1990; Holtgraves 2010). As such, the use of a dispreferred marker is an act of politeness that the communicator extends to the receiver. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), linguistic politeness is a social mechanism designed to preserve the face of both communicator and receiver, where "face" is defined as one's public image as someone who is liked, respected, competent, and approved of by others.

According to politeness theory, communication frequently involves face-threatening acts that must be managed through linguistic politeness strategies. People use myriad linguistic

devices to manage face-threatening acts, including exaggeration, joking, and passive voice constructions. The current work focused on one such device: dispreferred markers. Dispreferred markers reduce face-threats to the receiver either by sending out a warning that a threat, such as an argumentative position (Brown and Levinson 1987), is forthcoming, or by acknowledging in a conciliatory manner that a threat has occurred. Consistent with this view, previous research has found that people are quicker to identify a remark as face-threatening when it is preceded by a dispreferred marker than when it is not (Holtgraves 1998).

Dispreferred markers come in many forms, from idiomatic phrases (“I don’t want to be mean, but...”) to single words (“Well, ...”) to nonverbal cues, like extended pauses (Holtgraves 2000). Some words or phrases can serve as a dispreferred marker or not, depending on the context and the nonverbal cues that accompany it. For example, preceding a statement with “well” could signal that the statement is going to be unpleasant when the “well” is drawn out and accompanied by fidgeting and a lack of eye contact (Jucker 1993). In contrast, when said at normal conversational speed and said with a smile, it is not likely to signal a dispreferred turn in the conversation, as in, “Well, sure I’ll help.” Accordingly, dispreferred markers frequently require that communicators share a common social, cultural, and conversational frame of reference. A word, phrase, or non-verbal cue may serve as a clear marker of dispreferred discourse in one context but be meaningless in another. For example, the phrase “bless his/her heart,” can serve as a genuine expression of sympathy in some parts of the United States, but in the Southeast the same phrase can serve as a dispreferred marker, letting the receiver know that a negative opinion is likely to follow.

This research focused on one particular type of dispreferred marker: idiomatic expressions (e.g., I’ll be honest; I don’t want to be mean, but...). Previous research suggests that



dispreferred markers of all types serve a generally common purpose in conversation and tend to generate similar reactions in those hearing, reading, or seeing them (Holtgraves 2000, 2010).

We proposed that the use of dispreferred markers influences perceptions of a communicator's credibility and likability because it reveals something about the motivations of the communicator. This perspective fits within a growing body of research on the motivations underlying word-of-mouth communicators (Cheema and Kaikati 2010; Forman, Ghose, and Wiesenfeld 2008).

First, we predicted that people who communicate using dispreferred markers will be evaluated as more credible, both in terms of trustworthiness and expertness (Hovland, et al. 1953), than those who communicate the same information without using these markers. We reasoned that consumers could conclude that an opinion communicated at a potential cost to the communicator is likely to be an opinion to which they should give special consideration. By using a phrase such as "I don't want to be mean, but..." communicators reveal that sharing the information could be psychically or socially costly, but that he or she is going to share the information anyway. Accordingly, dispreferred markers may also signal that the opinion is held more strongly or is better reasoned than a similar opinion delivered without dispreferred markers. In fact, some dispreferred markers make use of explicit signals of credibility. For example, to say, "To be honest..." or "I'm not going to lie to you..." is an attempt to warn the listener that what is said next could be negative or uncomfortable, but that honesty and thoroughness dictate that the information must be shared.

Second, we expected that dispreferred markers would increase the perceived likability of the communicator. As with credibility, we predicted that the perceived motivation of the communicator would affect perceptions of likability. In particular, we expected that the use of

dispreferred markers would lead to increased liking because receivers of word-of-mouth communications would perceive the communicator was motivated by trying to be thoughtful or polite. The logic underlying this prediction is straightforward: Expressing a negative opinion raises the possibility that the communicator will threaten the face of the receiver by insulting something the receiver finds to be positive (Brown and Levinson 1987; Holtgraves 1997). Dispreferred markers show that a communicator is trying to be thoughtful by softening this negative information in order to offset the potential face threat (Holtgraves 1997, 2000; Jucker 1998). Indeed, the use of a dispreferred marker to mitigate the social harms of expressing a negative opinion may serve as a more diagnostic signal of likability than would the expression of positive opinions. After all, a dour and disagreeable person could still form a positive opinion of some things — even the prototypically unlikable Ebenezer Scrooge gave a strictly positive review of money, for example. (Scrooge was also a fan of *A Thousand and One Nights* and *Robinson Crusoe*; Dickens 1843).

#### *Dispreferred markers and evaluations of reviewed products*

We hypothesized that the effect of dispreferred markers could spillover from evaluations of communicators to evaluations of the products being discussed. First, we anticipated that dispreferred markers would affect brand evaluations by tempering the impact of negative information in a review. Markers such as “God bless it” or “Don’t get me wrong” could reveal that the communicator harbors some affection or positive views of the product, despite acknowledging its imperfections. In a sense, dispreferred markers might signal to a listener or reader that the negative information does not tell the whole story. For this reason, we predicted

that products or brands described using a dispreferred marker will be evaluated more positively than when described with otherwise identical reviews that do not include a dispreferred marker.

The second way dispreferred markers are likely to spillover to product evaluations is in consumers' assessments of the product's personality. We drew on Aaker's (1997) taxonomy of five brand personality factors: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. We hypothesized that these five brand personality factors were likely to be asymmetrically affected by the dispreferred marker effect. Specifically, we expected that because credibility and likability more are closely aligned with the sincerity and competence factors than with the other three personality factors, that a product's sincerity and competence would be rated more favorably if discussed by a communicator who uses dispreferred markers than if reviewed without dispreferred markers. The other brand personality factors, which are less closely related to credibility and likability, are less likely to reflect opinions offered with and without dispreferred markers.

### *Empirical tests*

The most important evaluation in testing the dispreferred marker effect is comparing the perceived likability and credibility of a consumer communicating a product review to evaluations of someone giving exactly the same review that includes a dispreferred marker. We tested our predictions in five experiments. The main goal of the first experiment was to establish the effect that communicators who use a dispreferred marker were evaluated as more likable and more credible than communicators who did not use a dispreferred marker. Its second goal was to use two markers with different denotative meanings in order to test whether the value of dispreferred

markers on perceptions of the communicator are not specific to the information conveyed in the phrases themselves.

In addition to the main comparison (dispreferred marker vs. the same information without a dispreferred marker), several studies reported in this paper included additional comparison conditions. Experiments 1 and 2 included a condition in which the product review stated only positive information. A positive-only review provides a baseline measurement against which to assess perceptions of likability of the communicator. Because people who express positive evaluations tend to be better liked than those who express negative evaluations (Gawronski and Walther 2008; Morris, Leung and Iyengar 2004), adding negative opinions to the review is likely to reduce the perceived likability of the communicator. Hence, the positive-only condition provides a useful reference point for a highly likable communicator.

