How Language Shapes Word of Mouth's Impact

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ABSTRACT

Word of mouth impacts consumer behavior, but how does the language used shape that impact? And might certain types of consumers be more likely to use certain types of language, affecting whose words have more influence? Five studies, including textual analysis of over 1,000 online reviews, demonstrate that compared to more implicit endorsements (e.g., “I liked it” or “I enjoyed it”), explicit endorsements (e.g., “I recommend it”) are more persuasive and increase purchase intent. This occurs because explicit endorsers are perceived to like the product more and have more expertise. Looking at the endorsement language consumers actually use, however, shows that while consumer knowledge does affect endorsement style, its effect actually works in the *opposite* direction. Because novices are less aware that others have heterogeneous product preferences, they are more likely to use explicit endorsements. Consequently, the endorsement styles novices and experts tend to use may lead to greater persuasion by novices. These findings highlight the important role that language, and endorsement styles in particular, play in shaping the effects of word of mouth.

Keywords: word of mouth, language, persuasion, consumer knowledge, social perception.

Word of mouth has an important impact on consumer behavior (Babić Rosario et al. 2016; Berger 2015). Others' opinions shape everything from the everyday products people buy (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Ho-Dac, Carson and Moore 2014) to important medical and financial matters (Iyengar, Van den Bulte and Valente 2011; Lin and Fang 2006).

But while it is clear that others' opinions are persuasive, less attention has been paid to *how* such opinions are expressed. Might the specific words consumers use to signal their product support impact persuasion, and if so, how?

This paper examines the endorsement language consumers use, and how this language use affects word of mouth persuasion. Sometimes people endorse a product or service by saying "I recommend it," while other times they might simply say "I like it." While these variations may seem minor, we examine these turns of phrase as different "endorsement styles," or explicit versus implicit assertions of product approval. Further, we demonstrate that these language variations influence an endorsement's persuasive impact. People are more likely to choose a product someone else recommended, rather than liked, because the former signals that the endorser both likes the product more and has more domain expertise.

We also demonstrate that consumer knowledge influences which endorsement style people use. Less knowledgeable consumers are particularly likely to say "I recommend it" because they are less aware that personal tastes vary (i.e. preference heterogeneity). Consequently, in the absence of other source credibility information, people may paradoxically be more persuaded by novices than experts. Five studies, including a mix of field data and laboratory experiments, test these predictions.

This paper makes three main contributions. First, we outline different endorsement styles—consumer declarations of product approval or support following a positive experience.

While lots of research shows that word of mouth endorsements impact behavior, there has been less attention to the language people use when making such endorsements. We examine explicit versus implicit endorsement styles, and demonstrate that they influence word of mouth's impact.

Second, we examine *why* endorsement styles impact persuasion. We provide evidence for two complementary processes. Explicit recommendations suggest the endorser liked the product more, which makes recipients think they will like it more as well. Further, explicit recommendations suggest the endorser has more knowledge, which makes their endorsement more persuasive.

Third, we contribute to research on consumer knowledge. This literature has tended to focus *within individuals*— how someone's experience with or expertise regarding a category's attributes or benefits impacts that person's own information processing and decisions (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). We show that consumer knowledge is also social; specifically, it includes a person's comprehension of what *other people* like or value. Less knowledgeable consumers fail to consider preference heterogeneity when endorsing, leading to explicit endorsements.

WORD OF MOUTH

Consumer-to-consumer transmission of product information (i.e., word of mouth) is a hot topic for practitioners and academics. Over half of C-level executives note word of mouth as a key business priority (WOMMA 2014; Simonson and Rosen 2014), and there is strong empirical evidence that this attention is well placed. Hearing that someone else likes something drives people to purchase (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Liu 2006; Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels 2009), generating $6 trillion a year in economic value (WOMMA 2014).

While a great deal of research demonstrates that consumer opinions shape behavior, there has been less work examining *how* such opinions are conveyed. Prior research tends to consider all positive word of mouth as having the same impact, regardless of the words used to express it (De Angelis et al. 2012; Chen and Lurie 2013). Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006), for example, treat all four-star Amazon reviews as having the same impact on sales, regardless of the language in the review.

Similarly, researchers often describe any positive word of mouth as a "recommendation," regardless of whether consumers actually used that word (e.g., Berger 2014; Cheema and Kaikati 2010; Naylor, Lamberton and West 2012; Wojnicki and Godes 2011). Word of mouth recommendations have been described as a decision "surrogate" (Duhan et al. 1997) that helps remove less attractive alternatives from consideration (Ariely, Lynch and Aparicio 2004; Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004), and advance decision tasks from search to choice (Delleart and Haubl 2012). Other work examines when and how prior word of mouth interactions help people determine whether a source's recommendation is diagnostic for the decision at hand (Gershoff et al. 2001; Gershoff and Johar 2006; Gershoff, Mukherjee and Mukhopadhyay 2003). While this work suggests that product endorsements advance decision-making, we are unaware of prior work that considers the language people use to deliver their endorsement.

The specific words people use to declare their own positive evaluation, however, should be important. Language use has a substantial impact on persuasion (Hosman 2002). In the context of consumer social interactions, researchers have begun to examine the consequences of language-related phenomena such as abstract versus concrete word use (Schellekens, Verlegh, and Smidts 2010), boasting (Packard, Gershoff and Wooten 2016), explained actions (Moore

2015), figurative language (Kronrod and Danziger 2013), emotional words (Berger and Milkman 2012) and linguistic mimicry (Moore and McFerran 2016).

Might the language consumers use to express their product approval affect the persuasive impact of word of mouth? And if so, how?

THE CURRENT RESEARCH

We outline different endorsement styles—the language consumers use when *endorsing* something or declaring their personal approval or support (Oxford English Dictionary 2015). Imagine you have a positive hotel experience and want to share that with others. You can say something like "I liked that hotel" or something like "I recommend that hotel." The former can be described as an implicit endorsement, or assertion of your own personal positive opinion; how you feel toward an attitude object (i.e., first person pronoun + declaration of approval for self). The latter can be described as an explicit endorsement, or a speaker's declaration that the object is appropriate for others (i.e., first person pronoun + declaration of approval for others). McCracken (1989) briefly discussed related modes of product approval in his cultural analysis of celebrity endorsements, but did not analyze them further. Research on probability judgments in advice-taking distinguishes processing word of mouth *evaluations*, or the source's subjective appraisal of an alternative from *recommendations*, or the source's social presentation of an appropriate alternative (Gershoff et al. 2001). Our conceptualization builds on these foundations, defining implicit endorsements as the speaker's declaration of their own tastes (i.e., an "assertive"), and explicit endorsements as a declaration that the speaker finds the object appropriate for an audience (i.e., a "directive", Searle 1969; see also Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1991).

We suggest that *how* people endorse a product—the endorsement styles they use—influence word of mouth persuasion for two key reasons. First, explicit endorsements should make the endorser seem more knowledgeable, which should make their endorsement more persuasive. Consumers try to infer source expertise when determining whether to follow word of mouth (Gershoff, Broniarczyk and West 2001; Gershoff and Johar 2006; Naylor, Lamberton and Norton 2011). When explicit experience or expertise cues are available (e.g., reviewer badges or job titles; Ghose and Ipeirotis 2011; Karmaker and Tormala 2009), people use them to follow the endorsements of people who seem to know more (Petty and Wegener 1998; Pornpitakpan 2004). Variations in the way information is conveyed should provide similar cues (Chaiken, Liberman and Eagly 1989). Compared to people who don't recommend, for example, those who recommend more often are perceived as more knowledgeable about the product they endorse, suggesting that the mere act of recommending is linked to expertise (Brown and Reingen 1987; Dichter 1966; Duhan et al. 2002). By definition, recommendations are generally expected to come from authority (Oxford English Dictionary 2015), and with greater perceived expertise comes greater persuasion (Petty and Wegener 1998; Pornpitakpan 2004). Consequently, people who use explicit endorsements should seem like they know more, which should make people more likely to follow their endorsement.

Second, explicit endorsements may be more persuasive because they suggest the endorser liked the product more. Inferring sender's preferences is central to the word of mouth recipient's decision process (Gershoff et al. 2001). While implicit endorsements (e.g., "I enjoyed this wine") only assert one's personal evaluation, explicit endorsements (e.g., "I recommend this wine") convey that the sender feels sufficiently positive about a product to approve of it for others (Gershoff et al. 2001). Indeed, one of the best predictors of product re-purchase is willingness to

recommend (Reichheld 2003), and as a result, people may see the sender's willingness to recommend a product as a signal that she holds a particularly positive attitude towards the product herself.

Implicit endorsements are not likely to be as persuasive. They simply summarize the source's personal product evaluation, which recipients can often infer from the evaluative content of word of mouth (e.g., "The hotel room was clean and nice looking") without the addition of a summarizing assertion (e.g., "I liked the hotel"; Babić Rosario et al. 2016). Consequently, adding an implicit endorsement to positive word of mouth may have little effect on persuasion relative to explicit endorsements, and even relative to no endorsement at all.

Overall, then, we suggest that explicit endorsements should boost persuasion by encouraging recipients to think the endorser likes the product more and has more expertise.

Consumer Knowledge and Endorsement Styles

But are these social perceptions accurate? While we expect that explicit endorsements will make someone seem like they have more expertise, perversely, we suggest that *less knowledgeable* consumers will actually be more likely to use them.

Consumer knowledge is someone's experience with and/or expertise in a product category. As a person's category experience grows, their ability to differentiate products should become more refined, complete, and accurate (Alba and Hutchinson 1987). People who know more about cars, for example, are better at differentiating between car makes and models (Rosch et al. 1976). Similarly, while a North American foodie can distinguish Chinese, Korean and Taiwanese cuisines, a less experienced restaurant goer may perceive all Asian food as more or

less the same. Thus, as consumer knowledge increases, so does awareness of heterogeneity in brands and attributes available in a category.

