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Whether and How Prepurchase Word of Mouth Affects Postpurchase Word of Mouth

Abstract

Consumers often purchase new products based on online reviews and recommendations from both friends and strangers. Previous studies have extensively explored the effects of word of mouth (WOM) on the prepurchase stage, but little is known about whether WOM from friends or strangers can alter consumers' postpurchase behavior. The authors propose that positive WOM from distant (vs. close) others increases consumers' intention to share negative WOM when the product/service fails to perform to their satisfaction due to two distinctive motivations. First, consumers perceive that positive WOM from distant others might mislead more people, and consequently, consumers expect their negative WOM to have a greater impact on helping others. Second, when receiving positive WOM from close others, they are less willing to publicly contradict the close others' WOM even though they believe the WOM is misleading. Studies 1a and 1b demonstrate the main effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM intention, while Study 2 reveals the dual mediating effects of anticipated impact and relationship norm. Studies 3 and 4 validate these mechanisms by showing the moderating role of the self-construal level while ruling out the role of impression management. This research offers practical implications for WOM management across different social ties.

Keywords: word of mouth, online reviews, user-generated content, interpersonal closeness, product failure, social ties

With the proliferation of social media, discussion forums, and e-commerce websites, consumers have gained access to a vast amount of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (e.g., online reviews, social media posts) in addition to traditional WOM (e.g., in-person recommendation). Unlike advertisements, WOM is not directly endorsed by the company; thus, it carries considerable weight in consumers' decision making (Tang and Guo 2015). Prior studies show that WOM plays an especially important role in consumers' purchase decisions of new products, as it aids the lack of sensory information and helps reduce risks (Herzenstein, Posavac, and Brakus 2007; Moreau, Lehmann, and Markman 2001). Importantly, the source of such positive WOM can either be friends or strangers. According to Statista (Kunst 2023b), consumers gain product inspirations from eWOM and traditional WOM generated by both friends and strangers. Specifically, 46% of consumers gain product inspirations from social media platforms, where they encounter both friends' and strangers' eWOM, while another 45% rely on in-person recommendations from friends and acquaintances. Additionally, third-party online review platforms such as Yelp.com and Goodreads.com have innovated to display reviews not only from unknown reviewers but also from within a user's social media circle, thereby incorporating reviews from their own friends.

While most consumers buy new products on the basis of positive WOM, especially eWOM on social media (Kunst 2023a, b; Navarro 2023; Olenski 2012), they are often left with disappointment after the purchase. Approximately 75% to 95% of newly launched products fail each year (Hyder 2019; Schneider and Hall 2011). Product failures not only reduce affected consumers' future repurchase intention but also damage brands' reputation and lower future prospects, as dissatisfied consumers often share negative WOM (Meuter et al. 2000). A study conducted in the airline industry shows that an increase of 1,000 negative WOM instances can cost as much as $8.1 million over a 20-month period (Luo 2009).

Evidently, negative WOM is frequently generated after a new product/service purchased on the basis of positive WOM received from either friends or strangers. Thus, an important question is, can the source of positive WOM—whether from friends or strangers—at the prepurchase stage influence consumers' intention to share negative WOM at the postpurchase stage?

This research directly addresses the above question. We propose that consumers are more likely to share negative WOM about a failed product purchased on the basis of a stranger's WOM versus a friend's WOM (i.e., interpersonal closeness) because of two different motives. First, building on interpersonal closeness and WOM literature (Trope and Liberman 2010; Berger 2014), we propose that when a stranger recommends a failed product/service, people believe that the recommendation has misled and will mislead many others. Therefore, consumers anticipate that sharing negative WOM can help more people make better decisions (i.e., anticipated impact). Second, building on relationship norm literature (Clark 1984; Aggarwal 2004), we also suggest that when a friend recommends a product/service and it fails, people are less willing to share negative WOM because they avoid violating the relationship norm of not publicly going against their friends. We conduct five experimental studies to test our hypotheses.

This research adds several insights to literature on online reviews, WOM and interpersonal closeness. First, we shed greater light on the effect of positive WOM at the prepurchase stage on negative postpurchase WOM intention, thereby challenging an implicit assumption that predictors of WOM only emerge at the postpurchase stage (Berger 2014; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Second, we directly extend the current understanding of interpersonal closeness in influencing consumer behavior by revealing that the effect of interpersonal closeness at the prepurchase stage goes beyond consumers' purchase intention (Zhang, Liang, and Qi 2021). Furthermore, we extend Dubois, Bonezzi, and De Angelis's

(2016) and Chen's (2017) studies, which show the role of interpersonal proximity between information sender and recipient in influencing how the *sender* shares information. We find that interpersonal closeness can also influence how the *recipient* shares information. Moreover, by showing the mediating effect of anticipated impact, we offer further evidence that an altruistic motive can explain information sharing among distant others. Finally, our findings extend research on the "strength of weak ties" (Brown and Reingen 1987; Granovetter 1973). We show that loosely tied social networks allow not only greater information diffusion but also a greater diversity of viewpoints by increasing the sharing of information that is opposite to the original information. We provide useful implications for managers for designing WOM programs.

Literature Review

Word-of-Mouth Sharing

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is a powerful tool that can influence consumers' purchase decisions. WOM can be divided into two types: in-person WOM and electronic WOM (eWOM). In-person WOM is a person-to-person conversation about a brand or product between non-commercial individuals (Arndt 1967) while eWOM is a positive or negative statement (i.e., online mentions and online reviews) generated by a non-commercial individual to a number of people and institutions via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Although traditional in-person WOM has a significant influence on consumers' purchase behaviors (de Matos and Rossi 2008) especially for product/service discovery and the initial consultation stage of the consumer journey (Bartschat, Cziehso and Hennig-Thurau 2022), eWOM also became an important source of information for consumers (Jiménez and Mendoza 2013). Consumers actively seek eWOM (e.g., reading online reviews, engaging in discussions on online forums)

and in-person WOM (e.g., seeking advice from friends) before purchasing specific products or services (Choi and Leon 2020; Berger 2014), making WOM a critical driver of product sales (e.g., Verma and Yadav 2021). Importantly, consumers tend to display a bias toward receiving negative WOM because, compared with positive WOM, they find negative WOM more useful, diagnostic, and persuasive (Ahluwalia 2002; Arndt 1967; Chakravarty, Liu, and Mazumdar 2010; Purnawirawan et al. 2015). The relatively large magnitude of negative WOM on consumers' decision-making underscores the significance of understanding their predictors.

Previous research has mainly identified postpurchase drivers of WOM, with a focus on the overall experience with brands and the interpersonal motivations of consumers (as information senders) toward WOM recipients (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Berger 2014). A recent meta-analytic study by de Matos and Rossi (2008) found that commitment to the brand is the strongest driver of positive WOM, while disloyalty and dissatisfaction drive negative WOM. Berger's (2014) review further proposes several interpersonal motivations to engage in WOM. For instance, sharing WOM helps consumers meet impression management needs through self-enhancement (Lampel and Bhalla 2007) and signaling their certain identities (Chung and Darke 2006). People also view WOM as a means to strengthen social bonds between the sharer and recipient through reinforcing shared views (e.g., about the advertisement that they like) (Ritson and Elliott 1999) and reducing loneliness and social exclusion (Maner et al. 2007). Moreover, when trustworthy information is lacking, people share WOM to persuade and help others make better decisions (Sundaram, Mitra and Webster 1998; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Berger 2014).

The literature highlights the importance of both in-person WOM and eWOM in shaping consumers' purchase decisions on new products and innovative technologies. This is because purchasing these products is associated with high investment risks due to a lack of available

information (e.g., Arndt 1967; Herzenstein, Posavac, and Brakus 2007; Moreau, Lehmann, and Markman 2001). Consequently, WOM becomes important reference points for consumers, who perceive them as more credible and trustworthy than brand-generated information (Wilson and Sherrell 1993).

