

What Goes Around, Comes Around:  
How Beliefs in Karma Influence the use of Word-of-Mouth for Self-Enhancement

ANA VALENZUELA

ANDREA BONEZZI

TEODÓRA SZABÓ-DOUAT

Ana Valenzuela ([Ana.Valenzuela@baruch.cuny.edu](mailto:Ana.Valenzuela@baruch.cuny.edu)) is a Professor of Marketing at the Zicklin School of Business, Baruch College, CUNY and at ESADE—Ramon Llull University, Barcelona.

Address: Baruch College, One Bernard Baruch Way, New York, NY 10010.

Andrea Bonezzi ([abonezzi@stern.nyu.edu](mailto:abonezzi@stern.nyu.edu)) is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Stern School of Business, New York University.

Address: New York University, 40 W. 4th Street, New York, NY 10012.

Teodóra Szabó-Douat ([Teodora.Szabo@baruch.cuny.edu](mailto:Teodora.Szabo@baruch.cuny.edu)) is PhD Candidate in Marketing at the Zicklin School of Business, Baruch College, CUNY.

Address: Baruch College, One Bernard Baruch Way, New York, NY 10010.

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**ABSTRACT**

It is well established that consumers often engage in word-of-mouth to self-enhance. Self-enhancement motives are reflected in consumers' tendency to spread negative word-of-mouth about others and positive word-of-mouth about oneself when self-views are threatened. The present research argues that this behavior is not universal. The authors contend that *belief in karma* moderates consumers' tendency to transmit negative and generate positive word-of-mouth as a way to self-enhance in response to threat. Five studies offer evidence that, when facing threat, consumers who believe in karma talk less negatively about others, and less positively about themselves, compared to consumers who do not believe in karma. The authors argue that this occurs because threat motivates people who believe in karma to seek karmic rewards, in order to restore their balance with the world. Overall, this research contributes to the literature on word-of-mouth, by shedding light on a deeply rooted extraordinary belief that shapes word-of-mouth valence.

Social sharing of information is a pervasive phenomenon that is as old as time. Commonly referred to as word-of-mouth (WOM), social sharing of information has recently become more important than ever, because social media like Facebook and Twitter as well as free messaging applications like WhatsApp and WeChat have accelerated the speed at which information spreads among consumers. To illustrate, Twitter handles an average of 500 million tweets per day (Internet Live Stats 2017), and Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp combined an average of 60 billion messages per day (Facebook for Developers 2016). Importantly, this deluge of socially shared information exerts tremendous influence on consumer behavior. WOM has been shown to affect all sorts of decisions, including what people buy (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006), what shows they watch (Liu 2006), what places they visit (Chen and Lurie 2013), and who they vote for (Bond et al. 2012).

Given the impact that WOM exerts on consumer behavior, scholars have long tried to understand the psychological motives that influence what people share and how (for a comprehensive review see Berger 2014). Among several, the motive to self-enhance (Baumeister 1998; Fiske 2001) has been identified as one of the most pervasive (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Wojnicki and Godes 2017). This motive is typically activated by situations in which consumers experience a threat that undermines a desired self-view and calls the positivity of the self-concept into question (Dichter 1966; Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard 1993; Chung and Darke 2006). When experiencing self-threat, consumers self-enhance by sharing WOM that casts the self in a positive light. In particular, De Angelis et al. (2012) found that consumers exhibit a tendency to generate positive WOM (i.e., talking about their own positive consumption experiences), and transmit negative WOM (i.e., talking about others' negative consumption experiences) in the service of self-enhancement.

In this research, we propose that the pattern of results documented by De Angelis et al. (2012) may not be universal. We put forth the idea that, when the motive to self-enhance is activated by threat, consumers might not always generate positive and transmit negative WOM. Building on the notion that routes to self-enhancement differ across cultures (Sedikides, Gaertner and Toguchi 2003), we propose that certain cultural beliefs may affect the valence of the WOM consumers generate and transmit when experiencing self-threat. In particular, we focus on the extraordinary belief in karma, and propose that belief in karma moderates consumers' tendency to transmit negative and generate positive WOM as a way to self-enhance in response to threat.

Karma refers to the spiritual principle of cause and effect that stands at the core of Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. According to the karmic doctrine, the universe bestows rewards for doing right and exacts punishments for doing wrong (Krishan 1997). Building on prior findings (Kopalle, Lehmann and Farley 2010; Converse, Risen and Carter 2012; Kulow and Kramer 2016), we hypothesize a systematic difference in WOM valence in response to threat between consumers who do and do not believe in karma. At the transmission stage, we propose that consumers who believe in karma might refrain from transmitting negative WOM as a means to self-enhance, and instead talk more positively about others than consumers who do not believe in karma. At the generation stage, we propose that consumers who believe in karma might refrain from boasting as a means to self-enhance, and instead talk less positively about themselves (although not necessarily negatively) compared to consumers who do not believe in karma. We next elaborate on our theoretical rationale, then present five experimental studies that provide empirical support for these predictions.

Overall, our research makes two contributions. First, it adds to the growing literature on how consumer behavior is influenced by extraordinary beliefs that depart from scientific

knowledge, such as those related to superstition (Block and Kramer 2009), magical thinking (Kramer and Block 2011), fate (Kim, Kulow, and Kramer 2014), and signs (Kramer, Irmak, and Barra 2013). Second, it contributes to the literature on WOM by shedding light on the role of belief in karma in shaping the valence of the information people share.

## **SELF-ENHANCEMENT AND WORD OF MOUTH**

Self-enhancement refers to the basic human motive to hold a positive self-concept and maintain self-esteem (Sedikides 1993; Baumeister 1998). While this fundamental motive may guide consumers' behavior at any given time, it becomes particularly prominent when individuals face self-threats. A self-threat occurs whenever a person experiences a discrepancy between one's desired self-view and one's actual self-view (Higgins 1987). Such discrepancy throws the self off-balance, casting doubt on the positivity of the self-concept and producing an aversive state of psychological discomfort (Festinger 1957; Elliot and Devine 1994). Such a state motivates people to engage in behaviors aimed at reestablishing balance within the self and restoring the positivity of the self-concept (Mandel et al. 2017).

