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# **When *cuisine* becomes less *haute*: The impact of expert ratings on consumers' legitimacy judgments**

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# **When *cuisine* becomes less *haute*: The impact of expert ratings on consumers' legitimacy judgments**

## **Abstract**

What happens when expert ratings downgrade an organization? How does this downgrading influence the consumers legitimacy's judgments? To answer this issue, we study the 'Relais Bernard Loiseau' that was downgraded from a three-star to a two-star restaurant by the widely recognized expert, the *Michelin Guide*. Based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the 665 online reviews on the TripAdvisor website from 2004 to June 2017, our findings reveal a null effect on the rating (quantitative component of the evaluation) and a non-linear influence on their online comments (qualitative component). Our findings thus underline the great role of negative emotions in their judgement process, as the emergence of three positions towards the *Michelin Guide* that evolve: disapproval, approval and impartial. Those findings contribute to nourish the nascent bridge between neo-institutional theory and consumer-behavior field.

**Keywords:** Legitimacy, neo-institutional theory, online review, consumers' judgment, expert ratings, gastronomy.

# **When *cuisine* becomes less *haute*: The impact of expert ratings on consumers' legitimacy judgments**

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, literature has increasingly recognized the key role of critics and experts, as well as the media, in shaping consumers' judgment in terms of experience goods (e.g. Durand, Rao & Monin, 2007; Hsu, 2006). The guidance offered by experts, such as the *Parker Guide* for wine (Humphreys & Carpenter, 2018), the *Grammy Awards* for music (Anand & Watson, 2004) and the *Booker Prize* for fiction writing (Kovács & Sharkey, 2014), plays a crucial role in shaping consumers' judgments and expectations (Wang, Wezel & Forgues, 2016). This influence has been mainly studied through the lens of positive expert evaluations, whereby an award or high-ranking position positively influences the success and sales of the good in question, as well as the perception of legitimacy by consumers (Humphreys & Latour, 2013). Indeed, a positive evaluation from experts underlines and confirms an appropriateness to existing norms and standards (e.g. Rao, Monin & Durand, 2003) and, as a consequence, is considered a static reference that cannot easily evolve.

Within such a context, we may wonder what happens when a widely recognized expert downgrades an organization. Although rare and exceptional, such a downgrade can lead to a loss of legitimacy and influences consumers' judgment; a process currently overlooked by the existing research (e.g. d'Astous & Touil, 1999). Furthermore, the way in which consumers' complex reactions, not only rational but also emotional (Huy, Corley & Kratz, 2014), are triggered also warrants further investigation. Given the influence of expert judgments on

experience goods, downgrading provides a great avenue through which to study its influence on consumers' judgment of legitimacy.

To explore this issue, we focus on the *haute cuisine* field, in which the *Michelin Guide* is acknowledged as the most influential of critics (Durand et al., 2007; Ferguson, 2004; Gomez & Bouty, 2011; Karpik, 2000, 2010). Despite its extremely conservative behavior and stable evaluation criteria (Durand et al., 2007), February 2016 saw the *Michelin Guide* downgrade the 'Relais Bernard Loiseau' – a French gourmet restaurant located in Burgundy (eastern France) – from a three-star (the highest ranking) to a two-star establishment. Such a downgrade is rare; since its creation in 1934, the *Michelin Guide* has only downgraded 19 three-star French restaurants. The guide has always remained silent as to its reasons why (Rao et al., 2003).

Acting as a professional certification (Ferguson, 2004), Michelin stars represent a commonly accepted proxy of legitimacy (Rao et al., 2003). As such, downgrading represents not only a loss of legitimacy for the restaurant but could also influence consumers' judgement, since stars represent the most valued criterion for all agents in the field (Karpik, 2000; Gomez & Bouty, 2011). In this context, we seek to explore how a negative evaluation, made by an expert, influences consumers' judgment on legitimacy.

To do this, we analyze the 665 online reviews of the 'Relais Bernard Loiseau' posted by the consumers on the TripAdvisor website, from 2004 to June 2017, through a mixed method based on quantitative data (regression and analysis of variance) and qualitative data (correspondence analysis, automatic textual analysis and content analysis).

Our findings reveal a null effect on the rating assessed by consumers and a non-linear influence on the online comments that evolve between the short and long term with the

emergence of new criteria of evaluation, combined to a great confusion between them, an increase and then decrease of negative emotions. Finally, we observe the emergence of three positions of consumers towards the *Michelin Guide* that evolve and influence their judgement: disapproval, approval and impartial.

Those findings allow us to contribute to the literature on legitimacy judgment in revealing the complex relationship between negative expert judgement and consumers' one, underlining the great role of negative emotions in the consumers' judgment, and nourishing thus the nascent bridge between neo-institutional theory and consumer-behavior field.

## **2. Theoretical background**

### *2.1. The different audiences of legitimation*

Legitimacy is defined as “the perceived appropriateness of an organization to a social system in terms of rules, values, norms and definitions” (Deephouse et al., 2017, p. 36), highlighting thus a strong perceptual component. Following this conceptualization, literature acknowledges that legitimacy can be granted by a variety of audiences, such as media (Deephouse, 1996; Humphreys & Latour, 2013), State, regulators, experts but also recently individuals such as consumers (Suddaby, Bitekine & Haack, 2017; Tost, 2011). Each audience, whether consciously or not, use different set of cognitive processes (Bitektine, 2011; Tost, 2011), different criteria or standards (Ruef & Scott, 1998) for evaluating organizations and communicating their evaluations and perceptions to others.