Building on these previous findings, we take a step further and predict that the source of positive WOM (i.e., interpersonal closeness) at the prepurchase stage influences consumers' intention to share negative WOM at the postpurchase stage. Specifically, consumers' negative WOM intention after product/service failure is influenced by whether a recommendation at the prepurchase stage is shared by close (vs. distant) others.

Interpersonal Closeness and Information Sharing

Interpersonal closeness is the degree of psychological proximity between two people and refers to the extent to which a person perceives another person as close to the self (Gino and Galinsky 2012). When a person feels interpersonally close to another person, both share affective, cognitive, and behavioral overlap (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992; Dubois, Bonezzi, and De Angelis 2016). In general, interpersonal closeness develops from a genuine relationship (e.g., close friendship, family), but it can also develop from incidental similarity between two people (e.g., same name or birthdate) (Jiang et al. 2009). Prior studies show that interpersonal closeness can predict many prosocial behaviors, such as cooperation and helping behaviors (e.g., Aron et al. 1991; Batson et al. 2002).

In information sharing, interpersonal closeness affects what people share and how they act on incoming information. Specifically, people share information differently depending on the interpersonal closeness between the recipients and themselves. Chen (2017) shows that people tend to share more negative information with close than distant others because they want to connect emotionally to maintain relationships. Conversely, people tend to share positive WOM with distant others for self-enhancement purposes. Dubois, Bonezzi, and De

Angelis (2016) also agree that people are more likely to share positive WOM with distant (vs. close) others out of self-enhancement motivations but negative WOM with close (vs. distant) others out of altruistic motivations (i.e., a need to protect them).

Interpersonal closeness also influences recipients' decisions and behaviors. In particular, people are more likely to trust the information and advice coming from close friends or those with whom they are in intimate relationships (Aral and Walker 2011; Podolny and Baron 1997). Furthermore, research shows that information received from close others is generally more valuable than information received from distant others (Aral 2011; Frenzen and Nakamoto 1993). In the commercial context, Zhang, Liang, and Qi (2021) show that WOM shared by close others (vs. acquaintances) is more effective in convincing consumers and thus increases purchase intention.

By contrast, information diffusion literature shows a favorable side to low interpersonal closeness, such that the information shared among distant others has a broader reach than information shared among close others (Brown and Reingen 1987; Frenzen and Nakamoto 1993; Lin, Ensel, and Vaughn 1981). This is because information can be transmitted from one community to another through distant others (Brown and Reingen 1987). Weenig and Midden (1991) show that when identical communication programs were implemented in two Dutch neighborhoods with different levels of interpersonal closeness, information diffusion was higher in the neighborhood with low interpersonal closeness than in the neighborhood with high interpersonal closeness. Thus, while information shared by close others might exert greater weight on each individual's decisions, information shared by distant others has a greater societal impact overall by allowing more dissemination.

In summary, prior studies have shown the impact of interpersonal closeness on recipients' acceptance of incoming information, but research on its influence on their subsequent willingness to share information is lacking. In this research, we focus on the

drivers of negative postpurchase WOM intention and propose that interpersonal closeness alters recipients' intention to share WOM which contradicts the original information they received.

Hypotheses Development

Effect of Positive Prepurchase Word-Of-Mouth on Negative Postpurchase Word-Of-Mouth

People frequently purchase new products and services based on recommendations shared by their close friends or family members (high interpersonal closeness) or by strangers (e.g., online reviews, social media posts, influencers' reviews) (low interpersonal closeness) (Baker, Donthu, and Kumar 2016; Huang and Chen 2006). However, new product and service failures are also common (Tyagi 2006). We argue that interpersonal closeness between the recommender and the receiver affects the receiver's intention to share negative WOM when a product failure occurs.

People share WOM for many different reasons (Berger 2014; Dubois, Bonezzi and De Angelis 2016). Specifically, we propose two distinct motivations (i.e., anticipated impact and relationship norm) behind the influence of interpersonal closeness on negative postpurchase WOM. First, when a stranger recommends a failed product, people perceive that the recommendation has misled and will mislead many others. Therefore, they will anticipate that sharing negative WOM will have a greater impact on helping others. Second, when a friend recommends a failed product, people are governed by the relationship norm of not contradicting a friend in public. Consequently, they are less likely to share negative WOM that opposes the friend's recommendation. Stated formally:

H_1: High (vs. low) interpersonal closeness has a differential effect on negative WOM intention. Consumers are more likely to share negative WOM when the product/service recommended by distant (vs. close) others fails to perform to their satisfaction.

In the next sections, we elaborate further on this central hypothesis through two key mediators, anticipated impact and relationship norm.

Anticipated Impact

Concern for others is one of the main drivers of sharing negative WOM (Berger 2014; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). For example, in Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster's (1998) study, 23% of consumers claimed that they shared negative WOM to protect others from having the same negative experience. Recipients also find negative WOM more helpful in general (Purnawirawan et al. 2015). When consumers believe that other people will suffer from the same negative experiences with the failed product, they will be willing to share WOM to protect others from the inaccurate positive WOM (Berger 2014). However, we predict that the tendency to share WOM will depend on the anticipated impact of their review—that is, the degree to which consumers believe that their review will benefit other people. Evidence shows that anticipation of the consequences of a particular action is a significant predictor of the intention to act. For example, anticipated emotions predict the intention to use new technologies (Beaudry and Pinsonneault 2010; Piçarra and Giger 2018) and to participate in a virtual community (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). In the context of sharing WOM, anticipated helpfulness of a review reflects what reviewers intend to write (Moore 2015), while anticipated self-enhancement increases overall WOM intention (Chen 2017). In line with this, we propose that when a distant other recommends a failed product, consumers anticipate a higher impact of their negative WOM in helping others because they perceive that the recommendation shared by a distant other has misled and will mislead many others than the

recommendation shared by a friend. There are two main reasons for this proposed effect: the intercorrelation of interpersonal closeness with other dimensions of psychological distance, and the perceived intentionality of deceiving others.

First, previous literature suggests that interpersonal closeness is cognitively interrelated with spatial and temporal distance, because they all have a common meaning: psychological distance (see review in Trope and Liberman 2010). People automatically associate close (distant) others with the near (distant) future and proximal (distant) locations. For example, people are more likely to imagine arguing with a close (distant) person, in the near (distant) future, and in a near (distant) place (Fiedler et al. 2012). Moreover, spatial distance (e.g., preferred sitting distance) is often used as a measure of interpersonal closeness (Macrae et al. 1994; Aron, Aron and Smollan 1992; Rim et al. 2019; Boothby et al. 2016). Accordingly, in our context, people automatically perceive a stranger (vs. a friend) who recommends a product to be spatially distant (proximal) to them. Hence, we reason that when people believe that the information needs to traverse a longer distance and time to reach them, they intuitively believe that the information has already reached and misled many others before reaching them. For example, when people hear gossip from an unknown neighbor, they may intuitively believe that the neighbor has probably shared the gossip with many others before sharing it with them. In contrast, when they hear gossip from a close friend, the friend probably shares it with them before sharing with others.

Second, people trust their friends more than strangers (Aral and Walker 2011; Podolny and Baron 1997). Ultimately, if a friend recommends a failed product, people are more likely to believe that the friend just made an honest mistake and unintentionally misled them. In contrast, if a stranger recommends a failed product, people are more likely to perceive that the stranger has done it intentionally for ulterior motives (e.g., an undisclosed sponsorship, attention seeking). In unstable and infrequent contexts, such as recommending new products,

intentionality even plays a more significant role in predicting future repeated behavior than habitual past behavior (Ouellette and Wood 1998). Additionally, individuals driven by personal gain or other self-centered motives are more prone to engaging in deceptive practices, attempting to mislead others (Vrij 2008; DePaulo et al. 1996). Consequently, customers who believe they have been intentionally misled by a stranger are more likely to attribute an active role to the stranger in spreading the incorrect recommendation to others.

