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**The Objectivity Illusion and Perceptions of Online Reviews**

### 1. The Objectivity Illusion and Perceptions of Online Reviews

Online product reviews influence consumers' purchasing decisions. Sales of a product increase if the product has been reviewed often and if these reviews are positive (Babić Rosario et al., 2016). Over and above the volume and valence of reviews overall, individual reviews differ in their persuasiveness (Ravula et al., 2022). We define persuasive reviews as those that influence a reader's opinion about the reviewed product or service to be more aligned with the reviewer's expressed opinion.

Because not all reviews are equally persuasive, research has investigated what renders a review (or a reviewer) persuasive. For example, readers find reviews persuasive that are specific (Bigne et al., 2024) and they find reviewers persuasive who signal credibility (Ruvala et al., 2022). However, not only readers evaluate a given review's persuasiveness, but the reviewer of that review might do the same, which might affect their decision whether to write the review in the first place and whether to share it with others. After all, if a reviewer feels their review will not be able to affect readers' opinions, they might not make the effort to write or post it.

Based on the notion that reviewers' perceptions of the persuasiveness of their reviews might affect their behavior, we investigate not only how *readers* perceive reviews, but also how *reviewers* of these reviews evaluate them. One could assume that readers and reviewers will be aligned in the perception of a given review's persuasiveness. Thus, those reviewers who believe their reviews to be persuasive are also rated as persuasive by readers. If this was the case, investigating the reviewers' perspective on the persuasiveness of their reviews would not provide much insight beyond investigating readers' perspectives, as previous research has done. If, however, individual differences between reviewers exist that lead some reviewers to deem their reviews particularly persuasive, the question arises whether such perceptions would be shared by readers. The possibility that some reviewers might

overestimate their reviews' persuasiveness is based on the objectivity illusion, according to which, the more someone perceives themselves as objective and unbiased (i.e., objectivism), the more they find those who disagree as biased (Pronin & Hazel, 2023). We posit that such objectivism might be transported in objectivist reviewers' reviews and might reduce persuasiveness in the eyes of readers who might find the objectivist perspective off-putting and unlikable.

### **1.1 Review persuasiveness**

Research has identified relevant characteristics of reviews as well as of reviewers that readers find persuasive. Regarding properties of the review itself, negative reviews tend to be more persuasive (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Purnawirawan et al., 2015). Reviews are also more persuasive if they are high in information disclosure and depth (Hong et al., 2017) and if they contain pictures and other multimedia content (Choi & Leon, 2025; Ganguly et al., 2024). Including emotions in reviews can also make them persuasive (Malik & Hussain, 2017), although this can backfire for utilitarian products (Rocklage & Fazio, 2020). Regarding characteristics of the reviewer, readers evaluate reviews as more persuasive if they believe the reviewer to be authentic, trustworthy, and credible (Bigne et al., 2021; Liao et al., 2024; Ravula et al., 2023).

As a property of reviews, recent research has explored the role of linguistic features within reviews and found that objective and subjective cues influence review persuasiveness. On the one hand, objective cues seem to foster persuasiveness, as including sensory information on a consumer's experience can reduce perceptions of objectivity and thereby of also reduce persuasiveness (Lopez & Garza, 2022). Similarly, including quantitative information in online review texts can increase persuasiveness (e.g., "the battery lasts 24 hours"; Li et al., 2023). On the other hand, cues that signal review subjectivity, such as profanity, can seem more authentic and thereby increase persuasiveness (Lie et al., 2024). For

hedonic products, adding subjective cues increase review persuasiveness more so than adding objective cues (Park et al., 2023). However, the interactive effect of subjective and objective language within a given review negatively affects its persuasiveness. Interestingly, these effects were not intuitive to those writing reviews, such that companies who solicit reviews could give clearer instructions, for example to focus on the subjective experience when reviewing hedonic products (Park et al., 2023).

## **1.2 Reviewer objectivism**

Although research has explored, with mixed results, whether objective versus subjective cues within reviews are more persuasive (e.g., Park et al., 2023), objectivism can also be a characteristic or perspective of the reviewer (not only a linguistic feature of the review). Such a perspective maps onto what the psychological literature deemed the “objectivity illusion”—people’s belief that, because they see the world in an objective manner, anyone who disagrees is ignorant or biased (e.g., Kennedy & Pronin, 2008). People differ in the extent to which they are objectivists (i.e., share the objectivity illusion; Pronin et al., 2025). Differences in objectivism have been shown to affect judgments, for example when consumers judged others who disagreed (vs. agreed) on their evaluation of artworks as less objective (Cheek et al., 2021).