Depending on the industry to which an organization belongs, all the audiences are not equivalent. For example, artists are evaluated by both museums and art galleries (Ertug et al., 2016). In the case of the *haute cuisine* field, the case under consideration, research reveal the role of two key audiences (Karpik, 2000) in assessing legitimacy: critic considered expert and

consumers, i.e. individuals. As legitimacy is a socially constructed perception, the way these different audiences interact each other starts to be examined (Bitekine, 2011; Tost, 2011). We follow this perspective by exploring the influence of a negative evaluation made by an expert audience on the legitimacy judgment made by the consumer audience.

### *2.2. The influence of expert judgement on consumers' judgement*

For some industries and experience goods, such as financial markets, healthcare, sports, movies, book, restaurants, wine or gambling, the influence of critics, experts, or media are critical for consumers (Hadj Ali, Lecoq & Visser, 2008; Durand et al., 2007; Humphreys & Carpenter, 2018; Humphreys & Latour, 2013; Kovács & Sharkey, 2014; Reinstein & Snyder, 2005), who rely on such evaluations when considering whether a product, service or organization is legitimate (Hsu, 2006).

This influence has been mainly explained by the uncertainty faced by consumers. “When the experience is highly ambiguous, consumers struggle to develop an independent and objective evaluation” (Humphreys & Carpenter, 2018, p. 150). In such context, experts contribute to “dissipate the opacity of the market [...] [and] reduce the cognitive deficit that characterizes consumers” (Karpik, 2010, p. 44). In evaluating first, they provide some guidance to consumers' judgement (Durand et al., 2007) and shape their expectations (Wang et al., 2016). This guidance is all the more important when one considers that critics and experts refer to stable criteria, i.e. the conformity to norms and standards to assess the value of a product or service (Rao et al., 2003), and in doing so provide a static reference.

### *2.3. The influence of a negative expert judgment on consumers' legitimacy judgment*

An even rarer instance is when, after awarding an organization, a wine, a movie, a book, experts decide to downgrade it through negative evaluations (e.g. d'Astous & Touil, 1999).



What happens in such a case? If consumers are mostly influenced by the value of experts' opinions (Holbrook, 1999), what relationships can we expect between experts' and consumers' judgments on the legitimacy of an organization? We face a paucity of research regarding the influence of a negative expert judgment on that of consumers.

However this is an important issue as if scholars have stressed the importance of expert as a source of validity cues (Bitekine & Haack, 2015) to assess the legitimacy of an organization for consumers, recent research tend to consider consumers no more as a passive audience but rather as an active one. Following this perspective, Tost (2011) suggests that, when legitimacy is contested, consumers are willing to engage more in the process of legitimacy judgment.

Furthermore, consumers' reactions are not just rational but emotional (Huy et al., 2014); a distinction that could influence their perception. This echoes a recent call in neo-institutional research as we know very little about how consumers use emotions and feelings in evaluating organizations (Deephouse et al., 2017) and more generally the role of emotions in legitimacy judgment (Lok, Creed & Voronov, 2017; Voronov & Vince, 2012), which can be addressed not only through the organization under consideration but also the expert who expresses the negative judgment.

To explore the issue of how a negative expert rating influences consumers' legitimacy judgment, we consider the case of the 'Relais Bernard Loiseau' restaurant in the *haute cuisine* field.

### **3. Context and methods**

#### *3.1. Research context*

The 'Relais Bernard Loiseau' belongs to the highly institutionalized field of *haute cuisine* (Ferguson, 2004; Gomez & Bouty, 2011). In 1977, two years after opening his own restaurant in Saulieu (a small town in Burgundy), Bernard Loiseau received his first star from the famous and widely recognized expert, *Michelin Guide* (Karpik, 2000). This young chef became famous for his own style of refined cuisine, with a number of signature dishes. In 1991, he gained his third star, the consecration of the *Michelin Guide*. Indeed, the *Michelin Guide* confers a maximum of three stars to restaurants worth a special journey (Karpik, 2000). In 2018, only 28 restaurants in France were awarded three-star, i.e. 4% of restaurants ranked. For 25 years, the three stars remained stable, despite the death of Bernard Loiseau in February 2003. After his death, his wife, Dominique Loiseau, took over as head of the Relais and the sous-chef, Patrick Bertron who had worked for more than 20 years with Bernard Loiseau, became the new chef of cuisine.

In February 2016, the *Michelin Guide* downgrades it from a three-star to a two-star restaurant, representing a loss of legitimacy. We seek to explore the influence of this negative expert judgment on the consumers' one, through the TripAdvisor website that allows consumers to rate and evaluate an organization (Karpik, 2010; Lamont, 2012). We thus could observe this influence on the rating (quantitative component of their evaluation) but also the online comments (qualitative component) made by consumers. This qualitative component allows us to account for not only the potential role of emotions in consumers' legitimacy judgment towards the organization, but also the other audience who assesses legitimacy: the *Michelin Guide*.