Noticeably, people who are misled are not limited to those who have seen the stranger's positive recommendation. People may perceive that the original recommendation written by a stranger has been seen and re-shared by a larger number of people and that these people will also share the misleading information with a larger number of others. Additionally, people perceive that distant others who misled them are likely to continue to mislead others in the future, using a variety of methods, such as blog posts and online reviews (Vrij 2008). Therefore, when consumers believe that an overall large number of people might be harmed by the exaggeratedly positive WOM from distant others, they will anticipate that sharing negative reviews will have a stronger impact on helping others. Stated formally,

> **H_2:** The anticipated impact of negative WOM mediates the effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM intention.

Relationship Norm

Previous studies suggest that consumers' public activity like spreading WOM is associated with a certain degree of social risks (Eisingerich et al. 2015; Miranda and Duarte 2022; Wien and Olsen 2014). This is because sharing WOM involves uncertainty about how other people respond and react to one's opinions, behaviors, and attitudes (Jacoby and Kaplan 1972). Therefore, consumers may be reluctant to leave WOM in a risky situation (Mazzarol,

Sweeney and Soutar 2007), especially in cases of spreading negative WOM (Chen 2017) and eWOM with people in both weak and close ties (Eisingerich et al. 2015). We argue that spreading negative WOM about the failed product/service recommended by a friend is categorized as a high-risk condition because this behavior violates a close relationship norm. As such, people are reluctant to oppose a friend's opinion in public.

Norms are the governing rules that shape an individual's expectations, values, and behaviors (Axelrod 1986). Norms have been examined in various fields such as economics, business, and psychology with definitions often reflecting on how two parties should interact within specific cultural, interpersonal, societal, and business settings (Hechter and Opp 2001). In most cases, people conform to social norms that are applied to a given social setting because behaviors that deviate from the norms are often punished (Axelrod 1986). In a close interpersonal relationship, people conform to certain norms regarding the giving and acceptance of benefits such as being more responsive to others' needs, not asking for repayments for helping close others, and being less reluctant to request help from others (Aggarwal 2004). These norms are underpinned by the intrinsic motivation of concern for the welfare of close others (e.g., family members and friends) without expecting reciprocity (Clark 1984; Clark and Reis 1988; Clark and Waddell 1985; Aggarwal 2004). In the context of this research, we believe that people are governed by a relationship norm of not publicly going against a friend's opinions because they are expected to protect their friend's reputation and image. Deviating from this norm can infringe the close relationship because it implies ungenuine concern for close others' needs. Therefore, to maintain the close relationship, people are less likely go against this relationship norm and spread negative WOM about a product/service recommended by a friend. Furthermore, because norm violations would be severely punished (Mendoza, Lane and Amodio 2014), people still refrain from violating this relationship norm even when it is extremely unlikely that the close friend will become aware

of norm violations. For instance, when people buy a product on Amazon based on a recommendation by a close friend, the relationship norm still hinders their intention to write a negative review on Amazon even though it is unlikely that the friend will come across this review.

In contrast, when a stranger recommends a failed product, people are not regulated by this relationship norm because they are not expected to attend to the stranger's needs (Clark 1984; Clark and Reis 1988). Consequently, spreading negative WOM to others is not a risky behavior. To sum up, we expect that people are less likely to share negative WOM when a product is recommended by their friends because they follow a relationship norm of not invalidating their friend's opinion in public. Stated formally,

H_3: Relationship norm (i.e., people are reluctant to go against their friends in public) mediates the effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM intention.

Self-Construal Level

Based on the proposed mechanisms, we expect the main effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM intention to be subject to consumers' self-construal level, or the degree to which consumers view themselves as connected with (vs. separate from) others (Markus and Kitayama 1991). People with an *independent* self-construal tend to view themselves as distinct from others, while people with an *interdependent* self-construal tend to view themselves in terms of their connections with others (Madan et al. 2018). Independent people, therefore, focus on their unique selves and are less concerned about others or the context. Conversely, interdependent people seek life meaning through their relationships with others. Importantly, people with independent self-construal are less willing to express prosocial behaviors than people with interdependent self-construal (Holland et al. 2004; Orehek et al.

2014; Poulin et al. 2021; Winterich and Barone 2011). For example, independent (interdependent) people are less (more) willing to self-sacrifice for the sake of others (Orehek et al. 2014) and also less (more) likely to engage in charitable behaviors (Poulin et al. 2021; Winterich and Barone 2011). This tendency becomes more salient when people are more mindful and self-aware of their own thoughts and experiences (Poulin et al. 2021).

Accordingly, based on the mediating role of anticipated impact, we expect that interdependent people, but not independent people, are more likely to spread negative WOM when a stranger recommends a failed product compared to when a friend does. Interdependent people prioritize the well-being of others. Therefore, when they perceive that more people need help to avoid incorrect information from a stranger than from a friend, they anticipate a higher impact of their negative WOM when a stranger shares incorrect information. In contrast, independent people, who are less inclined to help others, are unaffected by whether a stranger or a friend shares incorrect information, despite recognizing that more people may have been misled by the stranger's recommendation. Similarly, even when both interdependents and independents believe that the same number of people might be misled by the stranger's recommendation, because the former care more about other people, they will anticipate a higher impact of their negative WOM and in turn, are more likely to act on it than the latter.

Based on the mediating role of relationship norm, we also expect that interdependent people are less likely to share negative WOM than independent people when a friend recommends a failed product. Interdependent people derive their sense of purpose and meaning in life from their relationships with close others (Madan et al. 2018). Consequently, preserving and safeguarding these relationships hold immense importance for them. Therefore, the relationship norm plays a stronger role for interdependent people than independent people. As a result, the influence of relationship norms is stronger among

interdependent individuals than independent individuals. Thus, when a close friend shares incorrect information, interdependent individuals are less likely to disclose truthful but contradictory information due to their desire to avoid violating the relationship norm. Stated formally,

> **H_4:** Self-construal level moderates the effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM intention.

Overview of Studies

We conduct five studies to test our hypotheses. Studies 1a and 1b show the main effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM intention and demonstrate that when a product/service recommended by a distant (vs. close) other fails, consumers are more likely to share negative WOM about it. Study 1b is pre-registered. In Study 2, we show the dual mediating roles of anticipated impact and relationship norm. Study 3 tests the moderating role of self-construal level. We show that interdependent people are more likely to share negative WOM when the failed product is recommended by a stranger than by a friend, but the negative WOM intention was similar across both interpersonal closeness conditions among interdependent people. Furthermore, when a failed product is recommended by a friend, interdependent people are less likely to share negative WOM than independent people, whereas when a failed product is recommended by a stranger, interdependent people are more likely to share negative WOM than independent people. Study 4 provides evidence to rule out the role of impression management motive. Figure 1 outlines the theoretical model and empirical plan of this research.

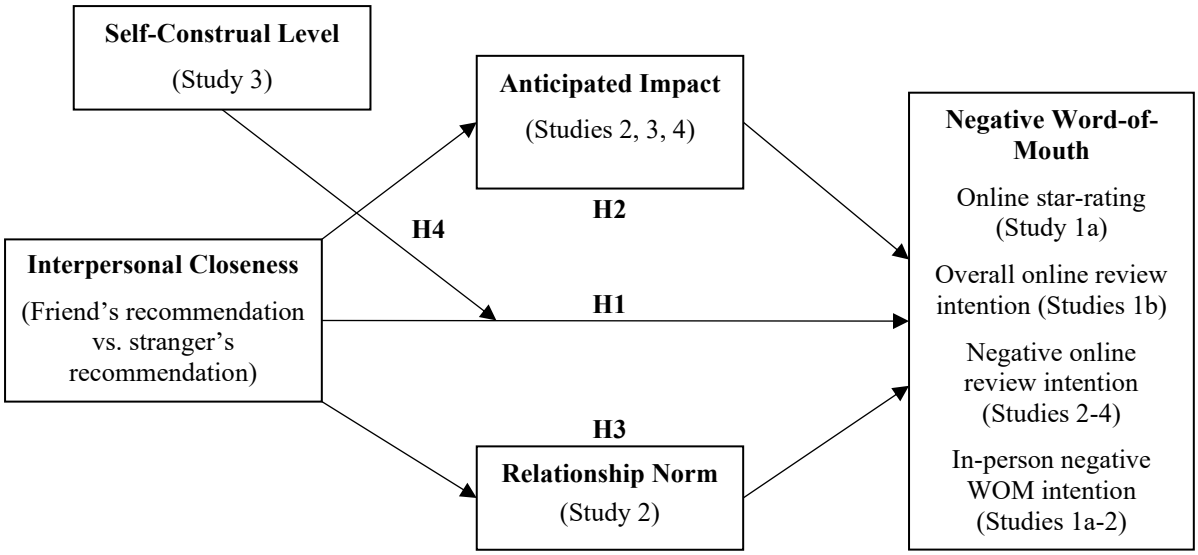

Figure 1. Theoretical model and empirical plan.