Because an objectivist worldview entails the belief that one’s opinions are correct and those who disagree are seen as biased, objectivism might be a variable that affects reviewers and readers of online reviews in different ways. Objectivist reviewers might assume that sharing their “correct” beliefs will be persuasive. Reviewers approach writing online reviews with different understandings of the task at hand (De Kerviler et al., 2025), which might also entail different perspectives on what makes reviews persuasive. If such differences exist, they might also affect reviewers’ willingness to write and share reviews. Presumably, if someone deems their reviews not very persuasive, they will feel less inclined to share their reviews

with others.

Although we predict that an objectivist worldview will positively affect how reviewers feel about their reviews' persuasiveness, the opposite might be true for readers. As the objectivity illusion entails the belief that one's opinions are superior (Kennedy & Pronin, 2008), conveying such superiority could reduce interpersonal liking (Van Damme et al., 2016). As reviews written by reviewers perceived as likable are more persuasive (Hamilton et al., 2014) and likability, as one of Cialdini's principles of persuasion (2009), generally affects persuasiveness judgements (Younan & Martire, 2021), low perceived likability could reduce the persuasiveness of objectivist reviews. This causal order (likability influenced persuasiveness, rather than vice versa) is based on findings from the persuasion literature, in which a speaker is evaluated first and then their message is evaluated regarding its persuasiveness based on the judgment about the speaker (Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

Taken together, we expect that reviewer objectivism affects reviewers and readers in different ways. Because the objectivity illusion leads reviewers to perceive their reviews as objectively correct, they believe those who disagree are seen as biased, and it is precisely this attitude that entails negative reader evaluations. Unlike previous research that investigated objectivist language cues within a review (e.g., Park et al., 2023), we investigate objectivism as a characteristic of the reviewer as a variable that differentially affects reviewers' and readers' evaluations of reviews. If we find such differential effects, this suggests that reviewers' perspectives are a meaningful but so far neglected part of what determines the generation of persuasive online reviews. Thus, we test the following hypotheses:

H1: Objectivist (vs. subjectivist) reviewers will perceive their reviews as more persuasive.

H2: Objectivist (vs. subjectivist) reviewers will be more inclined to share their reviews due to their greater perceptions of review persuasiveness.

H3: Readers will perceive reviews written by objectivist (vs. subjectivist) reviewers as less persuasive.

H4: The negative association between reviewers' objectivism and readers' ratings of reviews' persuasiveness will be mediated by lower likability of objectivist reviewers.

## 2. Overview of the Studies

We test our hypotheses in two studies and one supplemental study. Studies 1 and 2 investigate whether individual differences in reviewer objectivism positively predict reviewers' beliefs that their reviews are more persuasive and their willingness to share them, but at the same time negatively predict readers' persuasiveness judgments due to decreased likability of objectivist reviewers. The supplemental Study S1 replicates the relation between reviewer objectivism and review persuasiveness for negative reviews.

We determined an initial sample size of 200 participants per study to be able to detect a small correlation of  $r = .20$  with an 80% power level at  $\alpha = .05$ . We used this sample size across all studies. In all reviewer samples, we asked reviewers to provide one review of a given product. In contrast, all reader samples used within-subjects designs where readers evaluated ten reviews. This was done to provide ecological validity, as reviewers typically write and post one review of a given product, whereas readers typically read several different reviews when deciding on a product. All data, materials, and preregistrations are available at: <https://researchbox.org/529>.

## 3. Study 1

Study 1 tested our hypothesis that reviews written by individuals high in objectivism will be perceived as *more* persuasive by reviewers but as *less* persuasive by readers. Study 1 also tested reader-rated likability of the reviewer as a mechanism by which objectivism negatively affects readers' perceptions. Additionally, we examined the alternative explanation that objectivist reviewers might enjoy writing reviews more or might particularly

like the reviewed product. One may speculate whether the more someone believes their opinions are right (i.e., objectivists), the more they might like the given product or writing a review on it. This increased enjoyment and liking could translate into one's ability to write more persuasive reviews, whereas we expect objectivist reviewers to write less persuasive reviews. To generate reviews, reviewers reviewed an Instagram account that they selected out of a set of four accounts, to control for the reviewed product (e.g., no exclusivity or price differences).