### 3.2. Data collection

Exploring our issue requires an empirical setting in which consumers' perceptions are available for a long period to study their potential evolution between before and after the

expert negative judgment. As the most commonly used by consumers in Europe and in France in particular (Ayeh, Au & Law, 2013; Zaman, Botti & Thanh, 2016), the TripAdvisor platform meets our requirements and allows to collect rich qualitative and quantitative data, which are both spontaneous and independent (e.g., Zaman et al., 2016).

On this platform, consumer reviews are based on an algorithm and a form designed by TripAdvisor, including an overall five-items scale rating and ratings of different components of experience: quality-price ratio, location, cleanliness and service, as well as textual comments and photos. TripAdvisor encourages consumers to report on their experience by writing a free textual comment. Additional and optional information about consumers is also available, such as age, gender, geographical origin, number of emitted posts, date of issue and date of stay.

Our dataset represents all the 665 online reviews posted on this website since the first publication in August 2004. As all reviews provide ratings and online comments (data analyzed), we collected all of them. We ended our data collection in June 2017 with the launch of a new menu, and a new adapted pricing scheme. As 70% of the online reviews come from French consumers, we first used the translation service of the TripAdvisor website for the 30% of comments written in foreign languages, as such translations are the ones read by French consumers. We then submitted these automatic translations to a copyeditor, with the original text, to ensure their quality and robustness and to make change when necessary (exceptions include specific languages such a Russian, Chinese or Japanese, which represent less than 5% of all comments).

To improve the validity of our analysis, we also conducted ten semi-structured interviews. These consumers were chosen according to their age, sex, gourmet restaurants and 'Relais Bernard Loiseau' visit frequencies (Table 1). The interview guide is mainly based on the

perception of this loss of the third star, the way they reacted at that time and their current evaluation.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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To have a deeper understanding of the context, we collected complementary data, such as newspaper articles, relating to the loss of the third star, visited the ‘Relais Bernard Loiseau’, and interviewed four employees: Dominique Loiseau, the head of the ‘Relais’, Patrick Bertron, the chef, and two persons in charge of communication.

### *3.3. Data analysis*

We adopted a mixed method based on quantitative data (regression and ANOVA) and qualitative data (correspondence analysis, automatic textual and content analysis). Before analyzing our data, we splitted them into three distinct periods, labelled ‘Before’, ‘After 1’ and ‘After 2’. The ‘Before’ period, where the restaurant was a three-star, spans from August 2004 to January 2016 (420 online reviews). After the loss of the third star, we considered two separated periods to study evolutions on a short and a longer term. The ‘After 1’ period takes into account the immediate reactions and lasts six months, from February to July 2016 (88 online reviews), as in this type of restaurant, consumers generally book several months in advance. The ‘After 2’ period lasts from August 2016 to June 2017 (157 online reviews), date of a new menu and pricing scheme.

We followed four steps of analysis.

First, we explored the influence of this negative expert judgment on the rating through two

analyzes (quantitative data). To explain the global rating and, particularly, which factors (among the four items initially evaluated by consumers on TripAdvisor) contribute the most, a multinomial logistic regression was first conducted (Appendix 1). This led us to keep three items (quality-price ratio, cleanliness and service) for the ANOVA (Table 2).

We then performed a content analysis of the comments (qualitative data), through different steps. In the second step, to observe the potential evolution of criteria on which consumers assess the restaurant, we used a correspondence analysis *via* a descendent hierarchical classification for each period. The aim of the algorithm is to order the textual data source through a process of categorization and reduction. The complete textual corpus is divided into different word classes “that simplify it while maximizing the structure of the text” (Daudigeos Boutinot & Jaumier, 2013, p. 331). The different classes of words selected maximize the deviation from a uniform distribution of words (measured by a Chi-square). As underlined by Daudigeos et al. (2013, p. 331), “[a] deviation from the uniform distribution may signal the intention of the author of the discourse to associate words in a special manner in order to create meaning”. Once built by the algorithm, we labelled, for each period, the different classes in accordance with the words they contain, i.e. criteria of evaluation.

In order to visualize their structure and patterns, a correspondence analysis was conducted. By scaling the rows and columns of the rectangular data matrix obtained by the descendant hierarchical classification in corresponding units, factorial analysis allows to plot the scores of the most significant words in the same space for ease of interpretation (Hoffman & Franke, 1986). It was then possible to interpret the distance in space between words (and by extension between classes of words). To do so, we used a qualitative module, IRAMUTEQ, of R platform (step 2).

In the third step, we attempted to reveal the potential evolution of the emotions contained in

consumers' comments. To achieve it, we used a text-analysis software, *Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count* (LIWC), to categorize multiple dimensions of language (Humphreys & Wang, 2017; Wang et al., 2016). LIWC searches, counts and codes words according to its own dictionary. Among the 80 categories available, related to our research question, we considered the following ones: anger, sadness, negative emotion, causation, tentative, inhibition and assent. LIWC program calculates the percentage of total words contained in each comment that match with those categories. A mean of percentage of total words based on all the comments contained in a period was calculated to analyze the possible evolution along the three periods. Non-parametric Mann-Whitney tests were performed in pairs between the three periods (Step 3).