Prior research suggests that consumption-related behavior provides one potential avenue to rebalance the self after threat (e.g., Belk 1988; Berger and Heath 2007). For instance, ample research shows that consumers might acquire and consume products with the aim to compensate for self-threats, a phenomenon referred to as compensatory consumption (for a review see Mandel et al. 2017). To illustrate, Rucker and Galinsky (2008) found that consumers who are made to feel powerless respond by seeking products that signal status to restore their sense of power. Levav and Zhu (2009) found that when personal freedom is threatened, consumers

respond by seeking variety as a means to reassert their freedom. Similarly, Cutright (2012) found that consumers whose sense of control is undermined prefer products characterized by sharp edges and tight corners, because structured products provide a sense of control.

Prior literature also suggests that WOM can serve a compensatory function in response to self-threat, a phenomenon referred to as compensatory WOM (Peluso et al. 2017). De Angelis et al. (2012) found that, following a self-threat, consumers generate positive WOM (i.e., talk about their own positive consumption experiences), but transmit negative WOM (i.e., talk about others' negative consumption experiences), to cast the self in a positive light and feel better about themselves. Similarly, Peluso et al. (2017) found that, following a threat to their sense of control, consumers provide advice and recommendations to others in order to restore their sense of control. Along the same lines, Packard and Wooten (2013) found that consumers whose sense of being knowledgeable is threatened use more positive and complex language, and put more effort in their reviews, in order to signal knowledge. Similarly, Wojnicki and Godes (2017) demonstrated that consumers who want to affirm themselves as experts tend to talk more about their own positive rather than negative experiences, because sharing WOM about successful experiences portrays them as experts, thus reinforcing their desired self-image. Overall, these findings suggest that consumers often share WOM to enhance the self in response to threat.

While the motive to self-enhance is universal (Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice 1993), prior evidence shows that consumers may use different routes to self-enhancement (Sedikides et al. 2003). In particular, Sedikides and colleagues argue that individuals' fundamental values and beliefs guide the way they self-enhance. For example, some people self-enhance by engaging in behaviors that affirm their sense of agency, while others self-enhance by engaging in behaviors that affirm their sense of communion. We build on this notion to propose that belief in karma

(Kopalle et al. 2010; Kulow and Kramer 2016) influences the way consumers self-enhance, and as a consequence, affects the valence of the WOM that consumers share in response to threat.

## **BELIEF IN KARMA**

Often referred to as the “moral law of causation,” karma denotes the naturalistic principle of redistributive justice that governs the universe according to Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism (Krishan 1997). Karma is considered the external force that causes the entire cycle of cause and effect (Masih 2000). The karmic doctrine asserts no order or natural law from God, but rather that the universe achieves a state of balance by negotiating harmony among its parts through a system of karma (Young et al. 2005). Whenever an individual acts, he or she disrupts the balance of the universe either in a positive or in a negative way. Karma balances the positive (negative) energy produced by the individual by manifesting an equal amount of positive (negative) energy toward that individual in the future, thus restoring the initial state of balance (Kulow and Kramer 2016).

Karmic belief share properties with other extraordinary beliefs, such as superstition, magical thinking, and fate, in that all these beliefs bring about a perceived attribution of causality to one’s own actions for outcomes that are in fact uncontrollable (Berenbaum, Kerns, and Raghavan 2000; Kramer and Block 2011; Argo, Dahl, and Morales 2006, 2008; Kramer and Block 2008; Hamerman and Johar 2013). However, across such beliefs, consumers differ in their belief of how they can influence the outcome of events that are in fact uncontrollable. In particular, consumers who believe in superstition, magical thinking and fatalism believe they can bring about positive outcomes by associating the self with lucky colors, numbers, or brands

(Hamerman and Johar 2013). In contrast, consumers who believe in karma operate under the assumption that their very own good and bad actions bring about positive and negative outcomes, respectively. Thus, the behavior of consumers who believe in karma is often driven by the goal to accrue karmic rewards and avoid karmic punishments. For example, Converse and colleagues (2012) showed that people who believe in karma are more likely to help others when facing important yet uncontrollable future events, because they believe that engaging in a good deed will gain them favor from the universe and positively influence the outcome of those future events.

Building on this notion, we propose that the karmic principle that the universe bestows rewards for good deeds and exacts punishments for bad deeds (Herman 1976) might induce consumers who believe in karma to respond to threat differently than consumers who do not believe in karma. As discussed earlier, a threat creates a state of imbalance that motivates consumers to engage in self-enhancing behaviors aimed to restore balance. We propose that consumers who believe in karma might self-enhance by engaging in behaviors aimed to restore their balance with the universe. This approach entails engaging in acts that generate good karma, and refraining from acts that generate bad karma, because such acts will ultimately reflect positively on the self through the system of karma. In contrast, consumers who do not believe in karma might self-enhance by engaging in behaviors that affirm the self directly, even though such behaviors might be selfish or even detrimental to others.

In this paper, we explore our hypothesis in the context of social transmission of information, by examining how belief in karma influence the valence of the WOM that consumers share when a need to self-enhance is activated by threat.