We predict that this link between consumer knowledge and awareness of product heterogeneity should also extend to heterogeneity in *others'* preferences. Preference heterogeneity describes the diversity of consumer needs and wants (Feick and Higie 1992). Consumers often observe the choices and preferences of others (Ariely and Levav 2000; McFerran et al. 2010), even if they are not interacting with the people they observe (Zhou and Soman 2003). Greater category experience should give consumers more opportunity to observe the consumption (and responses to consumption) of others. Compared to someone who has never eaten Korean, for example, someone who often eats Korean should have a better sense of how different people feel about that cuisine (based on talking to others or seeing other's choices). As a result, category experience or expertise should make people more aware of others' preference variation (e.g., that different people may or may not like Kimchi).

We suggest that awareness of preference heterogeneity, in turn, should decrease consumer's tendency to explicitly endorse (e.g., "I recommend it"). Compared to more knowledgeable consumers, less knowledgeable consumers should be more likely to use explicit endorsements because their lower awareness of preference heterogeneity may lead them to assume that if they like it, others will as well. In short, less knowledgeable consumers might not only have less sophisticated tastes, but may also be less aware that others' tastes may not match their own (Kruger and Dunning 1999).

In contrast, there is no clear link between implicit endorsements and consumer knowledge of others' tastes. Implicit endorsements (e.g., "I liked it) are assertions of *personal* approval, an aggregate evaluative assertion likely to accompany explaining language (Moore

2012; 2015). While recommendations by definition contain a *social* "should" argument (i.e., that you [the recipient] should try this product), implicit endorsements have no such social basis. They are simply personal, subjective "truths" that reveal little about the world beyond the individual (Wisnewski 2002). Consequently, there is no reason to expect consumers' knowledge of others' taste will impact implicit endorsement use.

Taken together, then, explicit (but not implicit) endorsements should be used more often by novices than experts due to the novice's lower awareness of others' preference heterogeneity.

Empirical Investigation

Five studies, leveraging a mix of field data and laboratory experiments, test these predictions. Study 1 analyzes over 1,000 real consumer reviews to examine whether less experienced buyers are more likely to use explicit endorsements. Study 2 experimentally tests the relationship between consumer knowledge and explicit endorsement, and examines the hypothesized mechanism behind this effect. We manipulate attention to preference heterogeneity, and investigate whether it decreases novices' use of explicit endorsements. Study 3 turns to endorsement style's impact, testing how explicit endorsements affect persuasion, and the mechanisms underlying this effect. Finally, Studies 4 and 5 use a yoked design to combine both the sender's selection (Study 4) and recipient's processing (Study 5) of explicit versus implicit endorsements. We test whether novices are more likely to use explicit endorsements (Study 4), and whether this, combined with novices' tendency to choose inferior products (Alba and Hutchinson 1987), can lead people to be more persuaded by novices and sometimes make inferior choices (Study 5).

Note that we focus primarily on explicit endorsements: their impact and what drives their use. While our studies examine implicit endorsements as a comparison, we do not expect consumer knowledge to moderate their use. Further, given that real reviews can mix both explicit and implicit endorsements, we focus on what drives consumers to choose explicit endorsements, whether in addition to, or instead of, implicit ones. We also include no endorsement conditions as a baseline in Studies 3-5.

STUDY 1: DO LESS KNOWLEDGABLE PEOPLE TEND TO RECOMMEND?

Study 1 investigates the link between consumer knowledge and explicit endorsements in the field. Using actual consumer purchase data, and over 1,000 product reviews, we examine whether less experienced consumers are more likely to explicitly recommend products.

Data and Method

A large North American online book retailer provided a random sample of consumer book reviews posted on their website (1,500 reviews selected from all book reviews written in 2007-2008). Seventy-nine reviews contained no text (i.e., a star rating only) or were not written in English, leaving 1,421 for analysis. The median reviewer purchased 12 books (SD = 41.3) within this period and wrote 10 book reviews (SD = 34.79).[1]

First, two independent judges identified the presence of explicit endorsements in a training set (100 randomly selected reviews). They noted any first-person assertions of approval

[1] Results are not impacted by removing three extreme (>2SD) outliers who wrote more than 50 reviews each.

or support of the book for others (e.g., "I recommend this book" or similar).[2] Judge agreement on the training set was high (97.0%) and disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Then, using the language flagged by the judges and the full data set, we developed search strings that identified explicit endorsements using automated content analysis procedures (Humphreys 2014). The rule set flagged reviews containing any word starting with the string "recomm" (e.g., "recommend," "recommendation," or "recommended") or its synonyms (e.g., "endorse" or "suggest") and a first person pronoun (i.e., "I," "my" or "we") in the same sentence. Two judges and the first author then manually went through the flagged content. There was full inter-judge agreement with the automated coding for 92.4% of the reviews. There were no three-way disagreements and majority rules determined the final coding.[3]

Fifteen percent of reviews (15.1%) contained an explicit endorsement. The vast majority (96.0%) used the word "recommend" or its variants (e.g., "I recommend this book" or "It gets my highest recommendation"). A small remainder (4.0%) contained alternative explicit endorsement language such as "I suggest this book for everyone" or "I think people should read this." Results are the same whether or not these alternative explicit endorsements are included, but given how infrequently they appeared in the field, subsequent experiments operationalize explicit endorsements using the word "recommend."

We followed a similar procedure to identify implicit endorsements. The same combination of judge and automated content analysis described above identified cases where reviewers asserted personal approval or support of the overall book (e.g., "I enjoyed it").

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[2] We focus on cases where reviewers endorse the product as a whole, rather than only some attribute of it. Single attribute endorsements (e.g., "I liked the plotline") are not endorsements of the book as a whole and were often accompanied by negative assertions about other product attributes. The vast majority (99.5%) of reviews included such descriptive information about individual attributes (e.g., "It's a funny story" or "That character is so whiny").

[3] Examples where judges corrected the automated coding include third-person explicit endorsements (e.g. "My friend recommended this") and endorsements for something other than the book reviewed (e.g. "I recommend seeing the movie"). Judges also identified a few explicit endorsements where first-person was implicit (e.g., "Highly recommended!").

Reviews containing first person pronouns and words such as “like,” “enjoyed,” and “favorite’ (e.g., “I like this book”) were flagged as implicit endorsements. Implicit endorsements were present in 19.5% of reviews and the most common language used words such as “like” (43.6% of implicit endorsements) or “enjoy” (34.9% of implicit endorsements). Less frequent were phrases like, “My favorite novel,” “I couldn’t put this down,” and “This book captivated me”. Inclusion of these various alternatives does not affect the results.[4]

While neither category experience or category expertise are perfect measures of category knowledge (Alba and Hutchinson 1987), in cases where learning stems from consumption, experience has been found to be a particularly strong measure of consumer knowledge (e.g., books; Raju, Lonial and Mangold 1995). Consequently, consumer knowledge was operationalized as the number of books purchased prior to the review’s date stamp.

For our base analysis, we ran separate binary logistic regressions examining (1) explicit or (2) implicit endorsements as a function of category experience. We included star rating to control for the reviewer’s overall positivity towards the product and a dummy variable to control for the small number of cases (N = 58) in which both endorsement styles were present within the same review. All results below remain the same without these covariates.

Results

As predicted, less knowledgeable consumers were more likely to use explicit endorsements (B = -.013, Z = 3.37, $p < .001$). More knowledgeable consumers (+1SD in book purchases) explicitly recommended books only 5.7% of the time, but this jumped to 20.7%

[4] For thoroughness, we also flagged reviews in a third category that can be described as imperative endorsements (McCracken 1989), in which the reviewer asserts that others should, will, or must have a positive experience with the product (i.e., second person pronoun + declaration of approval for others, e.g. “You’ll like it”). There were relatively few imperative endorsements (only 3.7% of reviews), and their use was not linked to category experience (B = .000, Z = .22, $p = .83$).

among less experienced consumers (-1SD). The same analysis revealed no relationship between category experience and implicit endorsements (+1SD = 16.9%, -1SD = 14.8%; B = .002, Z = 1.10, p = .27).[5]

Robustness Checks. We focused on all reviews in our initial test, but the observed relationship between category experience and explicit endorsements also persists when examining just positive reviews (4 or 5 star; N = 944; B = -.014, Z = 3.53, p < .001). More knowledgeable consumers (+1SD in book purchases) explicitly recommended books only 9.2% of the time, but this jumped to 34.1% among less experienced consumers (-1SD). There was still no relationship between category experience and implicit endorsements (+1SD = 19.6%, -1SD = 21.6%; B = .002, Z = .97, p = .33).

Because many individuals wrote more than one review, we also used a model incorporating random effects for reviewer to account for non-independence in reviews. Results remain the same. More experienced book consumers were still less likely to use explicit endorsements (B = -.001, t(944) = 2.47, p = .01).

Results also remained the same if we added a dummy for reviewers that had purchased no books from the retailer (zero as a special case; B = -.001, t(944) = 2.99, p < .01).

One might wonder whether selectivity or experience writing reviews could explain the results. If experts write more reviews, one could argue that they are less likely to use explicit endorsements because the volume of reviews they write makes them more selective about recommending things (i.e., they only recommend a small portion of what they read). But even controlling for the number of reviews written (which itself was not significant, B = .0001, t < .3,

[5] Reviews containing explicit endorsements also tended to include higher star ratings (B = .314, Z = 2.93, p < .01) and contain implicit endorsements in the same review (B = .925, Z = 4.99, p < .001). While star rating did not predict implicit endorsements use (B = .003, Z = .03, p = .98), the presence of an explicit endorsement did (B = .926, Z = 5.01, p < .001).

$p > .7$) the relationship between experience and explicit endorsements persists (B = -.001, t(944) = 2.91, $p < .01$).

It also does not appear that experts were more critical about the books they reviewed (i.e., gave lower evaluations) or tended to read lower quality books. There was no difference in the mean star rating ($F < 1$) or the distribution of star ratings ($\chi^2 < 1.7$, $p > .8$) for consumers with high (vs. low) purchase experience (see appendix Table A1).

Discussion

Study 1 provides preliminary support for our theorizing. Analysis of over 1,000 book reviews demonstrates a negative relationship between category knowledge and explicit endorsements. Compared to more experienced book buyers, less experienced individuals were more likely to use explicit endorsements (e.g., "I recommend this book").