In the fourth step, to deep our analysis on the influence between expert and consumers' judgement, we selected a sub-sample that mentioned the words related to 'star' (star, stars, starred) and 'Michelin' (Guide, Michelin) after the loss of the third star, i.e. online comments that directly refers to the *Michelin Guide* and its judgment. This sub-sample represents 52 online comments (22 for 'After 1' and 30 for 'After 2') among the 245. Following an inductive perspective, two of the authors coded separately this sample, confronted their results until an agreement of about 90% among them was reached. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), we had pre-existing categories in mind but were open to other categories that might emerge from the data. Coding led us to identify three aggregated positions of consumers towards the *Guide*: disapproval, approval and impartial (Step 4). To support these three last steps, we cross-checked our results with those of the ten semi-structured interviews.

## **4. Results**

### *4.1. Step 1: Influence on the rating of consumers' judgement*

Our results indicate that the loss of the third star has a null effect on the evaluations of consumers who quantitatively assess the restaurant at the same level. As specified in Appendix 1, the global significant multinomial logistic regression ( $p=0,013$ ) carried out to explain the global rating indicates that this item is explained by, first, the cleanliness ( $p=0.000$ ); second, by the quality-price ratio ( $p=0.000$ ); and third, by the service ( $p=0.000$ ). The location score was dropped from the ANOVA as it has no significant impact on the global rating.

The ANOVA analysis indicates that the cleanliness and quality-price ratio items are unaffected by the loss of the third star; their respective averages are not statistically different (Table 2). Concerning the service item, its devaluation can be explained by the nuisances caused by the expansion works for the construction of a huge spa (more than 1,500 square meters) beside the restaurant during this period: *“First of all, the building extension, which offers a view of a rotating crane [...] The dinner was very good but the place was dusty”* (Emmanuel95, 27 February 2016) or *“The view was ruined by a huge crane [...] Mrs. Loiseau had a large complex built adjacent to the hotel... Business acumen is good, hospitality is better!”* (Mnemo75, May 2015).

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Insert Table 2 about here

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These results indicate that the expert negative judgment does not influence the global mean rating of consumers, nor the evaluation of other peripheral items (except for service). Since the rating as a metric variable (quantitative component of evaluation) is complex to interpret on its own, we completed our analysis by taking into consideration the online comments (the qualitative component), through different steps.

#### 4.2. Step 2: Influence on the criteria of consumers' judgment

To analyze the influence on the content of online comments, we first identified the evolution of clusters, i.e. criteria of evaluation, through a correspondence analysis based on a descendent hierarchical classification for each period identified.

Considering the 'Before' period, we observed four initial clusters: hotel (in red), i.e., the physical environment (room, garden, swimming pool, bath, bed, etc.); the general atmosphere of the place (in green) with words such as Bernard Loiseau's spirit, magical moment, excellent stay, sublime, mythical; hospitality and front-line employees (in blue) illustrated by hospitality, kindness, excellence, team or host, etc. and the restaurant (in purple) with words such as wine, food, price, restaurant, etc. As words of the first and second cluster are intrinsically intertwined, we merged them as one, under the label, 'atmosphere'. Fig. 1 spatially represents the three main clusters through a factorial analysis.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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We observed that the second and third clusters are very close in terms of meaning and are clearly separated from the other two. In short, consumers evaluate the physical environment (hotel), the restaurant (elementary or basic service) and the general atmosphere of the place: *"Very high quality gastronomy and a stay in a chic rustic setting. 'Le Relais Bernard Loiseau' is an embassy of the French way of life"* (Johannès, 3 May 2010).

Considering the period just after the loss of the third star, 'After 1', we observed the emergence of a new criteria, labelled reputation (reputation, explanation, excellence, note, French, quality, etc.), and the growing closeness between other clusters. Fig. 2 illustrates that



if the two clusters (hotel and restaurant) are still distinct, both are intertwined with that of atmosphere, which becomes central. These trends suggest that the loss of the third star directly introduces a less clear structure in consumers' judgment.

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Insert Figure 2 about here  
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Indeed, the atmosphere's criteria previously had two sub-dimensions that were previously expressed separately: one related to the general atmosphere of the place and another related to hospitality and front-line employees. After the loss of the star, a new sub-dimension emerges, the reputation and is categorically intertwined with the two others. *"The hotel and catering service is up to the reputation of the great houses [...] "However, it's unfortunate that the reputation of an establishment does not come from those paying the bill, but from a company with zero connection to the place in question." (François M., 20 April 2016).* This increases confusion between the three sub-dimensions and reveals the difficulty that consumers have in reaching a clear judgment with distinct criteria.

Furthermore, within the criteria, we note an evolution of the terms used. For example, the restaurant's cluster includes new terms, such as the name of the chef, Patrick Bertron, which is introduced for the first time: *"[...] To complete this beautiful evening, we were offered to visit the kitchen once the shot is over. Of course, we accepted: the chef himself (Patrick Bertron) who takes the time to talk about his passion" (Petitsgourmands78100, 28 February 2016).* The loss of the star is also discussed by consumers: *"Although everything has probably already been said, the question remains: how and why did this beautiful place lose its third star?" (Pastis04, 21 April 2016).*

During the third period ('After 2'), i.e., from six months after the loss of the third star to June 2017, the analysis reveals that the hotel cluster and that of atmosphere get closer. Interestingly, proximity between the two grows in line with confusion, in that consumers become increasingly prone to introducing different criteria to their evaluations. This can also be explained by the emergence of a new cluster about price. A price reduction is expected by consumers: *"This restaurant is very good, but does not reach the level of excellence of other great French restaurant. However, the menu price is at the same level"* (Lofteur, 24 August 2016) or *"I do not know about this star loss [...] But it may be necessary to revise their prices"* (Maril, 10 May 2017). This creates increased confusion between all the dimensions related to the atmosphere (Fig 3).