## **BELIEF IN KARMA AND WORD OF MOUTH**

We argued that, after experiencing self-threat, consumers who believe in karma might be motivated to self-enhance by engaging in acts that generate good karma and by refraining from acts that generate bad karma, in the hope that the redistributive force that is believed to govern the universe will reward them with positive outcomes in the future. This argument leads to predicting systematic differences in WOM valence in response to threat between consumers who do versus those who do not believe in karma, both at the transmission and at the generation stage. At the transmission stage, consumers who believe in karma should talk more positively about others compared to consumers who do not believe in karma. This is because transmitting other-enhancing information, instead of other-bashing information, constitutes a virtuous behavior that should introduce positive energy in the universe and thus call for karmic rewards (Kopalle et al. 2010). At the generation stage, consumers who believe in karma should talk less positively about themselves, although not necessarily negatively, compared to consumers who do not believe in karma. This is because bragging and talking in a boastful manner about oneself may be perceived as boorish, self-centered and non-harmonious with the collective (Maddux et al. 2010) and, as a consequence, might introduce negative energy in the universe and thus call for karmic punishment. Overall, we propose that belief in karma should moderate consumers' tendency to transmit negative and generate positive WOM as a way to self-enhance in response to threat. Four studies, using multiple operationalizations and measures of belief in karma, provide converging evidence for the moderating role of belief in karma in influencing the valence of WOM at the transmission and generation stage when a self-enhancement motive is present.

Furthermore, prior research suggests that not every act that appears to be good is believed to generate good karma. To illustrate, Kulow and Kramer (2016) found that consumers who believe in karma respond less favorably to charitable appeals highlighting self-gains, because being charitable calls for good karma only when altruistically motivated. In the context of WOM, we propose that transmitting positive WOM about others will be considered karma-worthy only if the message concerns a brand that has good nature. The act of talking positively about others, which may be construed as a good deed, loses its effectiveness at generating good karma if it entails talking positively about a brand that in fact affects the universe in a negative way, and thus is not karma worthy. Thus, after experiencing self-threat, individuals with strong karmic belief may refrain from transmitting positive WOM, when doing so would entail portraying a bad brand in a positive light, because salient negative brand associations (Cheng et al. 2012; Lisjak et al. 2012) would undermine their karmic investment. In our fifth study we test this boundary condition.

## **STUDY 1**

The purpose of the first study was to test our hypothesis that belief in karma moderates consumers' tendency to engage in negative WOM as a way to self-enhance. We manipulated the need to self-enhance via self-threat, and used cultural identity, as determined by respondents' country of residence (India vs. U.S.) as a proxy for karmic belief, an approach widely used in cross-cultural research (for examples see Briley and Aaker 2006; Monga and John 2007; Torelli and Shavitt 2010). Indeed prior literature suggests that Indians believe in karma to a higher extent than Americans (Engardio and McGregor 2006; Kopalle et al. 2010).

## *Method*

**Participants.** Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk in exchange for monetary compensation. At the end of data collection, we had 108 responses from India, and 115 responses from the United States, yielding a total of 223 participants (111 females, average age = 32.33)

**Procedure.** In the first part of the study, we manipulated the need to self-enhance via threat, using an episodic priming manipulation taken from prior research on WOM (De Angelis et al. 2012). Specifically, in the self-threat condition, participants were asked to recall an episode in which they were not able to accomplish what they wanted, their performance was not good, and they felt like a failure. In the control condition, participants were asked to recall the last time they went to the grocery store.

Next, we elicited WOM messages by asking participants to complete a writing task ostensibly framed as an investigation of the language people use when talking about consumption experiences. In particular, participants were instructed to write a message describing a consumption experience that occurred to other people (e.g., a person they barely knew, an acquaintance, a friend, a relative, a significant other). Exact instructions are reported in Appendix 1. Similar WOM elicitation procedures have been used in prior research on WOM (see De Angelis et al. 2012; Dubois, Bonezzi and De Angelis 2016; Chen 2017). After completing the writing task, participants were asked to rate the valence of the message they wrote on a nine-point scale (1 = very negative, 9 = very positive). This served as our measure of WOM valence.

In the third part of the study, participants completed the Belief in Karma scale (Kopalle et al. 2010;  $\alpha = .68$ ), and provided demographic information including gender, age, country of residence and ethnicity.

### ***Results and Discussion***

**Belief in Karma and Cultural Identity.** We first checked whether Indian respondents indeed believed in karma to a higher extent than American respondents. A two-way ANOVA with cultural identity (Indian versus American) and self-threat as the independent variables, and belief in karma as the dependent variable confirmed that Indians had significantly stronger belief in karma than Americans ( $M_{\text{Indians}} = 5.50$ ,  $SD = .90$  vs.  $M_{\text{Americans}} = 4.65$ ,  $SD = .99$ ;  $F(1, 220) = 43.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .161$ ). There was no significant main effect of self-threat ( $F(1, 220) = 1.58$ ,  $p > .20$ ) and no significant interaction ( $F(1, 220) = .13$ ,  $p > .70$ ).

**WOM Valence.** A two-way ANOVA with cultural identity (Indian versus American) and self-threat as the independent variables, and WOM valence as the dependent variable revealed a significant main effect of cultural identity, such that WOM valence was significantly more positive for Indians than for Americans ( $M_{\text{Indians}} = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 3.02$  vs.  $M_{\text{Americans}} = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 2.94$ ;  $F(1, 219) = 9.19$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ ). More importantly, this main effect was qualified by a significant self-threat  $\times$  cultural identity interaction ( $F(1, 219) = 4.10$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .018$ ; see Figure 1).

~ Figure 1 ~

Contrasts revealed that Americans transmitted marginally more negative WOM under self-threat ( $M_{\text{Americans-threat}} = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 2.71$  vs.  $M_{\text{Americans-control}} = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 3.12$ ;  $F(1, 219) = 2.98$ ,  $p = .086$ ,  $\eta_p^2$ ), whereas this behavior did not emerge among Indians ( $M_{\text{Indians-threat}} = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 2.86$  vs.  $M_{\text{Indians-control}} = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 3.16$ ;  $F(1, 219) = 1.32$ ,  $p > .20$ ). Moreover, under self-threat, Indians shared significantly more positive WOM than Americans ( $M_{\text{Indians-threat}} = 5.44$ ,  $SD = 2.86$  vs.  $M_{\text{Americans-threat}} = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 2.71$ ;  $F(1, 219) = 12.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .054$ ), but in the absence of self-threat, WOM valence did not differ between Indians and Americans ( $M_{\text{Indians-control}} = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 3.16$  vs.  $M_{\text{Americans-control}} = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 3.12$ ;  $F(1, 219) = .51$ ,  $p > .40$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .002$ ).