As expected, there was no relationship between implicit endorsements and category experience. Because implicit endorsements were a common alternate endorsement style, however, we use it as the comparison to contrast explicit endorsements in the remaining studies.

These field results are supportive, but to provide stronger experimental control we turn to the laboratory. The following experiments: (1) test whether category expertise drives the use of explicit endorsements, (2) examine the process underlying this effect, and (3) investigate how this relationship impacts the perceptions and choices of word of mouth recipients.

STUDY 2: WHY LESS KNOWLEDGABLE PEOPLE TEND TO RECOMMEND

Study 2 has four goals. First, it tests the relationship between category knowledge and endorsement style in a more controlled setting. All participants are given the same scenario, and we examine whether novices are again more likely to use explicit endorsements.

Second, Study 2 examines the hypothesized underlying process. If, as we suggest, novices use explicit endorsements more than experts because they are less aware of preference heterogeneity, then reminding all participants that people have varied preferences should reduce this discrepancy. We test this possibility.

Third, we operationalize consumer knowledge using category expertise rather than experience to test whether the results still hold.

Fourth, we test whether any of six alternative explanations can explain the effects. In particular, one might wonder whether rather than being driven by awareness of preference heterogeneity, our effects are driven by self-enhancement motives. If explicit endorsements make people seem like they have more expertise, for example, maybe novices use them to seem like experts. We test a self-enhancement explanation through both manipulation and measurement to see whether it can explain the results.

Method

Participants (N = 604, 55.0% female, mean age = 36) from Amazon Mechanical Turk were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 2 (preference heterogeneity: control, primed) x 3 (self-enhancement motive: low, control, high) between subjects design.

Everyone was asked to imagine browsing a travel website and happening across a hotel where they had recently stayed and had a positive experience. Participants were shown a screenshot of a generic travel website and the focal hotel.

First, we manipulated attention to preference heterogeneity. Prior research demonstrates that in categories in which tastes can vary, people attribute dispersion in reviewer ratings to heterogeneity in consumer preferences (He and Bond 2015; Sun 2012). Consequently, all participants were told that they had decided to post a positive hotel review, but in the preference heterogeneity condition, participants saw highly dispersed (i.e., more bipolar than central distribution) star ratings for the hotel from prior website visitors (see appendix Figure A1).[6] A manipulation check validated this approach, demonstrating that compared to the control (M = 3.15), the prime increased awareness that people have varied hotel preferences (M = 3.81; F(1, 601) = 40.95, $p < .001$; see appendix for items). While experts (+1SD category expertise, M = 3.42) were more aware of preference heterogeneity than novices (-1SD, M = 2.84) in the control condition (B = .20, t = 4.23, $p < .001$), priming people to think about preference heterogeneity increased novices' awareness (M = 3.93; B = 1.08, t = 7.57, $p < .001$) and made them as aware as experts (M = 3.67; B = -.09, t = -1.79, $p = .07$).

Second, participants indicated whether they would write an explicit endorsement ("I recommend it. I would suggest staying here") as part of their review, or an implicit one ("I enjoyed it. I had a great stay here"; order counterbalanced).

Third, participants completed a ten-item multiple choice category expertise test (e.g., "Who gives the very best hotels a 'Five Diamond' rating?" [Correct answer = AAA], $M = 4.89$ correct answers, SD = 1.47; see appendix for more examples).

Fourth, to test five additional alternative explanations, we also manipulated self-enhancement motive (described later), and measured subjective category knowledge, the

[6]The dispersion of star ratings from prior website visitors is not presented to consumers at the book retailer website used in Study 1. Therefore, we expect Study 2 participants assigned to the control condition will behave like consumers observed in Study 1.

signaling cost of making a bad recommendation, attitude towards the hotel, category attitude confidence, and altruistic motives for the endorsement. All items and scale reliabilities are reported in the appendix.

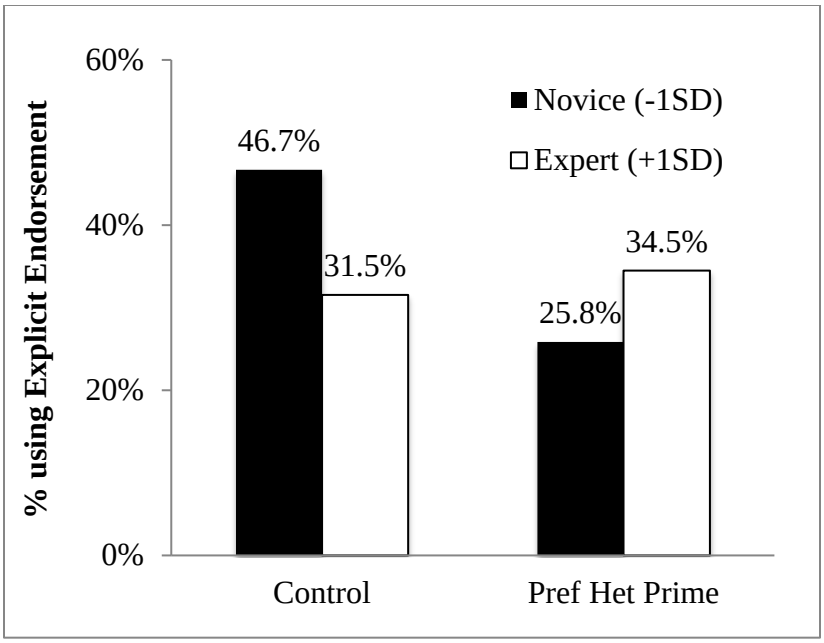
Finally, we measured gender and age. There were no main effects or interactions due to gender or age in this or subsequent studies, so we do not discuss these variables further.

Results

A logistic regression analyzed the choice of explicit versus implicit endorsement as a function of category knowledge (mean-centered), preference heterogeneity condition (effects coded: control = -1, primed = 1), and their interaction.

A main effect of preference heterogeneity prime (B = -1.07, Z = 3.45, $p < .001$) was qualified by the predicted category knowledge by preference heterogeneity interaction (B = .18, Z = 2.94, $p = .003$). Consistent with Study 1, in the control condition novices (-1SD category expertise) were more likely to "recommend" the hotel (M = 46.7%) than experts (+1SD M = 31.5%; B = -.22, Z = -2.57, $p = .01$). Reminding participants of preference heterogeneity, however, wiped out this difference, decreasing novices' likelihood of using explicit endorsements to the level of experts ($M_{Novices}$ = 25.8% vs. $M_{Experts}$ = 34.5%; B = .14, Z = 1.65, $p = .10$; Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: MAKING PREFERENCE HETEROGENEITY ACCESSIBLE WIPES OUT THE EFFECT OF EXPERTISE ON ENDORSEMENT STYLE



Looked at another way, while reminding participants of preferences heterogeneity had no effect on experts (who the manipulation check shows are already aware of preference heterogeneity; B = .13, Z < .6, $p > .5$), as expected, it decreased novices' tendency to explicitly recommend the hotel (B = -.92, Z = -3.69, $p < .001$).

Discussion

Study 2 provides further evidence that category knowledge impacts the use of explicit endorsements, while also demonstrating the process underlying this effect. First, consistent with Study 1, novices were more likely to use explicit endorsements (i.e., "I recommend the hotel").

Second, as predicted, attention to preference heterogeneity underlies this effect. At baseline, novices were less aware of preference heterogeneity. Reminding participants that people's category preferences differ led novices to act more like experts and avoid explicit recommendations.

Alternative Explanations. In addition to testing self-enhancement directly through manipulation, we also considered five other alternative explanations.

First, rather than being driven by preference heterogeneity, one could argue that novices are more likely to recommend because they want to look good to others (or that experts are less likely because they want to avoid looking bad). To test this possibility, in addition to our preference heterogeneity manipulation, we also manipulated self-enhancement motives. In the control condition, participants were told, "You decide to share your thoughts about the hotel online." In the low self-enhancement condition this was extended to say, "with some people you don't care about impressing." In the high self-enhancement condition it was extended to say, "with some people you want to impress." The manipulation was successful ($F(2, 601) = 9.77$, $p < .001$)[7] but there were no main effects or interactions due to self-enhancement, ($Zs < 1.6$, $ps > .10$). The fact that novices (experts) are not more (less) likely to recommend when they are trying to impress others casts doubt on the possibility that self enhancement drove our effects.

Further, although prior research does not predict or find that novices are more motivated than experts to self-enhance in order to compensate for their self-perceived shortcomings (Packard and Wooten 2013), one could speculate that people who believe they are less (rather than more) knowledgeable might be more likely to recommend products to compensate for this belief. However, subjective knowledge did not drive the impact of expertise (objective knowledge) on endorsement style in either condition (bootstrap 95% CI control: -.01, .06; preference heterogeneity: -.01, .05; model 7, Preacher and Hayes 2004), failing to support a compensatory self-enhancement explanation.

[7] Using three measures adapted from Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975; $\alpha = .95$; see Appendix for items), participants in the high self-enhancement motive condition were more concerned with making a good impression ($M = 3.12$) than those in the control ($M = 2.61$; $F(1, 601) = 9.80$, $p < .01$), and relative to those who were told this motivation was absent ($M = 2.42$; $F(1, 601) = 18.16$, $p < .001$).

Second, one might wonder whether experts avoid recommendations because making a bad recommendation would be more costly and tarnish their expert status (i.e., protective self-presentation, Arkin 1981). This was not the case. The signaling cost of making a bad recommendation did not mediate the effect in either condition (bootstrap 95% CI control: -.01, .02; preference heterogeneity: -.02, .03).

Third, we considered the possibility that experts "know what they don't know" (Kruger and Dunning 1999), and thus have lower attitude confidence (or certainty, e.g., Tormala and Petty 2004) leading them to avoid explicit recommendations**.** But this was not the case. Confidence did not drive the impact of expertise on endorsement style in either condition (bootstrap 95% CI control: -.01, .06; preference heterogeneity: -.01, .06).

