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Abstract

This research documents how negative reviews, when perceived as unfair, can activate feelings of empathy toward firms that have been wronged. Six studies and four supplemental experiments provide converging evidence that this experienced empathy for the firm motivates supportive consumer responses such as paying higher purchase prices and reporting increased patronage intentions. Importantly, this research highlights factors that can increase or decrease empathy toward a firm. For instance, adopting the reviewer's perspective when evaluating an unfair negative review can reduce positive consumer responses to a firm, whereas conditions that enhance the ability to experience empathy—such as when reviews are highly unfair, when the identity of the employee is made salient, or when the firm responds in an empathetic manner—can result in positive consumer responses toward the firm. Overall, this work extends the understanding of consumers' responses to word of mouth in the marketplace by highlighting the role of perceived (un)fairness. The authors discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the findings for better management of consumer reviews.

Keywords

word of mouth, fairness, negative reviews, customer complaints, empathy, emotions

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> 1 star: "More like 'Mediocre Canyon.'" (Grand Canyon National Park review, Yelp)
>
> 1 star: "Just a brown lump of metal. Nothing special." (Eiffel Tower review, TripAdvisor)
>
> 1 star: "Modern films are generally much better." (Citizen Kane review, Amazon)
>
> 1 star: "The ice cream was too cold." (McDonald's restaurant review, Yelp)

Managing negative reviews is an essential task for companies because word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has a compelling influence on consumer preferences (Fornell and Westbrook 1984; Liu 2006; Zhu and Zhang 2010). Compared with firm-generated communications, WOM from other consumers is considered more authentic, relevant, and unbiased (Friestad and Wright 1994; Godes and Mayzlin 2004). Indeed, about 50% of consumers report referring to online reviews before making purchases (PwC 2016), and 78% report trusting online reviews as much as personal recommendations (BrightLocal 2018). Within the WOM literature, the consensus is that consumer reviews most often lead to firm evaluations that are consistent with review valence. That is, negative reviews lead to less favorable firm evaluations, and positive reviews lead to more favorable firm evaluations (e.g., Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Fornell and Westbrook 1984). Both types of reviews, negative and positive, greatly influence consumer decision making (Basuroy, Chatterjee, and Ravid 2003; Godes and Mayzlin 2009; Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels 2009), with negative reviews often being the most impactful (Chen and Lurie 2013; Mizerski 1982).

Importantly, the increasing influx of online reviews is a challenge for managers who must deal with public expressions of customer disgruntlement that may or may not accurately reflect the objective quality of the firm's offerings (O'Brien and Hosany 2016). As the previous one-star reviews

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demonstrate, there are certainly times when the company's actual product or service experience quality does not warrant the degree of negativity that is conveyed via WOM. To demonstrate the prevalence of unfair WOM, we conducted a preliminary study examining a random selection of scraped one- and two-star hotel reviews from TripAdvisor, a major hotel-review site, for the ten top-ranked hotels in Chicago, Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles, Paris, and Singapore. Two independent coders who were blind to the hypotheses rated 1,000 reviews from these 60 hotels for their perceived fairness as well as the rationale for the ratings. The results revealed that more than one-quarter of negative reviews contained elements of unfairness (26.3%, rated as unfair or somewhat unfair; for detailed results, see Web Appendix A). Thus, it appears that unfair negative consumer reviews are somewhat prevalent.

Recently, the popular press has discussed the many ways firms respond to unfair negative reviews, from suing the reviewer (O'Donnell and Alltucker 2018; Verdina 2018) to changing how consumers can provide reviews (Bell 2017), to publicly shaming the reviewers (Web Appendix B). Given the prevalence of unfair negative reviews, companies must understand how consumers react to such reviews, as well as how best to respond to unfair negative WOM. In this research, we find that unfair negative reviews are not necessarily bad for the firm and that the impact of negative reviews on consumers' subsequent responses to the focal firm varies as a function of the perceived fairness of the review.

We define fairness as a judgment regarding whether the outcome an individual receives is deserved and justified based on the focal individual's previous actions (Cavanaugh 2014; Heuer et al. 1999). This work examines reactions of third-party observers to negative reviews of a focal firm that are perceived to be unfair based on the firm's performance. We draw on work examining empathetic responding in person-to-person contexts (Batson et al. 1997; Davis 1980; Stotland 1969) to argue that when consumers perceive a negative review to be unfair, they experience empathetic concerns for the firm. In turn, these feelings of empathy trigger favorable responses to the focal firm, such as increased patronage intentions and purchases.

The current research extends findings in both the WOM and service literature streams to make several contributions. First, while the majority of WOM research finds that negative reviews lead to negative consumer responses, we highlight a novel boundary condition for this effect—the degree to which the review is seen to be unfair. In doing so, we build on an emerging body of work documenting that the cues within the review content can influence consumer responses (Chen and Lurie 2013; Hamilton, Vohs, and McGill 2014; Rocklage and Fazio 2020). We find that, in addition to elements that enhance the credibility of the review (e.g., temporal cues, dispreferred markers, deviatory reviews, emotionality), perceived unfairness in reviews can enhance empathy, motivating subsequent helping and positive intentions toward the firm.

Second, we explore the role of empathy as a mechanism that enhances consumer support for firms, expanding the conceptualization of firms as being treated similarly to humanlike entities in the marketplace (Aaker 1997; Aggarwal 2004; Fournier 1998). The existing work on emotions motivating responses to brand/service failures has primarily focused on how attributions influence negative consumer emotions such as anger (Bonifield and Cole 2007; Folkes 1984; Taylor 1994). By focusing on empathy, we build on work that has begun to explore the underrepresented role of positive emotions in driving responses to negative reviews (McGraw, Warren, and Kan 2015). Moreover, our focus on the role of empathy extends the fairness literature more generally given that scholars have noted that its influence is underappreciated and often "lost" within the cognitive landscape of fairness (Barclay and Kiefer 2014). Similarly, work exploring justice motivations in the marketing literature has not considered the role of emotion (e.g., White, MacDonnell, and Ellard 2012).

Finally, from a managerial perspective, we show that the mere existence of an unfair negative review can enhance empathy for the reviewed firm, leading to subsequent support behaviors. Drawing on our conceptualization of empathy as the underlying process, we then provide clear managerial interventions (i.e., firm empathetic responses and employee spotlights) that can elicit greater empathy toward firms when dealing with consumer reviews.

Theoretical Framework

Consumers frequently consult reviews before making purchase decisions because WOM is perceived to be credible (Chen and Xie 2008; Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991). As such, consumer reviews can dramatically affect firm outcomes, including willingness to pay (Houser and Wooders 2006) and product sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Liu 2006). The overwhelming majority of research in this domain finds that positive reviews lead to higher firm sales by enhancing positive attitudes and expectations, whereas negative reviews lower firm sales, evaluations, and customer intentions (e.g., Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Liu 2006; Sonnier, McAlister, and Rutz 2011; Tang, Fang, and Wang 2014; Zhu and Zhang 2010). Importantly, positive and negative reviews appear to have differing degrees of impact on consumer responses. While positive reviews are more prevalent (Fowler and Avila 2009), negative reviews are better predictors of evaluations (Herr, Kardes, and Kim1991; Mizerski 1982) and sales (Basuroy, Chatterjee, and Ravid 2003; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006) due to the perception of negative information as diagnostic. For example, Mizerski (1982) finds that negative reviews are more likely to be credited to the performance of the product itself, whereas positive reviews are often credited to social norm dynamics.

However, research has begun to cast doubt on the notion that negative reviews unconditionally lead to negative firm outcomes (see Table 1). For instance, Berger, Sorensen, and Rasmussen (2010) proposed that unknown firms can benefit from negative WOM because negative reviews can raise product awareness. Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava (2000) found that when consumers are highly committed to a brand, they are

Table 1. Contribution Table: Review Characteristics and their Influence on Consumers.

Source	Focus (Review Valence)	Process	Takeaway
Mizerski (1982)	Diagnostic weight given to negative information in reviews. (Negative, positive)	Cognitive: Negative reviews tend to be more diagnostic. Thus, attribute the negative reviews to the product and positive reviews to social norms.	Negative reviews are more diagnostic than positive reviews.
Herr, Kardes, and Kim (1991)	Effects of WOM (vs. printed information) on product judgments. (Negative, positive)	Cognitive: Accessible negative information can override the effect of WOM on product evaluations.	Positive WOM results in more positive product judgments if other negative diagnostic cues are unavailable. If negative diagnostic cues are available, then this information becomes more accessible and overrides positive WOM.
Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava (2000)	Effects of brand commitment on the diagnosticity of negative information. (Negative, positive)	Cognitive: High- (vs. low-) commitment consumers will counterargue and discount negative brand information.	Low-commitment consumers show greater attitude change after exposure to negative information. High-commitment consumers show less attitude change due to discounting the diagnosticity of the negative information.
Laczniak, DeCarlo, and Ramaswami (2001)	Attributions of negative information to the reviewer vs. the product itself. (Negative)	Cognitive: Review configurations (consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency) can shift attributions from product experience to reviewer.	Low-consensus (e.g., not agreed on by other reviewers) and low-distinctiveness (e.g., the brand review is similar for all other brands in categories) messages are more likely to be attributed to the reviewer, mitigating their negative effect.
Berger, Sorensen, and Rasmussen (2010)	Effects of negative reviews for established vs. unknown brands. (Negative)	Cognitive: Negative reviews can increase awareness of unknown brands.	Negative reviews hurt established brands but can help unknown brands over time. This is because negative reviews increase awareness of the relatively unknown brand, which increases short-term sales.
Chen and Lurie (2013)	Effect of linguistic temporal cues in reviews. (Negative, positive)	Cognitive: Cues about a recent product experience change attribution from reviewer characteristics to product experience.	Temporal cues increase the value of positive reviews on product judgments because the review is more closely linked to the actual use of the product.
Hamilton, Vohs, and McGill (2014)	Effect of linguistic content aimed at softening negative information in reviews. (Negative, positive, and balanced)	Cognitive: Dispreferred markers moderate the effect of negative information by changing perceptions of the reviewer.	Dispreferred markers included in balanced reviews (both positive and negative information) lead to higher WTP. This is because the reviewer is seen as more credible and likable.
McGraw, Warren, and Kan (2015)	Effect of humor in negative reviews. (Complaints, praises)	Affective: Amusement changes the negative-review seriousness perception, making the review seem less negative while undermining redress or sympathy goals.	Humor can help when the complaint aims to create entertainment, warning, or impression management, but can be detrimental for redress or sympathy goals.
Kupor and Tormala (2018)	Effect of moderately positive reviews on persuasion. (Positive)	Cognitive: Deviation from the perceived default rating increased the perceived thoughtfulness and accuracy of the reviewer.	Positive reviews that deviate from the default rating result in increased persuasiveness of the review.
Reich and Maglio (2019)	Effect of recommendation including an admitted mistake on product choice. (Positive)	Cognitive: Mistakes shift perception of the reviewer as having more knowledge and expertise.	The presence of an admitted mistake from a previous purchase positively increases product choice.
Rocklage and Fazio (2020)	Effect of emotionality on positive review persuasion. (Positive)	Cognitive: Positive emotionality toward utilitarian products seems unhelpful and lowers choice.	Positive emotionality in reviews is persuasive when the review is for hedonic products, but not persuasive for utilitarian products.
Our research	Effect of unfairness in negative reviews. (Unfair negative, fair negative, and positive)	Affective: Unfair negative reviews elicit empathetic concern for the reviewed firm.	Unfair negative reviews lead to higher firm support intentions (e.g., purchase intentions, WTP) due to heightened empathy for the firm.