The results of study 1 provide preliminary evidence that belief in karma moderates consumers' tendency to share negative WOM about others as a way to self-enhance. For American respondents, who held weaker belief in karma, the results replicated prior findings showing that, after a self-threat, consumers transmit more negative WOM as a way to self-enhance (De Angelis et al. 2012). This pattern of results, however, did not emerge for Indian respondents, who held stronger belief in karma. After experiencing self-threat, Indian respondents did not transmit more negative WOM, and in fact, transmitted more positive WOM, even though only directionally so.

## **STUDY 2**

The purpose of study 2 was to provide further evidence that belief in karma moderates consumers' tendency to engage in negative WOM as a way to self-enhance. To provide convergence on our construct, in study 2 we directly measured belief in karma using the Belief in

Karma scale developed by Kopalle et al. (2010). To maximize the sensitivity of this measurement instrument, we only recruited Asian-American participants (Hong et al. 2000).

### ***Method***

**Participants.** Asian-American participants were recruited through a Qualtrics panel in exchange for a small monetary reward. At the end of data collection, we had a total of 126 respondents (90 females, average age = 34.7). We only recruited Asian-American participants based on the idea that such a population should exhibit variance in belief in karma, thus maximizing the sensitivity of the Belief in Karma scale.

**Procedure.** First, we measured participants' belief in karma using the Belief in Karma scale (Kopalle et al. 2010;  $\alpha = .611$ ). Next, we manipulated need to self-enhance via threat, by asking participants to complete the same episodic priming task we used in study 1. Specifically, in the self-threat condition, participants were asked to recall an episode in which they were not able to accomplish what they wanted, their performance was not good, and they felt like a failure. In the control condition, participants were asked to recall the last time they went to the grocery store.

Then, we asked participants to engage in the same writing task used in study 1. Ostensibly framed as an investigation of the language people use when describing consumption experiences, the writing task consisted of writing a message describing a consumption experience that occurred to other people (e.g., an acquaintance, a friend, a relative, a significant other). After completing the writing task, participants indicated the valence of the message they wrote on a nine-point scale (1 = very negative, 9 = very positive). To conclude, respondents provided demographic information including their gender, age, nationality and ethnicity.

### *Results and Discussion*

**WOM Valence.** We ran a moderation analysis using Hayes's PROCESS macro (2013, model 1) with self-threat as the independent variable, belief in karma as a continuous moderator, and WOM valence as the dependent variable. The analysis yielded a significant self-threat  $\times$  belief in karma interaction ( $b = 1.37$ ,  $SE = .50$ ,  $t(122) = 2.75$ ,  $p = .007$ ). As shown in Figure 2, participants with weaker karmic belief (1 SD below the mean) transmitted more negative WOM under self-threat ( $M_{\text{low BIK-control}} = 5.56$  vs.  $M_{\text{low BIK-threat}} = 4.23$ ;  $b = -1.33$ ,  $SE = .67$ ,  $t(122) = -1.98$ ,  $p = .050$ ). In contrast, participants with stronger karmic belief (1 SD above the mean) transmitted marginally more positive WOM under self-threat ( $M_{\text{high BIK-control}} = 4.62$  vs.  $M_{\text{high BIK-threat}} = 5.90$ ;  $b = 1.27$ ,  $SE = .66$ ,  $t(122) = 1.92$ ,  $p = .057$ ). Moreover, under self-threat, participants with stronger karmic belief (1 SD above the mean) wrote more positive messages than those with weaker karmic belief (1 SD below the mean;  $M_{\text{low BIK-threat}} = 4.23$  vs.  $M_{\text{high BIK-threat}} = 5.90$ ;  $b = 0.88$ ,  $SE = .33$ ,  $t(122) = 2.64$ ,  $p = .009$ ). In the absence of self-threat, there was no significant difference in WOM valence between participants with stronger and participants with weaker belief in karma ( $M_{\text{low BIK-control}} = 5.56$  vs.  $M_{\text{high BIK-control}} = 4.62$ ;  $b = -.49$ ,  $SE = .37$ ,  $t(122) = -1.33$ ,  $p > .10$ ).

~ Figure 2 ~

The results of study 2 provide further evidence that belief in karma moderates consumers' tendency to share negative WOM about others as a way to self-enhance. Respondents who held weaker belief in karma transmitted more negative WOM in response to threat, presumably as a way to self-enhance. In contrast, respondents who held stronger belief in karma did not transmit

more negative WOM, and in fact transmitted more positive WOM in response to threat. In the next two studies, we investigate whether belief in karma affects WOM generation and transmission differently.

### **STUDY 3**

The purpose of study 3 was to compare the valence of generated versus transmitted WOM as a function of karmic belief when a self-enhancement motive is active. In this study, we activated a need to self-enhance for all participants, and measured belief in karma.

#### ***Method***

**Participants.** Asian-American participants were recruited through a Qualtrics panel in exchange for monetary compensation. At the end of data collection, we had a total of 151 respondents (103 females, average age = 33.4).

**Procedure.** First, all participants completed the Belief in Karma scale (Kopalle et al. 2010;  $\alpha = .653$ ). Next, all participants completed the same episodic priming task used in study 1 and 2 aimed to induce self-threat. Specifically, participants were asked to recall an episode in which they were not able to accomplish what they wanted, their performance was not good, and they felt like a failure. Then, we manipulated WOM stage between-subjects, as either generation or transmission (see Appendix 1 for exact instructions). Participants read that we were interested in the language people use when reporting consumption experiences with products and services. In the WOM generation condition, participants were asked to describe a consumption experience

that occurred to them. In the WOM transmission condition, participants were asked to describe a consumption experience that occurred to others. This procedure was adapted from prior research (De Angelis et al. 2012; Dubois et al. 2016). After the writing task, participants indicated the valence of the message they wrote on a nine-point scale (1 = very negative, 9 = very positive).