### 3.1 Method

#### *Participants and Design*

To recruit reviewers, we opened the survey to 200 participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which yielded 162 reviewers who provided a usable review (62 female,  $M_{age} = 35.21$ ,  $SD_{age} = 9.92$ ). For all reviews generated in this research, we defined unusable reviews as those that consisted of fewer than three words or were of derogatory, unrelated, unintelligible, and/or inappropriate content. Reviews that we defined as unusable were not shown to readers, such that no reader data is available for these reviews. Due to a technical error, five reviews were not shown to readers. To be consistent across the reviewer and reader samples, the reviewers who had written these reviews were also excluded from all analyses. To recruit readers, we recruited 200 MTurk participants (77 female,  $M_{age} = 36.55$ ,  $SD_{age} = 10.02$ ). We pre-registered the reader sample and analysis at:

[https://aspredicted.org/5MV\\_8BF](https://aspredicted.org/5MV_8BF)

#### *Materials and Procedure*

Reviewers. Reviewers first viewed posts from four Instagram accounts in randomized order. The accounts were: @poorlydrawnlines (animal cartoons), @artbymoga (relationship humor), @buzzfeedparents (parenthood humor), and @lizzie.bear (Golden Retrievers). After viewing five posts from each account (i.e., 20 posts in total), reviewers indicated which

account they liked best and would review. There was no difference between participants high versus low in objectivism (i.e., participants above and below the scale median) in their choices,  $\chi^2(3, N = 198) = 1.175, p = .759$ .

In this study, we explicitly asked participants to write a “recommendation,” rather than simply calling it a “review,” to generalize our results. However, to be consistent with the other studies, we use the terms “review” and “recommendation” interchangeably.

Next, reviewers indicated how persuasive they thought their review was (1 = *not at all persuasive*, 7 = *extremely persuasive*) and how likely they thought it was that another worker who read the review would follow the recommended account (1 = *not at all likely*, 7 = *extremely likely*). We summarized these two items into one score of perceived review persuasiveness ( $\alpha = .78$ ). We also added an exploratory measure of reviewers’ confidence in their reviews. Reviewers predicted how many workers (out of 100) who read their review, as well as other reviews in this study, would choose their recommended account.

Reviewers also indicated how much they had enjoyed writing the recommendation, and how much they had enjoyed participating in this study (two items aggregated to enjoyment;  $\alpha = .88$ ; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We also asked them how much they liked their selected account (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

We measured reviewers’ individual levels of objectivism with a recently developed 11-item scale (Pronin et al., 2025). Participants completed this 11-item scale to assess their objectivism ( $\alpha = .77, M = 4.64, SD = 0.82$ ). A sample item from the scale includes: “If somebody disagrees with me, it’s usually because they are mistaken or biased.” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; see Appendix A for full scale). The order of the objectivism scale and the review task was counterbalanced.

Readers. Readers were informed that they would be viewing posts from an Instagram account of their choosing, but they would first read ten reviews written by other workers who

had looked at all four accounts. Readers then read ten randomly selected reviews of the set generated by reviewers. After reading each review, readers rated how persuasive they thought it was (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). To assess perceived reviewer likability, readers rated on one item created by us how likable and relatable they felt the reviewer who had written the review was (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). Finally, to maintain the cover story, readers chose and viewed one of the four Instagram accounts.

### 3.2 Results

As expected, reviewers' objectivism correlated positively with how persuasive they thought their review was,  $r(161) = .320, p < .001$ . In contrast, the more objectivist the reviewer, the less persuasive readers found the review to be,  $r(160) = -.196, p = .012$ . Taken together, objectivist reviewers think their reviews are particularly persuasive, but readers feel the opposite.

Furthermore, reviewers high in objectivism seemed less likable,  $r(160) = -.225, p = .004$ . We conducted a mediation analysis with reviewer objectivism as the independent variable, likability as the mediator, and reader-rated review persuasiveness as the dependent variable, using PROCESS model 4 with 5,000 bootstrapped resamples (Hayes, 2018). As predicted, likability mediated the effect of objectivism on reader-rated persuasiveness (indirect effect = -0.22,  $SE = .08$ , 95% CI = -0.37 to -0.07). This result was robust to the alternative possibility that objectivist reviewers' persuasiveness judgments simply reflect their enjoyment of the task and their liking of the chosen account. When including these two variables as alternative mediators, reader-rated likability still mediated the effect of objectivism on reader-rated persuasiveness (indirect effect = -0.22,  $SE = .08$ , 95% CI = -0.37 to -0.07), whereas neither reviewers' enjoyment of the task nor liking of the account did (indirect effect enjoyment = -0.01,  $SE = .01$ , 95% CI = -0.04 to 0.03; indirect effect liking = 0.01,  $SE = .01$ , 95% CI = -0.01 to 0.04).