Fourth, one could speculate that novices were more likely to use explicit endorsements because they imagined the hotel was better, and this encouraged them to recommend it. However, attitudes towards the hotel did not mediate the relationship between expertise and endorsement style in either condition (bootstrap 95% CI control: -.01, .02; preference heterogeneity: -.02, .03), casting doubt on the notion that differential attitudes drove the results.

Finally, one might believe that experts avoid recommendations because they believe that sharing their personal attitudes towards products (i.e., an implicit endorsement) is more helpful. However, altruism did not drive the relationship between expertise and endorsement style in either condition (bootstrap 95% CI control: -.05, .01; preference heterogeneity: -.002, .05).

Taken together, the results cast doubt on a variety of alternative explanations and instead suggest that novices tend to recommend more than experts because they are not as aware of potential variation in others' preferences.

STUDY 3: HOW EXPLICIT ENDORSEMENTS IMPACT PERSUASION

Study 3 starts to address how endorsement styles affect persuasion. Compared to implicit endorsements (and a no endorsement control), we predict that explicit endorsements will be more persuasive, leading word of mouth recipients to think they will like the product more and increasing their likelihood of choosing it. Further, this will be driven by how endorsement style impacts the recipient's perceptions of (1) the source's expertise and (2) the source's attitudes towards the product.

Method

Undergraduate students (N = 143, 35.7% female, mean age = 20.3) completed the study for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (Endorsement style: none, implicit, explicit) in a between-subjects design.

First, we manipulated endorsement style. All participants imagined that a friend just came back from a restaurant and said, "The food and service were very good. Atmosphere was nice too." In the endorsement conditions, we also added different endorsement styles. In the explicit condition the friend said, "I recommend it!" In the implicit endorsement condition, the friend said, "I liked it!"[8] In the no endorsement control condition, participants only saw the friend's description of the restaurant.

Second, we measured persuasion. We captured participants' attitudes towards the restaurant with two items ("How much do you think you would [like, enjoy] the restaurant?" 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). We also measured choice likelihood ("How likely are you to choose

[8] We also ran an ancillary condition (N = 48) to confirm that the "I liked it" variant of an implicit endorsement was no more or less persuasive than the "I enjoyed it" variant that was the other common implicit endorsement in the field data. The two variations were equally persuasive ($F < 1$).

this restaurant in the future?" 1 = not at all, 7 = very). These measures were highly correlated (α = .80) and averaged to a single measure of persuasion.

Next, we measured the two processes hypothesized to underlie the effect. We measured the participant's perception of the friend's expertise ("How [expert, knowledgeable] do you think the friend is about restaurants?" r = .53) as well as the participant's perception of the friend's attitude towards the restaurant ("How much do you think your friend [liked, enjoyed] the restaurant?" r = .78).

Finally, we collected measures to test alternative explanations (discussed later).

Results

Persuasive Impact. A one-way ANOVA reveals a significant effect of endorsement style ($F(2, 140) = 44.94$, $p < .001$). As predicted, compared to implicit endorsement (M = 4.68) or the no endorsement control (M = 4.47), the explicit endorsement led people to believe they would enjoy the restaurant more and increased the chance they would choose to eat there (M = 5.82; $F(1, 140) = 55.62$, $p < .001$ and $F(1, 140) = 77.76$, $p < .001$).

Perceived Expertise. Similar effects were observed for perceived expertise ($F(2, 140) = 5.97$, $p < .01$). Compared to an implicit endorsement (M = 4.28) or the no endorsement control (M = 4.39), people thought the friend had greater domain expertise when they provided an explicit endorsement (M = 4.95; $F(1, 140) = 10.35$, $p < .001$ and $F(1, 140) = 7.37$, $p < .01$).

Perceived Attitude. A similar pattern was observed for the participant's perception of the friend's attitude towards the product ($F(2, 140) = 15.52$, $p < .001$). Compared to an implicit endorsement (M = 5.78) or the no endorsement control (M = 5.27), people thought the friend

liked the restaurant more when they explicitly recommended it (M = 6.19; F(1, 140) = 6.14, p = .01 and F(1, 140) = 30.92, $p < .001$).

Mediation. As predicted, bootstrap analysis (model 4, Preacher and Hayes 2004) confirmed that (1) perceptions of the friend's expertise and (2) perceptions of the friend's attitudes towards the product simultaneously mediated the relationship between endorsement style (explicit vs. implicit) and persuasion (expertise 95% CI: .03, .15; attitudes 95% CI: .02, .13 at 5,000 samples). The friend was perceived as more expert if they used an explicit endorsement (a path; B = .33, SE = .09, $p < .001$) and perceived expertise, in turn, increased persuasion (b path; B = .23, SE = .07, $p < .01$). Similarly, participants believed that the friend liked the product more when the friend used an explicit endorsement (a path; B= .21, SE = .08, $p < .01$), which in turn, increased persuasion (b path; B = .28, SE = .09, $p < .01$).

Discussion

Study 3 demonstrates the persuasive impact of explicit endorsements and the process underlying this effect. As predicted, compared to implicit endorsements or no endorsement at all, word of mouth recipients thought they would like the product more, and were more willing to choose it, if someone explicitly recommended the product.[9]

This relationship was mediated by perceptions of the endorser's expertise and attitude towards the product. Explicit endorsements made it seem like the endorser liked the product more, which made recipients more likely to choose it and think they would also like it as well. Explicit endorsements also made the endorser seem to have greater product expertise, which

[9] We also note that the persuasive impact of explicit (vs. implicit) endorsements are not restricted to endorsements from those who are psychologically close (i.e., friends; Gershoff and Johar 2006). We ran a version of Study 3 where the endorsement came from "a person you just met" and found the same results (see Web Appendix).

increased the persuasive impact of their recommendation. Thus while less knowledgeable consumers are more likely to recommend products (Studies 1 and 2), word of mouth recipients think such explicit endorsements indicate the endorser actually has *greater* expertise.

Ancillary Analyses. One might wonder whether the effect may be limited to low involvement consumers given subtle cues can be more likely to impact their information processing (Chaiken 1980). This was not the case. We measured restaurant category involvement using Zaichkowsky's (1994) ten-item involvement inventory (α = .93). The persuasiveness of explicit vs. implicit endorsements persisted ($F(1, 140) = 56.33$, $p < .001$) after accounting for a significant category involvement covariate ($F(1, 140) = 11.67$, $p < .001$).

We also examined whether the co-presence of an implicit endorsement alongside an explicit endorsement would influence persuasion. While not key to our theory, we included two additional conditions where both explicit and implicit endorsements were present ("I recommend it and I liked it!" and "I liked it and I recommend it!"). The co-presence of both endorsement styles was no more persuasive than the explicit endorsement alone (Fs < 1) and had similar effects on perceived expertise and attitudes. As predicted, adding implicit endorsements may not further boost persuasion because they offer nothing more than a summary of the source's personal attitude, which may be already signaled elsewhere in the content. In the general discussion, we consider when implicit endorsements might be particularly persuasive as an opportunity for future research.

Finally, one might wonder whether experts are less impacted by endorsement style. We used a ten-item restaurant trivia test (e.g., "What does it mean when the words 'prix fixe' appear on a restaurant menu?") as a measure of category knowledge, but there was no category knowledge by endorsement style interaction (B = .02, SE = .05, t = .38, $p > .7$), suggesting that

endorsement style had a similar effect on expert and novice recipients. Further, when we asked participants the extent to which (a) people who are very knowledgeable about restaurants, and (b) people who are not very knowledgeable about restaurants are likely to say, "I recommend it!" after going to a restaurant they like (1 = Very unlikely, 7 = Very likely) there was no relationship between category knowledge and responses to either of these questions (B = .03, SE = .07, t = .39, $p > .7$ and B = .12, SE = .09, t = 1.33, $p > .18$). This suggests that while experts may be less likely to use explicit endorsements, they are no more likely to recognize that novices are more likely to use them. Future research might examine why, but at the very least this data suggests that experts are not consciously aware of the link between knowledge and language use.

STUDY 4: HOW CONSUMER KNOWLEDGE INFLUENCES CHOICE AND ENDORSEMENT STYLE

When considered in coordination with Studies 1 and 2, Study 3's findings highlight a potential paradox. While experts know more, novices use more explicit recommendations, which are more likely to change recipients' behavior. Consequently, in the absence of other expertise cues, people may end up being more persuaded by novices. Further, if novices also tend to choose products that are inferior (Alba and Hutchinson 1987), having access to word of mouth endorsements may sometimes lead recipients to make worse choices.

Studies 4 and 5 provide an initial test of this possibility, examining how the link between consumer knowledge and explicit endorsements impacts consumer choice. Using a yoked design, we investigate the product and endorsement style choices that experts and novices tend to make (Study 4) and the impact their endorsements have on word of mouth recipients (Study 5). Taken together, this tests whether consumers might sometimes make worse choices in the presence (vs. absence) of word of mouth endorsements.

In Study 4, participants chose between superior and inferior wine (according to a pretest) and decided what to say to others about the wine they chose. We leveraged prior findings that novices use the number of attributes as a cue for product quality, even when those attributes are unfavorable (Alba and Marmorstein 1987). We predict that category novices will both (1) choose the inferior product and (2) tend to explicitly (rather than implicitly) endorse it to others.

Method

Amazon Mechanical Turk participants (N = 264, 55.1% female, mean age = 32.9 years) imagined shopping for wine online.

Everyone chose between two wines. Both had three matched favorable attributes (e.g., "Very drinkable-balanced flavor and smoothness" and "Smooth and flavorful palate, with a very balanced drinkability") that were rated as equivalently positive in a pretest ($M_{\text{Superior wine}} = 5.60$ vs $M_{\text{Inferior wine}} = 5.58$; $t(56) = .07$, $p = .95$). To make one wine inferior, we added three unfavorable attributes (e.g., "Bottle contains clay sediment" pretested as unfavorable $M = 3.32$ vs. scale midpoint of 4; $t(56) = 4.52$, $p < .001$; see appendix Figure A2). Pretesting confirmed that this addition made the inferior wine's attributes less favorable overall (M = 4.45) compared to the superior wine (M = 5.60; $t(56) = 9.14$, $p < .001$). While experts should pick the superior wine, less knowledgeable consumers use the number of attributes as a heuristic cue for quality (Alba and Marmorstein 1987), and thus should be more likely to pick the inferior wine.