Study 1a: Product Rating

Study 1a aims to provide preliminary evidence for the effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM intention (H1). We predict that consumers who purchase a new product based on a stranger's recommendation, as opposed to a friend's recommendation, will give a lower star rating for the product online in the event of its failure.

Method

Two hundred sixty Prolific participants completed an online study in return for monetary compensation (M_{age} = 37.67; 62.3% female, 36.5% male, and 1.2% prefer not to say). We randomly assigned participants to two interpersonal closeness conditions (high: a friend's recommendation; low: a stranger's recommendation).

In the high interpersonal closeness condition, we first asked participants to think of a close friend and write down the name or initials of this person. Next, the participants read that they were surfing Instagram's home page and came across a post recommending a smartwatch written by this close friend. In the low interpersonal closeness condition, participants read

that they were surfing Instagram's home page and came across a post recommending a smartwatch written by a stranger. The content of the review was identical across the conditions. Participants in both conditions then read that they ordered the smartwatch from Amazon, and it arrived three days later. However, after using the product for a few days, they noticed many product defects. Web Appendix A presents the full descriptions of interpersonal closeness manipulations used in all studies.

Next, participants were asked to give a star rating on Amazon from 1 = "Very poor" to 5 = "Very good". To increase the realism of the measure, we used anchors that were similar to the real-life Amazon star rating (see Figure 2). Participants also responded to in-person negative WOM intention ("I would be very likely to warn other friends and relatives not to buy this smartwatch", 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). We also included an attention check question (see Web Appendix B for details). There was no significant difference in results between full sample and sample without those who failed the attention check (N = 20), therefore, we report the result from the full sample.

Figure 2. Product rating measure

Participants then completed the two-item measure of perceived interpersonal closeness from Dubois, Bonezzi, and De Angelis (2016) for a manipulation check: "How close do you feel to the stranger who wrote the review [the friend's name]?" (1 = "not at all close," 7 = "very close") and "How connected do you feel to the stranger who wrote the review [the friend's name]?" (1 = "not at all connected," 7 = "very connected"; $\alpha = .99$).

Results

Manipulation checks. The manipulation was successful. The results of a one-way ANOVA on perceived interpersonal closeness showed that participants in the friend's recommendation condition (M = 6.20, SD = .86) felt closer to the recommender than those in a stranger's recommendation condition (M = 1.31, SD = .75; $F(1, 258) = 2386.29$, $p < .001$).

Online Product Rating. Interpersonal closeness had a significant main effect on product rating ($F(1, 258) = 8.66$, $p = .004$), such that participants gave a lower rating of the failed product when recommended by a stranger (M =1.17, SD = .40) than a friend (M = 1.35, SD = .60).

In-person negative WOM. Interpersonal closeness also had a significant main effect on in-person negative WOM ($F(1, 258) = 10.00$, $p = .001$), such that participants were more likely to directly warn friends and relatives not to buy the failed product when recommended by a stranger (M =6.28, SD = .97) than a friend (M = 5.89, SD = .97).

Discussion

Study 1 provides preliminary evidence for the effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM (H1), such that when a product is recommended by a stranger (i.e., low interpersonal closeness) versus a friend (i.e., high interpersonal closeness) and it malfunctions, consumers give a lower product rating on the seller's website and are more likely to warn their friends and relatives about it.

Study 1b: Restaurant Review

Study 1b aims to examine the impact of interpersonal closeness on negative postpurchase WOM in a different context (i.e., restaurant review). This study was pre-registered (see https://osf.io/h54am/?view_only=3838888bafdf4295999f10d735ae47ea).

Method

Two hundred participants (M_{age} = 36.86; 63.5% female, 34.5% male, 1% non-binary, and 1% prefer not to say) recruited from Prolific completed an online survey for payment. We randomly assigned participants to two interpersonal closeness conditions (high: a friend's recommendation; low: a stranger's recommendation). In a stranger's recommendation (a friend's recommendation) condition, participants saw an Instagram post recommending a new restaurant written by a stranger (a friend). Participants in both conditions then read that based on the recommendation, they decided to try the restaurant a few days later, but the service was overall unsatisfactory (see Web Appendix A for details).

Next, to measure overall online review intention, participants rated their likelihood to share their experience on Google reviews ("How likely are you to share your experience at this restaurant on Google reviews?" 1 = "extremely unlikely," 7 = "extremely likely"; "I would leave an online review about this restaurant on Google reviews." 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; α = .95) and an in-person negative WOM measure from Study 1a. Finally, participants completed the two-item measure of perceived interpersonal closeness as manipulation check from Study 1a (α = .96).

Results

Manipulation checks. The manipulation was successful. Participants in the friend's recommendation condition (M = 6.02, SD = 1.11) felt closer to the reviewer than those in the stranger's recommendation condition (M = 2.92, SD = 1.43; F(1, 198) = 293.48, $p < .001$).

Overall online review intention. Interpersonal closeness had a marginally significant main effect on online review intention (F(1, 198) = 3.58, $p = .06$), such that participants were more likely to leave online reviews about the restaurant when recommended by a stranger (M = 4.34, SD = 1.88) than a friend (M = 3.84, SD = 1.88).

In-person negative WOM. Interpersonal closeness did not have a significant effect on in-person negative WOM ($F(1, 198) = .69$, $p = .41$), The likelihood to warn friends and relatives was similar across the stranger's recommendation condition ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.23$) and the friend's recommendation condition ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.32$).

Discussion

Study 1b provides further evidence for the effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM intention in a service context (H1). Particularly, when a restaurant is recommended by a stranger versus a friend and the service is unsatisfactory, consumers are more likely to write a Google review about the restaurant. However, we did not observe a similar effect on in-person negative WOM. We further elaborate on this issue in the limitation section. In the next study, we explore reasons why interpersonal closeness influences negative WOM intention.

Study 2: Roles of Anticipated Impact and Relationship Norm

Study 2 aims to examine the mediating roles of anticipated impact (H2) and relationship norm (H3). Specifically, we predict that when a failed product is recommended by a friend, consumers are less likely to share negative WOM because they adhere to the relationship norm of avoiding public contradiction with a friend. Conversely, when a failed product is recommended by a stranger, consumers anticipate a greater impact of their negative WOM, leading to an increase in negative WOM intention.

Furthermore, our theory posits that people anticipate a greater impact in the stranger's recommendation condition due to their perception that a larger number of people have been and will be misled by the stranger's recommendation. Therefore, this study also examines the serial mediation effect of the perceived extent of misleadingness and anticipated impact. In order to enhance generalizability, this study employs a different manipulation (i.e., a post on

Facebook) and utilizes a different new product (i.e., a virtual reality [VR] headset). Unlike Studies 1a and 1b, the reason for the failure of the VR headset in this study is kept more ambiguous (i.e., unable to set up the device properly).

Method

Two hundred seventy-seven Prolific participants completed an online study for monetary compensation (M_{age} = 37.12, SD = 11.54; 60.3% female, 38.6% male, .7% nonbinary, and .4% prefer not to say). We randomly assigned participants to two interpersonal closeness conditions (high: a friend's review; low: a stranger's review).