At the same time, consumers must articulate a fair, thorough, and complete evaluation of the product in order to be seen as credible, which means that reviews from credible sources are not likely to be uniformly positive. Indeed, previous research has shown that those who express negative opinions are viewed as more intelligent, competent, and higher in expertise – in other words, more credible – than people who express positive opinions (Amabile 1983). Therefore, the negative-only reviews also offer a useful reference point for a low credibility communicator and hence were included as a comparison condition in experiment 2.

Experiments 1, 3, 4 and 5 were conducted in the United States with English speakers. Experiment 2 was conducted in the Netherlands and had participants read a product evaluation in their native Dutch language. Its main goal was to demonstrate that the effect of dispreferred markers on credibility and likability is not limited to English but is a general phenomenon. It also, like experiment 1, used two different dispreferred markers with the hypothesis that they

would show convergent effects and thus the dispreferred marker is what matters, not its specific instantiation.

Experiment 3 was designed to rule out an alternative explanation based on the fact that dispreferred markers often make a review longer, potentially leading to different heuristic inferences on the part of the receiver. Experiment 4 investigated a boundary condition on the dispreferred marker effect, by investigating whether dispreferred markers still influence consumers' evaluations when they are prompted to be skeptical of the motives of the communicator.

Experiment 5 documented that the dispreferred marker effect goes beyond how consumers evaluate the communicators of word-of-mouth reviews and affects consumers' evaluations of the products being reviewed. We found that the positive evaluative effect of dispreferred markers spills over onto evaluations of the personality of the product being reviewed and also affected consumers' willingness to pay for the product.

## **EXPERIMENT 1**

The goal of this experiment was to establish the dispreferred marker effect by testing whether including a dispreferred marker in a word-of-mouth review affects evaluations of the communicator's likability and credibility. We predicted that the use of a dispreferred marker would increase both likability and credibility. Participants saw one of two dispreferred markers, "God bless it" and "bless its heart." We had no predictions about the relative strengths of the specific dispreferred marker used, and rather considered it a test of robustness.

### *Method*

Two-hundred-fifty-nine adults (127 female; average age = 31.5 years, SD = 10.66) participated. They were randomly assigned to condition in a four-cell design: positive only, balanced, dispreferred marker/God bless it, and dispreferred marker/bless its heart. There were no significant differences between the two dispreferred marker conditions, all  $t_s < 1.3$ ,  $p_s > .20$ , so we collapsed the two dispreferred marker cells, thus making it a three-cell design.

Participants read about two friends having a conversation in which a communicator, Friend A, opines about her car to a listener, Friend B. They read that Friend A notes how long she has owned the car (“going on 3 years”) and comments that, “it gets good mileage and still rides nice.” At this point, participants in the positive only condition then completed the dependent measures. Participants assigned to the other two conditions read on. Participants in the balanced condition read that Friend A next says, “The thing is, you cannot have the radio and the air conditioner on at the same time.” Those in the dispreferred marker conditions read that Friend A says, “The thing is, God bless it/bless its heart, but you cannot have the radio and the air conditioner on at the same time.” Thus, participants in the balanced and dispreferred marker conditions read the same information with the exception of a discourse marker in the latter.

The dependent measures consisted of ratings of Friend A on likability, intelligence, honesty, trustworthiness, and how realistic Friend A is likely to be. Due to a procedural error, some participants completed them using Likert scales (1 = none or very little; 7 = very much so), whereas others used 1-100 sliding scales (same anchors). We therefore standardized each rating and combined them into one variable.

## *Results*

*Credibility.* We averaged ratings of Friend A's honesty, realistic nature, intelligence, and trustworthiness into an index of credibility ( $\alpha = .84$ ). An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) predicting ratings of Friend A's credibility showed the expected effect of condition, ( $F(2, 254) = 8.82, p < .001$ ). Consistent with hypotheses, when Friend A included both negative and positive information in her assessment (balanced condition) she was viewed as more credible ( $M = .04, SD = 3.01$ ) than when Friend A included only positive information ( $M = -1.05, SD = 3.72; t(254) = 4.20, p < .001$ ). In line with predictions, the results revealed that the credibility benefit of including negative information was enhanced by including a dispreferred marker ( $M = 1.00, SD = 2.76; t(254) = 2.00, p < .05$ ). In other words, the use of a dispreferred marker gave additional perceived credibility over presenting the same information without the marker.

*Likability.* An ANOVA predicting Friend A's likability showed an effect of condition, ( $F(2, 254) = 9.20, p < .001$ ). Planned comparisons revealed that, as expected, the harm done to likability by including negative information in a review was overcome by the inclusion of a dispreferred marker. Participants perceived Friend A to be more likable in the dispreferred marker condition ( $M = .34, SD = .90$ ) than in the balanced condition in which both positive and negative information were relayed ( $M = -.28, SD = 1.05; t(254) = 4.25, p < .001$ ). What is more, the dispreferred marker condition even made the communicator more likable than in the positive-only condition ( $M = -.05, SD = .95; t(254) = 2.66, p < .01$ ) — despite stating some drawbacks about the car.

*Discussion*

The results of experiment 1 provided support for both aspects of the proposed dispreferred marker effect: First, a communicator who used a dispreferred marker was seen as more likable than a communicator who gave the same, balanced review without the use of a dispreferred marker. Second, a communicator who used a dispreferred marker was evaluated as being more credible than both someone who gave just a positive review and also than someone who gave a balanced review without the marker. Third, whether the communicator said “God bless it” or “bless its heart” did not seem to matter, as those phrases produced similar effects. This result suggests that the importance of dispreferred markers lies not in the objective information stated but rather the information that is implied.

In order to make the case that the dispreferred marker effect is a general phenomenon that is likely to occur when communicators use the diverse class of phrases that are considered to be dispreferred markers, it is necessary to replicate these results using different markers. Experiment 2 was designed to achieve this aim, with the added purpose of testing the phenomenon in a different language. As mentioned, dispreferred markers are not limited to English and in fact many languages have such phrases. We conducted experiment 2 in the Netherlands. As a further test of robustness, experiment 2 used two dispreferred markers that were different in meaning from the ones used in experiment 1.

**EXPERIMENT 2**

Experiment 2 was designed to provide several different types of support for the proposed theory. First, this experiment was conducted in the Netherlands, in order to check whether the



dispreferred marker effect is idiosyncratic to English communicators or a more general linguistic phenomenon. The politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) explicitly predicts similar face-saving efforts across cultures and languages, and therefore we too predicted that the dispreferred marker effect would emerge in the Netherlands in a similar manner to what we observed among American participants in experiment 1. Second, this experiment used two dispreferred markers that have different denotative meanings (the phrases contain qualitatively different information) but that serve the same type of linguistic signal (both are dispreferred markers). Third, previous research has documented that both likability and credibility influence a communicator's persuasiveness (Cialdini 2007; Hovland and Weiss 1951). We measured whether participants would seek advice from the communicator as a measure of persuasiveness. Last, this experiment included a condition in which only negative information was included in the product review.