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Insert Figure 3 about here  
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However, our results indicate that the restaurant cluster is still distinct from the others. Contrary to the previous periods, consumers provide more detailed descriptions of the different dishes or quality: *"The poached foie gras with artichoke puree is very well cooked and the harmony of the flavors is successful [...] the snails in tempura are not at all at the level of what can be expected in a gourmet restaurant"* (Mamuguiphi, 26 September 2016). Consumers use technical language in an apparent attempt to be seen as informed with a real expertise in the *haute cuisine*.

To conclude, we observe that the loss of the third star influences the content of the online comments through the emergence of new criteria (reputation first, and then price) (Table 3 for illustrative quotes) and the increase confusion between them. If the restaurant' criteria still stays distinct from the others, we note an evolution in the terms used as a way to be more

engaged in their judgment and legitimate them. To explore this potential stronger involvement in a context which appeals to consumers' emotions, we perform a LIWC analysis.

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Insert Table 3 about here  
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*4.3. Step 3: Influence on the emotional content of the online comments*

The results of LIWC analysis (Table 4) indicate a significant increase of words related to negative emotions immediately after the loss of the third star (+28.7% between 'Before' and 'After 1').

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Insert Table 4 about here  
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This result is consistent with previous research highlighting that negative emotion words are used in writing about a negative event (Kahn et al., 2007) among which a loss of legitimacy (Huy et al., 2004). As illustrated by Peter (Interview 6): *"I didn't expect it. But just I said to myself, it's a shame now that they lost that star they'll never find it"*. In detailing words related to negative emotions, they encompass significantly more anger (+66.7%) and sadness (+22,5%). This increase reflects a stronger involvement from consumers in the process of legitimacy judgement, as theoretically suggested by Tost (2011). However, the use of negative emotion words significantly decreases in the long term and are closed to those before the loss (0.831 for 'Before' vs. 0.873 for 'After 2'). This result echoes literature on surprise effect (Bagozzi et al., 1999) underlining that the influence is stronger in the six months following a negative surprise (Ford, DiBiase & Kensinger, 2018).

In parallel, we observed a significant increase of causal words between the periods ‘Before’ and ‘After1’ (+39.6%), suggesting the willingness of consumers to justify their judgment (Tost, 2011). But at the same time, they seem less confident as revealed by the increase of tentative words (+12.7%): *“Coming with a priori following the Michelin Guide, we had a wonderful moment [...] It is probably not the most creative cuisine, nor the most stylish hotel [...] If I had to find a downside” (Denis, 5 March 2016)*. We observe an influence of the expert negative judgment on the content of consumers’ judgment, through an increase of their negative emotions and the introduction of doubts in their evaluations. This result is consistent with the observation of a less clear structure of their judgment in step 2.

Finally, the decrease of assents words measuring the level of agreement (-33%), related to the increase of negative emotions (+28.7%) reveals a disagreement between consumers and the expert’ judgement in a short term (‘After 1). In a longer term (‘After 2’), the increase of assent words (+60.7%) reveals rather a consensus. However, this consensus may be considered as not totally an in-depth coping strategy (Duhachek, 2005) due to the important increase of words related to inhibition (+46.8%) but rather as a surface coping strategies (Hur, Moon & Han, 2015) as illustrated by Valerie (Interview 1): *“Disappointed but also a little questioning. If professionals have said it was less suitable for a 3-star rating, they may also be right”*.

To deepen our analysis of emotional content and further our analysis of the assent dimension in the relationship between expert and consumers, we perform a content analysis.

#### *4.4. Step 4: Influence of the Michelin Guide on the online comments*

The qualitative analysis of the 52 online comments (22 for ‘After 1’ and 30 for ‘After 2’) that directly mention the words ‘star’ and/or ‘Michelin’ after the loss of the third star reveals that

this downgrading is differently perceived by consumers. Three positions towards the *Michelin Guide* were observed: disapproval, approval and impartial, with an evolution of proportion and content.

In the short term ('After 1'), a majority of consumers (55% of this subsample) express a disapproval towards the *Guide*. Consumers refer to negative emotions to express their disapproval and question the expert judgment. As they find this negative judgment unjustified, they choose to actively support the restaurant: "*Excellent. I do not understand why this restaurant lost a star*" (Marie-Pierre, 7 June 2016). The content analysis reveals the use of several arguments to justify their disapproval, underlining a strong involvement in their legitimacy judgment, while, at the same time, leaving room for doubt. These observations are consistent with those observed through LIWC analysis with the increase of causation (+39.6%) and tentative (12.7%) words in the period 'After1'. On the contrary, 30% of consumers approve expert judgment in supporting directly the apparently deserved loss of the third star: "*I understand the loss of the third star. We are far enough from a three-star*" (Kharrin, 5 July 2016). Finally, 15% of the online comments evoke the loss of the star in an impartial way: "*Thank you to the entire Bernard Loiseau' team for this exceptional stay. Two or three stars, who cares?*" (Laurent, 8 March, 2016).