Finally, participants completed a self-threat measure whereby they were asked to indicate how they felt upon recalling the experience they described in the first part of the study (7-point semantic differential scale: unsatisfied/satisfied, not proud/proud, bad/good, unsuccessful/successful, not confident/confident, and worthless/person of worth;  $\alpha = .952$ ), and provided demographic information including gender, age, and ethnicity.

### ***Results and Discussion***

**Self-threat manipulation check.** A one-sample t-test revealed that participants reported significantly lower levels of overall self-satisfaction than the mid-point of the scale ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 1.67$  vs.  $4.00$ ;  $t(1, 150) = -7.623$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**WOM Valence.** We ran a moderation analysis with Hayes's PROCESS macro (2013, model 1) with WOM condition (generation vs. transmission) as the independent variable, belief in karma as a continuous moderator and WOM valence as the dependent variable. The analysis yielded a significant interaction between WOM condition and belief in karma ( $b = 1.29$ ,  $SE = .49$ ,  $t(147) = 2.65$ ,  $p = .009$ ). As shown in Figure 3, in the WOM transmission condition, participants with stronger belief in karma (1 SD above the mean) wrote marginally more positive messages than participants with weaker belief in karma (1 SD below the mean;  $M_{\text{high BIK-transmission}} = 5.45$  vs.  $M_{\text{low BIK-transmission}} = 4.12$ ;  $b = .66$ ,  $SE = .38$ ,  $t(147) = 1.76$ ,  $p = .081$ ). In the WOM generation

condition, participants with stronger belief in karma wrote significantly less positive messages than participants with weaker belief in karma ( $M_{\text{high BIK-generation}} = 5.50$  vs.  $M_{\text{low BIK-generation}} = 6.76$ ;  $b = -.62$ ,  $SE = .31$ ,  $t(147) = -2.04$ ,  $p = .043$ ).

Further analysis revealed that participants with weaker belief in karma (1 SD below the mean) wrote significantly more positive messages in the generation than in the transmission condition ( $M_{\text{low BIK-generation}} = 6.76$  vs.  $M_{\text{low BIK-transmission}} = 4.12$ ;  $b = -2.64$ ,  $SE = .69$ ,  $t(147) = -3.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There was no significant difference in WOM valence across generation and transmission for participants with stronger belief in karma (1 SD above the mean;  $M_{\text{high BIK-generation}} = 5.50$  vs.  $M_{\text{high BIK-transmission}} = 5.45$ ;  $b = -.05$ ,  $SE = .68$ ,  $t(147) = -.07$ ,  $p > .90$ ).

~ Figure 3 ~

The results of study 3 provide evidence that belief in karma moderates consumers' tendency to share negative WOM about others, and positive WOM about themselves, as a way to self-enhance. Respondents with stronger karmic belief transmitted more positive WOM than respondents with weaker karmic belief after experiencing self-threat. Furthermore, respondents with stronger karmic belief generated less positive WOM than respondents with weaker karmic belief after experiencing self-threat.

#### **STUDY 4**

The purpose of study 4 was to provide an additional piece of converging evidence that belief in karma moderates consumers' tendency to generate positive and transmit negative WOM to self-

enhance. To converge on our construct, in study 4 we directly manipulated belief in karma. Furthermore, we activated a need to self-enhance for all participants and used self-reported level of threat as a continuous factor.

### ***Method***

**Participants.** Undergraduate students from an East Coast University participated in a lab study in exchange for course credit. At the end of data collection, we had a total of 251 respondents (132 females, average age = 21.5).

**Procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (karma: salient vs. not salient) x 2 (WOM stage: generation vs. transmission) between-subjects design. The study started with a task aimed to manipulate karma, adapted from Kopalle et al. (2010; see Appendix 1). In the karma salient condition, participants read about the philosophy and concept of karma. Then they were asked to think about three situations in their lives when their behavior had been dictated by beliefs consistent with the karma philosophy, describe each situation in a sentence, then pick one and elaborate on it in greater detail. In the karma not salient condition, participants were asked to think about three evening activities they commonly engage in, describe each of them in a sentence, then pick one and elaborate on it in greater detail.

After the karma manipulation, all participants completed an episodic priming task aimed to manipulate self-threat. Participants were told that we were interested in learning more about the courses they had taken during their academic career. In particular, we asked them to think about the course in which they had the poorest performance during their academic career, describe this course and elaborate on how they felt about their performance in that course. After

the writing task, we asked respondents to indicate how the writing task made them feel on a 7-point semantic differential scale (unsatisfied/satisfied, not proud/proud, bad/good, unsuccessful/successful, not confident/confident, and worthless/person of worth;  $\alpha = .913$ ). This measure of self-threat was used as a continuous factor in our analysis.

Next, we manipulated WOM stage between-subjects, as either generation or transmission. After writing a message about a consumption experience that occurred either to them (WOM generation) or to someone else (WOM transmission), participants indicated the valence of the message they wrote (1 = very negative, 9 = very positive). To conclude, participants indicated the extent to which they believed in karma (“I believe in karma”, 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), and provided demographic information including gender, age, and ethnicity.

### ***Results and Discussion***

**Karma Manipulation Check.** A one-way ANOVA revealed that participants reported that they believed in karma significantly more when karma was salient compared to when karma was not salient ( $M_{\text{karma}} = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 1.41$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ;  $F(1, 249) = 5.037$ ,  $p = .026$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .020$ ).