### *Method*

One hundred ninety-eight undergraduates (191 female) from the Netherlands volunteered to participate. Participants were randomly assigned to one of five experimental conditions: positive only, negative only, balanced, dispreferred marker/I don't want to be mean, and dispreferred marker/it's still great. The latter two conditions were meant as replicates and, mirroring experiment 1's results, they did not have differential effects on outcomes,  $t_s < 1.5$ ,  $p > .13$ . We therefore collapsed these cells. Materials were created with assistance from two native Dutch speakers, translated into Dutch, and then back-translated into English to check for accuracy. Participants completed survey materials in Dutch.

Participants read about two friends conversing about a cell phone. In the positive only condition, Friend A says, “You know, I have had this iPhone for a while and it has some really great features and applications.” In the negative only condition, Friend A says, “You know, I have had this iPhone for a while. Its quality as an actual phone is somewhat less than great.” The balanced condition combines both of the evaluative statements from the positive and negative conditions by having Friend A say, “It has some really great features and applications. But its quality as an actual phone is somewhat less than great.”

The dispreferred marker conditions used the same statements as in the balanced condition, with the exception that the markers were inserted after the positive information and before the negative information. The phrases are common Dutch dispreferred markers: “I don’t want to be difficult, but...” and “I still think it’s great, but....” It is important to note that these phrases convey quite different information. One reveals a self-presentation motivation whereas the other expresses an overtly positive evaluation of the attitude object. Yet, they are similar in that they both serve as common dispreferred markers in Dutch; they signal that the communicator is about to reveal something negative. To the extent that these two conditions result in similar outcomes, then, it can be attributed to their common use as dispreferred markers, though they accomplish that purpose in different ways.

After reading one of the product review scenarios, participants rated the warmth and discerning nature of the communicator, Friend A, using 7-point scales (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). They also rated the likelihood that they would ask Friend A for advice about something in the marketplace, such as where to shop for a gift, and about something apart from the marketplace, such as personal issues or relationship problems. Both questions were answered on

7-point scales ranging from 1 = highly unlikely to 7 = highly likely. Last, participants rated the statements that they read in terms of how natural they seemed (1 = not at all; 7 = very).

### *Results*

*Naturalness of the statements.* To ensure that the experimental materials used dispreferred markers that were common in the Dutch language, participants rated the statements in terms of how natural they seemed. Confirming expectations, an ANOVA with condition as the predictor confirmed that the statements in all conditions felt similarly natural ( $F < 1$ ).

*Credibility.* We used evaluations of how discerning participants thought the communicator was as our measure of credibility. An ANOVA predicting discerning ratings showed an effect of condition ( $F(3,194) = 22.73, p < .001$ ). As expected, communicators who communicated only positive information ( $M = 3.3, SD = 1.09$ ) were perceived as less discerning than those who communicated only negative information ( $M = 4.5, SD = 1.55; t(194) = 4.07, p < .001$ ) and also less discerning than those who communicated both positive and negative information ( $M = 4.4, SD = 1.39; t(194) = 3.79, p < .001$ ). Consistent with predictions, communicators who used a dispreferred marker were perceived to be the most discerning ( $M = 5.44, SD = 1.04$ ). Participants in the dispreferred marker condition rated the communicator as being significantly more discerning than did participants in the positive only ( $t(194) = 8.04, p < .001$ ), negative only ( $t(194) = 3.88, p < .001$ ) and balanced conditions ( $t(194) = 4.36, p < .001$ ).

*Likability.* We used participants' evaluations of warmth as our indicator of the communicator's likability. An ANOVA predicting ratings of Friend A's warmth revealed an effect of experimental condition ( $F(3,194) = 50.50, p < .001$ ). As expected, communicators who communicated only positive information were perceived as warmer ( $M = 5.1, SD = 1.37$ ) than

those who communicated only negative information ( $M = 2.7, SD = .89; t(194) = 8.71, p < .001$ ) and those who communicated both positive and negative information ( $M = 3.7, SD = 1.27; t(194) = 4.89, p < .001$ ). As predicted, the reduction in warmth caused by communicating negative information was overcome by including a dispreferred marker ( $M = 5.29, SD = 1.27$ ) compared to only negative information ( $t(194) = 11.30, p < .001$ ) and both positive and negative information ( $t(194) = 6.78, p < .001$ ). There was no difference in warmth ratings between the dispreferred marker conditions and the positive only condition ( $t < 1$ ).

*Follow communicator's advice?* We included a general measure of the overall quality of the communicator's persuasiveness by asking participants whether they would seek Friend A's advice for consumer-related and non-consumer-related decisions. We averaged these two responses to create an index of advice quality ( $\alpha = .74$ ). An ANOVA predicting advice quality revealed the expected effect of condition ( $F(3,194) = 17.16, p < .001$ ). Consistent with predictions, advice was most likely to be sought from a communicator who had used dispreferred markers ( $M = 4.81, SD = .86$ ). Participants in the dispreferred marker conditions were significantly more likely to seek the advice of the communicator than were participants in the positive only ( $M = 3.35, SD = 1.03, t(194) = 6.84, p < .001$ ), the negative only ( $M = 3.97, SD = 1.31; t(194) = 4.31, p < .001$ ) and the balanced ( $M = 4.32, SD = .93; t(194) = 2.56, p < .05$ ) conditions.

### *Discussion*

The results of experiment 2 provided additional support for the dispreferred marker effect in that the use of a dispreferred marker boosted likability and credibility, as measured by warmth and discernment. We also measured whether participants said that they would seek advice from

the communicator, and found that it too was higher in the dispreferred marker condition than other conditions. Experiment 2 also increased the generalizability of the effect by showing that it is not limited to discourse markers in English, but that the effect also manifests in Dutch. As in experiment 1, these results suggest that it is the use of these phrases as dispreferred markers that is driving the effects and not surface-level information conveyed in the phrases themselves: experiment 2 also used two markers with different denotative meanings and these two phrases resulted in equivalent outcomes, as predicted. Taken together, experiments 1 and 2 provided support for the dispreferred marker effect.

### **EXPERIMENT 3**

Experiment 3 had two aims. First was to test the specificity of the dispreferred marker effect. We have argued that the dispreferred marker effect specifically affects the perceived likability and credibility of the communicator but does not provide a general halo effect, boosting attributions of all positive traits. Accordingly, experiment 3 measured dependent variables other than those meant to tap credibility and likability. As before, we predicted that the dispreferred marker condition would lead to ratings that the communicator was more likable and credible than the comparison condition. In contrast, we expected that these effects would not manifest in other positive traits.

Second, experiment 3 aimed to rule out an alternate explanation of the dispreferred marker effect. The statements in the dispreferred marker conditions in experiments 1-2 were longer (in word count) than the comparison conditions. Prior research has found evidence that consumers sometimes use a “length-implies-strength” heuristic, which means that people assume

that the longer an argument is, the stronger it must be, rendering longer arguments more persuasive than shorter ones (Chaiken, Liberman and Eagly 1989). Because dispreferred markers add length to a message, this heuristic serves as a reasonable alternative explanation our effects. To test this alternate explanation, the dispreferred marker condition in experiment 3 used fewer words than in the non-dispreferred marker condition.