After picking a wine, we asked participants to indicate how likely they were to share their opinion in an online review (1 = not at all, 7 = very likely).

Participants then chose what to say to others about their choice. Participants imagined that they had purchased the wine, and were pleased with it. Then, we asked them what they

would be most likely to write as part of their review: (counterbalanced) “I enjoyed the [chosen product name]!” or “I recommend the [chosen product name]!” Note, our results fully replicate even when participants are not told they were pleased with the wine and are given the option of writing a negative review or no review in addition to positive reviews (see Web Appendix).

Finally, participants completed a pretested ten-item wine category knowledge test (e.g. “What is the common term used to describe a wine that is the opposite of ‘sweet’?” ([Correct answer = dry]; M = 3.88 questions correct, SD = 1.95).

Results

Wine Choice. Consistent with the pretest indicating that it was inferior, overall, fewer people picked the inferior wine (M = 41.1%). More importantly, as predicted, category knowledge was negatively related to choice (B = -.21, Z = 2.97, $p < .01$). Compared to experts (+1SD on wine test, M = 30.7%), novices (-1SD, M = 47.5%) were more likely to pick the inferior wine.

Endorsement Choice. There was also a negative relationship between category knowledge and explicit (vs. implicit) endorsement (B = -.14, Z = 2.21, $p < .05$). Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, compared to experts (+1SD M = 44.9%), novices were more likely to explicitly recommend their choice to others (-1SD M = 58.0%). Combining choice and endorsement, 60% of people who chose the inferior wine recommended it (40% said they liked it), while only 45% of people who chose the superior wine recommended it (55% said they liked it).

Replication (Study 4a). To account for the handful of co-present endorsements we saw in the field data and to allow a no endorsement response option, we ran a version of Study 4 that included “both” and “neither” as endorsement options (N = 214, 60.1% female, mean age =

32.5). Results were the same. Category knowledge was negatively related to inferior wine choice (B = -.25, Z = 3.31 $p < .01$), with novices (-1SD, M = 55.3%) more likely to pick the inferior wine than experts (+1SD, M = 30.3%). Category knowledge was also negatively related to endorsement style (B = -.13, Z = 1.98, $p < .05$), with novices more likely to use endorsements including an explicit recommendation (M = 60.9%) than experts (M = 47.3%).

Discussion

Study 4 and 4a demonstrate the relationship between category expertise, choice, and explicit endorsement. Novices not only tended to pick the inferior wine, but consistent with Studies 1 and 2, they were more likely to explicitly recommend their choice to others.

Alternative Explanations. Alternative explanations based on category involvement have trouble explaining the results. One might argue that category involvement's impact on attribute processing style (Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann 1983) could extend to endorsement style. That is, the way one thinks about a product may influence how they express their approval of it to others. To test this possibility, at the end of the study we measured wine category involvement using Zaichkowsky's (1994) ten-item involvement inventory (α = .96). The predicted relationship between category knowledge and endorsement style remained significant (B = -.22, Z = 3.13, $p < .01$) even after controlling for involvement (B = .36, Z = 3.67, $p < .01$). This casts doubt on the possibility that involvement is driving the effects.

Explanations based on different attitudes also fail to explain the effect. Similar to the alternative discussed in Study 2, one could argue that novices were more likely to recommend the chosen wine because they liked it more. But this was not the case. There was no relationship

between expertise and the same three-item measure of attitude towards the chosen wine used in Study 2 (α = .93; B = -.01, t = -.43, p > .65).

Finally, there was no relationship between category knowledge and intention to write the review (B = -.03, t = -1.20, p = .23). What's more, neither the wine chosen (B = .5, t = 1.36, p = .17) nor an interaction of category knowledge and choice impacted review intentions (B = -.03, t = -.31, p = .75). Regardless of whether or not they chose the inferior wine, novices were no less willing than experts to share their product endorsement with others.

STUDY 5: CONSEQUENCES FOR WORD OF MOUTH RECIPIENTS

Study 5 examines how the relationship between the sender's category knowledge, product choice, and endorsement style impacts the choices of word of mouth recipients.

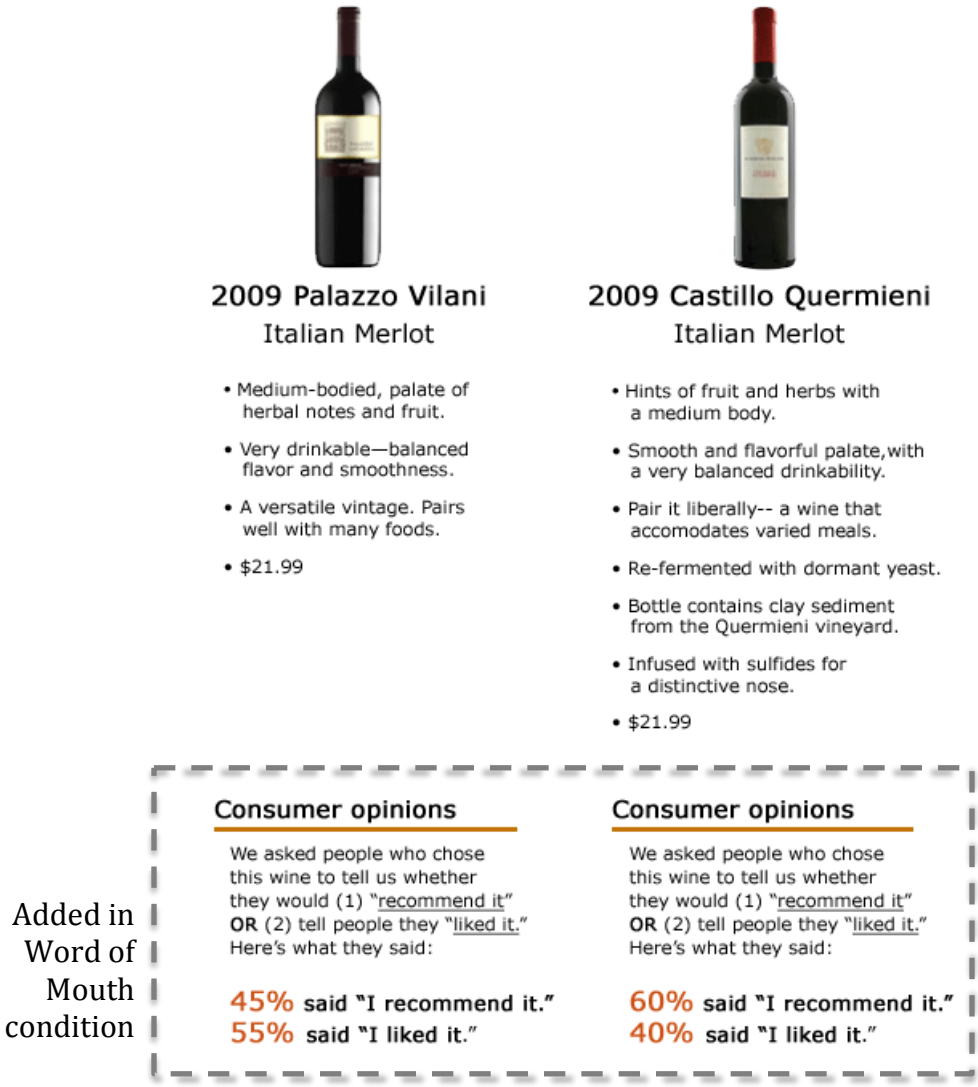
Participants were given the wine information from Study 4 and asked which wine they preferred. In addition, half the participants were given access to word of mouth information before making their choice. Consumer opinions online are often aggregated and presented alongside the product (e.g., the star ratings for all reviews of a hotel on Tripadvisor.com or a book on Amazon.com). To mimic this situation, participants in the word of mouth condition were shown the aggregate distribution of endorsement choices made by Study 4 participants. For example, for the inferior wine they were told that 60% recommended it and 40% liked it.

Because novices in Study 4 both chose the inferior product and tended to explicitly recommend what they chose, we predict that the addition of word of mouth information will lead people to make inferior choices.

Method

Participants (N = 407, 58.7% female, mean age = 33.4) from the same population as Study 4 were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions (attributes-only vs. attributes + word of mouth). Participants were given the same wine choice scenario from Study 4. The only difference between conditions was that word of mouth condition participants also saw the aggregate endorsements chosen by Study 4 participants (see Figure 2). The order of presentation for the aggregate endorsements was counterbalanced.

FIGURE 2: STUDY 5 STIMULI



Results

As predicted, word of mouth information led participants to make inferior choices. Compared to the attributes-only condition (41.6%), seeing word of mouth information led more people to choose the inferior wine (55.3%; $\chi^2(1) = 4.08$, $p < .05$).

Studies 5a and 5b. Two additional versions of Study 5 find the same results. Study 5a (N = 400, Amazon Turk, 61.0% female, mean age = 34.7) presented participants with the aggregate distribution of the four endorsement options selected by participants from Study 4a (see appendix Figure A2). Word of mouth information (in this case across four response options rather than two) again led more people to choose the inferior wine ($M_{\text{Word of Mouth}} = 66.1\%$ vs. $M_{\text{Attributes Only}} = 41.9\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 23.36$, $p < .001$).

Study 5b (N = 396, Amazon Turk, 58.0% female, mean age = 34.1) used a complex matching procedure to present each participant with a single endorsement for each of the two wines using the precise distribution across the four choices made by participants in Study 4a. That is, rather than seeing the aggregate percentage of people who recommended, enjoyed, did "both" or neither for each wine (as in Study 5a), participants in the word of mouth condition of Study 5b saw a single word of mouth statement (e.g., "I enjoyed [wine name]!" or "I neither enjoyed nor recommend [wine name]!" for the "none" condition) as a quote from a reviewer below each of the two wines (see appendix Figure A3). Each participant saw one of 15 potential endorsement combinations, the distribution of which was carefully weighted to match the population-level distribution of endorsement choices made in Study 4a. The word of mouth condition again led more people to choose the inferior wine ($M_{\text{Word of Mouth}} = 53.7\%$ vs. $M_{\text{Attributes Only}} = 41.9\%$; $\chi^2(1) = 5.46$, $p < .02$).