**WOM Valence.** Moderation analysis using Hayes’s PROCESS macro (2013, model 3) with karma (salient vs. not salient), WOM stage (generation vs. transmission), and reported self-threat as the independent variables, and WOM valence as the dependent variable revealed a significant three-way interaction ( $b = -1.31$ ,  $SE = .47$ ,  $t = -2.78$ ,  $p = .006$ ). To decompose this interaction, we used the Johnson-Neyman technique to identify the ranges of self-threat at which the interaction

became significant (at  $p < .10$ ). This analysis revealed that there was a significant interaction between karma and WOM stage for any value of self-threat below 2.20 (High Threat) and above 4.20 (Low Threat). We calculated pairwise contrasts using those significance regions.

~ Table 1 ~

Overall, as shown in Figure 4, when the need for self-enhancement was high (self-threat below 2.20), participants transmitted directionally more positive WOM when karma was salient than when it was not ( $M_{\text{high threat-karma-transmission}} = 5.22$ ,  $SD = 2.77$  vs.  $M_{\text{high threat-control-transmission}} = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 2.31$ ;  $F(1, 35) = 2.66$ ,  $p = .11$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .073$ ). Furthermore, when the need for self-enhancement was high, participants generated less positive WOM when karma was salient than when it was not salient ( $M_{\text{high threat-karma-generation}} = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 2.76$  vs.  $M_{\text{high threat-control-generation}} = 6.25$ ,  $SD = 2.47$ ;  $F(1, 44) = 6.84$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 1.35$ ). Moreover, when the need for self-enhancement was high, WOM valence was significantly more positive at generation compared to transmission, when karma was not salient ( $M_{\text{high threat-control-generation}} = 6.25$  vs.  $M_{\text{high threat-control-transmission}} = 3.83$ ;  $F(1, 36) = 9.54$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .214$ ). The difference was not significant between generated and transmitted WOM valence when karma was salient ( $M_{\text{high threat-karma-generation}} = 4.15$  vs.  $M_{\text{high threat-karma-transmission}} = 5.22$ ;  $F(1, 43) = 1.55$ ,  $p = .22$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .036$ ).

On the other hand, when the need for self-enhancement was low (self-threat above 4.20), generated and transmitted WOM valence was not significantly different when karma was not salient ( $M_{\text{low threat-control-generation}} = 5.83$ ,  $SD = 2.61$  vs.  $M_{\text{low threat-control-transmission}} = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 2.81$ ;  $F(1, 23) = .62$ ,  $p = .44$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .027$ ). Of note, when the need for self-enhancement was low and karma was salient, WOM valence was significantly more positive at generation transmission

( $M_{\text{low threat-karma-generation}} = 6.13$ ,  $SD = 2.92$  vs.  $M_{\text{low threat-karma-transmission}} = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 2.55$ ;  $F(1, 26) = 4.16$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .217$ ). Although we were not expecting to find a difference between these two conditions, such a result is not inconsistent with our theory. Our theory, in fact, makes no prediction about how making karma salient in the absence of self-threat might influence WOM valence. In the absence of self-threat, self-enhancement motives should not be active, thus other goals and individual tendencies may drive behavior.

In sum, the results of study 4 provide further converging evidence that belief in karma moderates consumers' tendency to generate positive and transmit negative WOM as a way to self-enhance. Consistent with the results of the previous studies, respondents for whom karma was not salient transmitted more negative WOM in response to threat, compared to respondents for whom karma was salient. For generated WOM, valence also differed depending on whether karma was salient or not.

~ Figure 4A ~

~ Figure 4B ~

## STUDY 5

The goal of study 5 was to investigate a boundary condition to the effects documented in the previous four studies. In particular, the goal of study 5 was to examine how, under self-threat, WOM valence may vary depending on two different elements: (1) whether respondents believe in karma or not, (2) whether the brand involved in the consumption experience is actually karma-

worthy. We implemented this idea by comparing how people under self-threat and with different karmic belief transmit WOM related to consumption experiences connected with brands that are considered either good or bad citizens.

### ***Method***

**Participants.** Caucasian-American participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk in exchange for monetary compensation. At the end of data collection, we had a total of 182 respondents (45 females, average age = 33.6).

**Procedure.** This study started with the same karma manipulation used in study 4 (Kopalle et al. 2010). However, the karma manipulation did not work (no significant difference in BIK ratings between conditions,  $p > .30$ ). As a result, we present moderation results based on the continuous BIK measure.

All participants completed the same episodic priming task aimed to manipulate self-threat used in study 1, 2 and 3. Specifically, participants were asked to recall an episode in which they were not able to accomplish what they wanted, their performance was not good, and they felt like a failure. Then, we asked participants to engage in the same writing task used in the previous studies. Ostensibly framed as an investigation of the language people use when describing consumption experiences, the writing task consisted of writing a message describing a consumption experience that occurred to other people (e.g., an acquaintance, a friend, a relative, a significant other).

However, we adapted the instructions in order to manipulate the type of brand respondents would write about. Specifically, we instructed participants to write about

consumption experiences connected to either a brand they considered a bad citizen, or a brand they considered a good citizen (see exact instructions in Appendix 1). We explained that by bad (good) citizen we meant a brand that has a negative (positive) impact on society. For example, a brand that behaves dishonestly (honestly) with consumers, treats employees unfairly (fairly), or harms (helps) the environment.

After the writing task, participants indicated the valence of the message they wrote (1 = very negative, 9 = very positive), and completed a three-item manipulation check aimed to assess whether the brand they wrote about was indeed perceived to be a good versus bad citizen (the brand is: 1 = do-gooder/well-intentioned/admirable, 7 = evil-doer/ill-intentioned/despicable;  $\alpha = .974$ ). To conclude, participants completed a three-item BIK scale (“Good actions in the present lead to good outcomes in the future,” “I believe in Karma,” “Bad actions in the present lead to bad outcomes in the future;” 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree,  $\alpha = .875$ ), and provided basic demographic information including gender, age and ethnicity.