### *Method*

Forty-eight students (27 female) participated in exchange for partial course credit. Participants read a product description sheet for a cooler to keep drinks cold during hot weather. The page showed a color image of the product, specifications, and a customer review. The review was printed in the style of an online webpage, with a narrative and star rating. The reviewer gave it 4 of 5 stars, and with the product review differing by condition. In the long review condition, the review started by noting the positive aspects of the cooler. Then as a transition to the drawbacks of the product was the line, “It isn’t perfect, though.” In the dispreferred marker condition, the transition line was amended to read, “Don’t get me wrong, it isn’t perfect, though.” In order to ensure that the predicted effects of the dispreferred marker condition on persuasion was not due to a length-implies-strength effect (Chaiken, Liberman and Eagly 1989), we added the following sentence (a restatement of the cooler’s function) in the middle of the review in the long condition only: “Throw some ice in there and it will keep everything cold for a long time.” The long version was 84 words, to the dispreferred marker’s 73, a difference of 13% (Appendix A).

Participants then answered questions about the reviewer's personality. They rated how likable, credible, fashionable, young, and neat the reviewer seemed using 7-point Likert scales: 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

### *Results*

We predicted that the dispreferred marker condition, compared to the long condition, would lead to perceptions that the reviewer was more likeable and credible. Consistent with the findings of the previous two experiments, participants who read a review that included a dispreferred marker thought the communicator was more likable ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = .94$  vs.  $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = .83$ ;  $t(46) = 3.90$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and more credible ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 1.10$  vs.  $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ;  $t(46) = 2.24$ ,  $p < .05$ ) than the communicator whose review did not include a marker. This result was despite the fact that the review without the dispreferred marker was longer than the review with the marker.

The influence of dispreferred markers on other personality traits was less consistent. Unexpectedly, the reviewer was seen as neater in the dispreferred marker condition compared to the long condition ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 1.14$  vs.  $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ;  $t(46) = 2.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As predicted, ratings of the other positive traits, fashionable and young, did not differ by condition,  $t_s < 1.15$ , suggesting the effect of dispreferred markers does not simply result in a halo effect on positive traits.

### *Discussion*

The results of experiment 3 provided further support for the dispreferred marker effect by showing that when a product review includes a dispreferred marker, people tend to evaluate the

reviewer as both more likable and more credible. These effects were not consistent with a generalized halo effect, in that not all positive traits were enhanced when the communicator used a dispreferred marker. This study also ruled out an alternative explanation for our findings based on the length-implies-strength heuristic. We found that even when a review that includes a dispreferred marker was shorter in length, the dispreferred marker effect persisted.

#### **EXPERIMENT 4**

We have proposed that dispreferred markers influence consumers' evaluations because of their common, idiomatic use in language: in the course of interacting with others, we have been trained to recognize these phrases as face-saving gestures and we react accordingly. This reaction is likely not an active choice by consumers, but something that happens without careful consideration. If true, this suggests that the influence of dispreferred markers may be reduced or even reversed when people examine the use of dispreferred markers more carefully. In particular, when consumers are skeptical about the motives of the communicator, they may attempt to correct for the possible influence of a dispreferred marker on their evaluations. The Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright 1994) predicts that defensive cognitions are elicited when people believe that others are trying to persuade them. When consumers believe that a communicator has an ulterior motive, they will try to correct for this when forming evaluations of him or her (Campbell and Kirmani 2000).

We argue that when consumers are skeptical of word-of-mouth communicators, such as when they consider whether the person giving a customer review might have an ulterior motive, they are likely to try and correct for the influence of dispreferred markers in their evaluation of



the communicator. When trying to anticipate the effects of skepticism on the influence of dispreferred markers, it is interesting to note that the influence on credibility and on likability may not be equally evident to the person receiving the communication. According to politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987), dispreferred markers serve as a signal that the communicator is trying to be polite. As such, dispreferred markers serve as commonly accepted signals that the communicator is trying to be likable, agreeable, and polite. In contrast, we hypothesized that the influence of dispreferred markers on a communicator's credibility may be less apparent to receivers.

Because dispreferred markers are overt signals of politeness, skeptical consumers are more likely to be able to correct for any potential boost in likability caused by the use of a phrase like "I don't want to be mean." In contrast, to the extent that the influence of dispreferred markers on judgments of credibility is less apparent, consumers may be less likely to correct for it. We therefore predict an asymmetric influence of skepticism on evaluations of consumers: skeptical consumers will be able to reduce their likability impressions of communicators using dispreferred markers but will not be able to do this to the same degree for evaluations of credibility. Experiment 4 tested these predictions.

The goal of this experiment was to investigate skepticism as a possible boundary condition on the dispreferred marker effect. We tested whether prompting people to think about the motives of the person giving the product review.

### *Method*

Sixty-eight American participants from an online subject pool were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (review: balanced vs. dispreferred marker) x 2 (skepticism: control vs.

activated) factorial design. Everyone was told they would be shown information about a television being sold on an online retailer's website. In the skeptical condition, participants were told that on the following page "we'll ask you about your impression of the person who posted the review. As you read, try to determine what the reviewer's intentions are. Does the reviewer have an ulterior motive? Does the reviewer seem overly concerned with managing others' impressions? Why would the reviewer be sharing this particular information?"

Participants then saw information about a television, including a picture of it, the brand and model names, its features, and a customer review. In the balanced review condition, the review stated, "This is a real bargain at this price. I'm glad I bought it. I really like the picture quality. Very bright and crisp. And the built-in speakers are surprisingly good, especially considering the low price. I'm not happy with refresh rate. When things are moving fast on the screen it starts to look blurry and pixelated. That can be distracting. Also, there is no audio output, so you can't hook it up to external speakers, if you care about that." In the dispreferred marker condition, the negative information ("I'm not happy with the refresh rate," etc) was preceded with the marker "I've got to be honest, though..."

Participants then rated the review writer on the attributes of credibility and likability using 7-point scales (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). These ratings served as our dependent variables.

### *Results*

The data were analyzed using ANOVAs predicting credibility and likability ratings as a function of the content of the review (balanced vs. dispreferred marker) and the presence of a skepticism prompt (control vs. skeptical). The analysis revealed a significant effect of the

dispreferred marker condition for both likability ( $F(1,64) = 4.68; p < .05$ ) and credibility ( $F(1,64) = 6.39; p < .05$ ).