In a stranger's recommendation (a friend's recommendation) condition, participants saw a Facebook post recommending a VR headset written by a stranger (a friend). Participants in both conditions then read that they ordered the VR headset from Amazon, and it arrived three days later. However, even after spending nearly all day on it, they could not set up the device to function properly (see Web Appendix A for details).

Next, participants responded to a two-item measure of negative online review intention ("How likely are you to share your negative VR headset experience on Amazon?" 1 = "extremely unlikely," 7 = "extremely likely"; "I would leave a negative online review about this VR headset on Amazon?" 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; α = .92) and the in-person negative WOM intention measure from Study 1a. Participants then answered a three-item scale measuring the anticipated impact of writing a review ("If I post a negative review about this product, I expect many people will read my review", "If I post a negative review about this product, I believe many people will benefit from my review" and "If I post a negative review about this product, I expect my review will help many people to avoid this product"; 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; α = .83), followed by a two-item scale measuring the perceived extent to misleadingness with one item reflecting the perceived extent to which the recommendation *has misled* people ("In your opinion, how

many people do you think were misled by stranger's review [the friend's name]? 1 = "None at all," 7 = "A great deal") and one-item reflecting the perceived extent to which the recommendation *will mislead* people ("To what extent do you think people will be misled by the stranger's review [the friend's name]?" 1 = "extremely unlikely," 7 = "extremely likely"; α = .81). Then, participants were asked to answer a question measuring relationship norm ("I don't want to publicly go against the stranger [the friend's name] who recommended the VR headset by posting a review"; 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). Finally, participants completed the two-item measure of perceived interpersonal closeness (α = .98) and an attention check question from Study 1a. We report the results using the full sample, which were similar to the results using sample without those who failed the attention check (N = 9).

Results

Manipulation check. The manipulation was successful. A one-way ANOVA on interpersonal closeness revealed that participants in the friend's review condition (M = 5.86, SD = 1.11) felt closer to the recommender than those in the stranger's review condition (M = 1.56, SD = .88; ($F(1, 275) = 1268.35$, $p < .001$).

Negative online review intention. Interpersonal closeness had a significant main effect on negative online review intention ($F(1, 275) = 17.10$, $p < .001$). Participants were more likely to leave negative online reviews about the failed product when recommended by a stranger (M = 5.57, SD = 1.37) than a friend (M = 4.87, SD = 1.42).

In-person negative WOM. Interpersonal closeness had a significant main effect on in-person negative WOM ($F(1, 275) = 21.35$, $p < .001$), such that participants were more likely to warn friends and relatives not to buy the failed product when recommended by a stranger (M =5.98, SD = 1.11) than a friend (M = 5.31, SD = 1.28).

Parallel mediation analysis. To investigate the mediating roles of anticipated impact and relationship norm we followed Bhattacharjee and Mogilner's (2013) approach and conducted a multiple mediation analysis with two factors entered simultaneously using PROCESS model 4 (Hayes 2017) with 5,000 bootstrapped samples and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) (See Figure 3). The analysis revealed a significant indirect effect through both anticipated impact (indirect effect = −.168, SE = .0610, 95% CI [–.3044, –.0424]) and relationship norm (indirect effect = −.097, SE = .0, 95% CI [−.2156, −.0078]). The direct effect of interpersonal closeness on negative online review intention was weaker after we controlled for the mediating effects (b = –.430, p = .008, 95% CI [−.7454, −.1144]). Particularly, participants anticipated a higher impact of writing a negative review when the product was recommended by a stranger than by a friend (b = −.291, t = −2.62, p = .009) and were less willing to publicly go against the friend than the stranger who wrote the recommendation post (b = .839, t = 4.40, p < .001). Subsequently, the anticipated impact increased the intention to write a negative review (b = .577, t = 6.91, p < .001) while the relationship norm decreased the intention to write a negative review (b = −.116, t = −2.38, p = .02). Web Appendix C provides the results of separate mediation tests of each mediator and the results using the in-person negative WOM measure for the dependent variable. Therefore, H2 and H3 were supported.

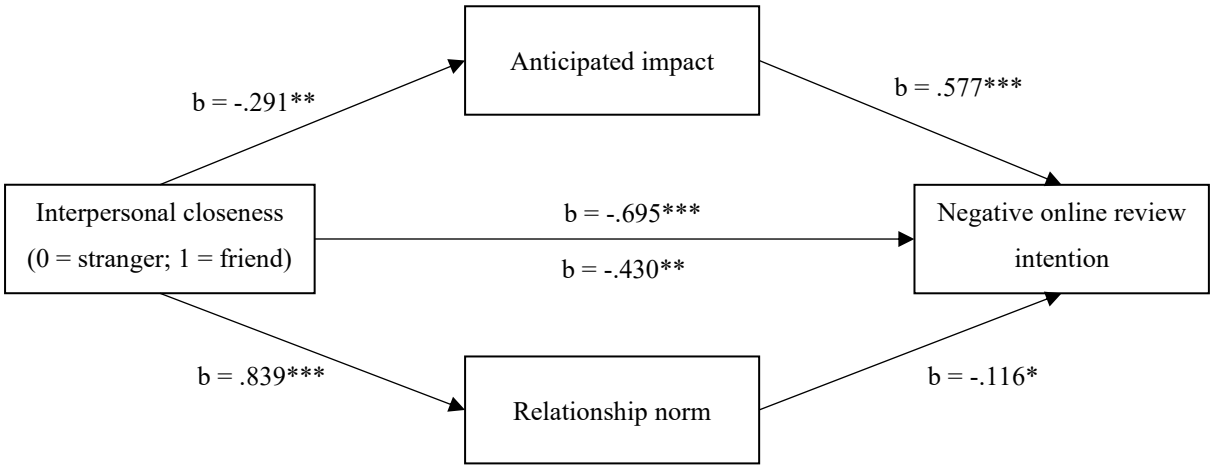

Figure 3. Effect of interpersonal closeness on negative online review intention through mediating roles of anticipated impact and relationship norm (Study 2).

Serial mediation analysis. To investigate the serial mediating effect of perceived extent of misleadingness and anticipated impact, we conducted a serial mediating effect analysis using PROCESS model 6 (5,000 bootstrapped samples, 95% CIs) with perceived extent of misleadingness entered as the first mediator and anticipated impact entered as the second mediator (See Figure 4). The analysis revealed a significant serial mediating effect through perceived extent of misleadingness and anticipated impact (indirect effect = −.0866, SE = .0294, 95% CI [–.1484, –.0328]). Particularly, participants perceived that a review by a stranger could mislead more people than a review by a friend (b = −.7965, t = −6.32, $p <$ .001). Perceived extent of misleadingness, in turn, increased anticipated impact of writing a review (b = .2047, t = 3.94, $p < .001$). Consequently, anticipated impact increased participants' intention to write a negative review (b = .5312, t = 6.257, $p < .001$). After controlling for the effect of perceived extent of misleadingness and anticipated impact, the main effect of interpersonal closeness on review intention became significantly weaker (b = -.350, t = −2.16, $p = .03$), yet remained significant, indicating a partial mediation. Furthermore, the indirect effect through perceived extent of misleadingness was significant (indirect effect = −.1881, SE = .0741, 95% CI [–.3469, –.0583]), but the indirect effect through anticipated impact was non-significant (indirect effect = −.0682, SE = .0577, 95% CI [–.1849, .0428]), suggesting the perceived extent of misleadingness fully accounts for the mediating effect of anticipated impact on the relationship between interpersonal closeness and negative online review intention.