### ***Results and Discussion***

**Brand Manipulation Check.** A one-way ANOVA with type of brand as the independent variable and the brand manipulation check as the dependent variable revealed that indeed the brands participants mentioned in the good brand condition were considered to be better citizens than the brands participants mentioned in the bad brand condition ( $M_{\text{good brand}} = 2.26$ ,  $SD = 1.3$  vs.  $M_{\text{bad brand}} = 5.6$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ;  $F(1, 181) = 312.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The most frequently mentioned good citizen brands were Apple (8%), Starbucks (5%), Nike (4%), and Amazon (4%), and the most frequently mentioned bad citizen brands were Walmart (9%), Marlboro (8%), Apple (5%), and Chick-fil-A (5%).

**WOM Valence.** We ran a moderation analysis with Hayes's PROCESS macro (2013, model 1) with type of brand (good vs. bad) as the independent variable, belief in karma as a continuous moderator and WOM valence as the dependent variable. The analysis yielded a significant interaction between type of brand and belief in karma ( $b = .25$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $t(178) = 2.10$ ,  $p = .037$ ). As shown in Figure 5, under self-threat, participants with stronger belief in karma (1 SD above the mean) wrote significantly more positive messages about others' experiences with good-citizen brands than participants with weaker belief in karma (1 SD below the mean;  $M_{\text{low karma} - \text{good brand}} = 5.84$  vs.  $M_{\text{high karma} - \text{good brand}} = 7.05$ ;  $b = .46$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $t(178) = 2.81$ ,  $p = .006$ ). However, there was no significant difference in WOM valence across participants with different levels of karmic belief when they were asked to write about others' experiences with bad-citizen brands ( $M_{\text{low karma} - \text{bad brand}} = 2.39$  vs.  $M_{\text{high karma} - \text{bad brand}} = 2.29$ ;  $b = -.04$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $t(178) = -.21$ ,  $p > .80$ ).

These results indicate that, when facing self-threat, participants with stronger karmic belief transmitted more positive WOM about the experience of others with good citizen brands than those with weaker karmic belief. WOM valence however did not differ across participants with different levels of karmic belief when they were asked to share a consumption experience connected with a bad citizen brand, supposedly because talking positively about a bad brand would not be worthy of karmic rewards.

~ Figure 5 ~

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Prior research on WOM has documented a tendency for consumers to share negative WOM about others and generate positive WOM about themselves whenever their self-views are threatened (De Angelis et al. 2012). Our research suggests that this behavior is not universal, but is in fact moderated by cultural differences in the strength of certain beliefs, such as the belief in karma. The fundamental belief in karma, widespread in many Eastern cultures, dampens consumers' willingness to talk negatively about others and positively about oneself as a way to self-enhance in response to self-threat.

Across five studies we show that, when facing threat, consumers who believe in karma not only refrain from talking negatively about others, but may in fact talk more positively about them, compared to consumers who do not believe in karma. Moreover, when facing threat, consumers who believe in karma talk less positively about themselves, although not necessarily negatively, compared to consumers who do not believe in karma. Study 1 demonstrates that, under self-threat, Americans—who hold weaker belief in karma—transmit more negative WOM than Indians—who hold stronger belief in karma. Study 2 further shows that, under self-threat, consumers who hold weaker belief in karma transmit more negative WOM, whereas consumers who hold stronger belief in karma do not, and in fact transmit more positive WOM. Study 3 and 4 show that consumers with stronger karmic belief not only transmit more positive WOM, but also generate less positive WOM, than respondents with weaker karmic belief, after experiencing self-threat. Finally, Study 5 shows that, when facing self-threat, individuals with stronger karmic belief transmit more positive WOM about the experience of others only if talking about brands that are worthy of karmic rewards.

## **Theoretical Contributions**

Our research makes three theoretical contributions. First, we add to the growing literature that examines how extraordinary beliefs influence consumer behavior. Prior research has explored a plethora of beliefs that transcend and depart from science, including superstition (Block and Kramer 2009), magical thinking (Kramer and Block 2011) and fate (Kim, Kulow, and Kramer 2014). Our research contributes to this literature by exploring an extraordinary belief that has received limited attention in marketing and consumer psychology (for exceptions see Kopalle et al. 2010; Converse et al. 2012; Kulow and Kramer 2016), yet is widespread across many Eastern cultures: the belief in karma.

Second, we contribute to the literature on WOM, by shedding light on an important cultural difference that influences WOM valence. Prior research has established that WOM is often driven by the fundamental human motive to self-enhance (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Wojnicki and Godes 2017), a motive that is particularly pronounced when consumers experience self-threats (Baumeister 1998; Fiske 2001). In particular, consumers have been shown to respond to threats by sharing negative WOM about others' consumption experiences and positive WOM about their own (De Angelis et al. 2012). We show that this behavior is not universal. Consumers who believe in karma in fact spread positive WOM about others, and refrain from spreading positive WOM about themselves, as a way to self-enhance in response to self-threat.

Third, we contribute to the literature that examines how consumers respond to psychological threats. Our findings support the notion that, while the motive to self-enhance is universal (Sedikides et al. 2003), there are different routes to self-enhancement in response to threat. Our research shows that consumers who believe in karma are more likely to self-enhance by engaging in behaviors aimed at generating good karma, such as acting generously and

respectfully towards others, or being humble about themselves, in the hope that the world will then in turn reward them with positive outcomes, thus restoring balance. In contrast, consumer who do not hold this belief are more likely to self-enhance by engaging in behaviors aimed to bolster their image and make them look better than others, such as bragging about oneself and gossiping about others, in order to feel better about themselves and restore balance.

### **Practical Implications and Future Research Directions**

Our findings suggest that WOM might spread differently in the East versus the West. Because WOM is often driven by a self-enhancement motive, our findings suggest that negative WOM should travel more easily in the West than in the East. Vice versa, positive WOM should travel more easily in the East than in the West. This insight, which awaits further investigation, could have relevant implications for how marketers should manage service recovery efforts and customer misbehavior.