The results revealed that in the control condition, the dispreferred marker effect was present, replicating the findings of the previous studies. Participants rated the review writer as both more credible (5.2 vs. 4.4;  $t(30) = 2.04, p < .01$ ) and more likable (5.7 vs. 4.4;  $t(30) = 2.12, p < .05$ ) when the review included a dispreferred marker than when it did not. When participants were prompted to be skeptical of the review writer, the effect of a dispreferred marker was greatly reduced for likability (5.0 vs. 4.9;  $t(30) < 1$ ). The notion that when consumers are skeptical of the review writer, they adjust their impressions is supported by the significant interaction between dispreferred marker condition and skepticism condition for likability ( $F(1,64) = 6.02; p < .05$ ). Participants also appeared to adjust their assessments of the communicator's credibility when prompted to be skeptical (5.2 vs. 4.6;  $t(30) = 1.57, p < .15$ ). However, it appears that even when encouraged to be skeptical, the credibility adjustment was not as substantial as the adjustment made for likability, as evidenced by the non-significant interaction between skepticism and dispreferred marker conditions ( $F(1,64) < 1$ ).

### *Discussion*

The results of experiment 4 revealed a boundary condition to the dispreferred marker effect. This experiment showed that when consumers are prompted to be skeptical of the review writer, they might attempt to correct for the influence of dispreferred markers. However, this study also revealed that this correction is not symmetric, such that evaluations of likability are more easily corrected for than evaluations of credibility.

## EXPERIMENT 5

Experiment 5 was designed to investigate whether the dispreferred marker effect might spill over from perceptions of the communicator to affect perceptions of the brand personality of an evaluated brand. We reasoned that dispreferred markers would likely not affect not all dimensions of a product's personality. Using Aaker's (1997) Big Five Brand Personality typology, we reasoned that sincerity, which includes traits such as honest, sincere, real, cheerful, and friendly, and competence, which includes traits such as reliable, intelligent and confident, would be more closely aligned to credibility and likability than the other three personality dimensions of excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness. As such, we predicted that spillover from a product review that includes a dispreferred marker would be more likely to affect the sincerity and competence dimensions of brand personality than the other dimensions. We also examined the influence of dispreferred markers on behavioral intentions by measuring willingness to pay.

### *Method*

One hundred and twenty-five American undergraduates (63 female) participated in exchange for extra course credit. They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: balanced and dispreferred marker.

Participants read a description of an Oniss brand luxury watch that included a customer review. The review, which we created based on reviews on Amazon.com, included positive information (e.g., the color and finish are perfect) and negative information (e.g., the band can sometimes pinch and rub). In the dispreferred marker condition, the negative information was

preceded by “—and I don’t want to be mean, but—.” In the balanced condition, this dispreferred marker was not included (Appendix B).

Next, participants reported how much they would be willing to pay for the watch and completed Aaker’s (1997) Brand Personality Scale. The scale consists of 42 personality traits that form 15 mid-level facets and five superordinate factors: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness.

### *Results*

*Brand personality.* Following the protocol established by Aaker (1997), we computed the reliability of each of the five personality factor subscales. Each factor had a high level of reliability: sincerity ( $\alpha = .90$ ), excitement ( $\alpha = .91$ ), competence ( $\alpha = .88$ ), sophistication ( $\alpha = .84$ ), and ruggedness ( $\alpha = .72$ ).

The results of experiments 1-4 focused on the effects of dispreferred markers on likability and credibility of the communicator. As a consequence, we focused on the sincerity and competence brand personality factors as being more likely to reflect dispreferred marker effects than the personality factors of excitement, sophistication and ruggedness.

The Oniss brand was perceived to be more sincere ( $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = .86$ ) among participants who had read a product description that included a dispreferred marker as compared to the balanced condition, which was the same review without the marker ( $M = 2.4$ ,  $SD = .77$ ). A MANOVA predicting all five personality factors as a function of experimental condition revealed an overall effect of condition ( $F(5,111) = 3.3$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Specific personality dimensions were examined next. Only ratings of the brand’s perceived sincerity were significantly predicted by condition ( $F(1,115) = 12.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As expected, excitement ( $p > .85$ ), sophistication ( $p >$

.95), and ruggedness ( $p > .20$ ) were not affected by the presence of a dispreferred marker in the customer review. Competence, which we had expected could be affected by the use of dispreferred markers, was not ( $p > .90$ ).

We gained further confirmation that sincerity was affected by dispreferred marker use by examining the personality facets identified by Aaker (1997) that compose each of the personality dimensions. A MANOVA predicting all 15 personality facets as a function of condition revealed that the four the facets that comprise the sincerity factor were significantly higher in the dispreferred marker condition than in the balanced condition: honest ( $M = 3.3, SD = .97$  vs.  $M = 2.8, SD = 1.07$ ;  $F(1,115) = 9.65, p < .005$ ), cheerful ( $M = 2.9, SD = 1.10$  vs.  $M = 2.4, SD = .97$ ;  $F(1,115) = 4.22, p < .05$ ), down-to-earth ( $M = 2.3, SD = 1.08$  vs.  $M = 1.8, SD = .86$ ;  $F(1,115) = 5.36, p < .05$ ), and wholesome ( $M = 3.0, SD = 1.02$  vs.  $M = 2.6, SD = 1.00$ ;  $F(1,115) = 4.43, p < .05$ ). None of the remaining 11 personality facets differed significantly across conditions (for the up-to-date facet,  $p = .08$ , all other facets  $p > .25$ ).

*Willingness to pay.* We reasoned that the presence of a dispreferred marker could lead to differences in the attractiveness of the product being reviewed, which would result in a difference in willingness to pay. Consistent with this prediction, we found that in the dispreferred marker condition, in which the customer review included the phrase “I don’t want to be mean, but...,” participants were willing to pay an average of \$135.58. When given the same description without the dispreferred marker, participants were willing to pay only \$94.67 for the watch. An ANOVA conducted on willingness to pay, log-transformed to correct for skewness, revealed that the effect of condition was significant ( $F(1,123) = 7.37, p < .01$ ).

*Discussion*

The results of experiment 5 established that the influence of dispreferred markers is not limited to inferences about the communicator, but also affects inferences about the product being discussed. Specifically, we found that the dispreferred marker effect affects perceptions of brand personality, though only for the perceived sincerity of the brand. It appears that a brand's perceived sincerity is likely to be most sensitive to spillover effects based on the perceived credibility and likability of the communicator. Consistent with this view, we found that of the five brand personality factors, only the sincerity factor differed as a result of the experimental manipulation. We further found that of the 15 brand personality facets, only those associated with sincerity differed by condition.

We had also predicted, but found no evidence for, a spillover effect on the competence personality factor. It appears that the likability spilled over onto assessments of the product personality (e.g., cheerful, friendly), but only some aspects of credibility spilled over. In interpreting these results, we return to the trustworthiness-expertness distinction made by Hovland et al. (1953) for insight. Following from their work, it seems that the aspects of credibility associated with trustworthiness (e.g., honest, sincere, down-to-earth) spilled over to assessments of the product. However, the aspects of credibility more closely associated with expertness (e.g., competent, intelligent, successful, reliable) did not change with the use of a dispreferred marker. Future research might delve into these aspects of credibility for a finer-grained look at its relationship to brands that are evaluated by sources that use dispreferred markers.