Notes: WTP = willingness to pay. A detailed version of this contribution table appears in Web Appendix C.

more likely to counterargue and thus discount negative brand information. McGraw, Warren, and Kan (2015) observed that experiencing amusement in reaction to humorous negative reviews influences responses both positively and negatively, depending on the review intention. Research by Hamilton, Vohs, and McGill (2014) found that the use of dispreferred markers as a means of softening the negative information featured in reviews ("I'll be honest . . .") led to higher willingness to pay for products because this makes reviewers appear more credible and likable. Finally, work by Rocklage and Fazio (2020) finds that effusive positive emotionality can increase evaluations for hedonic products but lower evaluations for utilitarian products. Previous research has also identified attributional elements in reviews that can positively or negatively affect the interpretation of the review by consumers, such as changing the focus from dispositional drivers to external causes of the reviewers' behavior (Chen and Lurie 2013; Kupor and Tormala 2018; Mizerski 1982). The current research proposes a novel factor that affects consumer interpretations of negative reviews—the degree to which the review is perceived to be unfair.

Perceptions of Fairness

Most marketing research examining fairness has conceptualized the construct according to equity theory, which considers whether the outcome and input ratios of exchange partners are equivalent (Adams 1965; Cook and Hegtvedt 1983). Such work tends to examine perceptions of equity from the first-person perspective (i.e., the perspective of the individual undergoing the exchange experience; Bagozzi 1974) and has explored social comparisons in price fairness (Cox 2001; Ho and Su 2009; Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1986, 1990) and fair treatment in service recovery (e.g., Bies and Shapiro 1988; Clemmer 1993; Folger 1977; Leventhal 1980; Lind and Tyler 1988; Sparks and McColl-Kennedy 2001; Thibaut and Walker 1975). This work mostly examines reactions to both the service failure itself and the service recovery (Bitner 1990), showing how providing consumers with the compensation they feel they deserve can help retain them postfailure (Smith and Bolton 1998; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekaran 1998). Some work has found that attributions of failure will change the need for compensation. For example, if there is no perceived inequity due to attributions of external causes for the failure (low firm control over the failure or low stability of the failure), compensation may not be necessary (Grewal, Roggeveen, and Tsiros 2008).

In the service marketing literature, justice has primarily been conceptualized as the imbalance in fairness felt throughout a service failure and the subsequent recovery process. This literature identifies a three-dimensional model of justice as an explanation for when complaining and satisfaction might occur during service failure and recovery (Goodwin and Ross 1992; Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekaran 1998). Work in this tradition highlights how fairness, in terms of allocations of outcomes and resources (distributive justice; Hocutt, Chakraborty, and Mowen 1997; Smith, Bolton, and Wagner 1999), processes and procedures (procedural justice; Leventhal 1980; McColl-Kennedy and Sparks 2003), and customer treatment (interactional justice; Clemmer 1993; Sparks and McColl-Kennedy 2001), can all influence consumer reactions to service failure. While this prior work has examined how elements of justice and attributions can lead to firsthand responses to service failures, we focus on the reactions of consumers who learn, secondhand, of negative information about a company's performance via reviews. There is a dearth of work exploring how third-party observers respond to the learning of another entity being wronged in consumption contexts.

The current research takes an approach to conceptualizing fairness that is highly relevant in contexts in which a third-party observer sees another entity being wronged in some way (Skarlicki and Kulik 2004). Our definition of fairness focuses on whether the outcome an individual receives is judged to be deserved and justified based on the focal actor's previous actions (Heuer et al. 1999; Lerner 1980). While some researchers use the terms "justice" (Lerner 1980) or "deservingness" (Feather 1992), we use the term "fairness" because this is how laypeople interpret these constructs.[1] This view of fairness is rooted in just-world theory, which proposes that a "justice motive" drives people to restore a sense of justice (Ellard, Harvey, and Callan 2016; Lee, Winterich, and Ross 2014; Lerner 1980). In a just world, people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. The theory further proposes that people are motivated to defend their just-world beliefs (Rubin and Peplau 1975). As a result, when people observe another entity being treated in a manner that is unfair (i.e., expectations of fairness are violated), people often seek ways to restore fairness. Work by Turillo et al. (2002) demonstrates that people will try to restore justice even when they have no relationship to the wronged party and when they stand to gain nothing. This work suggests that people are driven to restore justice not through self-interest, but due to a predisposition of sensitivity to unfairness (Cropanzano, Goldman, and Folger 2003). Expounding on this, we propose that when a review is perceived to be unfair, this leads to positive consumer actions toward the firm in ways that allow for the restoration of fairness.

Although research has not directly tested these predictions, some work stemming from attribution theory aligns with our theorizing. Attribution theories suggest that people's causal attribution of events leads to both emotional responses and behavioral outcomes (Weiner 1980). In the marketing context, for example, attributions to the firm itself (vs. external factors) for service failures lead to increased complaining behaviors (Folkes 1988). Moreover, work has shown that attributing an outcome (i.e., falling) on the dimension of controllability (i.e., being ill vs. being drunk) can lead to feelings such as pity or anger, which subsequently motivate either supportive or

[1] We note that the average correlation between the "fair" and "deserved" item ratings across studies in the current research is $r = .85$.

nonsupportive responses (Morales 2005; Weiner 1995). The majority of work on attributions in service failure contexts supports the notion of a pathway through anger (Bonifield and Cole 2007; Folkes, Koletsky, and Graham 1987) leading to retaliatory behavior (Andreassen 1999; Harrison-Walker 2012). To our knowledge, existing work has not examined how attributions may influence positive reactions to firms, such as increased empathy or compassion.

Thus, one could argue that, in our research, unfair negative reviews are seen as uncontrollable by the firm, and it is these perceptions of low controllability that lead to supportive responses to the firm. However, in our inquiry, we focus not on the dimensions of attributions made, but on how perceptions of unfairness (regardless of controllability) can elicit positive emotional consequences of empathy. Importantly, we show that our effects emerge even under conditions where the outcome is under the firm's control (Study 2). We also show that unfair negative reviews naturally evoke empathy, which motivates supportive actions toward the firm (Study 3).

Inherent in our conceptualization is the notion that consumers recognize unfair reviews and, in response, show a desire to restore fairness. As a preliminary test of this underlying assumption, we ran an exploratory study with an online panel ($n = 73$; Web Appendix D). Notably, 43% of participants spontaneously reported that an unfair negative review led to an improved view of the firm, and 35% felt motivated to support the firm. One insight derived from this study is that perceived unfairness can activate a desire to support the focal firm, which is consistent with the notion that people are often motivated to defend others after witnessing unfairness and feeling compassion (Lerner 1980). When expectations of fairness are violated, people seek ways to restore a sense of balance—for instance, by helping the person who has been wronged (Batson et al. 2007), compensating the victim (Lerner 1965), or choosing ethical product options that support those who have been mistreated (White, MacDonnell, and Ellard 2012). These effects primarily occur when people can empathize or identify with the victim in some way (Aldermann, Brehm, and Katz 1974). We propose that perceptions of the unfairness of a firm's treatment by other customers will motivate reparative actions such as more favorable behaviors and patronage intentions as a means to restore a sense of fairness. Formally,

> **H_1:** Unfair negative reviews elicit greater firm support relative to comparison reviews (i.e., fair negative reviews).[2]

The Role of Empathetic Responding

We define empathy as a vicarious emotional response to observing another person's situation that is marked by the ability to feel warmth, compassion, and concern for others (Batson et al. 1995; Jackson, Meltzoff, and Decety 2005). Empathetic responding involves viewing another's situation from that person's perspective and understanding the other person's cognitive-emotional experience as if it were affecting the observer directly (Granzin and Olsen 1991). Empathy has been linked to altruism and various prosocial behaviors (e.g., Bagozzi and Moore 1994; Coke, Batson, and McDavis 1978; Unger and Thumuluri 1997). Specifically, empathy has been shown to activate moral concern for others (Batson et al. 2007), especially when the target has been wronged in some way (Hoffman 2001). Furthermore, such moral concern can motivate reparative actions on the part of the observer (Batson and Ahmad 2001; Rumble, Van Lange, and Parks 2010). This sensitivity to outcomes for others can be a powerful motivator to restore a sense of fairness by compensating the victim (e.g., Batson et al. 2007; Carlsmith, Darley, and Robinson 2002; Darley and Pittman 2003).

We build on this previous work demonstrating that empathy leads to positive and helpful responses to *other people* who were wronged by proposing that the same might be true for responses to *firms* (see also Kirmani et al. 2016). We draw on previous work showing that empathetic responses are heightened under conditions where unfair outcomes become salient (e.g., Batson et al. 2007; Haidt 2003) and propose that when the consumer perceives a negative review as unfair, this naturally activates empathy toward the firm. We further predict that this increased empathy will trigger a desire to restore fairness by responding in ways that support the firm. Formally,

> **H_2:** Feelings of empathy mediate the tendency to exhibit increased support for a firm that received an unfair negative review (vs. a fair negative review).

To provide evidence for the role of empathy as the underlying process, we employ statistical mediation and moderation approaches. Specifically, our conceptual framework predicts that unfair negative reviews naturally elicit empathy, which then motivates positive responses toward the firm (Study 2). Following from this, we also propose that conditions that reduce reviewers' ability to experience an empathetic response toward the firm (e.g., focusing on the reviewer's experience instead of the firm's) should reduce positive responses to unfair negative reviews (Study 3), but that such an effect would not occur under conditions in which empathy is not the mechanism underlying the response (i.e., fair negative and positive reviews). In addition, a key argument within our

[2] Note that we explore how unfair negative reviews can change consumer responses to firms compared with other types of reviews—both fair negative and positive reviews. We make our key hypotheses against fair negative reviews. However, we also compare unfair negative reviews with positive reviews in the studies themselves. Drawing on prior work on WOM, we anticipate that positive reviews should generally elicit positive responses from consumers. We further suggest that unfair negative reviews should also lead to positive consumer responses. However, we remain agnostic regarding whether unfair negative reviews will be similarly favorable or more favorable than positive reviews. This is because the content of the positive reviews themselves is relevant and depends on the calibration of this content. As such, we focus our formal hypotheses on comparing unfair and fair negative reviews, but in the studies themselves we do compare unfair negative reviews with both fair negative reviews and positive reviews.