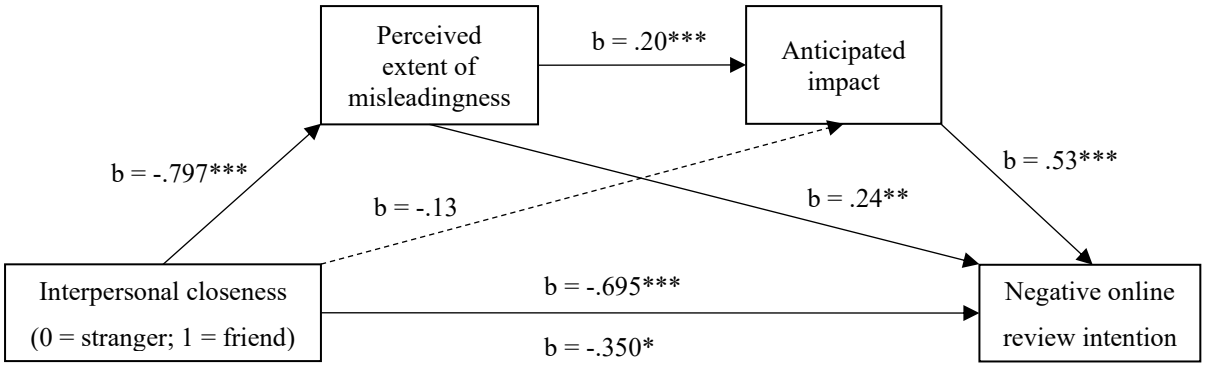

Figure 4. Effect of interpersonal closeness on online review intention through mediating roles of perceived extent of misleadingness and anticipated impact (Study 2).

Discussion

Study 2 demonstrates the dual mediating roles of anticipated impact and relationship norm in explaining the direct effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM intention. Similar to Study 1a and 1b, when a stranger (vs. a friend) recommends a failed product, consumers are more likely to share negative WOM. We provide underlying mechanisms of this effect. On the one hand, when a stranger recommends a failed product, consumers perceive that more people were (will be) misled by the stranger's recommendation and consequently, are more likely to share negative WOM because they anticipate that their WOM would benefit many others. On the other hand, when a friend recommends a failed product, consumers are less likely to share negative WOM also because of the relationship norm of not publicly going against a friend's recommendation.

Study 3: Roles of Self-Construal

Study 3 aims to test the role of self-construal in moderating the effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM intention. Particularly, a stranger's recommendation (vs. a friend's) increases negative WOM intention among interdependent people but not among

independent people. Furthermore, in the friend's recommendation condition, interdependent people are less likely to share negative WOM than independent people.

Method

One hundred ninety-one Prolific participants who had never used a VR headset before completed an online study for monetary compensation (M_{age} = 41.8, SD = 13.88; 72.3% female, 26.2% male, and 1.6% nonbinary). We randomly assigned participants to two interpersonal closeness conditions (high: a friend's review; low: a stranger's review). Participants engaged in the same interpersonal closeness manipulation as in Study 2.

Next, participants responded to a two-item measure of negative online review intention ("How likely are you to share your VR headset experience on Amazon?" 1 = "extremely unlikely," 7 = "extremely likely"; "I would leave negative online review about this VR headset on Amazon?" 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; α = .82). Participants then answered a two-item measure of anticipated impact of writing a review ("If I post a negative review about this product, I expect many people will read my review" and "If I post a negative review about this product, I believe many people will benefit from my review"; 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; α = .80). Furthermore, we also included measures of attribution of responsibility (i.e., the degree to which consumers blame recommenders for leaving misleadingly positive reviews) and intention to contact the recommender, as possible alternative explanations. Web Appendix D contains detailed information regarding these measures, as well as the results of our mediation and moderated mediation analyses. The findings from these analyses offer compelling evidence that allows us to dismiss these alternative explanations.

Next, participants completed the two-item measure of perceived interpersonal closeness from Study 2 (α = .99). They also responded to a four-item scale adapted from the well-established self-construal scale by (Singelis 1994), as validated by Madan et al. (2018). A

sample item is, “My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me” (1 = “strongly disagree,” 7 = “strongly agree”; α = .77. Furthermore, we included an item (“Please select “agree” for attention check”) and only one participant failed this check, and the results after excluding this participant were almost identical to the results from the full sample; thus, we report the result from the full sample.

Results

Manipulation checks. The results of a one-way ANOVA on perceived interpersonal closeness showed a successful manipulation ($F(1, 189) = 513.638$, $p < .001$). Participants in the high interpersonal closeness (a friend’s review) condition ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.22$) felt closer to the recommender than those in the low interpersonal closeness (a stranger’s review) condition ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 1.20$).

Negative online review intention. Interpersonal closeness had a significant main effect on negative online review intention ($F(1, 189) = 5.60$, $p = .019$). Thus, participants were more likely to leave negative online reviews about the failed product when recommended by a stranger ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.64$) than a friend ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.54$), in support of H_1.

Moderating effect of self-construal. We regressed the negative online review intention on interpersonal closeness, self-construal, and their interaction. The results showed a significant main effect of interpersonal closeness ($b = 3.99$, $t(187) = 2.42$, $p = .016$) and a marginally significant main effect of self-construal ($b = .39$, $t(187) = 1.77$, $p = .08$). Importantly, the interaction effect was significant ($b = –.895$, $t(187) = –2.72$, $p = .007$). Spotlight analysis revealed that interdependent self-construal participants (+1SD) were more likely to leave a negative online review about the failed product recommended by a stranger than by a friend ($M_{stranger} = 5.59$ vs. $M_{friend} = 4.42$; $b = –1.17$, $SE = .388$, $p = .003$). The effect was nonsignificant among independent self-construal participants (–1SD) ($M_{stranger} = 4.94$ vs. $M_{friend} = 5.26$; $b = .32$, $SE = .385$, $p = .40$; see Figure 5). Additional spotlight analysis

revealed that in the stranger's recommendation condition, interdependent self-construal participants (M = 5.59) were more likely to write negative reviews than independent self-construal participants (M = 4.94; b = .39, SE = .2215, p = .08), while in the friend's recommendation condition, interdependent self-construal participants (M = 4.42) were less likely to write negative reviews than independent self-construal participants (M = 5.26; b = –.50, SE = .2440, p = .04). Thus, H_4 was supported.

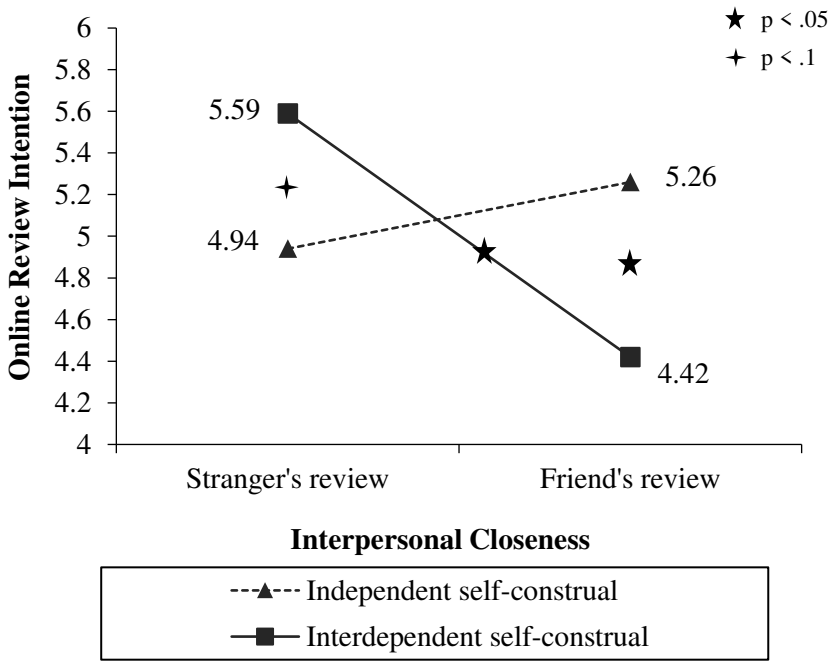

Figure 5. Interactive effect of interpersonal closeness and self-construal on online review intention.