Discussion

Taken together, Studies 4 and 5 and their replicates demonstrate how the link between consumer knowledge and endorsement style can shape recipients' choices. Because they lack domain knowledge, novices both chose inferior options and explicitly endorsed their choice to others. In this instance, the combination meant that access to word of mouth information led recipients to make worse choices than they would have otherwise. People were more likely to choose a wine containing dirt and added sulfites that would produce a rotten egg smell.

Alternative Explanations. One might wonder whether these effects were solely driven by the fact that we told Study 4 participants they had a positive experiences with the wine. If they had actually tasted the wine, shouldn't they have been able to tell the inferior wine was bad and thus not endorse it? While this might happen with truly terrible products, it is less likely to be the case if the wine was merely mediocre or inferior. Further, expectations color judgment (e.g., Lee, Frederick and Ariely 2006) and choice increases liking (Bem 1967) suggesting that actual experience may not be that influential in this case. Finally, we also ran a replicate of Study 4 without telling participants they had a positive experience, and the results fully replicated (see Web Appendix). Regardless, more research is needed to definitively establish whether and when endorsement style could have a negative impact on consumer choices.

Any potential processing style differences also have trouble explaining the results. Since category knowledge and involvement are positively correlated (Sujan 1985), higher knowledge consumers could process word of mouth information more systematically (Petty, Cacioppo and Schumman 1983), making them more persuaded by subtle variations in endorsement styles. There was no relationship, however, between category involvement (Zaichkowsky involvement scale (1994); $\alpha = .95$) and choice (B = .07, Z = .98, $p = .33$). Further, while knowledgeable consumers were marginally less likely than novices to pick the inferior wine overall (B = -.12, Z

= 1.77, *p* = .07), there was no consumer knowledge by word of mouth condition interaction (B = -.02, Z = .21, *p* = .84). This suggests that the addition of word of mouth had a similar effect (i.e., worse choices) on both experts and novices.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Consumers use word of mouth more than ever (Simonson and Rosen 2014), and are influenced by this information source more than any other (WOMMA 2014). While it is clear that word of mouth has a huge influence on attitudes and behavior, less is known about the language people use to endorse products (i.e., the endorsement styles they tend to use), who tends to use different endorsement styles, and the consequence these factors have on consumer behavior.

The present research begins to fill these gaps. First, the studies demonstrate that not all endorsements are the same and that different endorsement styles have different effects. Compared to implicit endorsements, where people say they personally liked or enjoyed a product or service, explicit endorsements, where people directly recommend something to others, are more persuasive. People who hear explicit recommendations think they will like the product more (Study 3) and are more willing to choose it (Studies 3, 5, 5a and 5b).

Second, the studies illustrate that different types of consumers use different endorsement styles. Less knowledgeable consumers are more likely to use explicit recommendations (Study 1, 2, 4 and 4a), because they are less aware of preference heterogeneity (Study 2). Less experienced book buyers, for example, are more likely to explicitly recommend books to others.

Third, the results show that endorsement styles can shape perceptions of word of mouth senders. Explicit endorsements not only caused people to think the sender liked the product

more, but also that they had more category expertise (Study 3). Consequently, particularly when other expertise cues are absent, word of mouth recipients may end up being more persuaded by less knowledgeable people. Studies 4 and 5 suggest this could sometimes lead people to make worse choices than they would have in the absence of word of mouth information.

These effects persisted across different categories, contexts, and presentation modes, attesting to their generalizability. The results hold for products, like books (Study 1) and wine (Studies 4 and 5), as well as service goods such as hotels (Study 2) and restaurants (Study 3). They hold whether the word of mouth endorsement was shared by a friend (Study 3) or stranger (Studies 1 and 5), in the field (Study 1) as well as in controlled experimental contexts (Studies 2-5), whether people read aggregate or single reviewer endorsements, and whether implicit and explicit endorsements were separated or co-occured in the same review (Studies 3, 5a and 5b).

Theoretical Contributions

This research makes several contributions. First, it demonstrates the importance of *how* consumers express their positive attitudes. While researchers often use the word "recommendation" as a generic synonym for positive word of mouth, we show that the specific language used to endorse a product can have significant consequences. "I liked the product" and "I recommend the product" may seem similar-- just happenstance variation in turns of phrase-- but their differences have an important impact on word of mouth recipients. As such, we add to a small, but growing, literature on the impact of language use in consumer settings (e.g., Moore 2012, 2015; Sela, Wheeler and Sarial-Abi 2012).

Second, we contribute to the literature on source credibility cues. Much research considers how overt signals (e.g., titles or credentials; Karmaker and Tormala 2009;

Pornpitakpan 2004) shape perceived expertise. Relatively little work, however, has examined how language use impacts these perceptions (for an exception, see Oppenheimer 2005). The present research demonstrates that the words people use to assert their product approval impacts perceived source expertise.

Third, this work offers insight into a social facet of consumer knowledge. Consumer knowledge research has been focused on the consumer's own search, information processing and decision-making (e.g., Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Burson 2007; Moorman et al. 2004). Social phenomena are not even mentioned in a popular consumer knowledge typology (Brucks 1986). We propose and demonstrate, however, that when it comes to sharing word of mouth information, a consumer's comprehension of the nature of others' preferences is linked to their own category knowledge; and further, we reveal a meaningful consequence of this social aspect of consumer knowledge.

Implications

These results may have important implications for consumer welfare. Studies 4 and 5 suggest that endorsement styles could sometimes lead people to choose inferior products. To mitigate this, consumers may be wise to treat explicit recommendations as a cue to more carefully scrutinize sender expertise (Priester and Petty 1995), or look for other expertise indicators (e.g., helpfulness ratings or credentials).

We note that while novices are generally found to be worse decision-makers than experts (Alba and Hutchinson 1987), we are not suggesting that less knowledgeable consumers always make inferior choices, or that their tendency to use explicit recommendations will always lead others astray. Studies 4 and 5 (and their replications) used a situation where the inferior product

was objectively inferior for anyone, but in cases where experts and novices have different preferences, the negative impact of novices' explicit recommendations may be lessened. Even in situations where expertise cues are unavailable, quality is not always objective, and in these instances, novices greater use of explicit endorsements may just lead recipients to choose novices' preferred options, even if they are not objectively worse.

The studies also used a product category where post-purchase experience (e.g., taste) is somewhat fungible (Ariely, Loewenstein, and Prelec 2006; Golstein et al. 2008). But if novices had instead chosen a functional good that clearly failed (e.g., a crashed computer hard drive), they obviously would not share a positive endorsement in the first place. In this sense, the potentially aversive "paradox" of consumer knowledge and endorsement styles seems more likely to occur for experiential than functional goods.

Our findings also offer implications for marketers. Websites often provide average star or number ratings, but using rating scale labels like "highly recommended" should boost purchase of those products. If Facebook wanted "likes" to have more persuasive impact, they could change to the number of people that "recommended" that thing. That said, if experts are more likely to avoid rating or clicking buttons that use the word "recommend," such changes may not be in the marketer's—or the consumer's—best interests. Instead, to maximize consumer welfare, websites could encourage reviewers to think about different people's preferences, which might reduce novices' use of explicit endorsements. Encouraging reviewers to specify the kind of people they think will like the product may be one way to bring preference variation to mind (e.g., "I recommend this wine for anyone who loves bold, spicy reds").

Directions for Further Research

We examined an important cause and consequence of consumer language use but these findings also raise important questions for future research.

First, future research should investigate other factors driving endorsement styles. Interaction mode or audience size, for example, may influence whether people explicitly or implicitly endorse. In face-to-face interactions, word of mouth recipients should be more salient to the sender, which may make them more concerned with the recipient's own preferences (Berger 2014). Similarly, compared to broadcasting (i.e., sharing with many people), narrowcasting (i.e., sharing with just one) heightens other-focus and encourages people to attend to others' preferences (Barasch and Berger 2014). In either case, attention to others may make people more aware of preference heterogeneity, reducing explicit endorsement. Linguistic mimicry (e.g., Moore and McFerran 2016) may also play a role. When someone asks for a recommendation, senders may be more likely to mimic and explicitly endorse in response.

Motivational factors should also impact explicit endorsement. Take financial self-interest. People may assume someone who frequently recommends is being paid to do so (Verlegh et al. 2013), which may discourage frequent explicit endorsement. Emotion regulation may also play a role. Expressing positive emotion ("I really liked it!") might help a consumer who just returned from a great ski trip make sense of the experience (Rimé 2009), making implicit endorsement more likely while the trip is still vivid. Whether "negative endorsement" follows the same pattern may depend on whether the consumer is seeking emotional relief (Zech 1999) or wants to punish the company (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). An assertion of the consumer's personal experience ("I did not like it")—a negative implicit endorsement—seems more likely to offer emotional catharsis, while a focus on the product's utility for others ("I do not recommend it") –

a negative explicit endorsement – may be more likely to occur when someone wants to punish the company.

More broadly, it would be useful to explore other variations in endorsement language. Our studies focused on explicit and implicit endorsements, but the text surrounding an endorsement may color its impact. One could imagine explicit endorsements surrounded by hedge words that make them less persuasive (e.g., "I guess I kind of recommend it") and implicit endorsements surrounded by adverbs that make them more persuasive ("I really, really, really like it"). Similarly, it would be interesting to examine conditional recommendations (e.g., "I recommend this book for those who love a good romance"). Endorsements made with a specific audience in mind suggest the sender is considering their preferences, and has a nuanced sense of what people do and don't like.