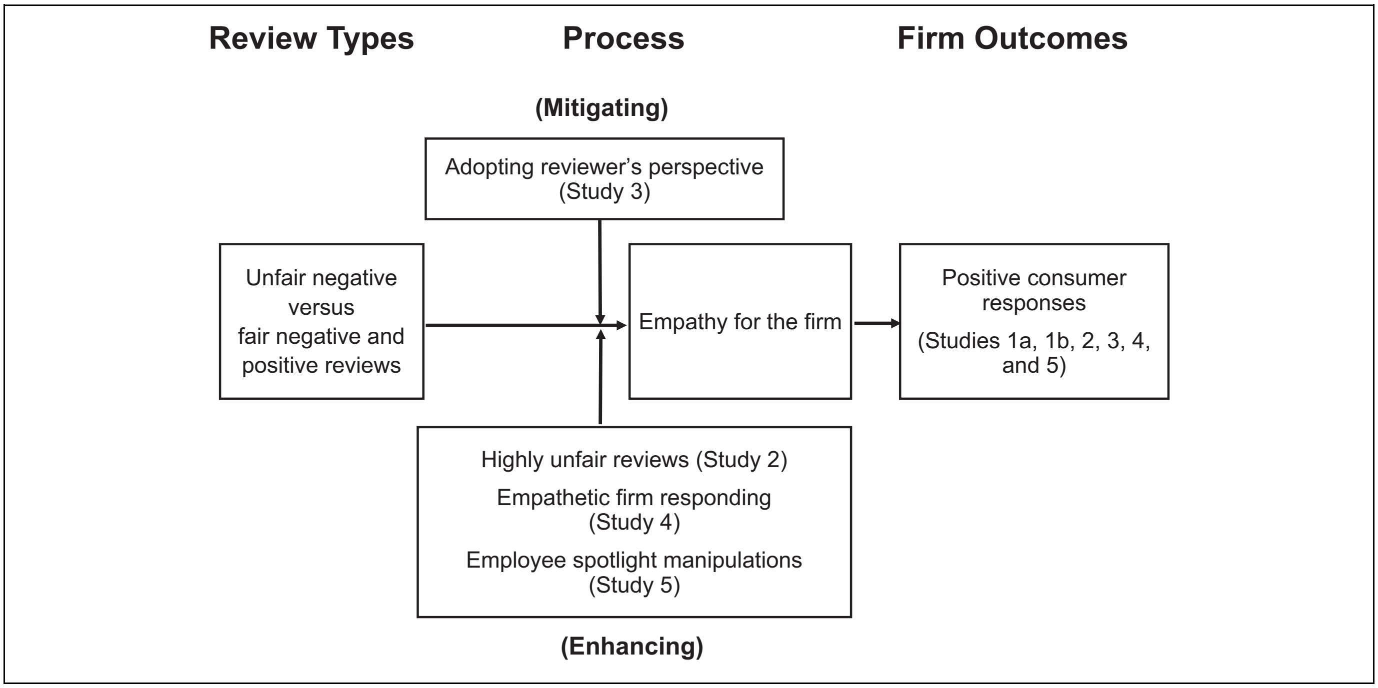

Figure 1. Theoretical framework.
Notes: We control for reviewer rudeness and review length.

conceptualization is that perceived unfairness in negative reviews enables empathy from consumers. Thus, firm interventions that provide consumers with review elements that increase empathy for the firm should lead to more favorable consumer responses to reviews that do not naturally evoke empathy (i.e., fair negative and positive reviews; Studies 4 and 5). For our conceptual model, see to Figure 1.

The Current Research

Six studies test our theoretical framework suggesting that perceptions of unfairness in negative reviews can lead to positive consumer responses due to feelings of empathy for the reviewed firm (for a summary of results, see Table 2). First, using behavioral measures, we show that consumer support for a firm following an unfair negative review is higher than that following a fair negative review and can become akin to the support generated by a positive review (Studies 1a and 1b). We further test our conceptual model by showing that empathy mediates the effects of unfair negative reviews on responses to the firm. We also provide a unique contribution to existing research by identifying conditions under which unfair negative reviews can activate higher degrees of empathy and, subsequently, higher patronage intentions. Specifically, we show that highly unfair negative reviews (vs. moderately unfair negative reviews; Study 2) lead to more favorable purchase intentions than do positive reviews. We then show that unfair negative reviews naturally evoke empathy similar to what is observed when participants are asked to take the perspective of the firm and more positive than when they are asked to take the perspective of the reviewer (Study 3). In the final two studies, we demonstrate how managers may be able to harness empathy and increase positive responses to the firm resulting from reviews that are not naturally empathy-evoking. Study 4 illustrates that responding to reviews in an empathy-evoking manner (i.e., highly empathetic by using first-person language and employee profile pictures vs. neutral firm response) leads to greater empathy and increased positive responses to the firm for fair negative and positive reviews. Finally, in Study 5, we show that taking the perspective of an employee through an employee spotlight increases empathy for the firm following fair negative and positive reviews, also leading to more favorable purchase intentions.[3]

Study 1a

Study 1a and Study 1b examine consumer responses to the organization (a nonprofit [Study 1a] and a for-profit [Study 1b]) following exposure to an unfair negative review compared with both a fair negative review and a positive review using consequential measures. We anticipate that consumers

[3] We note that we present four supplemental foundational studies in our Web Appendix, all of which support our conceptual framework. We first present a field experiment (n = 75) showing increased purchase following unfair negative WOM and a scenario replication controlling for perceived rudeness (n = 90; Web Appendix L). We then report a study focusing on justice-restoration motives arising from unfair negative reviews (n = 234; Web Appendix M). We also report an additional behavioral study that tests the robustness of our framework using an alternative dependent variable (n = 337; Web Appendix N).

Table 2. Summary of Results by Study Condition.

Study 1: Baseline Effect

Study 1a: 4ocean; N = 88, 58% female, M_{age} = 20.8 years, undergraduate students	Fair Negative (n = 31)	Unfair Negative (n = 28)	Positive (n = 29)
Fairness	5.70 (.91)	2.55 (1.30)	5.34 (1.02)
Donation ($)	6.58 (7.36)	13.57 (6.05)	12.76 (6.35)
Rudeness	2.58 (1.36)	5.54 (1.00)	2.72 (1.62)

Study 1b: Bottle; N = 223, 57% female, M_{age} = 20.7 years, undergraduate students	Fair Negative (n = 74)	Unfair Negative (n = 74)	Positive (n = 75)
Purchase intentions	3.66 (1.30)	4.78 (1.23)	4.61 (1.41)
Empathy	3.12 (1.27)	4.95 (1.26)	3.82 (1.42)
Bottle choice	1.14 (1.19)	1.55 (1.30)	1.12 (1.29)

Main finding: Unfairness in negative reviews leads to positive consumer responses such that an unfair negative review can lead to responses that are as positive as the ones following positive reviews.

Study 2: Mediation by Empathy for the Firm

Sushi scenario; N = 312, 51% female, M_{age} = 20.9 years, undergraduate students

	Fair Negative (n = 78)	Moderately Unfair Negative (n = 79)	Highly Unfair Negative (n = 77)	Positive (n = 78)
Empathy	3.44 (1.69)	5.43 (1.48)	5.85 (1.39)	4.46 (1.57)
WTP	$38.78 (16.69)	$45.65 (18.66)	$52.94 (20.56)	$45.55 (26.08)
Rudeness	3.17 (1.40)	4.70 (1.28)	4.83 (1.25)	4.28 (1.24)

Main finding: While unfair negative reviews can lead to consumer responses that are as positive as those observed following positive reviews, highly unfair negative reviews can lead to responses that are even more positive than those following positive responses. Feelings of empathy for the firm drive this effect.

Study 3: Moderation by Empathy Manipulation

Panini scenario; N = 615, 46% female, M_{age} = 40.4 years, MTurk

	Fair Negative			Unfair Negative			Positive		
Empathy Manipulation	Employee Perspective (n = 67)	Reviewer Perspective (n = 71)	Control (n = 71)	Employee Perspective (n = 68)	Reviewer Perspective (n = 66)	Control (n = 64)	Employee Perspective (n = 67)	Reviewer Perspective (n = 70)	Control (n = 71)
Evaluation	3.62 (1.76)	3.24 (1.78)	3.57 (1.68)	4.66 (1.75)	3.75 (1.66)	4.63 (1.73)	6.26 (.93)	6.37 (.72)	6.11 (1.20)
Rudeness	4.12 (1.80)	4.04 (1.83)	4.27 (2.05)	5.40 (1.47)	4.77 (1.58)	5.19 (1.63)	1.85 (1.68)	2.30 (1.98)	2.45 (2.02)

Main finding: Suppressing participants' ability to experience empathy leads to less positive consumer responses following exposure to an unfair negative review.

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Study 4: Moderated Mediation Between Review Type and Firm Response Type Through Empathy						
Garden tools scenario; N = 599, 44% female, M_{age} = 38.41 years, MTurk						
	Fair Negative		Unfair Negative		Positive	
Firm Response Type	Neutral (n = 101)	Empathetic (n = 101)	Neutral (n = 101)	Empathetic (n = 98)	Neutral (n = 99)	Empathetic (n = 99)
Empathy	4.13 (2.39)	5.47 (2.16)	6.73 (1.89)	7.09 (1.63)	4.17 (2.51)	5.87 (2.28)
Purchase intentions	4.13 (1.71)	5.10 (1.54)	5.90 (1.14)	6.04 (1.00)	5.48 (1.05)	6.15 (.81)
Rudeness	3.45 (1.69)	3.47 (1.79)	5.20 (1.71)	5.17 (1.53)	2.65 (1.89)	2.84 (1.97)
Main finding: Responding to the review in a highly empathetic way can evoke empathy in the consumer that would not naturally have an increase in empathy (i.e., fair negative and positive reviews) to the same extent as the exposure to a review that naturally evokes higher empathy (i.e., unfair negative reviews).						

Study 5: Moderated Mediation Between Review Type and Employee Spotlight Through Empathy						
Barista scenario; N = 642, 46% female, M_{age} = 38.2 years, MTurk						
	Fair Negative		Unfair Negative		Positive	
Employee Spotlight	Absent (n = 106)	Present (n = 108)	Absent (n = 106)	Present (n = 106)	Absent (n = 107)	Present (n = 109)
Empathy	4.36 (2.47)	5.40 (2.12)	6.86 (1.49)	6.76 (1.79)	4.80 (2.10)	5.55 (2.20)
Voucher value	$4.07 (1.98)	$5.03 (1.55)	$5.83 (1.17)	$6.03 (1.01)	$5.42 (1.23)	$6.23 (.83)
Main finding: Similar to Study 4, employee spotlights can evoke empathy in the consumer that would not naturally see an increase in empathy and positive consumer response for these review types.						