Last, this experiment demonstrated that dispreferred markers can affect willingness to pay, such that participants said that they were willing to pay more for a watch described by a

customer who prefaced negative information with a dispreferred marker than when it was described without a marker.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Consumers value word-of-mouth communication because it offers them information that they might not get otherwise (Richins 1983). To mitigate the social costs of communicating negative information in product reviews, communicators frequently couch it in linguistic markers warning receivers that negative information is coming or acknowledging that it has been said. In five experiments, we found that dispreferred markers increased both the perceived likability and perceived credibility of the communicator, a phenomenon we termed the dispreferred marker effect. We further found that changes in likability and credibility of the communicator spill over to evaluations of the product being reviewed. Specifically, consumers evaluated a brand's personality as more sincere when reviewed by someone using a dispreferred marker (experiment 5). They also indicated they would be willing to pay more for (experiment 5) a product when the review included a dispreferred marker than when the same review did not.

The findings were robust to multiple changes in procedure, sample characteristics, and outcomes. The scenarios included both written and spoken product review settings. Dutch and American participants, from community and collegiate samples, showed similar patterns. The studies used convergent measures of the two constructs of interest. Likability was measured by ratings of likability and warmth; the multi-faceted credibility construct was measured by ratings of competency, honesty, realism, intelligence, trustworthiness, and discernment. We found beneficial effects of dispreferred markers on attributes of the communicator and product being



discussed, as well as the behavioral intention outcome willingness to pay. The stability of the findings across these disparate methods and samples speaks to the strength of the dispreferred marker effect.

#### *Contributions to word-of-mouth research*

This research contributes to the growing body of work on word-of-mouth communications. Most of the work to date on the persuasiveness of word-of-mouth communications has focused on the content of the message (Chen and Berger 2013; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991) or the characteristics of the communicator (Cheema and Kaikati 2010; Forman, Ghose, and Wiesenfeld 2008). Our work is novel in that it focuses on how communicators phrase their messages by specifically invoking discourse markers, which then affect consumer evaluations. We showed that some of the techniques that communicators use to be polite can influence the reviewer's persuasiveness. Perhaps even more relevant to marketers is the possibility that the use of dispreferred markers in reviews might make people willing to pay more, and even make the brand seem more likable and more sincere, than if the marker was not used.

#### *Contributions to communication science*

Positioned within the classical rhetorical framework (Aristotle 2007), our research investigates dispreferred markers as signals of ethos. Ethos, one of Aristotle's three *pisteis*, or means of persuasion, refers to the perceived credibility, reputation, and identity of the communicator. Our focus places this research within the tradition of two prominent streams of research in social psychology. One is persuasion, which has investigated source characteristics

such as credibility (Chaiken and Maheswaran 1994; Hovland and Weiss 1951) and likability (Roskos-Ewoldsen and Fazio 1992). The other is politeness (Brown and Levisnson 1987), which has investigated the strategies communicators use to save face.

Our research parallels a recent interest in signals of ethos within the field of rhetoric and technical communications. These researchers have found that online communicators try to signal credibility by the way information is communicated in reviews, using, for example, technical jargon (Mackiewicz 2008; Richardson 2003) or precise spelling, punctuation and grammar (Mackiewicz 2008). Our investigation of signals of ethos in word-of-mouth communications may be contrasted with recent research, particularly research on online reviews, which has tended to focus on what Aristotle would have termed logos, the content of the message or the informational value of the message volume as a means of persuasion (Chen and Xie 2008; Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Kozinets et al. 2010).

The dispreferred marker effect adds to a body of work investigating how negative information can heighten positive responses by receivers of the information. Previous research includes the negative acknowledgement effect (Ward and Brenner 2006), paradoxical acknowledgement (Knowles and Linn 2004), and two-sided arguments (Rucker, Petty and Brinol 2008). The dispreferred marker effect differs from these effects in that it is rooted in politeness and norms of conversational reciprocity, which do not underlie those related effects.

#### *Practical Implications and Future Research*

Our research suggests several possible implications for marketers. Our findings suggest that marketers might aim to cultivate a polite customer base. Marketing strategists have previously spoken of the importance of “firing” unprofitable customers (Reid 2005) or attracting customers who are consistent with the image the brand is trying to cultivate (Wallop 2005). Our

research suggests that polite customers who engage in word-of-mouth communication can benefit the firm. According to our findings, polite customer reviews may result in higher willingness to pay and perceptions of a more sincere brand personality than equally informative reviews written by less polite customers (i.e., those who do not use dispreferred markers). The surprising result is that these positive effects may be found even when negative information is shared in reviews, if this negative information triggers the use of a dispreferred marker.

The predictions laid out in this paper were developed and tested in the domain of word-of-mouth communication, in part because communications from other customers are both more likely to include negative information and to include conversational dispreferred markers than communications coming from a firm. However, the theory need not be limited to word-of-mouth. As research on one-sided vs. two-sided persuasion has identified, there are situations in which a firm might gain a persuasive advantage by including negative information in its ads (Crowley and Hoyer 1994). To the extent that these firms also use an informal, conversational approach to communicating with their customers, they could potentially also see a boost to credibility and likability when they use dispreferred markers.

One promising question to be answered by future research is, why do people feel the need to use dispreferred markers at all when reviewing products, particularly in anonymous reviews? Our research is focused exclusively on the receivers of word-of-mouth communications: how do dispreferred markers change the evaluations and attributions of the consumers of reviews. This research makes no attempt to explore why consumers use dispreferred markers or what factors make these markers more or less common. These questions relate to the motivation consumers have for engaging in word-of-mouth communications in the first place.

Another question raised by these findings is how these findings might change when the consumer already has an established relationship with a communicator. The settings we studied in our experiments were deliberately chosen to mimic the anonymous reviews that consumers often encounter in the marketplace (e.g., online product reviews). However, consumers also commonly receive product information from friends, neighbors, family and co-workers. Will customers in these situations react to dispreferred markers in the same way? On the one hand, when consumers are familiar with a communicator, there may be less need to use linguistic signals like dispreferred markers to infer qualities like likability and credibility. On the other hand, when communicating with someone with whom consumers have an ongoing relationship, there may be a greater need to manage face using linguistic devices such as dispreferred markers. Future research addressing this question would be welcome.

This research focused on the effects of dispreferred markers: warnings or acknowledgment of negative information. Although less studied in conversation analysis, one can think of examples of “preferred” markers as well. For example, a speaker might precede a positive opinion with, “I don’t want to be a Pollyanna, but...” or “I don’t mean to gush, but...” A promising area for future research would be to investigate the effects of other types of conversational discourse markers, including preferred markers. Though it is possible that a “Pollyanna” effect could operate in the same way as the dispreferred marker effect identified in this paper (i.e., an increase in the perceived credibility and likability of the communicator), it is also possible that preferred markers operate in a different way, for example, affecting perceptions of credibility but not likability. Indeed, unlike dispreferred markers, which warn a receiver of something unpleasant, a disclaimer of “I don’t mean to gush,” seems designed to signal that the speaker is not as positive as his or her opinions.