In a longer term ('After 2'), we observe two evolutions. First, if the proportion of disapproval (38.3%) and approval (29.8%) towards the *Guide* decreases, the content of their comments evolves, leading to a more radical opposition between them and the use of particularly strong negative terms: "*How the Michelin Guide could remove a star from this place and keep three stars at the Paul Bocuse restaurant, which is completely outdated!*" (Misnard, 27 March 2017) vs. "*a really mediocre experience and, for us, not up to the height of its stars and reputation*" (Nickoparis, 11 October 2016). Among consumers remain impartial towards the

*Guide*, they go even further and mention the possibility of losing the second star: “*For a two-star Michelin restaurant, the dinner, compared to other star restaurants frequented, is not, in my opinion, as good as these stars!*” (Rassian, 2 October 2016).

Second and in relation to, the proportion of impartial position increases (31.9%). This observation is in line with the positive evolution of assent words (+60.7%) between the periods ‘After 1’ and ‘After 2’. This increase of impartial comments can be explained by the fact that the restaurant is more often evaluated as a two-star with less reference to the loss of the third star: “*A chef who absolutely deserves these 2 stars*” (Veronique, 28 May 2017). Some comments even do not refer to a number of stars but just evoke a restaurant “*with Michelin stars*”: “*Super gastro restaurant. It deserves its stars*” (Vanillevodka, 30 April 2017). By evaluating in a lower (two-star restaurant) or in a broader (“*star restaurant*”) manner, an impartial position towards the *Guide* appears easier to adopt.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

In this article, we explore the influence of a negative expert judgment on consumers’ legitimacy judgment. To do so, we studied the evolution of the legitimacy judgement towards the ‘Relais Bernard Loiseau’ by consumers following its downgrading from a three-star to a two-star restaurant in February 2016 by the expert *Michelin Guide*. Our analysis of the online reviews posted by consumers on the widely used TripAdvisor website reveal a null effect on the rating (quantitative component of the evaluation) and a non-linear influence on their online comments (qualitative component). Contrary to research that underline a direct and positive influence of expert judgment on consumers’ one (e.g. Humphreys & Latour, 2013), our findings reveal that in a case of a negative expert judgement, this influence does not follow the same pattern. Our results led us to contribute to the nascent bridge between neo-

institutional theory and consumers behavior field (Chaney & Ben Slimane, 2014) in several ways.

First, contrary to research suggesting that a bias of conformity can be applied and that consumers will follow the expert judgement (Holbrook, 1999; Hadj Ali et al., 2008), especially when the taste and the subjectivity are important, our findings reveal a null effect on the rating. Despite primarily surprising, this null effect can be explained technically by the 5-point scale (Peterson & Wilson, 1992) developed by TripAdvisor that limits consumers' ability to adjust their rating unless really sanctioning the restaurant. As underlined by Eric T. (2 April 2007): *“The problem of the rating system is that there is no intermediary position between average and very good. It wasn't average, and it wasn't very good – it was good, no more and no less.”* Furthermore, by conformity to the norms and standards (reference to the normative legitimacy), a gourmet restaurant is still well ranked on the TripAdvisor website, whether its number of stars, with a rating between 4 and 5, reflecting a rapid simplifying process for transforming qualities into quantities (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). This null effect on the rating tends to nuance its role on the legitimacy judgment, for the benefit of the online comments as suggested by two complementary streams of literature. On the one hand, considering the rating as the outcome of the legitimacy judgement process, and the comments as the process (Tost, 2011), our findings suggest to more focus on the process to explain the outcome of this legitimacy judgement (Bitekine, 2011; Bitekine & Haack, 2015) as an apparent lack of change of the outcome can be supported by major evolutions in terms of process. On the other hand, recent research in marketing underline the role of the online comments as a fundamental narrative compensation for online reviews (Liu & Park, 2015). The narrative details could even have an even more significant influence on other consumers than just the rating score (Van Laer et al., 2018). Thus, our findings suggest to no limit the

study on the rating that could be difficult to interpret alone but also to encompass the in-depth analysis of the comments to fully understand the influence on consumers' judgement.