Notes: WTP = willingness to pay.

responding to an unfair negative review will exhibit more positive responses compared with consumers responding to a fair negative review. In addition to a fair-negative-review condition, we include a positive review as an exploratory comparison condition. This study also casts doubt on rudeness as an alternative explanation for the observed effects by showing that the effects occur even while statistically controlling for perceptions of rudeness.

Method

Participants and design. Eighty-eight undergraduate students took part in this experiment in exchange for course credit (58% female; $M_{age} = 20.8$ years). The experiment used a one-factor, three-level (review type: fair negative vs. unfair negative vs. positive) between-participants design. The dependent variable was the donation amount to the organization.

Procedure. Participants were assigned to one of three conditions that all described a nonprofit organization dedicated to removing trash from waterways with funds raised through selling upcycled bracelets (for all review manipulations across studies, see the Appendix). In the fair negative review, the reviewer complained about not receiving the bracelets and experiencing difficulty reaching customer service. In the unfair negative review, the customer complained about having to wait three days for delivery, despite receiving an apology, a refund, and overnight shipping. In both negative-review conditions, the review ended with “I purchased for the cause—the whole experience sucked! Don’t buy from them.” In the positive-review condition, the review ended with “I purchased for the cause” (for the full stimuli, see Web Appendix E).

As a manipulation check, participants rated the extent to which they perceived the review to be fair using four seven-point scales: “fair,” “deserved,” “justified,” and “reasonable” (1 = “strongly disagree,” and 7 = “strongly agree”; $\alpha = .98$).[4] Participants were then informed that three participants would be randomly selected to execute a real purchase. They learned that, if selected, they would be given $20 and could give a portion to the organization if they wished. Our dependent measure was the amount allocated to the nonprofit. Finally, participants rated how rude the reviewer was by indicating their agreement with the statement, “The review was rude” (1 = “strongly disagree,” and 7 = “strongly agree”).

Manipulation check. There was a main effect of review type on perceived fairness ($F(2, 85) = 72.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .63$). Specifically, the unfair negative review was perceived as less fair (M = 2.55, SD = 1.30) than the fair negative review (M = 5.70, SD = .91; $t(85) = 11.14$, $p < .001$) and the positive review (M = 5.34, SD = 1.02; $t(85) = 9.72$, $p < .001$). The latter two conditions were not significantly different from each other ($t(85) = 1.27$, $p > .20$). These results support the validity of our fairness manipulation.

Results

A generalized linear model (GLM) analysis controlling for review rudeness revealed a main effect of review type on purchase amount ($F(2, 84) = 6.47$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$). As we anticipated, donation amounts were lower following the fair negative review (M = $6.58, SD = $7.36) versus the unfair negative review (M = $13.57, SD = $6.05; $t(85) = 4.04$, $p < .001$) and the positive review (M = $12.76, SD = $6.35; $t(85) = 3.60$, $p = .001$). The latter two conditions did not significantly differ ($t < 1$).

Discussion

Study 1a uses a behavioral measure to demonstrate that unfair negative reviews can lead to more positive consumer responses than fair negative reviews. In this study, unfair negative reviews lead to similarly positive responses as positive reviews. Importantly, we show that the perceived rudeness of the review does not appear to drive the observed effect, given that the results emerge even when statistically controlling for rudeness. Studies 1b replicates these findings in a for-profit context.

Study 1b

Method

Participants and design. Two hundred twenty-three undergraduate students were recruited from marketing classes to take part in exchange for a product raffle (57% female; $M_{age} = 20.7$ years). As in Study 1a, Study 1b utilized a one-factor, three-level (review type: fair negative vs. unfair negative vs. positive) between-participants design.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of three versions of a review that described a previous purchase from a reusable water bottle company. In the fair negative review, the reviewer complained about not receiving an answer for two weeks after contacting customer service. In the unfair negative review, the customer complained about not being able to reach customer service on Christmas Eve. In the positive-review condition, the review mentioned receiving an answer within 24 hours of reaching the company. The positive review also ended with “If you have a deadline during the week, this company works. Good experience.” This study kept review length constant and asked the dependent variable immediately after the review (for the full stimuli, see Figure 2). Participants rated their purchase intentions (1 = “unlikely/improbable,” and 7 = “very likely/very probable”; r = .91) and, afterward, their level of empathy for the company using three scales: “empathy,” “sympathy,” and “compassion” (1 = “not at all,” and 9 = “very much”; $\alpha = .88$; adapted from Fredrickson et al. [2003]). Participants were then told that, as a token of gratitude, they would be entered into a raffle to receive either a bottle

[4] The fairness measure acts as a manipulation check for Study 1a. Stimuli in all other studies were pretested separately, and the results of these appear in the Web Appendix.

Fair Negative Review (M = 5.01, SD = 1.30)	Unfair Negative Review (M = 2.82, SD = 1.62)	Positive Review (M = 5.90, SD = .66)
Taiga Hard Fail. Don't do business with this company if you want things handled right!! I had a question about an order. They provide an email, so I sent them an email with a question. They did not answer for TWO WEEKS! They're awful! If you have a deadline during the typical work week, when they should definitely be working. Forget it!	Taiga Hard Fail. Don't do business with this company if you want things handled right!! I had a question about an order. They provide an email, so I sent them an email the day before Christmas. They did not answer until AFTER CHRISTMAS! They're awful! If you have a deadline during the Christmas holidays, when they definitely should be working. Forget it!	Taiga Bottle. Consider doing business with this company if you want things handled right. I had a question about an order. They provide an email, so I sent them an email with a question. While the response wasn't immediate, they got back to me within 24 hours. If you have a deadline during the week, this company works. Good experience.

Figure 2. Study 1b: Review type manipulation.
Notes: The review was rated whether it was "fair," "deserved," "justified," and "reasonable" (1 = "strongly disagree," and 7 = "strongly agree")

worth $25 from the reviewed company or a $15 gift card. They would receive three raffle tickets and could allot their tickets between the two raffles.

Results

Purchase intentions. An analysis of variance revealed a main effect of review type on purchase intentions (F(2, 220) = 15.82, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$). Purchase intentions were lower following the fair negative review (M = 3.66, SD = 1.30) compared with the unfair negative review (M = 4.78, SD = 1.23; t(220) = 5.21, $p < .001$) and the positive review (M = 4.61, SD = 1.41; t(220) = 4.44, $p < .001$). The latter two conditions were not significantly different from each other ($t < 1$).

Empathy for the firm. Results revealed a main effect of review type on empathy (F(2, 220) = 36.25, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$). Empathy was higher for unfair negative reviews (M = 4.95, SD = 1.26) compared with the fair negative reviews (M = 3.12, SD = 1.27; t(220) = 8.44, $p < .001$) and positive reviews (M = 3.82, SD = 1.42; t(220) = 5.22, $p < .001$). The latter two conditions were also significantly different from each other (t(220) = 3.24, $p = .001$).

Bottle choice. Results revealed a main effect of review type on the choice of raffle tickets for the bottle (F(2, 220) = 2.82, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$). Choice of the reviewed bottle tickets was higher after the unfair negative review (M = 1.55, SD = 1.30) compared with the fair negative review (M = 1.14, SD = 1.19; t(220) = 2.02, $p < .05$) or the positive review (M = 1.12, SD = 1.29; t(220) = 2.10, $p < .05$). The latter two conditions did not differ in terms of product choice ($t < 1$).

Discussion

Replicating Study 1a, this study found that the unfair negative review led to more positive purchase intentions and greater choice of the reviewed product as compared with the fair-negative-review condition. Interestingly, in Study 1a, we found that unfair negative reviews resulted in firm support on par with positive reviews, while Study 1b shows that unfair negative reviews resulted in greater firm support when we look at the behavioral choice measure. As discussed in footnote 2, we do believe that this is likely due to the calibration of the positive reviews. However, this does not take away from our focal prediction and finding that unfair negative reviews can increase supportive consumer behaviors compared with fair negative reviews.

Study 2

Studies 1a and 1b found that unfair negative reviews can lead to responses that are similar to or more positive in favorability to those arising from positive reviews. However, one interesting question is: What are the conditions under which responses to unfair negative reviews can be *more favorable* than positive reviews? According to just-world theory, unfairness creates an imbalance that people feel motivated to resolve (Carlsmith, Darley, and Robinson 2002; Darley, Carlsmith, and Robinson 2000). One possibility is that the greater the degree of unfairness, the greater the restorative response. This reasoning suggests that reading a review that activates perceptions of high unfairness (vs. moderate unfairness) could increase the favorability of consumer responses—to a point where those responses might even become *more* favorable than those arising from positive reviews. In this study, we examine the role of the degree of unfairness evoked by the review in determining consumer responses. We also cast doubt on the alternative explanation that the effect is driven by perceptions of controllability (i.e., the unfair conditions are less controllable by the firm; Weiner 1980) by demonstrating that our effects emerge even when unfair negative reviews are given in situations under the firm's control. Finally, we measure empathy and show that it mediates the focal effect.

Method

Participants and design. Three hundred twelve undergraduate students participated in exchange for credit (51% female; M_{age} = 20.9 years). The experiment was a one-factor, four-level (review type: fair negative vs. moderately unfair negative vs. highly unfair negative vs. positive), between-participants design. The dependent variable was the willingness to pay.

Procedure. Participants read an online review for a new local (fictitious) sushi restaurant. In all conditions, the reviewer described the relative enjoyment of their meal. In the positive-review condition, the customer described leaving the restaurant feeling full and recommended the restaurant. In the fair-negative-review condition, the reviewer described leaving the restaurant feeling hungry and finished the review by "NOT" recommending the restaurant. In both unfair-negative-review conditions, the reviewer did "NOT" recommend the restaurant. In addition, the reviewer expressed disappointment over the unavailability of the toro sashimi listed on the menu and, consequently, showed disregard for the restaurant. In the moderately-unfair-negative-review condition, the item was unavailable because it was sold out at the pier. In the highly-unfair-negative-review condition, the item was unavailable in the restaurant (despite being available at the pier) because the chef had heard that it made consumers at other restaurants sick and consequently took it off the menu (for the full stimuli, see Web Appendix F). These conditions were pretested to show that the highly unfair negative condition was perceived to be significantly more unfair than the moderately unfair negative condition ($p < .05$; for detailed pretest results, see Web Appendix F).

After reading the review, participants rated their feelings of empathy toward the restaurant using the same nine-point scale as in Study 1b ($\alpha = .91$). Participants then reported their willingness to pay for a dinner for two people (excluding drinks) at the restaurant using a sliding scale anchored at \$0 and \$200. Finally, participants rated the reviewer rudeness (same measure as Study 1a).