Finally, we found that reviewers' objectivism correlated positively with our exploratory measure of reviewers' confidence in their reviews, namely their estimate of how many out of 100 workers who read their reviews would choose the recommended account,  $r(161) = .224, p = .004$ .

An alternative explanation for the observed results could be that differences exist in review effort between reviewers high and low in objectivism. Although objectivism did not affect enjoyment of the task, more objectivist reviewers might work harder and write longer reviews to share their "correct" opinions. To control for such potential differences, we calculated the character count of each review as a proxy for a reviewer's effort. We then conducted the above analyses controlling for character count and found the pattern and significance of the positive relation between objectivism and perceived persuasiveness on the one hand and the negative relation between objectivism and reader-rated persuasiveness, mediated by likability, unchanged. Character count itself did not affect perceived persuasiveness ( $p = .132$ ) rated by reviewers. Yet, replicating previous research that longer reviews are seen as more persuasive by readers (Jia et al., 2022), review length indeed affected reader reactions ( $p < .001$ ). Thus, although review length affects reader-rated persuasiveness, it cannot explain the relation between reviewer objectivism, perceived review persuasiveness, and reader-rated persuasiveness.

For exploratory purposes, we examined features that might have caused the differences in likability between reviewers high and low in objectivism. To do so, we used a qualitative approach by having an LLM extract differences between the reviews written by participants in the lowest versus highest quartile of objectivism scores (see Table 1 in Appendix C). Reviewers scoring low on objectivism seem to convey an attitude of seriously admiring the reviewed Instagram account and using language that is warm, enthusiastic, and humble (e.g., "She's my favorite!"). In contrast, reviewers scoring high on objectivism seem

to take the perspective of an observer or critic who uses more detached and ironic language (e.g., “It’s hard to tell if she’s serious or satirical.”). These differences in perspectives might well map onto differences in likability, as warmth and humility are typically seen as more likable than detachment (Ludwig et al., 2022; Van Tongeren et al., 2024). These qualitative data support our analyses showing that reviewer objectivism reduced perceived reviewer likability, which is why reviews written by reviewers scoring high on objectivism seem less persuasive to readers.

## 4. Study 2

Study 2 sets out to replicate our finding that reviewers’ objectivism predicts perceived review persuasiveness and tests whether persuasiveness perceptions lead to an increased willingness to share reviews. To test these hypotheses, we asked participants to write a review of Chocolate M&Ms – a product that is low cost and widespread, such that familiarity with the product is uninformative about a reviewer’s taste, sophistication, or expertise. We subsequently asked reviewers whether they would share their reviews.

### 4.1 Method

#### *Participants and Design*

We opened the survey to 200 participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). We used Cloudresearch to recruit workers approved by the platform (Litman et al., 2017). We pre-registered this study at: [https://aspredicted.org/P9B\\_8SP](https://aspredicted.org/P9B_8SP)

As preregistered, we excluded participants from all analyses if they had never had Chocolate M&Ms (two participants had not had this product, and one left the question unanswered) or if their review was unusable (six participants were excluded based on pre-registered criteria). This yielded a final sample of 191 participants (93 female,  $M_{age} = 39.47$ ,  $SD_{age} = 11.85$ ).

#### *Materials and Procedure*

First, participants completed the 11-item objectivism scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ;  $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) used previously. Next, participants were asked to provide an honest review of Chocolate M&Ms (inspection of the reviews revealed that >95% of reviews were positive). Participants then indicated how persuasive they thought their review was (1 = *not at all persuasive*; 7 = *extremely persuasive*). We then asked participants whether they would be willing to share their reviews with other workers in future studies (1 = *yes, show my review to others*; 2 = *no, do not show my review to others*). We stated explicitly that their decision to share the review would not affect their compensation.