Second, in addition to being indirect, this influence is non-linear in relation to the evolution of online comments over time. Indeed, we observe an increase confusion with the emergence and multiplicity of criteria that become difficult to differentiate, and in parallel an increase of negative emotions that tend to decrease in the long term with more and more consumers that tend to be neutral. Our results refine thus the central role of emotions in the post-consumption stage of the decision-making process, stage that has been less studied (Bagozzi et al., 1999), and in experiential marketing, particularly in the luxury and creative fields (Kim et al., 2016). The loss of the third star can be assimilated to an unexpected shock that leads to too dissonant negative tensions that consumers have to deal with. If the negative emotions tend to decrease on the long term whatever the consumer, completing thus the work of Ford et al. (2018), the progressive neutral position towards the *Michelin Guide*, and thus an increase consonance, cannot be considered an in-depth coping strategy (Duhachek, 2005) and deserves further research. This central role of emotions echoes also a recent trend in the literature of legitimacy judgment (Lok et al., 2017; Voronov & Vince, 2012) in revealing empirically two types of negative emotions: anger and sadness. Our findings also suggest that these emotions alter their legitimacy judgement process with an increase of confusion and doubt. Furthermore, these negative emotions are addressed not to one but two distinct audiences: the organization but also the expert at the origin of the negative judgment. Disappointed consumers are more engaged to justify their judgement to support the organization whose legitimacy is contested. They can be considered active audience in assessing the organizational legitimacy (Bitekine & Haack, 2015; Tost, 2011), audience that has been left aside in neo-institutional literature (Chaney & Ben Slimane, 2014).



Third, our results contribute to the relation of power between these two external audiences who confer legitimacy to an organization (Orlikowski & Scott, 2013): expert vs. consumers. Traditionally experts such as the *Michelin Guide*, the Booker Prize or the Grammy Awards represent the standard of continuity and act as a coordination mechanism in a field (Karpik, 2000, 2010). Today, they seem challenged by online-reviews platforms that, by compiling consumers' judgment, progressively exert influence (Wang et al., 2016) and can be considered 'expert system' (Jeacle & Carter, 2011). In this complex relationship between the expert audience which values tradition of continuity in evaluating a product or service a few times a year and a consumer audience that makes evaluation every day, this questions the legitimation dynamics, i.e. the sub-process of negotiation over who is a legitimate judge (Lamont, 2012). Our findings suggest that in parallel to the expert audience, consumers become key audiences in the legitimacy judgment with increasing power (Humphreys, 2010), as is the case of the '*Consumer Reports*', which exerts great influence in how consumers choose their cars, for example. However, this dyad between expert and consumers should not overshadow the role the organization itself can play in this dynamic. Following a market-driven approach, an organization can influence these both external audiences and be actively part of the legitimation process as suggested by Dion and Borraz (2017) or Humphreys and Carpenter (2018).

These theoretical contributions have practical implications for both the organization and the expert. For the organization, beyond rethinking the role of the community manager from a defensive perspective, a strong presence on social networks and online platforms could reduce the influence of the expert's judgment. Transparent communication regarding the adaptation of certain offers following a downgrading could also be useful. To gain legitimacy, the community manager should offer systematic responses as suggested by Beuscart et al. (2016). Following the market-driven approach, an organization may choose to focus on a particular

audience and not the other. For example, chef Bras of the famous three-star restaurant ‘Le Suquet’, officially requested to not appear in the 2018 *Michelin Guide*. For the experts, they could consider integrating consumers’ judgments into their marketing strategy, as seen in the famous Rotten Tomatoes website, which provides the movie judgments of both experts and consumers on the same web page. Doing so would increase the visibility for consumers, enhance the authority of experts, and deal with the observed empowerment phenomenon of online communities.

Finally, several limitations of our study provide promising opportunities for further research. First, despite we focus on the restaurant ‘Relais’ cluster, online comments occasionally mention the hotel or the experience as a whole. This represents an inherent limitation, which has been nevertheless reduced when interviewing the organization members and ten consumers and by the fact that in the correspondence analysis, this cluster still remains distinct from the other criteria in the online comments. Second, despite we observed that the profile variables of consumers have no direct effect on the global rating (reviewer’s gender:  $p=0.585$ , issuer’s age:  $p=0.681$ ; reviewer’s geographical origin (French or not):  $p=0.741$ ), it could be interesting to take into consideration the status of consumers, and notably the distinction between French and foreign consumers, in the way they perceive the legitimacy of this restaurant. Another limitation relies on the use of a unique website, TripAdvisor. Despite we collected all the online reviews available on this website and conducted ten interviews to limit sampling bias, a research perspective could consist in collecting data on other food-specialized websites. However, these platforms are less widely used: *lafourchette.fr* (127 online reviews for the ‘Relais’) and *Yelp.fr* (13). To enhance our external validity, it could be useful to replicate our study for the other few restaurants that faced a loss of a third star. Another way could be to apply this methodology in others luxury consumption contexts where excellence rewards are central such as the haute couture’ label or finest jewellery.

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**Table 1**  
Interviewees characteristics

Interview number	First name	Gender	Age	Interview duration (min)	Attendance of a gourmet restaurant (mean per year)	Number of visits to the 'Relais Bernard Loiseau'
1	Valérie	Female	37	36	4	3
2	Guido	Male	71	25	3	2
3	Joséphine	Female	64	21	3	1
4	Marine	Female	42	15	1	1
5	Sophie	Female	36	41	2	2
6	Peter	Male	41	22	2	2
7	Benjamin	Male	23	18	2	1
8	Christiane	Female	54	24	0.5	2
9	Jeanne	Female	71	32	8	4
10	Sofiane	Male	26	17	0.5	1