Results

Willingness to pay. A GLM analysis controlling for rudeness revealed a significant effect of review type on willingness to pay ($F(3, 307) = 5.55, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .05$; Figure 3). Participants reported a lower willingness to pay after viewing the fair negative review (M = \$38.78, SD = \$16.69) compared with the moderately unfair negative review (M = \$45.65, SD = \$18.66; $t(308) = 2.07, p < .05$), the highly unfair negative review (M = \$52.94, SD = \$20.56; $t(308) = 4.24, p < .001$), and the positive review (M = \$45.55, SD = \$26.08; $t(308) = 2.03, p < .05$). The highly unfair negative review led to greater willingness to pay than did the moderately unfair negative review ($t(308) = 2.19, p < .05$). The moderately unfair negative review led to similar willingness to pay as the positive review ($t < 1$). Finally, participants were willing to pay

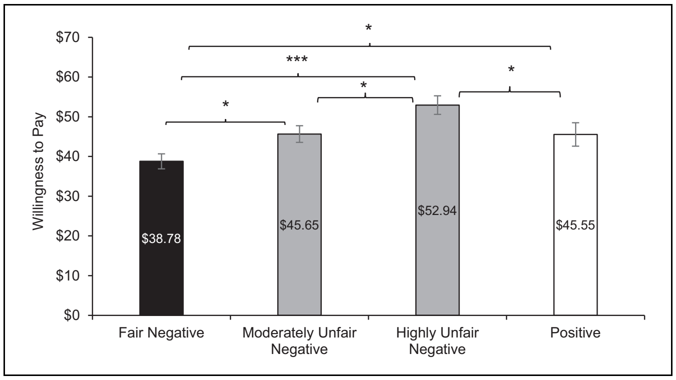

Figure 3. Study 2: Willingness to pay as a function of review type.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.
Notes: Error bars = ±1 SEs.

significantly more in the highly-unfair-negative condition versus the positive-review condition ($t(308) = 2.21, p < .05$).

Empathy for the firm. A GLM analysis controlling for rudeness revealed a significant effect of review type on empathy for the restaurant ($F(3, 307) = 23.39, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .19$) and a significant effect of the covariate $F(1, 307) = 9.94, p < .01$). The highly unfair negative review (M = 5.85, SD = 1.39) led to marginally more empathy than the moderately unfair negative review (M = 5.43, SD = 1.48; $t(308) = 1.72, p = .09$). In addition, the highly unfair negative review led to significantly more empathy than the positive review (M = 4.46, SD = 1.57; $t(308) = 5.64, p < .001$) and the fair negative review (M = 3.44, SD = 1.69; $t(308) = 9.76, p < .001$). The moderately-unfair-negative-review condition also led to more empathy than the fair negative review ($t(308) = 8.10, p < .001$) and the positive review ($t(308) = 3.95, p < .001$). These two latter conditions were significantly different from each other ($t(308) = 4.14, p < .001$).

Mediation. As a test for our proposed process explanation, we ran the following test of indirect effect: Review Type → Empathy → Willingness to Pay, using dummy-coded variables as predictors (using the fair negative condition as the reference category: D1 = moderately unfair negative, D2 = highly unfair negative, D3 = positive) and controlling for rudeness (PROCESS Model 4). The results revealed three significant indirect effects for the dummy-coded variables representing the highly-unfair-negative (b = 5.10, SE = 1.93; 95% confidence interval [CI_{95}] = [1.63, 9.07]), moderately-unfair-negative (b = 4.12, SE = 1.65; CI_{95} = [1.30, 7.74]), and positive (b = 1.94, SE = .97; CI_{95} = [.27, 4.00]) review conditions. Simply put, these results are consistent with an explanation in which, over and above the effects of reviewer rudeness, higher willingness to pay in the unfair negative review condition compared with the fair negative review can be attributed to consumers' heightened feelings of empathy for the firm (for detailed results, see Web Appendix F).

Discussion

Study 2 provides insight into when unfair negative reviews might result in firm outcomes that are more favorable than (vs. similar to) those in response to positive reviews. We demonstrate that the degree of perceived unfairness amplifies the positivity of responses to the firm. In particular, highly unfair negative reviews resulted in more favorable consumer responses compared with fair negative, moderately unfair negative, and positive reviews. This is theoretically important because it also rules out an alternative explanation for the results of Study 1a—that the perception of unfairness occurred because of a discounting of the negative information completely, leading to a null effect (Laczniak, DeCarlo, and Ramaswami 2001). We instead observed responses that suggest that consumers are attending to the unfair negative information, which can lead to even more favorable responses than positive reviews.

Furthermore, Study 2 tested for evidence of empathy as our underlying process. The results revealed that empathy does indeed mediate the observed effects. Importantly, our results remain significant even while we control for perceived rudeness, suggesting that rudeness does not adequately account for the observed results. In Study 3, we further examine the role of empathy by manipulating participants' ability to experience empathy toward the firm.

Study 3

Study 3 provides additional evidence for empathy as the underlying mechanism by demonstrating that positive consumer responses to unfair negative reviews are moderated by participants' ability to experience empathy. Previous work has found that state empathy can be manipulated through a perspective-taking task (Batson et al. 1997; Stotland 1969; Toi and Batson 1982). In the context of consumer reviews, readers can adopt either the perspective of the firm's employees or the perspective of the reviewer. Arguably, taking the perspective of the firm's employees should induce empathy toward the firm, while taking the view of the reviewer should not. If our prediction that unfair negative reviews naturally evoke greater empathy toward the firm is correct, we would expect that adopting the perspective of the employees (i.e., empathizing with the firm) when evaluating unfair negative reviews should result in similarly favorable responses response as a control condition, where no perspective is prompted. However, instructions to take the reviewer's perspective should reduce the ability to empathize with the firm and lead to less favorable consumer responses to unfair negative reviews.

Importantly, in this context, the perspective-taking prompts should not be effective in changing consumer responses when the review is fair—negative or positive. This is because fair negative reviews do not have content that would elicit empathy toward the firm, and whether the participant takes the reviewer's or the employee's perspective does not remove the instances of firm failure. Similarly, there is no room for movement on empathy for the positive condition because neither the reviewer nor the firm has done anything warranting an other-than-positive response. Thus, we would expect the effects of perspective-taking manipulations to be muted in those conditions. This study also kept the review length (i.e., word count) consistent across conditions to increase experimental control and presented the focal review along with another review to increase realism. Again, we measured and controlled for reviewer rudeness.

Method

Participants and design. Six hundred fifteen participants recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) took part in this study (46% female; $M_{age} = 40.4$ years), which had a 3 (review type: fair negative vs. unfair negative vs. positive) $\times$ 3 (empathy manipulation: employee perspective vs. reviewer perspective vs. control) between-participants design. The dependent variable was restaurant evaluations.

Procedure. Adapting a procedure from Batson and colleagues (Batson and Ahmad 2001; Batson and Moran 1999), we gave participants in the employee's-perspective condition the following instructions: "Try to imagine how the restaurant employees feel about what is described. Try to imagine how they were affected and feel as a result." In the reviewer's-perspective condition, participants were instructed, "Try to imagine how the reviewer feels about what is described. Try to imagine how he/she was affected and feels as a result." The control condition prompted participants to "Try to imagine what is described in as much detail as possible. Try to imagine what is going to happen as a result." It is important to note that if unfair negative reviews naturally evoke empathy, the manipulation is worded in such a way that the employee-perspective and control conditions should yield similar results.

Next, participants read the focal restaurant review. Across the two negative-review conditions, the customer recalled not being able to get his panini warmed because the kitchen had started cleaning either 55 minutes before (fair condition) or 5 minutes before (unfair condition) closing time. In the positive-review condition, the customer recalled being able to get the panini warmed even though the kitchen was about to start cleaning (for stimuli and pretests, see Web Appendix G). The review length was kept constant. Participants evaluated the restaurant on three seven-point scales, "negative–positive," "bad–good," and "dislike–like" ($\alpha = .98$). Then, on a different page, participants rated the reviewer rudeness (same measure as in previous studies).

Results

Using dummy-coded multicategorical predictors while controlling for reviewer rudeness, we regressed the restaurant evaluation on review type (with the unfair negative review condition as the reference category; X1 = fair negative, X2 = positive) and empathy manipulation (using the employee-perspective

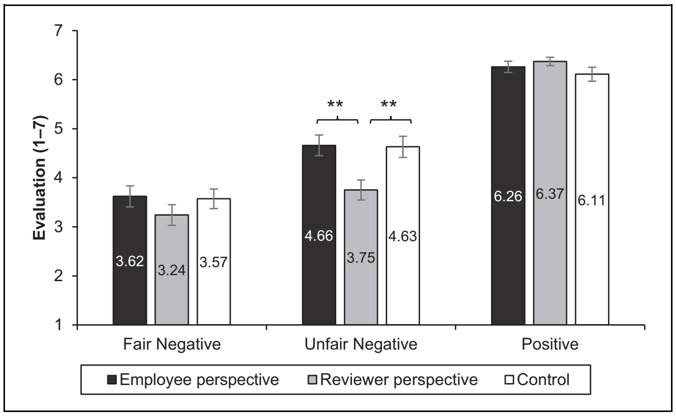

Figure 4. Study 3: Patronage intentions as a function of negative-review fairness and perspective manipulation.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.
Notes: Error bars = ±1 SEs.

condition as the reference category; W1 = control, W2 = reviewer-perspective condition; PROCESS Model 1). Results revealed a significant interaction between the positive-review variable and the reviewer-perspective dummy variable ($\beta = .13$, b = .77, SE = .36; t(605) = 2.16, $p < .05$), as well as two main effects of the review types (fair negative: $\beta = -.18$, b = −.75, SE = .25; t(605) = 2.93, $p < .01$; positive: $\beta = .59$, b = 2.41, SE = .28; t(605) = 8.68, $p < .001$). We also observed main effects of the reviewer-perspective dummy variable ($\beta = -.19$, b = −.76, SE = .25; t(605) = 3.02, $p < .01$) and of the rudeness covariate ($\beta = .26$, b = .23, SE = .03; t(605) = 6.85, $p < .001$; Figure 4).

A simple effects analysis controlling for rudeness and using a least significant difference test shows that, overall, the positive review led to more positive evaluations (M = 6.25, SD = .97) than the unfair negative review (M = 4.35, SD = 1.75; $p < .001$) and the fair negative review (M = 3.48, SD = 1.74; $p < .001$). The latter two conditions were significantly different from each other ($p < .001$). More importantly, a simple main effect of the empathy manipulation emerged only for those in the unfair-negative-review condition (F(2,605) = 6.09, $p < .01$). As we anticipated, for those exposed to the unfair negative review, adopting the reviewer perspective resulted in lower restaurant evaluations (M = 3.75, SD = 1.66) than did adopting the employee perspective (M = 4.66, SD = 1.75; $p < .01$) or being in the control condition (M = 4.63, SD = 1.72; $p < .01$). The latter two conditions did not significantly differ ($p > .95$). This crucial result suggests that unfair negative reviews naturally evoke responses akin to taking an empathetic perspective toward the firm.