*Conclusion*

Word-of-mouth communication is a fundamentally social endeavor. Accordingly, consumer-to-consumer communication is not simply a matter of trading facts and assessments. Our findings indicate that a few simple words to soften negative assessments of a product are enough to evoke a positive response in others and can affect judgments of the communicator and product alike. More than homey sayings, dispreferred markers act as a social lubricant, allowing an otherwise sticky interaction (the communication of negative, and therefore potentially threatening, information) to operate smoothly.

## DATA COLLECTION

The data from experiment 1 were collected by research assistants at the University of Minnesota under the direction of the second author. Data were collected at two times, 2008 and 2013. The second author analyzed this data. The data from experiment 2 were collected by research assistants at Nijmegen University in the Netherlands under the supervision of the second author in 2009. The second author analyzed this data. The data from experiment 3 were collected by research assistants at the University of Minnesota under the direction of the second author in 2013. The second author analyzed this data. The data from experiment 4 were collected by the first author, using Amazon's Mechanical Turk, in 2013. The first author analyzed this data. The data from experiment 5 were collected by research assistants at the University of Minnesota under the direction of the second author in 2011. The first author analyzed this data.

## APPENDIX A: STIMULI FOR EXPERIMENT 3

Imagine you have several picnics and trips to the beach planned in the next few months. You decide you should buy a cooler to take with you on these outings. Here is one of the coolers you are considering.

### COMPACT POP-UP COOLER



- Thermal shield insulation
- Waterproof lining
- Collapsible
- Door in lid for quick access to drinks
- 8-1/2-Inch by 13-Inch by 3-1/4-Inch

### CUSTOMER REVIEW ★★★★★

I love that this folds down and is easily storable. It's lined on the inside to keep your food and drinks cold and the little opening at the top is very handy. {Throw some ice in there and it will keep everything cold for a long time.} [Don't get me wrong,] it isn't perfect, though. The cooler would benefit from a shoulder strap. But it does not come with one and there are no hooks to attach one. The lack of a shoulder strap is kind of inconvenient.

NOTE.—The only difference between conditions was in the text of the customer review. In the long text condition, the review included the sentence in {braces}. In the dispreferred marker condition, the review included the phrase in [brackets].

## APPENDIX B: STIMULI FOR EXPERIMENT 5



Features polished finish high tech tungsten case with brown ceramic bezel. This great watch also comes with high quality Swiss quartz movement, scratch resistant sapphire crystal, water resistant up to 30 meters, polished finish two tone tungsten and brown ceramic bracelet with deployment clasp push button and brown dial with Chronograph functions, twin date display and luminous tone hands and hour markers.

Material: Ceramic & Tungsten  
 Case Dimension: 47 mm  
 Movement: Swiss Quartz  
 Features: Chronograph  
 Calendar: Date  
 Dial: Blue  
 Water Resistant: 30 Meters

### CUSTOMER REVIEW ★★★★★

This watch took my breath away from the moment it arrived in the elegant Oniss box. The color and finish are perfect, it is just the right size and weight, and the workmanship is excellent. On the negative side, the band [—and I don't mean to be mean, but—] it can sometimes pinch and rub. I sometimes have to take it off for a while if I've worn it too long.

NOTE.—The only difference between conditions was the presence or absence of the dispreferred marker, set off in [brackets], in the text of the customer review.



## REFERENCES

- Aaker, Jennifer L. (1997), "Dimensions of Brand Personality," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34, 347-56.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1999), "The Malleable Self: The Role of Self-Expression in Persuasion," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 36(February), 45-57.
- Amabile, Teresa M. (1983), "Brilliant but Cruel: Perceptions of Negative Evaluators," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 19(March), 146-156.
- Ambady, Nalini and Robert Rosenthal (1992), "Thin Slices of Expressive Behavior as Predictors of Interpersonal Consequences: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin*, 111(2), 256-74.
- Ambady, Nalini and Robert Rosenthal (1993), "Half a Minute: Predicting Teacher Evaluations From Thin Slices of Nonverbal Behavior and Physical Attractiveness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64(3), 431-41.
- Aristotle (2007), *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civil Discourse* (George Alexander Kennedy, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Asch, S. E. (1946), "Forming Impressions of Personality," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 41, 258-90.
- Baumeister, Roy F., Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer and Kathleen D. Vohs (2001), "Bad Is Stronger Than Good," *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 323-70.
- Brown, Jacqueline Johnson and Peter H. Reingen (1987), "Social Ties and Word-of-Mouth Referral Behavior," *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 14, 350-62.

- Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson (1987), *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell, Margaret C., and Amna Kirmani (2000), "Consumers' Use of Persuasion Knowledge: The Effects of Accessibility and Cognitive Capacity on Perceptions of an Influence Agent," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (June), 69-83.
- Chaiken, Shelly, Akiva Liberman and Alice H. Eagly (1989), "Heuristic and Systematic Information Processing within and beyond the Persuasion Context," in *Unintended Thought*, James S. Uleman and John A. Bargh, Eds. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 212-252.
- Chaiken, Shelly and Durairaj Maheswaran (1994), "Heuristic Processing Can Bias Systematic Processing: Effects of Source Credibility, Argument Ambiguity, and Task Importance on Attitude Judgment," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66, 460-73.
- Cheema, Amar and Andrew M. Kaikati (2010), "The Effect of Need for Uniqueness on Word of Mouth," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 47(June), 553-63.
- Chen, Yubo and Jinhong Xie (2008), "Online Consumer Review: Word-of-Mouth as a New Element of Marketing Communication Mix," *Management Science*, 54, 477-91.
- Chen, Zoey and Jonah Berger, (2013), "When, Why, and How Controversy Causes Conversation," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40 (October), 580-593.
- Cialdini, Robert B. (2007), *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Crowley, Ayn E. and Wayne D. Hoyer (1994), "An Integrative Framework for Understanding Two-sided Persuasion," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(March), 561-574.
- Dickens, Charles (1843), *A Christmas Carol*. London: Chapman & Hall Company.

- Ein-Gar, Danit, Baba Shiv, and Zakary L. Tormala (2012), "When Blemishing Leads to Blossoming: The Positive Effect of Negative Information," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38(February), 846-59.
- Fazio, Russell H. (1979), Motives for social comparison: The construction-validation distinction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, 1683-98.
- Fiske, S.T., J. Xu, A.C. Cuddy, and P. Glick (1999), "(Dis)Respecting Versus (Dis)Liking: Status and Interdependence Predict Ambivalent Stereotypes of Competence and Warmth," *Journal of Social Issues*, 55, 473-89.
- Forman, Chris, Anindya Ghose, and Batia Wiesenfeld (2008), "Examining the Relationship between Reviews and Sales: The Role of Reviewer Identity Disclosure in Electronic Markets," *Information Systems Research*, 19, 291-313.
- Fraser, Bruce (1990), "An Approach to Discourse Markers," *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14, 383-98.
- Friestad, Marian and Peter Wright (1994), "The Persuasion Knowledge Model: How People Cope with Persuasion Attempts," *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 21, 1-31.
- Gawronski, Bertram and Eva Walther (2008), "The TAR Effect: When the Ones Who Dislike Become the Ones Who Are Disliked," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34 (September), 1276-1289.
- Godes, David and Dina Mayzlin (2004), "Using Online Conversations to Study Word-of-Mouth Communication," *Marketing Science*, 23, 545-60.
- Grice, H. Paul (1975). "Logic and Conversation," in *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Act*, Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan, Eds. New York: Academic Press, 41-58.