Moderated mediation effect. We also tested the moderated mediation effect of interpersonal closeness and self-construal on online review intention through anticipated impact of the review using PROCESS model 8 (Hayes 2017). The results showed that anticipated impact mediated the interactive effect of interpersonal closeness and self-construal on negative online review intention (index = –.336, SE = .127, 95% CI = [–.5973, –.1040]). Particularly, self-construal moderated the effect of interpersonal closeness on anticipated impact (F(1,187) = 11.53, p < .001), such that interpersonal closeness reduced

anticipated impact of the review among interdependent participants (+1SD; $M_{stranger}$ = 5.66 vs. M_{friend} = 4.80; b = –.85, t = –3.85, p < .001) but not among independent participants (–1SD; $M_{stranger}$ = 4.85 vs. M_{friend} = 5.06; b = .21, t = .96, p = .34). Anticipated impact then increased negative online review intention (b = .53, SE = .123, t (186) = 4.29, p < .001).

Discussion

Study 3 shows the moderating effect of consumers' self-construal level. Specifically, a stranger's recommendation, as opposed to a friend's recommendation, increases negative WOM intention among interdependent consumers but not among independent consumers. In accordance with our theory, our findings also reveal that in the friend's recommendation condition, interdependent consumers are less likely to share negative WOM compared to independent consumers, while in the stranger's recommendation condition, interdependent consumers are more likely to share negative WOM compared to independent consumers.

Study 4: Impression Management as an Alternative Explanation

Impression management (self-enhancement) is an important driver of WOM intention (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Evidence indicates that when interacting with distant others (e.g., online reviews), consumers tend to engage more in impression management and self-enhancement (Dubois, Bonezzi and De Angelis 2016). Previous studies show that need for uniqueness strongly influences WOM intention (Cheema and Kaikati 2010). Thus, when consumers post a negative review that contradicts the popular opinion (e.g., overwhelmingly positive reviews by distanced others), the underlying motivation may be attention seeking (e.g., more upvotes/likes) by showing a unique opinion rather than helping others. Therefore, Study 4 examines this possibility.

Method

Two hundred twenty-three participants who had never used a VR headset prior to this study were recruited from Prolific in return for a monetary compensation (M_{age} = 39.4, SD = 13.35; 67.7% female, 30.5% male, 1.3% nonbinary, and .4% prefer not to say). We randomly assigned participants to one of four conditions in a 2 (impression management: high vs. low) × 2 (interpersonal closeness: high vs. low) between-subjects design. First, participants engaged in impression management manipulation. In the high impression management condition, we asked participants to write about an experience when they wanted to impress someone or a group of people; in the low impression management condition, we asked participants to write about an experience when they wanted to just be themselves and were not motivated to impress others.

Second, participants engaged in the same interpersonal closeness manipulation as in Study 3. Participants then responded to the two-item measure of negative online review intention (α = .86) from Study 3. To examine the altruistic motive, we measured the anticipated impact (α = .71) from Study 3.

Next, they completed a two-item measure of impression management adapted from Philp and Nepomuceno (2020) for a manipulation check: "I am concerned what others think about me" and "I try to make good impressions on others" (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; α = .81). We also included an item ("Please select disagree for attention check"); all participants answered the question correctly.

Results

Manipulation check. The manipulation was successful. A one-way ANOVA on impression management revealed a significant effect of the manipulation ($F(1, 220) = 11.33$, $p < .001$);. Participants in the high impression management condition (M = 5.04, SD = 1.38) reported that they had a higher need to make a good impression than those in the low impression

management condition (M = 4.38, SD = 1.53). Furthermore, there were a non-significant effect of interpersonal closeness manipulation on the perception of impression management ($F(1, 221) = .022$, $p = .882$) and a non-significant interactive effect of impression management manipulation and interpersonal closeness manipulation on the perception of impression management ($F(1, 218) = .636$, $p = .426$).

Negative online review intention. Interpersonal closeness had a significant main effect on negative online review intention ($F(1, 221) = 9.15$, $p = .003$). Thus, participants were more likely to leave negative online reviews about the failed product when recommended by a stranger (M = 5.24, SD = 1.62) than a friend (M = 4.58, SD = 1.64), in support of H_1.

Role of impression management. We used a two-way ANOVA to test the interactive effect of interpersonal closeness and impression management on negative online review intention. The ANOVA revealed a nonsignificant interaction ($F(1, 218) = .099$, $p = .754$). The main effect of impression management on online review intention was also nonsignificant ($F(1, 218) = .579$, $p = .45$). However, the main effect of interpersonal closeness on online review intention was again significant ($F(1, 218) = 8.875$, $p = .003$). As such, participants were more likely to leave a negative online review about the failed product recommended by a stranger (M = 5.29, SD = 1.64) than by a friend (M = 4.75, SD = 1.54). Similarly, a two-way ANOVA revealed a nonsignificant interactive effect of interpersonal closeness and impression management on anticipated impact ($F(1, 218) = .849$, $p = .358$) and a nonsignificant main effect of impression management ($F(1, 218) = 1.26$, $p = .26$). By contrast, the main effect of interpersonal closeness on anticipated impact was again significant ($F(1, 218) = 10.443$, $p = .001$).

Discussion

Study 4 rules out impression management as an alternative explanation for sharing negative WOM and replicates the mediating effect of anticipated impact (see more details in Web

Appendix E) thereby providing further support for an altruistic motive of sharing negative WOM (i.e., helping others).

General Discussion

WOM, especially negative ones, play an important role in shaping consumers' purchase decisions (e.g., Arndt 1967; Dellarocas, Zhang, and Awad 2007). Therefore, understanding the factors that drive consumers to share negative WOM is essential for brands. Through the series of five experiments, we examined how positive WOM at the prepurchase stage influences consumers' intention to share negative WOM at the postpurchase. Specifically, we tested our hypotheses using different types of products and services (i.e., restaurants, smartwatches, and VR headsets), different induction tasks of interpersonal closeness (Instagram's posts and Facebook's posts), and different levels of failure ambiguity (clear product defects and failures to set up the product properly). Across all five studies, we consistently find that consumers are more likely to share negative WOM if they bought a new product/service based on distant (vs. close) others' positive recommendation at the prepurchase stage and the product/service did not live up to their expectation (i.e., product/service failure). In Study 2, we illustrate the mediating roles of the anticipated impact and relationship norm on the link between interpersonal closeness and negative WOM intention. We also uncover the moderating effect of self-construal level (Study 3). Particularly, the effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM intention diminishes when consumers have independent self-construal. Furthermore, interdependent consumers are less (more) likely to share negative WOM than independent consumers when the failed product was recommended by their friend (a stranger). Finally, Study 4 also provides empirical evidence that impression management motives do not affect the proposed effect

and demonstrates the altruistic motive of sharing negative WOM (through anticipating helping other people).

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the literature on online reviews, WOM, and interpersonal closeness. First, heretofore, the assumption that motives for sharing online reviews only emerge at the postpurchase stage has underpinned research on WOM (Berger 2014; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). By demonstrating that positive WOM at the prepurchase stage influences negative WOM at the postpurchase stage, we challenge this assumption, thus opening new avenues for future online review and WOM research (i.e., other prepurchase predictors of postpurchase WOM). Furthermore, by showing that the intention to share negative WOM is due to consumers' altruistic motivation (i.e., helping others make better decisions), we contribute to the current discussion on the factors that prompt consumers to share WOM (Berger 2014; King, Racherla, and Bush 2014).

Second, prior studies on interpersonal closeness have focused heavily on how interpersonal closeness between information senders and recipients influences the way senders share information (Chen 2017; Dubois, Bonezzi, and De Angelis 2016) and recipients process the information (Zhang, Liang, and Qi 2021). By contrast, our research focuses on how interpersonal closeness influences the *recipients'* intention to share contradictory information. Furthermore, our studies align with previous research conducted by Chen (2017) and Dubois, Bonezzi, and De Angelis (2016), highlighting the motive of maintaining and protecting close relationships when interpersonal closeness is high. Specifically, we demonstrate that the relationship norm acts as a barrier to the intention of sharing WOM that contradicts the opinions of friends. Our findings also suggest that when perceiving that many others might be misled by incorrect information from strangers, people are willing to share correct information because they anticipate that the correct information is more helpful.