Discussion

By manipulating participants' ability to empathize with either the reviewer or the firm's employees, Study 3 provides support for empathy as the process underlying our effects using a moderation approach. Importantly, one main postulation is that unfair negative reviews naturally elicit an empathetic response toward the firm. Thus, in finding no differences between the employee's-perspective and control conditions, this study offers support for the proposition that unfair negative reviews naturally elicit empathetic responses,[5] which motivate greater firm support. However, focusing on the reviewer's (vs. the firm) perspective diminished this natural tendency to empathize with the service provider among those in the negative-review condition. Thus, when the ability to empathize with the firm is thwarted in some way, unfair negative reviews no longer lead to positive responses. In previous studies, it could be argued that elements of the design, such as measuring the dependent variable right after the review, having potential differences in review length, or perceived rudeness of the review could play a role in driving the observed effects. This study casts doubt on these alternative explanations by measuring the dependent variable right after the review, keeping the review length constant across conditions, and controlling for reviewer rudeness.

One might wonder why the employee's-perspective manipulation did not lead to an increase in responses to the firm for either the fair-negative or the positive-review condition. Given that no content within the reviews would result in greater empathy toward the firm, we would not expect this perspective manipulation to increase empathy or firm evaluations. For example, in the fair-negative-review condition, the employees are still clearly at fault for the negative review—they had decided to start closing early, so taking the employee's perspective should not have made the review seem any less fair. Thus, it is not surprising that the empathy manipulation did not influence responses to the fair negative or positive review. In the subsequent studies, we examine managerially relevant manipulations to increase empathy in the context of fair negative and positive reviews (i.e., reviews that do not naturally evoke empathy). If empathy can result in more positive responses to the firm, finding a way to increase empathetic responses toward reviews that do not evoke them naturally should be beneficial.

Study 4

Study 4 tests a managerial intervention that can enhance empathetic responses to reviews: firm responses. Social media strategists often suggest that using a person to represent a firm is more engaging to consumers than just a firm avatar. The reasoning behind this managerial wisdom is that providing person-like cues such as the first-person language in firm communication or a profile picture of the corresponding individual may enhance perceptions of similarity and, thus, empathetic concern (Harrison and Hall 2010). We expect that firms facing

[5] A pretest of review stimuli provides additional support for this concept by showing that unfair negative reviews led to higher empathy than did fair negative or positive reviews. See Web Appendix G.

negative reviews can activate more consumer empathy by replying in a way that activates consumer empathy (i.e., by speaking as a firm employee instead of as the firm itself) as opposed to communication that does not activate consumer empathy. Using a moderation approach, we show that a managerially relevant intervention can increase empathy for those reviews that are not naturally empathy-evoking. If increased empathy can have a positive effect on firm responses, then finding ways to increase empathetic response should allow for positive firm responses regardless of review type. Specifically, we suggest that increased empathy will lead those exposed to fair negative and positive reviews to report higher levels of both empathy and positive firm support intentions. However, because the baseline effect of unfair negative reviews is increased empathy, an additional empathy boost is unlikely to increase empathy perceptions for consumers exposed to the unfair-negative-review condition.

Method

Participants and design. Five hundred ninety-nine participants recruited through MTurk participated in this experiment in exchange for monetary compensation (44% female; M_{age} = 38.4 years). The experiment used a 3 (review type: fair negative vs. unfair negative vs. positive) × 2 (firm response type: neutral vs. empathetic) between-participants design. The dependent variable was purchase intentions toward the firm described in the review.

Procedure. We asked participants to read an online review from a consumer who had recently ordered a set of garden tools from a hardware store. Constant across the conditions, the consumer described how he received the tools in good condition but noted that the selection was limited. In the positive review, the customer gave a four-star review and praised the tools. In the fair-negative-review condition, the customer gave a one-star review and added a complaint about the low quality after using the tools. In the unfair-negative-review condition, the customer gave a one-star review and complained about not being able to return the tools to the store in the fall after using them to do garden work. Review length was held constant across conditions. Each review was presented with a firm reply prompting a follow-up with the customer. In the neutral-response condition, the response was generic (i.e., featuring a generic logo image and no details regarding the review) and directed the customer to a generic customer-service email for follow-up. In the empathetic response condition, the response was instead more apologetic and personable (i.e., featuring a person image and providing details regarding the review). The manipulation was presented in a manner that resembled a real review page (see Web Appendix H).

Participants once again rated their feelings of empathy toward the firm (α = .97); the extent to which they would consider supporting the focal firm if they were looking to purchase garden tools, using two seven-point bipolar scales (“unlikely–likely” and “improbable–probable”; α = .93); and

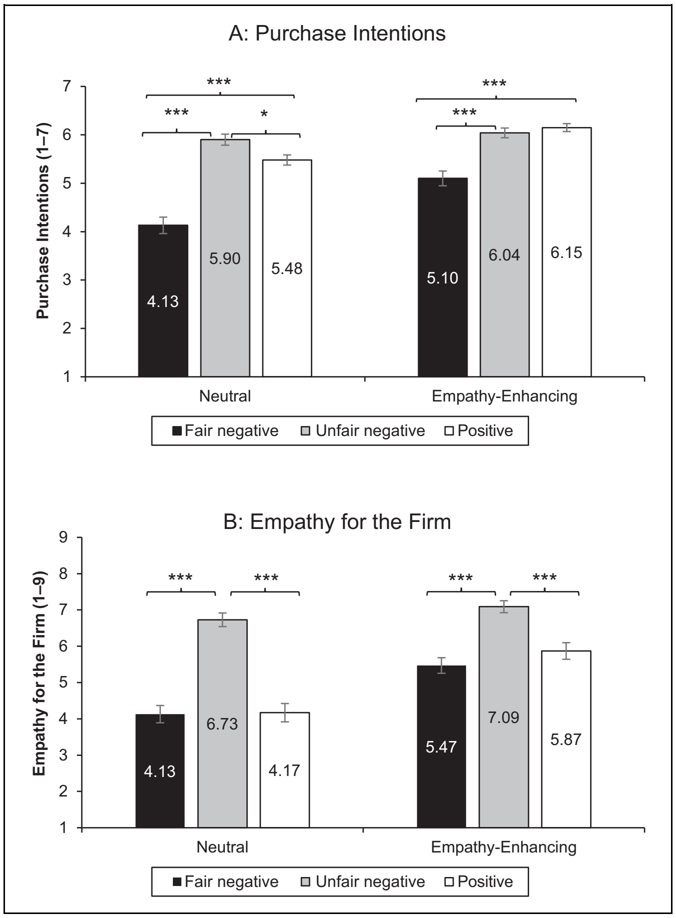

Figure 5. Study 4: Purchase intentions and empathy for the firm as functions of review type and firm response.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.
Notes: Error bars= ±1 SEs.

the extent to which they perceived the review to be rude (as in previous studies). The results presented next control for rudeness.

Results

Purchase intentions. We regressed purchase intentions on review type (dummy-coded multicategorical predictor using the unfair-negative-review condition as the reference category; X1 = fair negative, X2 = positive) and firm response type (coded as 0 = neutral, 1 = empathetic; PROCESS model 1). Results revealed two significant interactions between the response type and the two review-type dummy variables (fair negative review × response type: β = .13, b = .50, SE = .25; t(592) = 2.02, $p < .05$; positive review × response type: β = .22, b = .83, SE = .25; t(592) = 3.38, $p < .001$). We also observed main effects of the positive-review dummy variable (β = −.50, b = −1.54, SE = .18; t(592) = 8.53, $p < .001$) and of the rudeness covariate (β = .19, b = .13, SE = .03; t(592) = 5.60, $p < .001$; for details, see Figure 5).

We further probed these results with a series of contrasts. In the neutral-response condition, we replicated our typical pattern of results where, compared with the fair negative review (M = 4.13, SD = 1.71), purchase intentions were higher in the unfair-negative-review (M = 5.90, SD = 1.14; $t(593) = 10.03$, $p < .001$) and positive-review (M = 5.48, SD = 1.05; $t(593) = 7.66$, $p < .001$) conditions. These latter two conditions were significantly different from one another ($t(593) = 2.32$, $p < .05$). In the empathetic response condition, the fair negative review condition led to lower purchase intentions (M = 5.10, SD = 1.54), than the unfair negative review (M = 6.04, SD = 1.00; $t(593) = 5.25$, $p < .001$) and positive review (M = 6.15, SD = .81; $t(593) = 5.91$, $p < .001$). These latter two conditions were not significantly different from one another ($t < 1$). Stated differently, as anticipated, we observed significantly higher purchase intentions between the empathetic and neutral firm responses for the fair negative ($t(593) = 5.53$, $p < .001$) and positive reviews ($t(593) = 3.75$, $p < .001$), but not for the unfair negative review ($t < 1$).

Empathy for the firm. We regressed empathy ratings on review type and firm response type (PROCESS Model 1; same coding as previously). Results revealed two significant interactions between the response type and the two review-type dummy variables (fair negative review × response type: $\beta = .19$, b = 1.22, SE = .39; $t(592) = 3.13$, $p < .01$; positive review × response type: $\beta = .15$, b = .96, SE = .39; $t(592) = 2.47$, $p = .01$). We also observed main effects of the fair negative review dummy ($\beta = -.23$, b = −1.17, SE = .30; $t(592) = 3.94$, $p < .001$), positive review dummy ($\beta = -.32$, b = −1.65, SE = .28; $t(592) = 5.81$, $p < .001$), and the rudeness covariate ($\beta = .45$, b = .54, SE = .05; $t(652) = 12.01$, $p < .001$). We probed these results with a series of contrasts. In the neutral-response condition, we replicated our typical pattern of results where the unfair negative review (M = 6.73, SD = 1.89) led to higher feelings of empathy than the fair negative review (M = 4.13, SD = 2.39; $t(593) = 8.52$, $p < .001$) and the positive review (M = 4.17, SD = 2.51; $t(593) = 8.35$, $p < .001$). These latter two conditions did not significantly differ ($t < 1$). The pattern of results was similar in the empathetic response, where the unfair negative review (M = 7.09, SD = 1.63) led to higher feelings of empathy than the fair negative review (M = 5.47, SD = 2.16; $t(593) = 5.27$, $p < .001$) and the positive review (M = 5.87, SD = 2.28; $t(593) = 3.94$, $p < .001$). These latter two conditions were not significantly different from one another ($t(593) = 1.31$, $p = .19$). In other words, we observed a significant increase in feelings of empathy in the empathy-enhancing-response versus the neutral-response condition for the fair negative review ($t(593) = 4.39$, $p < .001$) and positive review ($t(593) = 5.52$, $p < .001$), but not for the unfair negative review ($t(593) = 1.17$, $p > .20$). This result is consistent with our prediction that firm responses can evoke empathy within conditions that do not naturally elicit empathy.

Moderated mediation. We ran a moderated-mediation analysis to test whether our observed pattern of results between the firm-response manipulation and review type on the purchase intentions could be explained by variations in empathy for the firm (PROCESS Model 7). Results revealed two significant indexes of moderated mediation at each review-type level (X1 [fair negative review]: b = .31, SE = .11; CI_{95} = [.11, .54]; X2 [positive review]: b = .24, SE = .10; CI_{95} = [.06, .46]), suggesting that the observed increase in purchase intentions in the empathetic response (vs. neutral) condition is mediated by empathy in those two review conditions.

