



Second Person Pronouns Enhance Consumer Involvement and Brand Attitude[☆]

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Abstract

Online brand messaging, e.g., blogging or posting on social media platforms, has an important role in digital marketing strategy. Such messaging is largely text based and provides an opportunity for brands to interact with many consumers simultaneously. The marketing literature, however, has yet to provide sufficient guidance on effective online brand messaging strategies. In particular, research has yet to address how the inclusion of second person pronouns in online brand messaging affects relevant consumer outcomes. The present research proposes that second person pronouns should work to enhance consumer involvement and brand attitude as a result of increasing the extent that consumers engage in self-referencing. A field study involving actual brand posts on Facebook and two subsequent experiments provide support for this hypothesis. In addition, drawing on cultural dimensions theory, individual levels of collectivism are identified as a boundary condition. The presence (vs. absence) of second person pronouns in online brand messaging enhances involvement and brand attitude for consumers that are lower, but not higher, in collectivism. The results provide marketers with needed guidance for creating effective online brand messaging.

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Keywords: Second person pronoun; Self-referencing; Consumer involvement; Brand attitude; Collectivism

Introduction

Enhancing consumer involvement and brand attitude through online brand messaging remains an ongoing challenge for digital marketers. Brand-to-consumer messaging is increasingly emphasized in firms' digital marketing strategies. Content-based marketing strategies such as blogging or posting on popular social media platforms, for example, have become staples of digital marketing practice. However, despite the popularity of such online brand messaging, the literature has

yet to provide sufficient guidance on effective messaging strategies. Some strategies, such as incorporating video content, are discussed by practitioners (e.g., Rampton 2014) but strategies resulting from theory-based research are scarce. In the present research, we address this gap in the literature by drawing on research on psycholinguistics and cultural differences to understand how the use of second person pronouns (e.g., "you") in online brand messaging might enhance consumer involvement and brand attitude.

Research shows that addressing consumers directly creates a sense of personalization, which in turn has a positive impact on how consumers respond to marketing communications (Roberts 2003; Vesanen 2007). Sahni, Zou, and Chintagunta (forthcoming), for instance, found that adding the first name of customers to the subject line of emails used in direct-to-consumer marketing increased the probability of consumers opening the email by 20% and increased sales by 31%. However, online brand messaging cannot always be personalized for individual consumers. When blogging or posting on Facebook, for example, brands are tasked

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with creating generic content that speaks, not to individual, but to a multitude of consumers simultaneously. Recognizing this limitation, the present research tests an alternative strategy to augment consumer involvement with online brand messaging based on the inclusion of second person pronouns.

The results of an initial study using field data and two subsequent experiments suggest that the inclusion of second person pronouns in online brand messaging (e.g., blogs, social media posts) enhances consumer involvement and attitude toward the brand. This effect of second person pronouns on consumer involvement is found to be mediated by consumer self-referencing. Online brand messages that include a second person pronoun increase consumer involvement as a result of increasing the extent that consumers engage in self-referencing. This increase in consumer involvement, in turn, is found to enhance consumers' attitude toward the brand. This effect of second person pronouns on consumer involvement and brand attitude, however, is not found to hold for all consumers. Drawing on cultural dimensions theory (e.g., Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010), the final study finds that individual levels of collectivism establish a boundary condition for the observed effects. Brand messaging with (vs. without) second person pronouns only enhance involvement and brand attitude among consumer that are lower (vs. higher) in collectivism.

Conceptual Framework

Brands are allocating increasingly larger portions of their marketing budget to influence consumers through online brand messaging. According to a survey of marketing executives, spending on online marketing activities increased 234% from 2009 to 2016 and now accounts for approximately 11.7% of marketing budgets, on average (Moorman 2016a, 2016b). Online brand messaging benefits brands by allowing them to communicate with a large number of consumers at a relatively low cost. On Facebook, for instance, brands can post messages to their official brand page that are then streamed to the brand's fans and visitors. Such online brand-to-consumer communications provide brands with a powerful means for facilitating emotional attachment in consumers and the possibility of widespread sharing of their brand content (Sashi 2012; Zheng et al. 2015).

Despite the emphases on videos, images, links, hashtags, etc., words serve as the foundation for online messaging. Whether messaging occurs through blogging, tweeting, or posting on Facebook, word choice remains crucial for effectively speaking to consumers. On Facebook, for instance, words provide meaning and context to brand messages posted to a brand's timeline. When blogging, words take center stage to convey often more complex brand messages. When constructing brand messages the focus is typically on content words such as verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. Content words are essential to communicate meaning, in developing mental imagery, and in directing the attention of the reader (Chung and Pennebaker 2007).

In addition to content words, however, brand messaging also includes function words. Function words, such as pronouns, provide the reader with auxiliary information such as who is the creator and intended recipient of the message. The marketing literature has only begun to address how function words might affect the success of brand messaging. Moreover, existing research only addresses how first person pronouns such as "we" and "I" affect consumers. Because second person pronouns (e.g., you, you'd, you'll, you're, you've, your) also play an important role in communication (Pennebaker 2011), the present research focuses on the effect of using second person pronouns in brand messaging.

The literature suggests that the use of pronouns has an important effect on marketing communication outcomes. For example, recent research identifies contexts in which using first person pronouns such as "we" (Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012), "I" (Packard, Moore, and McFerran 2014), and "my" (Kachersky and Palermo 2013) benefit brand communications. Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi (2012), for instance, found that using the pronoun "we" in advertisements enhanced brand attitudes by creating a sense of closeness with the brand. They explain that in emotionally close and committed relationships, people often refer to themselves and another person as "we" rather than by addressing their self and the other person separately (Brown and Gilman 1960). In turn, because "we" is used frequently in close relationships, a generalized positive response develops to the word. Packard, Moore, and McFerran (2014), on the other hand, focused on the positive effect of using the pronoun "I" when responding to customer complaints. When compared to firms that do not self-reference by using the word "I," using the word "I" had a positive effect on customer satisfaction. They suggest that perceptions of firm empathy and agency drive this effect.

Such research reveals important implications for the use of first person pronouns; however, it also leaves open the question as whether second person pronouns may also affect the effectiveness of brand messaging. Second person pronouns are special in that they implicate the reader. Brand messaging that includes a second person pronoun is directed at the consumer — it speaks directly to the consumer (e.g., Are *you* paying attention?).

Prior research suggests that second person pronouns may influence consumer involvement. Consumer involvement refers to the perceived relevance of a message based on the inherent needs, values, and interests of consumers (Mittal and Lee 1989; Zaichkowsky 1985). Consumer involvement influences depth of message processing (Andrews, Durvasula, and Akhter 1990), emotional attachment to the brand (Sashi 2012; Zheng et al. 2015), and subsequent consumer–brand interactions (Richins and Bloch 1986; Zaichkowsky 1985). When brand messaging elicits high involvement in consumers they are more likely to promote the brand and its content, for example, by sharing it with others online (Berger and Milkman 2012) or by interacting with it on social media platforms such as Facebook using site-features such as "likes," "comments," and "shares" (Mochon et al. 2017).

Given the positive consumer outcomes that can result from consumer involvement, it is important to consider how brand

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