Future research could also take the recipient's perspective. "I like" endorsements may be particularly persuasive when recipients think they and the endorser have similar tastes (Gershoff et al. 2003; Naylor et al. 2011), such as in online communities of shared interests (Manchanda, Packard, and Pattabhiramaiah 2013). Alternatively, abstract language when describing a product experience may suggest that the endorser is considering global, general preferences, while more concrete language could suggest he can't see beyond his personal tastes (Schellekens et al. 2010). If true, abstract (concrete) language by word of mouth senders should enhance (impede) the persuasive power of explicit endorsements. Elaboration level may also moderate endorsement style's impact given low involvement individuals (e.g., non customers) are less likely to be affected by subtle language variations (Sela et al. 2012). Finally, understanding how word of mouth language (e.g., endorsement style) and other source cues (e.g., credentials or titles) interact to shape perceived credibility is a rich path for future investigation. While explicit

source cues (e.g., an Amazon “trusted reviewer” badge) may tend to dominate subtle language cues, recipients may turn to reviewer language to determine whether the knowledge received is diagnostic to the recipient’s personal needs. In this case, a subtler linguistic cue of irrelevant expertise such as reviewer boasting (Packard et al. 2016) may dominate the explicit cue.

While we did not find that implicit endorsements increased persuasion (Study 3), the particular arguments someone makes while endorsing a product could moderate this result. Reviews containing both pros and cons can impede persuasion (i.e., Schlosser 2011), for example, but we speculate that by signaling the source’s overall attitude, adding an implicit endorsement (e.g., “I like it”) reduces ambiguity about the source’s overall attitude, bolstering their review’s persuasive power.

Another interesting question is if and when category expertise impacts the processing of source cues. To the extent that experts are more involved with a category, it seems plausible that they might also be less likely to be impacted by heuristic cues of source expertise (Chaiken 1980). Ancillary analysis on expertise and category involvement in Studies 3 and 5, however, did not support this speculation. One possibility is that both expert and novice recipients ego-centrically assume that the source shares their tastes (Naylor et al. 2011), making them equally persuaded by explicit recommendations. Another possibility is that experts assume that, like themselves, other word of mouth senders also account for preference heterogeneity when endorsing products. Future research should investigate these possibilities.

More broadly, while there is a well-established link between category knowledge and product information processing (e.g., Mehta, Hoegg, and Chakravarti 2011; Park and Lessig 1981), whether and when category knowledge impacts how consumers use source information has received little attention (Pornpitakpan 2004, 269). For example, although we know that

experts attempt to assert their knowledge through product comparisons in online reviews (Mackiewicz 2010), it is not clear whether recipients use the presence of product comparisons to infer the reviewer's expertise. This social facet of category expertise, and consumer knowledge as a driver or moderator of social perceptions, deserves more attention.

In conclusion, the current research demonstrates that how people endorse products has important causes and consequences. This paper deepens understanding around word of mouth, and sheds light on language use and its influence on consumer behavior more broadly.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1: DISTRIBUTION AND MEANS OF BOOK STAR RATINGS
BY EXPERIENCE QUARTILE (S1)

Experience	Cutoff (books)	Star Rating Distribution 1	2	3	4	5	Star Rating Mean
Top Qrtile. ("high experience")	31	1.2%	1.9%	11.2%	34.9%	50.8%	4.32
3rd Quartile	12	1.0%	2.7%	15.4%	34.2%	46.6%	4.23
2nd Quartile	4	1.8%	3.9%	15.3%	26.7%	52.3%	4.24
Bot. Qrtile. ("low experience")	0	2.2%	2.6%	11.5%	31.7%	51.9%	4.29

ANCILLARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEASURES FROM STUDY 2

Preference heterogeneity

1. People look for different things when it comes to this kind of hotel
2. Most people want the same things from this kind of hotel (reverse item)
3. People can generally agree on what makes this kind of hotel good or bad (reverse item)

[1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; α = .91]

Situated self-enhancement motive

1. I was concerned about the way I present myself
2. I was worried about making a good impression
3. I was concerned about what other people think of me

[1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; α = .95; adapted from Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975)]

Subjective category knowledge

1. I am an expert about hotels
2. I'm knowledgeable about hotels

[1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; r = .69]

Signaling cost of making a bad recommendation

1. How much would you have to lose if you approved of a bad hotel?
2. How costly would it be to your sense of self if people disagreed with your assessment of the hotel?
3. How embarrassed would you feel if other people didn't like the hotel that you did?

[1 = not at all, 7 = very much; α = .88]

Attitude towards the hotel

1. bad:good
2. unappealing:appealing
3. unfavorable:favorable

[bipolar seven-point scales; α = .96]

Hotel category attitude confidence

1. I am confident in my opinions about hotels
2. I'm certain about my opinions on hotels

[1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; r = .88]

Altruistic motives

1. I was motivated by a desire to help people
2. I wanted to assist others who may be choosing a hotel
3. I was concerned about being useful to other people

[1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; α = .86]

SAMPLE CATEGORY KNOWLEDGE TEST SAMPLE ITEMS FROM STUDIES 2-4

Below are two examples from each of the three ten-item category knowledge tests used in Study 2 (hotel), Study 3 (restaurant), and Study 4 (wine). Response options order was randomized. The remaining items from each of the three tests are available from the authors on request.

Please sort the hotel brands below by their average room prices (as of 2013), where #1 is the highest average price hotel brand, and #4 is the lowest average price hotel brand.

1 Hilton
2 Sheraton
3 Holiday Inn
4 Days Inn
(correct order shown)

What is the word used to describe a hotel room that contains a separate living area from the bedroom?

_____ (correct answer: suite, executive suite)

Which of the following restaurants does not offer table service?

Chipotle Mexican Grill (correct answer)
Swiss Chalet
Boston Market
Pizza Hut

At finer restaurants, the waiter or waitress is usually taught to serve the food...

… from the left side of the person dining. (correct answer)
… from the right side of the person dining.
.... from directly behind the person dining.
… from the most easily accessible side of the person dining.

Which of the following best describes Beaujolais wine?

Light-bodied red wine (correct answer)
Bold red wine
Sweet fortified wine
Dry white wine

Which of the following is not one of the 25 most popular wine brands in North America as of 2013?

Mazzocco (correct answer)
Robert Mondavi
Gallo
Lindeman

FIGURE A1: STUDY 2 STIMULI

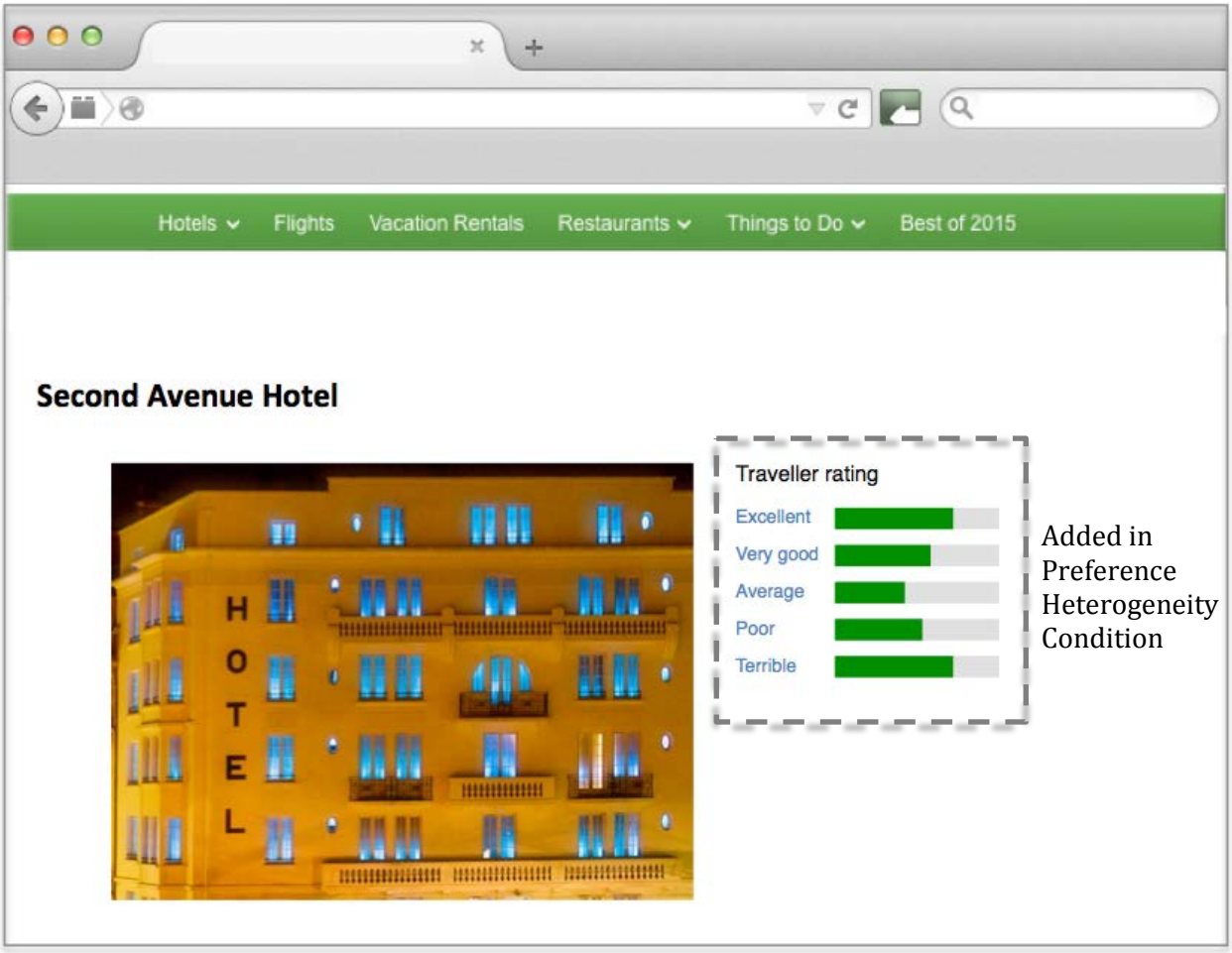

FIGURE A2: STUDY 5A STIMULI
(USING ACTUAL ENDORSEMENT CHOICE DISTRIBUTION FROM STUDY 4A)