**Table 2**  
Comparative F-tests realized on item scores

Comparison of periods around the loss of the third star (ANOVA)	Before Mean (Std dev.)*	After1 Mean (Std dev.)*	After2 Mean (Std dev.)*	<i>F</i> ***	<i>p</i>	Evolution
<b>Global rating</b>	4.63 (.72)	4.63 (.76)	4.61 (.81)	0.066	0.936	→
<b>Quality/price ratio</b>	4.25 (.74)	4.27 (.31)	4.26 (.47)	0.032	0.968	→
<b>Cleanliness</b>	4.84 (.43)	4.78 (.31)	4.87 (.12)	2.104	0.123	→
<b>Service</b>	4.78 (.47)	4.65 (.61)	4.73 (.48)	2.701	<b>0.068**</b>	↘ ↗
<b>Sample</b>	358	88	157			

\* Mean tests for unequal variance (associated with its standard deviation) from Levene tests

\*\* Although critical probability ( $p = 0.068$ ) slightly exceeds the significance threshold traditionally used (5%), this link is said directionally significant

\*\*\* Fisher's exact test

**Table 3**  
Illustrative quotes of the different criteria by consumers

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Before</b>	<b>After 1</b>	<b>After 2</b>
Restaurant	<i>'The tasting menu was fabulous and hearty, from starter to dessert. Meticulous dressings, beautiful dishes and flavors... unforgettable! A big thank you for these culinary emotions!' Babelle4, 20 November 2014</i>	<i>'Patrick Bertron went all out and gave us the best, with rigor and precision. But apparently this wasn't good enough for the Michelin inspectors!' François M, 20 April 2016</i>	<i>'The appetizer was exceptional. It was a pâté, made with an Alexandre Dumaine recipe. For an appetizer, it was surprising because we had expected a quick bite, but nothing that sophisticated.' JF, 20 December 2016</i>
Hotel	<i>'A room with all the 'modern comfort' and more... A high-end bed. Beautiful garden with a small but absolutely delightful pool.' Pierre M., 17 July 2015</i>	<i>'Very well decorated bedroom overlooking the interior garden. Perfect bedding – fabulous bathroom and all the necessary amenities.' Xavier B., 2 April 2016</i>	<i>'A room is basically a bed, but what a bed! A bathroom is just a bathroom, but what a bathroom! A hotel is a hotel, but what a hotel!' Domi 70110, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2016</i>
General atmosphere	<i>'The meal was excellent like everything else. We had the impression that Bernard Loiseau was still there. It was a moment of pure happiness for us.' Francine J., 20 January 2016</i>	<i>'We have such a great memory of our stay in 2003 that I was a little apprehensive... the magic is still there and we had a great time in this warm house, where the memory of the homeowner is always present.' Nicole T, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2016</i>	<i>'For a two-starred Michelin restaurant, our dinner was more than disappointing!', Nickoparis, 2 October 2016</i>
Hospitality and front-line employees	<i>'A house where you feel good from the moment you are welcomed by the valet, and where everyone is so friendly you quickly feel at home. [...] Perhaps the best service I've ever had.' Dentalez, 2 November 2015</i>	<i>'From the moment we arrived, the smile is present.' Jean-Yves 77460, 25 March 2016</i>	<i>'We can't thank Mrs. Loiseau enough for coming by to say a few words at all the tables [...] Thank you to the staff for their attention, and for offering a simple, warm welcome without pretension or snobbery.' Domlaic, 20 December 2016</i>
Reputation		<i>'I knew the reputation of this place, and it's always hard to achieve perfection in such cases... But not this time.' Sylvain V., 22 February 2016</i>	
Location			<i>'The possibility of a spa before dinner is obviously a luxurious offer, and one to complete an excellent stay.' Dominique38, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2016</i>

**Table 4**

The most emotive and cognitive LIWC dimensions

Categories from LIWC	Average mean of % of words of a category <i>Evolution in % and Mann-Whitney U tests</i>				
	August 2004 – January 2016 (Before)		February 2016 – July 2016 (After 1)		August 2016 – June 2017 (After 2)
Negative emotions (hate, worthless, enemy, etc.)	0.873	+28.7% $p=0.001$ →	1.124	-26.1% $p=0.000$ →	0.831
Anger	0.186	+66.7% $p=0.000$ →	0.310	-32.3% $p=0.000$ →	0.210
Sadness	0.422	+22.5% $p=0.049$ →	0.517	-29.1% $p=0.014$ →	0.366
Causation (because, effect, hence)	0.914	+39.6% $p=0.010$ →	1.276	-12% $p=0.065^*$ →	1.124
Tentative (maybe, perhaps, guess)	0.825	+12.7% $p=0.053^*$ →	0.930	-25.4% $p=0.002$ →	0.694
Inhibition (block, constrain)	0.276	+6.7% $p=0.196$ →	0.293	+46.8% $p=0.001$ →	0.430
Assent (agree, OK, yes)	1.442	-33% $p=0.001$ →	0.972	+60.7% $p=0.000$ →	1.562

\* These links are directionally significant

## Appendix 1

### Model fitting information for multinomial regression

Effect (analyzed sample)	Maximum likelihood ratio			
	Model fitting criteria	tests		
	-2 Log-likelihood	Chi-square	df	Sig.
Quality-price ratio (455)	224.497	62.029	16	.000
Location (439)	171.105	8.636	12	.734
Cleanliness (421)	229.702	67.233	16	.000
Service (542)	198.090	35.621	12	.000
				Nagelkerke R-square = .425