While our studies provide evidence that belief in karma influence WOM valence in response to threat, additional research could investigate how other extraordinary beliefs might influence social sharing of information. For example, fatalism (Kim et al. 2013), another extraordinary belief deeply rooted in certain cultures and religions, might influence WOM in a very different way as compared to belief in karma. Furthermore, additional work may examine the moderating role of contextual factors. For example, prior research has shown that WOM valence varies as a function of whether people share information with psychologically close versus distant others (Dubois et al. 2016; Chen 2017). It might be of interest to investigate how interpersonal closeness influences WOM across cultures.

## **APPENDIX 1: INSTRUCTIONS BY STUDY**

### **Self-threat manipulations**

#### **Self-threat condition – Online studies (study 1, 2, 3, and 5):**

For the first part of this study, we are interested in the language people use when writing about experiences that occurred in their own life.

We would like you to recall a particular episode in which you were not able to accomplish what you wanted, your performance was not good, and you felt like a failure. Please take a moment to vividly recall what happened and how you felt.

Please describe the episode (what happened, how you felt, etc...):

#### **Self-threat condition – Lab study with student population (study 4):**

Please think about the course in which you had the POOREST PERFORMANCE during your academic career. In the space below, please describe your performance in that course and elaborate on how you felt about it.

#### **No self-threat condition (study 1 and 2):**

We would like you to recall a particular episode in which you went to the grocery store. Please take a moment to vividly recall what happened and how you felt.

Please describe the episode (what happened, how you felt, etc...):

**Self-threat measure:**

Please indicate how recalling your performance in that course made you feel:

- |                              |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |                          |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Unsatisfied with yourself    | <input type="radio"/> | Satisfied with yourself  |
| Not proud of yourself        | <input type="radio"/> | Proud of yourself        |
| Bad about yourself           | <input type="radio"/> | Good about yourself      |
| Unsuccessful                 | <input type="radio"/> | Successful               |
| Not confident about yourself | <input type="radio"/> | Confident about yourself |
| Worthless                    | <input type="radio"/> | A person of worth        |

**WOM manipulations****WOM generation manipulation (study 3 and 4):**

In this study, we are interested in the language people use when writing about their own consumption experiences.

On the next page, you will be asked to write a message to describe a consumption experience (i.e. an experience with a product or a service) that **occurred to you**. Please use the language you normally use.

Please describe a consumption experience (remember, please describe a consumption **experience that occurred to YOU**, not to other people).

**WOM transmission manipulation (study 1, 2, 3, and 4):**

In this study, we are interested in the language people use when writing about consumption experiences that occurred to **other people**.

On the next page, you will be asked to write a message to describe a consumption experience (i.e. an experience with a product or a service) that **occurred to others**. By others we mean people other than yourself (i.e. people you barely know, acquaintances, friends, relatives, significant others, etc.). Please use the language you normally use.

Please describe the consumption experience (remember, please describe a consumption **experience that occurred to OTHER PEOPLE**, not to you).

**WOM valence measure:**

Overall, the experience you just described was:

Very negative ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Very positive

**Karma manipulation (study 4)**

**Karma condition:**

“As you have planted, so do you harvest”

According to the concept of karma, the universe is a continuous cycle, so that what goes around comes around. A key part of the philosophy of karma is that your current actions lead to corresponding results in the future. If you sow goodness, you will reap goodness. If you sow evil, you will reap evil. For example, if you behave appropriately in the present (e.g., being honest and kind), something good will happen to you in the future. However, if you do something bad (e.g., being dishonest and unkind) in the present, something bad will happen to you in the future.

Please think about three situations in your life where a belief in karma caused you to act in a

particular way. Please describe each situation in a few words.

Situation 1:

Situation 2:

Situation 3:

Now please pick one of the three situations you just mentioned, and describe it in more detail in the space below.

**Control condition:**

"Life is full of routine activities."

In this study, we are interested in learning more about activities that are part of your everyday life. In particular, we would like to learn more about how you typically spend your evenings on an ordinary day. Think of activities that you normally do in a typical evening. Do you normally work, read, watch television, or engage in other routine activities such as doing household chores, chatting with other family members, calling friends on the phone, etc.?

Please think about three evening activities that are part of your everyday life. Please describe each activity in a few words.

Activity 1:

Activity 2:

Activity 3:

Now please pick one of the three activities you just mentioned and describe it in more detail in the space below.

**Brand manipulation (study 5)**

**Bad citizen brand condition**

Please think about a consumption **experience that you heard occurred to somebody else** and that involved **a brand that you consider a "bad citizen."** By bad citizen we mean a brand that has a negative impact on our society. For example, a brand that behaves dishonestly with consumers, treats employees unfairly, harms the environment, etc.

Please write the name of the brand below:

Please describe the experience in the space below (remember, this should be an **experience that you heard occurred to somebody else**, not to you).

**Good citizen brand condition**

Please think about a consumption **experience that you heard occurred to somebody else** and that involved **a brand that you consider a "good citizen."** By good citizen we mean a brand that has a positive impact on our society. For example, a brand that behaves honestly with consumers, treats employees fairly, helps the environment, etc.

Please write the name of the brand below:

Please describe the experience in the space below (remember, this should be an **experience that you heard occurred to somebody else**, not to you).

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Figure and tables titles:

Figure 1: cultural identity moderates the effect of self-threat on WOM transmission valence (Study 1).

Figure 2: belief in karma moderates the effect of self-threat on WOM transmission valence (Study 2).

Figure 3: effects of belief in karma and WOM condition (generation vs. transmission) on the valence of WOM (Study 3).

Table 1: conditional effect of WOM condition  $\times$  karma salience on WOM valence at different levels of self-threat (Study 4).

Figure 4: the effect of karma and the type of WOM (generation or transmission) on WOM valence when self-threat is high (A) and low (B) (Study 4).

Figure 5: effect of brand citizenship (bad vs. good) and belief in karma (low vs. high) on the valence of WOM (Study 5).