Notably, this willingness to share correct information extends beyond self-enhancement needs, as indicated by the results of Study 3, emphasizing the presence of altruistic motives even in interactions with distant others.

Finally, our findings also offer a new angle to the discussion on the strength of weak ties. Previous research on social networks at a macro-level has suggested that weak ties possess an advantage over strong ties in terms of information diffusion (Brown and Reingen 1987; Granovetter 1973). In our study, by examining the psychological processes of individuals at a micro-level, we not only support but also extend this notion. Our findings indicate that weak ties facilitate the diffusion of information but with *diverse viewpoints*. As such, compared with people in a community with strong ties, people in a community with weak ties are more likely to share the correct information when the original information is perceived as misleading. Consequently, this finding has a valuable implication for how weakly tied social networks might facilitate viewpoint diversity. For example, social media, which is replete with weakly tied networks in general, may facilitate misinformation sharing (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018); however, our research suggests that social media can also facilitate the diffusion of correct information to counter this misinformation. By contrast, when misinformation is shared among communities with close ties (e.g., friends), people are more reluctant to correct it.

Managerial Implications

This research provides practical guidance for industries by unpacking mechanisms through which consumers share negative WOM in light of product failure. First, this study reemphasizes the importance of asking customers "how did you hear about us?". Practitioners traditionally use this question to track promotion effectiveness (Jones and Sasser 1995). Our finding suggests that this question is also essential for negative WOM management. In particular, we propose expanding response options to capture the relationship between the

referrer and the customer (e.g., social media posts from friends/acquaintances, online reviews from unknown reviewers). As consumers are more likely to share negative WOM when the failed product/service was recommended by distant others, these nuanced options help brands pinpoint and proactively support those who purchased products based on distant others' recommendations, especially for new and potentially fault-prone products, through after-sales communication and technical assistance.

Second, with the prevalence of online marketplaces like Amazon and eBay, where reviews are mostly from distant others, our study is particularly relevant for new products introduced on these platforms. Strikingly positive early reviews can paradoxically invite negative feedback if the product falls short of expectations. Managers must understand that a multitude of predominant 5-star reviews from unknown reviewers can lead to harsher judgments from consumers upon any shortfall. Our research emphasizes the need for additional guidance to consumers when launching error-prone products on such platforms. Furthermore, our research suggests that simulating interpersonal closeness with reviewers through shared attributes, such as nationality or common names, can reduce the likelihood of negative reviews. Specifically, in our supplementary study (see Web Appendix F for details), we manipulated interpersonal closeness by highlighting accidental similarities between potential customers and the unknown reviewer (Jiang et al. 2009). The results show that people in the high-similarity reviewer condition were less likely to write a negative online review (M_{low} = 4.99, SD = 1.42) than those in the low-similarity reviewer condition (M = 5.43, SD = 1.35; F(1, 150) = 3.868, p = .051). Companies, including e-retailers and marketplaces, can apply this strategy by strategically displaying testimonials and reviews from reviewers with shared characteristics (e.g., nationality, city, date of birth, gender) on their websites, potentially reducing negative WOM.

Third, Study 2 shows that the effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM is more pronounced for interdependent self-construal consumers. Evidence shows that people from Eastern cultures (e.g., China) often possess stronger interdependent self-construal while people from Western cultures (e.g., United States) often possess stronger independent self-construal (Madan et al. 2018; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Zablocki, Makri, and Houston 2019). Thus, we recommend that managers in countries characterized as an interdependent culture (e.g., Eastern countries) pay closer attention to this effect and follow our recommendations.

Limitation and Future Research Directions

As with any research, this research also has certain limitations that offer directions for future research. First, although our research provides insight into how recommendation sources can affect the likelihood of sharing negative WOM after a new product failure, our research primarily focused on relatively mid- and high-involvement products (i.e., restaurants, and high-tech products). It is highly possible that the main effect may be hindered when the product is low-involvement and frequently purchased (e.g., lemon) partially because people are less likely to share WOM in this case in general (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Furthermore, low-involvement products are generally inexpensive, and hence, even if people perceive that many others are misled by incorrect positive WOM, people are less likely to anticipate their review making a strong impact given the limited harmfulness of the misled WOM. In fact, the observed effect of interpersonal closeness on negative WOM intention in restaurant context (Study 1b) was significantly weaker, possibly because restaurant services are usually considered more frequent, low- to medium-involvement purchases. This result could also be explained by the service context. The specific failure scenario—consisting of a long waiting time and an underwhelming meal—might be viewed as a one-off event and contingent upon personal taste and preferences. Research suggests that consumers show less

dissatisfaction and are less likely to spread negative WOM when they attribute service failures to factors outside a firm's control and view such failures as non-recurring (Bitner 1990). Future research could enrich our findings by investigating the moderating effects of product involvement, the perceived stability and controllability of product/service failures.

Second, while using the underlying processes of the main effect, we demonstrated moderating roles of self-construal level. However, the effect of interpersonal closeness may be contingent on other factors. Future research could expand our findings by investigating different recovery methods that brands can take under product failure (e.g., refund, apology). For example, how firms respond to negative reviews from a stranger or a friend can affect a brand's reputation (Proserpio and Zervas 2017). Moreover, our research focuses only on product failure. Future research can investigate the effect of interpersonal closeness when a recommended product performs to consumers' satisfaction. If a product operates as the reviewer suggests, the effect of interpersonal closeness on WOM intention may diminish because the effect through the anticipated impact (i.e., no one is misled) and relationship norm (i.e., sharing positive WOM does not conflict with friend's positive WOM) is canceled. Therefore, a good recommendation from a friend or a stranger is less likely to influence the postpurchase WOM.

Third, future research can also examine the cultural influences in facilitating or hindering the effect of interpersonal closeness. Our research provides initial evidence that the effect might become stronger in Eastern countries where interdependent culture is dominant. It is intriguing to see whether any other cultural factors can also play a role. For instance, in high power-distance countries, the effect might also be contingent on the perceived power position of the recommender. When a high-power stranger (e.g., a celebrity) shares a misleading recommendation, low-power customers are less likely to share negative WOM

that challenges the original recommendation even though they believe that their WOM can help many people (Winterich, Gangwar and Grewal 2018).

Fourth, by demonstrating the effects of positive prepurchase WOM on negative postpurchase WOM, we raise an important question for WOM researchers, What other prepurchase factors, if any, influence WOM intention at the postpurchase stage? For instance, future research can investigate whether different types of the prepurchase WOM (in-person vs. online), or the product review reposts (i.e., a friend's repost of a stranger's online review on social media), can influence the postpurchase WOM. Generally, eWOM reaches more people than in-person WOM (Eisingerich et al. 2015). Therefore, consumers are more likely to post negative WOM when a product is purchased based on the misleading eWOM (vs. in-person WOM) fails. In a separate experiment, we found preliminary support for this prediction. Study participants (N = 262) were randomly assigned to two conditions (in-person recommendation vs. overwhelming positive online reviews). Participants in both conditions then read that they could not set up the device to function properly. The result indicated that people in the online reviews condition were more likely to write a negative online review (M = 4.29, SD = 1.69) than people in the in-person recommendation condition (M = 3.69, SD = 1.61; $F(1, 262) = 8.689$, $p = .003$).

Moreover, future research can also investigate the congruent effect between prepurchase WOM and postpurchase WOM. Particularly, how receiving eWOM (in-person WOM) at the prepurchase stage effects consumers' intention to share eWOM (vs. in-person WOM) at the postpurchase stage. For instance, the congruent effect can explain the above result, such that receiving prepurchase online reviews can increase the overall tendency to post online reviews after the purchase. Further experiments can be conducted to examine whether in-person recommendations can increase consumers' preference for sharing in-person WOM.

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