Discussion

Study 4 explored whether a managerial intervention can enhance empathetic feelings and supportive responses toward the firm. We find that when a firm responds to a review in a highly empathetic way, it can evoke both consumer empathy and more favorable purchase intentions in response to reviews that are not naturally empathy-evoking. In other words, by recognizing that unfair negative reviews naturally evoke consumer empathy, we show that managers can harness empathy to improve consumer responses to fair negative and positive consumer reviews. Our results also demonstrate that interventions aimed at increasing empathy as a motivation for increased patronage are most effective for reviews that are not already high in empathy (i.e., the fair negative and positive reviews; for detailed results, see Web Appendix H). In these cases, unfair negative reviews are akin to having a ceiling effect on empathy.

Study 5

Study 5 uses another managerially relevant intervention to examine the moderating role of increased empathy for the firm. In particular, we investigate how firms can boost customer empathy by using a narrative to increase perspective taking. Recently, an emerging and managerially actionable marketing practice is to provide information about the employee or the particular manufacturer of a product in the form of employee "spotlights." For example, Lush Cosmetics, a company that makes all of its products by hand, includes a label informing consumers about the employee who made their product (for other examples, see Web Appendix J). Prior work by Batson (2011) shows that a "spotlight" on victims increases perspective taking and empathy (see also Bamberg 1991; Bloom 2017). These manipulations make the beneficiary's point of view more tangible (Small and Loewenstein 2003), which increases empathetic concern and subsequent helping (Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic 2007). In a retail context, an employee spotlight (with a description and picture of the sales employee) was shown to increase consumer perspective taking and empathetic response (Main, Guo, and White 2019). We predict that a spotlight manipulation will increase empathy in response to reviews that are not naturally empathy-evoking (positive and fair negative), which should lead to more positive responses. We do not expect the spotlight manipulation to increase further empathy generated by an unfair negative review.

Method

Participants and design. Six hundred forty-two participants recruited through MTurk took part (46% female; $M_{age} = 38.2$ years) in a 3 (review type: fair negative vs. unfair negative vs. positive) × 2 (employee-spotlight manipulation: absent vs. present) between-participants study design. The dependent variable was the value of coffee-shop vouchers selected.

Procedure. Before reading a review for a coffee shop, half of the participants were assigned to receive an employee spotlight manipulation. Specifically, participants read a short "Meet Your Barista" article introducing Alicia, a (fictitious) barista at a coffee shop. In the article, Alicia describes various aspects of her job, such as her favorite coffee drink and one thing she wishes she could do better in her job. Participants in the employee-spotlight-absent condition proceeded directly to the review evaluation.

Next, participants read the focal review. All conditions included a customer's description of trying this new coffee shop for the first time. Participants learned that the customer mentioned the odd taste of the hazelnut syrup in their drink and that the barista replied that it was a different brand than usual. In the fair-negative-review condition, the customer complained about the barista not addressing the issue and about the price of the drink at $7.50. In the unfair negative review, the barista made the $3.50 drink complimentary. There was an additional complaint in the unfair negative review that the barista did not provide an apology. In the positive review, the barista offered to make the drink complimentary, but the customers "told her it wasn't a big deal and not to worry." Review length was kept constant, and the review was presented along with another review to increase realism (for the stimuli, see Figure 6). We measured empathy toward the firm ($\alpha = .95$). Then, as our main incentive-compatible dependent variable, we told participants that the coffee shop described in the scenario would be celebrating the opening of its new online store with up to 75% off coffee beans, apparel, and gear. Participants learned that one person would be randomly selected to receive a bonus of $40, but that part of that bonus could be exchanged for vouchers at the coffee shop at half the cost (e.g., $1 = $2 vouchers). We reminded participants that this was a real choice and asked them to provide us with the bonus amount they would want to exchange for vouchers (for stimuli and manipulation checks, see Web Appendix I).

Results

Voucher value. We regressed the voucher value on review type (dummy-coded multicategorical predictor using the unfair negative review as the reference category; X1 = fair negative, X2 = positive) and employee spotlight (coded as 0 = absent, 1 = present; PROCESS Model 1). Results revealed two significant interactions between the employee spotlight and the two review-type dummy variables (fair negative × spotlight: $\beta = .19$, $b = .76$, $SE = .26$; $t(636) = 2.92$, $p < .01$; positive × spotlight: $\beta = .15$, $b = .61$, $SE = .26$; $t(636) = 2.34$, $p < .05$). We also observed main effects of the fair negative ($\beta = -.55$, $b = -1.76$, $SE = .19$; $t(636) = 9.53$, $p < .001$) and the positive review ($\beta = -.13$, $b = -.41$, $SE = .18$; $t(636) = 2.22$, $p < .05$; Figure 7). Contrasts revealed that in the spotlight-absent condition, we replicated the basic effect: voucher value was lower in the fair-negative-review ($M = \$4.07$, $SD = \$1.98$) versus the unfair-negative review ($M = \$5.83$, $SD = \$1.17$; $t(636) = 9.53$, $p < .001$) and the positive-review ($M = \$5.42$, $SD = \$1.23$; $t(636) = 7.34$, $p < .001$) conditions. The unfair-negative and the positive conditions did significantly differ from each other ($t(636) = 2.22$, $p < .05$). In the spotlight-present condition, the voucher value was lower for the fair-negative-review condition ($M = \$5.03$, $SD = \$1.55$) compared with the unfair negative ($M = \$6.03$, $SD = \$1.01$; $t(636) = 5.43$, $p < .001$) and the positive ($M = \$6.23$, $SD = \$.83$; $t(636) = 6.57$, $p < .001$) review conditions. The latter two conditions did not differ significantly ($t(636) = 1.09$, $p > .25$). Stated differently, we observed a significant increase in voucher value in the employee-spotlight present compared with absent condition for the fair negative review ($t(636) = 5.22$, $p < .001$) and positive review ($t(636) = 4.41$, $p < .001$) conditions, but not for the unfair negative review condition ($t(636) = 1.07$, $p > .25$). Thus, the employee spotlight increased spending in conditions that do not naturally elicit a high level of empathy.

Empathy for the firm. Using the same coding as previously, we regressed empathy on review type and employee spotlight. Results revealed two significant interactions between the employee spotlight and the two review-type dummy variables (fair negative × spotlight: $\beta = .19$, $b = 1.15$, $SE = .40$; $t(636) = 2.89$, $p < .01$; positive × spotlight: $\beta = .14$, $b = .84$, $SE = .40$; $t(636) = 2.12$, $p < .05$). We also observed main effects of the fair negative ($\beta = -.53$, $b = -2.51$, $SE = .28$; $t(636) = 8.89$, $p < .001$) and the positive review ($\beta = -.43$, $b = -2.06$, $SE = .28$; $t(636) = 7.32$, $p < .001$). We explore this pattern of results for in a series of contrasts. We replicated our general pattern of results in the spotlight-absent condition, such that the empathy was lower for the fair negative review ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 2.47$) compared with the unfair negative review ($M = 6.86$, $SD = 1.49$; $t(636) = 8.89$, $p < .001$), but it did not differ from the positive-review condition ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 2.10$; $t(636) = 1.59$, $p > .10$). The unfair-negative and the positive conditions were also significantly different from each other ($t(636) = 7.32$, $p < .001$). This supports our proposition that unfair negative reviews naturally evoke higher empathy. In the spotlight-present condition, the empathy was lower in the fair-negative-review condition ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 2.12$) compared with the unfair-negative-review condition ($M = 6.76$, $SD = 1.79$; $t(636) = 4.84$, $p < .001$), but it did not differ from the positive-review condition ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 2.20$; $t < 1$). The latter two conditions were significantly different from each other ($t(636) = 4.34$, $p < .001$). As we predicted, there was a significant increase in empathy between the spotlight-present and spotlight-absent conditions for the fair-negative-review ($t(636) = 3.73$, $p < .001$) and positive-review ($t(636) = 2.66$, $p = .01$) conditions, but not for the unfair-negative-review

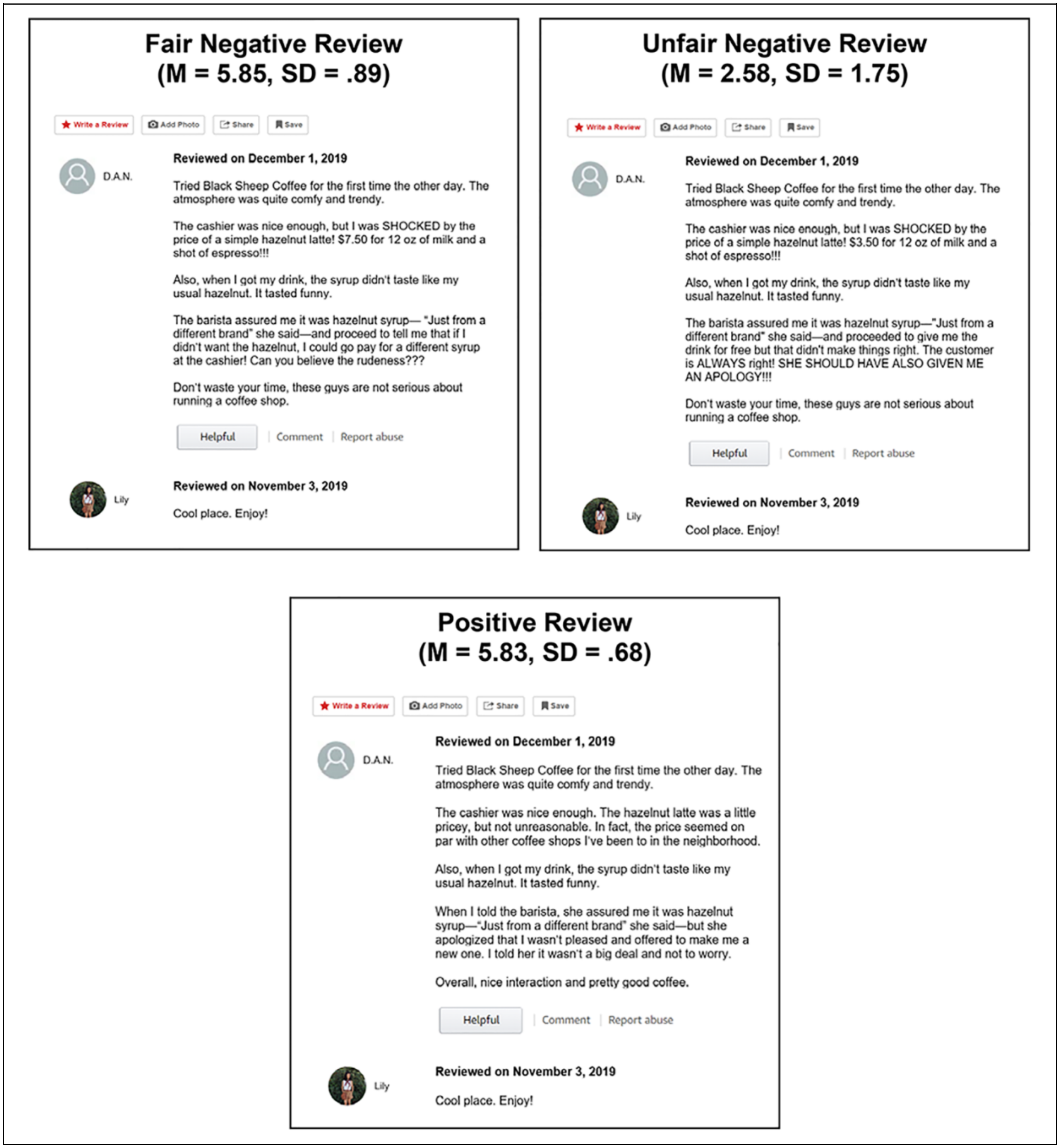

Figure 6. Study 5: Review type manipulation.
Notes: The review was Fair, Deserved, Justified, and Reasonable (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

condition ($t < 1$). This suggests that the spotlight manipulation increased empathy for the fair negative and positive reviews.