## 4.2 Results

A simple linear regression examining whether objectivism predicted how persuasive participants rated their own reviews was statistically significant,  $F(1, 188) = 41.27$ ,  $p < .001$ , and explained approximately 18% of the variance in persuasiveness ratings,  $R^2 = .18$ . The regression coefficient for objectivism was significant,  $B = 0.68$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $t = 6.42$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that higher levels of objectivism were associated with greater perceived review persuasiveness.

Next, a binary logistic regression examining whether objectivism predicted participants' willingness to share their reviews (0 = yes, 1 = no) was marginally significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.65$ ,  $p = .056$ , and explained 3.8% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variance. The regression coefficient for objectivism was marginally significant ( $B = -0.47$ ,  $SE = 0.24$ ,  $Wald = 3.72$ ,  $p = .054$ ,  $OR = 0.62$ , 95% CI [0.39, 1.01]). Of all participants, 170 chose to share their review, whereas 21 declined.

A mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2018) to examine whether perceived persuasiveness mediated the effect of objectivism on participants' willingness to share their review with others. Objectivism significantly predicted perceived persuasiveness,  $B = 0.68$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $t = 6.42$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.47, 0.89],

indicating that higher objectivism scores were associated with higher ratings of persuasiveness. Perceived persuasiveness significantly predicted the likelihood of sharing the review,  $B = -0.73$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $Z = -4.19$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI  $[-1.07, -0.39]$ . The direct effect of objectivism on the decision to share the review was not significant,  $B = -0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.28$ ,  $Z = -0.21$ ,  $p = .83$ , 95% CI  $[-0.61, 0.49]$ . However, the indirect effect of objectivism on the decision to share the review through perceived persuasiveness was significant,  $B = -0.50$ ,  $BootSE = 0.13$ , 95% CI  $[-0.80, -0.28]$ . These results suggest that higher objectivism indirectly increased the likelihood of sharing one's review, through increased perceptions of persuasiveness.

A potential limitation of this study is the class imbalance in the dependent variable because most participants chose to share (vs. not share) their reviews. Such an imbalance can lead to an underestimation of the probability of the rare class (i.e., decision not to share). Our focal construct of interest is reviewers' beliefs in the persuasiveness of their reviews, and how these affect the decision to share. Therefore, the class imbalance should be less consequential for our results. Nevertheless, future research should replicate the relation between reviewers' perception of their reviews' persuasiveness and the decision to write and post reviews.

## 5. General Discussion

In two studies, we found that objectivism affects reviewers' as well as readers' perceptions of online reviews. In Study 1, reviewers' objectivism positively predicted their perceived reviews' persuasiveness but negatively predicted readers' ratings of persuasiveness due to the decreased likability of objectivist reviewers. Study 2 demonstrated that perceptions of persuasiveness matter for objectivist reviewers' willingness to share their reviews.

In our studies, we used only positive reviews as stimuli. Although participants could provide any kind of review in Study 2, virtually all submitted reviews were nevertheless

positive. To generalize to negative reviews, we conducted a supplemental study (Study S1 in Appendix B) in which we only used negative reviews of a self-chosen product. We replicated our finding that reviewer objectivism correlates positively with reviewers' perceptions of their reviews as persuasive.

Regarding the theoretical contributions of our research, we contribute to the literature on review persuasiveness by investigating the reviewer's perspective. Previous research has tested what renders reviews (and reviewers) persuasive in the eyes of readers, but we show that differences exist in how reviewers think about their reviews, and that these differences affect the decision to share reviews. This research further contributes to the literature on the objectivity illusion. We show that this theory applies outside of interpersonal judgments even regarding mundane and less consequential communication such as consumer reviews.

Because the corresponding belief in one's opinions as objective affects even minimal and one-sided communication (i.e., online reviews), the objectivity illusion could provide a lens to studying other domains of consumer communication in which likability affects consumer reactions (e.g., online forums, direct word of mouth).

Regarding the practical implications of our research, marketers could use more specific instructions when soliciting customer reviews. For example, in email communication after a sale, brands could specifically ask about consumers' subjective experience and opinions and suggest that reviews are written with a subjectivist perspective in mind (e.g., "there are no right or wrong opinions") to increase persuasiveness.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that especially those reviewers who write less persuasive reviews are willing to share them. Thus, marketers should rely less on the self-selection of those eager to review to provide reviews but should entice a broader spectrum of reviewers to write more persuasive reviews. To this end, brands could use targeted incentives for writing reviews to be less reliant on reviewers' (inaccurate) self-perceptions of which

reviews are persuasive and worthy to share.

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