Herr, Paul M., Frank R. Kardes, and John Kim (1991), "Effects of Word-of-Mouth and Product-Attribute Information on Persuasion: An Accessibility-Diagnosticity Perspective," *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 17, 454-62.

Holtgraves, Thomas (1997), "Yes, But...: Positive Politeness in Conversation Arguments," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16 (June), 222-39.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1998), "Interpreting Indirect Replies," *Cognitive Psychology*, 37, 1-27.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2000), "Preference Organization and Reply Comprehension," *Discourse Processes*, 30, 87 - 106.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2010), "Social Psychology and Language: Words, Utterances, and Conversations," in *Handbook of Social Psychology, Fifth Edition*, Susan T. Fiske, Daniel T. Gilbert, and Gardner Lindzey, Eds., Vol 2., Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Hovland, Carl I. and Walter Weiss (1951), "The Influence of Source Credibility on Communication Effectiveness," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15, 635-50.

Hovland, Carl I., Irving L. Janis, and Harold H. Kelly (1953), *Communication and Persuasion: Psychological Studies of Opinion Change*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Jucker, Andreas H. (1998), *Discourse Markers: Descriptions and Theory*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1993), "The Discourse Marker *Well*: A Relevance-theoretical Account," *Journal of Pragmatics*, 19, 435-452.

Kahneman, Daniel and Shane Frederick (2002), "Representativeness Revisited: Attribute Substitution in Intuitive Judgment," in *The Psychology of Intuitive Judgment: Heuristics and Biases*, Thomas Gilovich and Dale Griffin and Daniel Kahneman, Eds. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Kivetz, Ran and Itamar Simonson (2000), "The Effects of Incomplete Information on Consumer Choice," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 37 (November), 427-48.
- Knowles, Eric S. and Jay A. Linn (2004), "Approach-Avoidance Model of Persuasion: Alpha and Omega Strategies for Change," in *Resistance and Persuasion*, Eric S. Knowles and Jay A. Linn, Eds., Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kozinets, Robert V., Kristine de Valck, Andrea C. Wojnicki, and Sarah J. S. Wilner (2010), "Networked Narratives: Understanding Word-of-Mouth Marketing in Online Communities," *Journal of Marketing*, 74, 71-89.
- Kruglanski, Arie, and Ofra Mayseless (1990), "Classic and Current Social Comparison Research: Expanding the Perspective," *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(2), 195-208.
- Mackiewicz, Jo (2008), "Reviewer Motivations, Bias, and Credibility in Online Reviews," in *Handbook of Research on Computer Mediated Communication*, Sigrid Kelsey and Kirk St. Amant, Eds. Hershey, PA: The Idea Group Publishers, 252-66.
- Morris, Michael W., Kwok Leung and Sheena S. Iyengar (2004), "Person Perception in the Heat of Conflict: Negative Trait Attributions Affect Procedural Preferences and Account for Situational Cultural Differences," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 7, 127-147.
- Nisbett, Richard E. and Timothy D. Wilson (1977) "The Halo Effect: Evidence for Unconscious Alteration of Judgments," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35(4), 250-6.
- Preacher, Kristopher and Andrew Hayes (2004), "SPSS and SAS Procedures for Estimating Indirect Effects in Simple Mediation Models," *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, and Computers*, 36, 717-31.
- Pomerantz, Anita (1984), "Agreeing and Disagreeing with Assessments: Some Features of Preferred/Dispreferred Turn Shapes," in *Structures of Social Action: Studies in*

- Conversation Analysis*, John Maxwell-Atkinson and John Heritage, Eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 57-101.
- Reid, Thomas (2004), "Fire Your Customer," *Contract Management*, (December), 6-13.
- Richardson, Kay (2003), "Health Risks on the Internet: Establishing Credibility on Line," *Health, Risk & Society*, 5, 171.
- Richins, Marsha L. (1983), "Negative Word-of-Mouth by Dissatisfied Consumers: A Pilot Study," *The Journal of Marketing*, 47, 68-78.
- Roskos-Ewoldsen, David R. and Russell H. Fazio (1992), "The Accessibility of Source Likability as a Determinant of Persuasion," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18(February), 19-25.
- Rucker, Derek D., Richard E. Petty, and Pablo Brinol (2008), "What's in a Frame Anyway? A Meta-Cognitive Analysis of the Impact of One Versus Two Sided Message Framing on Attitude Certainty," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 18 (April), 137-49.
- Wallop, Harry (2005, January 2005), "Burberry admits chav effect checked sales over Christmas," *The Telegraph*.
- Ward, Andrew and Lyle Brenner (2006), "Accentuate the Negative: The Positive Effects of Negative Acknowledgement," *Psychological Science*, 17(11), 959-62.
- Xia, Lan, Kent B. Monroe, and Jennifer L. Cox (2004), "The Price Is Unfair! A Conceptual Framework of Price Fairness Perceptions," *Journal of Marketing*, 68(October), 1-15.

## HEADINGS LIST

- 1) THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
- 2) Inferences from word-of-mouth communications
- 2) Using dispreferred markers to infer likability and credibility
- 2) Dispreferred markers and evaluations of reviewed products
- 2) Empirical tests
- 1) EXPERIMENT 1
- 2) Method
- 2) Results
- 3) Credibility
- 3) Likability
- 2) Discussion
- 1) EXPERIMENT 2
- 2) Method
- 2) Results
- 3) Naturalness of the statements
- 3) Credibility
- 3) Likability
- 3) Follow communicator's advice?
- 2) Discussion
- 1) EXPERIMENT 3
- 2) Method
- 2) Results
- 2) Discussion
- 1) EXPERIMENT 4
- 2) Method
- 2) Results
- 2) Discussion
- 1) EXPERIMENT 5
- 2) Method
- 2) Results
- 3) Brand personality
- 3) Willingness to pay
- 2) Discussion
- 1) GENERAL DISCUSSION
- 2) Contributions to word-of-mouth research
- 2) Contributions to communication science
- 2) Practical implications and future research
- 2) Conclusion
- 1) APPENDIX A: STIMULI FOR EXPERIMENT 3
- 1) APPENDIX B: STIMULI FOR EXPERIMENT 5
- 1) REFERENCES