Moderated mediation. We used moderated-mediation analysis to test whether our observed pattern of results was mediated by empathy (PROCESS model 7). Results revealed two significant indexes of moderated mediation at each review-type level (X1 [fair negative review]: $b = .31$, $SE = .11$; $CI_{95} = [.10, .55]$; X2 [positive review]: $b = .23$, $SE = .11$; $CI_{95} = [.03, .45]$), suggesting that the observed differences in voucher value as a

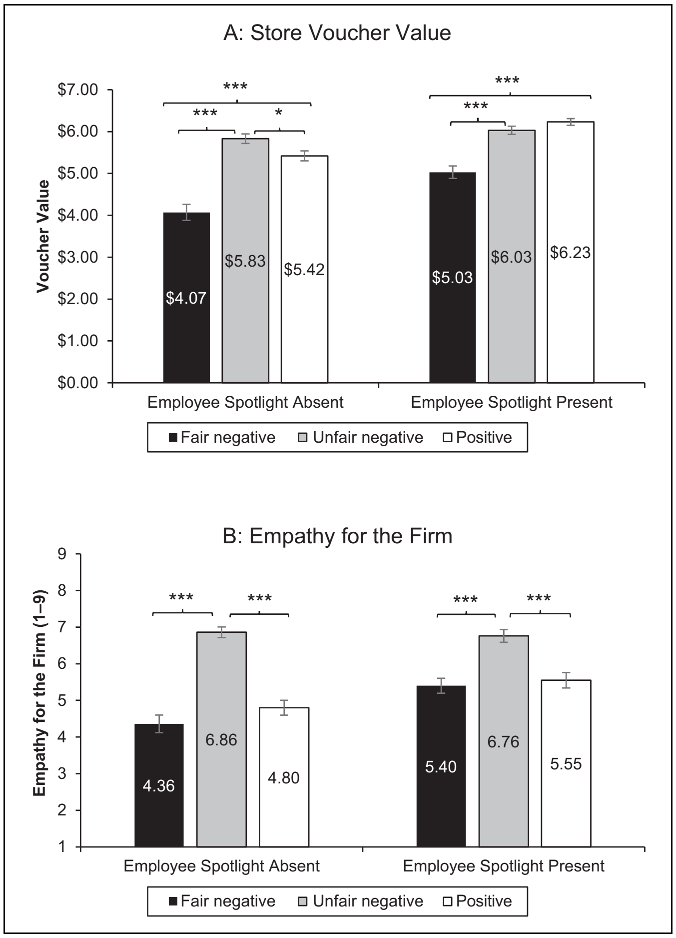

Figure 7. Study 5: Store voucher value selected and empathy for the firm as functions of review type and employee-spotlight manipulation.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.
Notes: Error bars $= \pm 1$ SEs.

function of the employee spotlight are driven by an increase in empathy for those two review conditions.

Discussion

In Study 5, we find that an employee spotlight can effectively increase empathetic responding to reviews that are not naturally empathy-evoking (i.e., fair negative and positive reviews). This increased empathy led to higher firm support. Taken together, the results provide evidence for the notion that firms can increase empathetic consumer responses to reviews by helping consumers identify with employees. In this case, we introduced the employee to the consumer via an employee-spotlight manipulation (i.e., meet your barista; Main, Guo, and White 2019). Consistent with our previous results, we observed that even without such manipulation, an unfair negative review yields positive consumer responses, presumably because of its associated heightened feeling of empathy. However, we also find that using employee spotlights enables firms to further leverage these empathetic responses, mostly for those conditions that would not naturally see an increase in empathy (i.e., positive and fair negative reviews).

General Discussion

Across two pilot studies, six focal studies, and four foundational studies (see Web Appendices L, M, and N), we provide converging evidence that unfair negative reviews can lead to positive responses to the focal firm due to heightened feelings of empathy. We discuss the implications of these findings for theory and practice and identify avenues for future research.

Theoretical Implications

By suggesting that negative reviews can sometimes lead to positive consumer reactions toward the firm being reviewed, our results build on and extend previous WOM research (Chen and Lurie 2013; Hamilton, Vohs, and McGill 2014; Kupor and Tormala 2018; McGraw, Warren, and Kan 2015). Despite a large body of research indicating that negative reviews lead to negative consumer responses (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Fornell and Westbrook 1984), the current research reveals that when a negative review is considered unfair, this injustice can facilitate positive consumer reactions to the firm. Most importantly, we show that the mere presence of unfairness in a review is enough to increase empathy and subsequent supportive firm responses. In demonstrating this nuanced role of empathy, we add to the emerging body of work that explores emotionally motivated reactions to negative reviews (e.g., McGraw, Warren, and Kan 2015). We show that perceived unfairness can evoke empathy for the firm's negative experience, which, in turn, motivates consumers to support the firm. By exploring this empathy-driven account, the current work extends our knowledge of how emotional mechanisms can influence and guide consumer responses to negative reviews. The current work also extends our understanding of attribution-emotion accounts of helping (Weiner 1995). Specifically, we show an additional way in which a cognitive-emotional (i.e., perceived unfairness → empathy) sequence can be applied to WOM and result in helping behavior toward firms.

Second, by highlighting the role of empathy in consumer responses to WOM, we build on a nascent body of work that has begun to show that consumers can experience empathy for firms, similar to the way they can experience empathy for other people or animals (Kirmani et al. 2016). In our context, reading an unfair negative review heightens empathetic concern for the firm, which motivates reparative actions. We also contribute to knowledge on empathetic reactions in consumption more generally (e.g., Aaker and Williams 1998; Argo, Zhu, and Dahl 2008; Escalas and Stern 2003), contending that the discrete emotion of empathy can drive supportive consumer responses to unfair negative reviews. An alternative explanation for our effects is that the results are due to sympathy rather than empathy. Although these two terms often are used interchangeably in everyday discourse and have been found to be related to each other (Escalas and Stern 2003), they differ subtly in their meaning. Empathy involves taking the perspective of and vicariously experiencing the other person's emotions, whereas sympathy involves the comprehension of another's emotional state that is accompanied by feelings of concern or sorrow (Eisenberg and Miller 1987). Therefore, these two emotions are quite similar and can often arise in the same context. While we believe that sympathy may also emerge in our context, we see the results as primarily driven by empathy. Converging evidence across the studies—indicating that the effects are moderated by manipulations that directly discourage (or allow for) empathetic responding (Study 3) and that activate perspective taking (Studies 4 and 5)—suggests that empathy is the most parsimonious explanation for the results.

Third, we build on work examining consumer attributions in WOM outcomes by observing how perceptions of unfairness in reviews can have emotional consequences for consumers. Extant work examines whether a review is attributed to internal consumer disposition or factors external to the consumer. For instance, attributing negative WOM to a reviewer's internal disposition is associated with fewer negative consequences for brand perception, resulting in a null effect because consumers do not incorporate the negative information cues in their judgments (Laczniak, DeCarlo, and Ramaswami 2001). This tendency is due to the locus of control, which refers to attributions regarding whether or not outcomes were under the actor's control (Weiner 1979, 1980). For example, if a consumer finds that failure is out of the firm's control, dissatisfaction decreases (Bitner 1990). However, when failure is attributed to the company (vs. the consumer or extenuating circumstances), complaints increase (Folkes 1988). While controllability might predict less negative responses to negative reviews, we do not believe that perceptions of controllability are the only driver of our effects. Future research could explore the role of attributions in consumer responses to unfair negative reviews.

Practical Implications and Future Research

While most firms would prefer to avoid negative reviews altogether, a key implication of this research is that firms may be able to use *unfair* negative reviews to cultivate stronger consumer relationships. At a minimum, allowing unfair negative reviews to exist motivates consumer empathy and can generate supportive responses. By showing that an increase in empathy drives this effect, our research also explores ways for managers to increase empathetic responses regardless of the type of review. For example, creating employee-focused narratives as a form of firm communication (via employee spotlights) or even responding to reviews in a way that is more personal and human-like enhances empathetic responding on the part of consumers and protects the firm against the potentially adverse impacts of negative reviews.

Interestingly, our results suggest that, in addressing inherently unfair negative reviews, firms may want to emphasize the unfairness of these reviews as a way to increase empathy and subsequent patronage among third-party consumers. Given that unfair negative reviews cause consumers to experience empathy for the firm, firms may want to highlight unfair negative reviews and strategically leverage their positive downstream consequences. For example, the Drake Hotel in Toronto emphasizes unfair negative reviews from TripAdvisor as part of its marketing communications, for instance, by turning complaints about its decor into unintended praise for its hip styling (Web Appendix K). Similarly, Snowbird ski resort and the Vienna Tourism Board have both used a one-star review as the core of an ad campaign (Web Appendix K). Thus, firms can use unfair negative reviews to highlight the positive components of the brand experience.

We focused on perceptions of fairness regarding negative reviews. Perceptions of fairness also apply to positive outcomes (e.g., Cavanaugh 2014). Future research would do well to investigate consumer responses following the perceptions of unfairness associated with unjustifiably positive reviews. In addition, the present research is limited to contexts wherein customers' reactions are measured after being exposed to a single unfair negative review; more work is needed to expand our understanding of consumer inferences—and reactions—to multiple unfair negative reviews. For instance, exposure to multiple negative feedback may lead consumers to reappraise the situation and conclude that the negative evaluations are the firm's fault.

Overall, this work highlights that empathy for firms, a relatively new and underexplored facet of consumer–firm interaction, can have compelling implications for consumers' intentions and behaviors in support of a firm that has been treated unfairly. Firms and researchers alike can benefit from a more detailed investigation of consumers' emotional engagement with firms, especially using an empathy approach.

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Author Contributions

The first two authors share equal authorship.

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