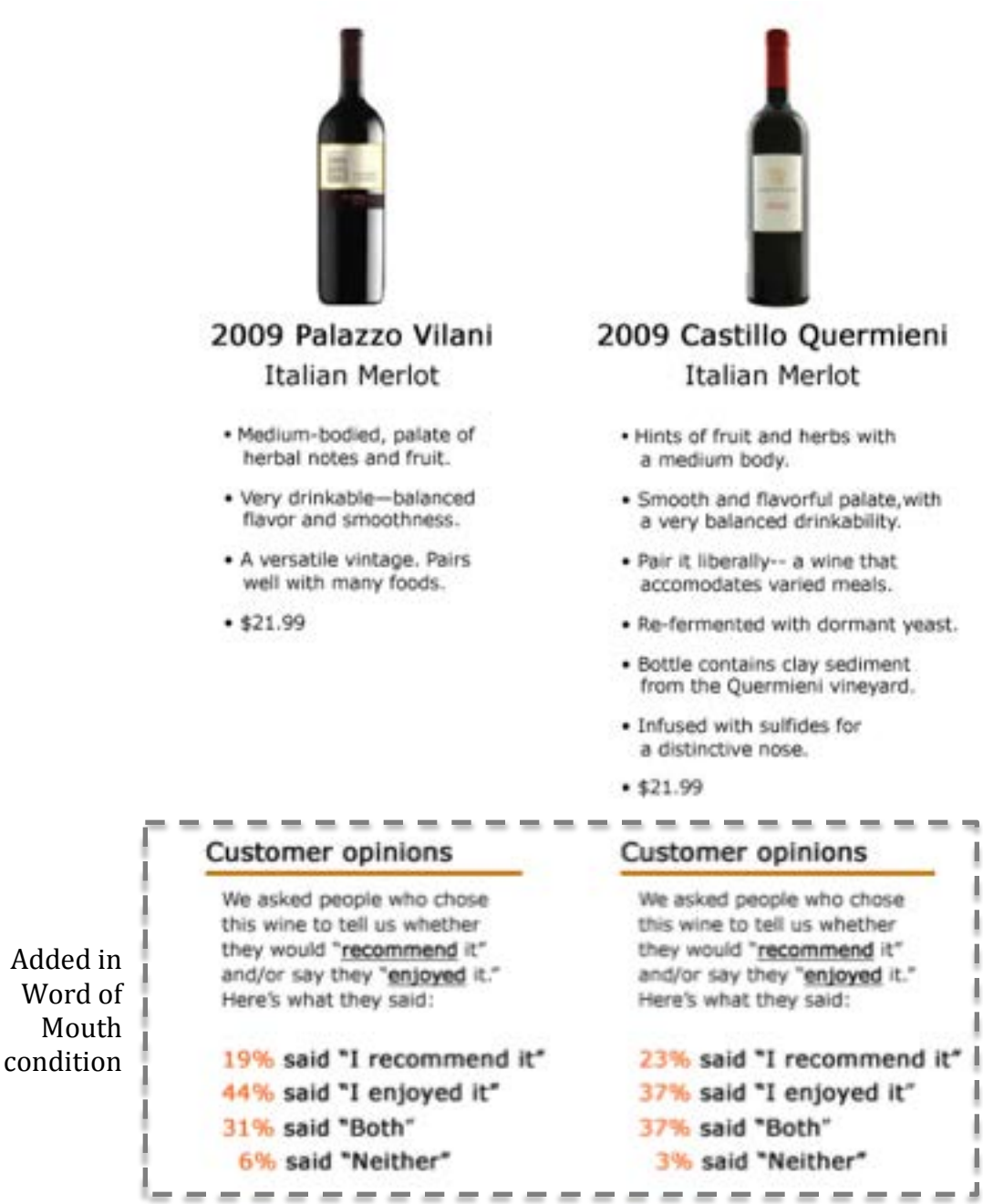

FIGURE A3: STUDY 5B STIMULI
(USING ACTUAL ENDORSEMENT CHOICE DISTRIBUTION FROM STUDY 4A)

2009 Palazzo Vilani

Italian Merlot

- Medium-bodied, palate of herbal notes and fruit.
- Very drinkable—balanced flavor and smoothness.
- A versatile vintage. Pairs well with many foods.
- $21.99

2009 Castillo Quermieni

Italian Merlot

- Hints of fruit and herbs with a medium body.
- Smooth and flavorful palate,with a very balanced drinkability.
- Pair it liberally-- a wine that accomodates varied meals.
- Re-fermented with dormant yeast.
- Bottle contains clay sediment from the Quermieni vineyard.
- Infused with sulfides for a distinctive nose.
- $21.99

One of 15 versions of the stimuli presented in the Word of Mouth condition using a distribution carefully matched to Study 4A.

Customer opinions

Most recent review:

"I enjoyed the Palazzo Vilani!"

By Sam_TZ

Customer opinions

Most recent review:

"I recommend the Castillo Quermieni!"

By Chris034

WEB APPENDIX

STUDY 3 REPLICATE

While the empirical package presented in the article demonstrates that explicit endorsements are more persuasive among both friends (e.g. Study 3) and strangers (Study 5 and replicates), this study provides a controlled test of psychological closeness as a moderator of the persuasive impact of endorsement style.

Some prior research has found that closeness moderates word of mouth persuasion (e.g., Gershoff and Johar 2006; Packard and Wooten 2013). If recipients infer that a friend is more likely to know their own restaurant preferences than someone they just met, the persuasive impact of explicit endorsements may be attenuated when they come from strangers. However, implicit endorsements may also be more persuasive coming from friends (vs. strangers) because recipients may assume greater shared tastes (i.e., homophily) among friends. We expect that this study will replicate our main effect for endorsement style and find that friends are more persuasive than strangers, but reveal no interactive effect of endorsement style and psychological closeness on persuasion.

Method

Amazon Mechanical Turkers (N = 275, 42.2% female, mean age = 33.2) completed the study for a small payment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 3 (Endorsement style: none, implicit, explicit) x 2 (Source closeness: friend, stranger) between-subjects design.

The study's content and procedure were identical to Study 3 with one exception. In the stranger condition, participants were asked imagine that the source of the restaurant endorsement was a person they just met (rather than a friend).

Results

Omnibus ANOVA confirmed a significant effect of endorsement style on persuasion ($F(2, 269) = 25.21$, $p < .001$). As predicted, compared to implicit endorsement ($M = 5.07$) or the no endorsement control ($M = 4.57$), the explicit endorsement led people to believe they would enjoy the restaurant more and increased the chance they would choose to eat there ($M = 5.51$; $F(1, 269) = 11.57$, $p < .001$ and $F(1, 269) = 50.77$, $p < .001$).

There was also a main effect for closeness ($F(1, 269) = 3.72$, $p = .06$), with the friend ($M = 5.16$) marginally more persuasive than the stranger overall ($M = 4.95$).

There was no interactive effect of endorsement style and closeness ($F < 1$), suggesting that impact of endorsement style on persuasion is not moderated by source closeness.

Discussion

This replication of Study 3 suggests that psychological closeness does not moderate the persuasive impact of endorsement style.

ADDITIONAL STUDY 4 REPLICATE

In this study, we tested whether telling participants they had a positive experience with the wine in Study 4 may have increased their reported intentions to write an online review about the wine. Under this potential alternative, if novices chose an inferior wine and it tasted bad, they

might have been less likely to endorse it. However, unless the wine was truly terrible, we expect that post-purchase experience would be unlikely to impact their endorsement intentions. Prior research suggests that choice increases liking (Bem 1967), expectations color judgment (Lee et al. 2006), and most people are unable to distinguish wine quality from taste experience (Golstein et al. 2008). We therefore expect that novice's intentions to endorse their chosen wine will be similar to the results observed in Study 4 even if the stimuli did not tell them they had a positive experience with the wine.

We also used this study to assess whether the distribution of endorsement styles chosen by participants in Study 4 would sustain if we allowed participants to say they didn't like or recommend the wine (i.e., a "negative" endorsement) or make no endorsement at all.

Method

Amazon Mechanical Turk participants (N = 252, 53.6% female, mean age = 36.9 years) completed the study for a small payment.

The stimuli and procedure were identical to Study 4 with two exceptions. First, the stimuli did not tell participants that they were pleased with their choice before asking what they would write about the product in a review. Second, in addition to the two endorsement style options they could choose for their review in Study 4 ("I liked the [wine name]," "I recommend the [wine name]"), participants could choose to post a "negative" endorsement ("I don't recommend the [wine name]" or "I didn't like the [wine name]") or not write a review at all ("None of these (I wouldn't post my opinion)").

Results

Wine Choice. Consistent with Study 4, overall, fewer people picked the inferior wine (M = 40.9%). Category knowledge was again negatively related to choice (B = -.05, Z = 3.58, $p < .001$). Compared to experts (+1SD on wine test, M = 28.9%), novices (-1SD, M = 52.5%) were more likely to pick the inferior wine.

Endorsement Choice. Fewer than one in four participants (24%) said they would not post an opinion about their chosen wine. This proportion did not differ across those who chose the superior (24.8%) versus the inferior wine (23.3%; $\chi^2(1) = .08$, $p > .75$). Of the 76% of participants who chose to say something about their wine in an online review, none chose the "negative" endorsement options (e.g., "I don't like [wine name]"). We therefore contrast positive explicit and implicit endorsements in the same manner as Study 4. There was again a negative relationship between category knowledge and explicit (vs. implicit) endorsement (B = -.04, Z = 2.75, $p < .01$). Consistent with Studies 1, 2, 4 and 4a compared to experts (+1SD M = 32.0%), novices were more likely to explicitly recommend their wine choice to others (-1SD M = 49.7%). Combining choice and endorsement, 61% of people who chose the inferior wine recommended it (39% said they liked it), while only 49% of people who chose the superior wine recommended it (51% said they liked it).

Discussion

A pattern of results highly similar to Study 4 is sustained even when participants are not told that they enjoyed their wine choice, and even when they are offered options to make a "negative" endorsement or no endorsement at all, suggesting the stimuli choices in Study 4 did not drive the results.