Metaphorical communication, self-presentation, and consumer inference in service encounters

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ABSTRACT

In service encounters, the meaning inferred by a customer is a result of verbal and visual communication. This research focuses on how visual metaphorical communication in a service encounter can evoke the concept of power. We show that when representation of the service provider is at the bottom (versus top) of an image, the consumer's perception of their own power is increased (Study 1). Study 2 demonstrates that power perceptions interact with self-presentational motives to influence intentions to use the service. Further, perceptions of power mediate the effect of visual representation on usage intentions. This occurs only when consumption is public and self-presentational concerns are high. In Study 3, we demonstrate that when the concept of power has little applicability, visual representation of perceived power does not affect intentions to use the service provider. Further, only individuals with a high need for status access the conceptual link between power and visual representation (Study 4). Together, the results further our understanding of the use of visual metaphorical communication in a service encounter.

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Well-designed visuals do more than provide information; they bring order to the conversation.

[Owen-Boger & Ludwig, 2014]

1. Introduction

Metaphors are one of the most important and influential tools in interpersonal communication. Linguistic and non-linguistic metaphors typically use concrete concepts to facilitate comprehension of abstract concepts. For example, life is often described or depicted as a journey, and an argument is often described or depicted as a war. In the present research, we examine the effects of visual language creating metaphorical communications on consumer inferences about power, and we investigate the effects of these inferences on social influence in service encounters. We also investigate the potential moderating roles of consumption context and consumer concern about self-presentation and status.

The firm-customer interaction is critical to building value in services (Grönroos, 1990; Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). In highly interactive contexts such as services (Eiglier & Langeard, 1976; Grönroos, 1978), language can be a key factor in the customer's determination of service value (Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert, & Zeithaml, 1997; Grönroos, 1978, 1984, 2008). Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) note that the power of language is such that it influences customer engagement before, during, and even after a service interaction. However, the words and grammar we use in verbal language do not exist in a vacuum. Visual information and other environmental factors influence the meaning inferred by a consumer (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010; Weikum et al., 2007).

Consumers increasingly engage in services in graphically rich online environments (Allied Market Research, 2015). Instead of hearing tone or seeing facial expressions, consumers see layouts arranging text and graphics. The meaning consumers infer from language in such environments can be greatly altered by presentation of visual elements as well (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2010). These visual elements of language communicate service-provider attributes to consumers that has the potential to impact trial or purchase intent (Jung, Kim, & Lee, 2014). Importantly, visual communication is susceptible to varying interpretations based on personality, culture, and other factors (Jung et al., 2014; Bartikowski & Singh, 2014).

A key attribute conveyed in service interactions is power, where a consumer assesses a service provider's dominance in a given context

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(Farquhar, 1989). Power is defined by Rucker, Galinsky, and Dubois (2012, p. 254) as "the asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations." Such a definition is fundamental to the notion of exchange—something is given in order for something else to be received. A consumer's perception of control or power is tied to both the service's power and the consumer's own power. This perception is largely derived by the information presented by the service provider. Visual communication in service encounters is a big part of the information provided by the service provider. In addition to visual language, consumption context and individual differences can also play an impactful role.

When it comes to visual communication, many researchers have demonstrated the effect of verticality in the representation of the concept of power (Schubert, 2005). An example of this in the marketing context is when the visual representation of a company's logo on product packaging directly impacts the perceived power of the brand (Sundar & Noseworthy, 2014). In the services context, images of service encounters could influence trial or purchase. An example of this is the image of a UPS or FedEx employee delivering a package. How does visual language influence trial or purchase? Specifically, does the visual representation of the service provider in relation to other elements in visual communication affect the consumer's perceived power? What consumption contexts can influence such a sense of perceived power? What personality traits can alter a consumer's perceptions of their power? In this research, we address these questions and extend the research of visual language in the services context. We specifically examine the contextual effects of self-presentation motivation on a consumer's perceived power and, ultimately, intent to use the service.

In the following section we present a review of relevant literature and resulting hypotheses. Next, a main effect of the visual language of power in a service encounter is demonstrated (Study 1). Study 2 demonstrates the moderating influence of self-presentation motivations (SPM) and how perceived consumer power mediates usage intent when SPM is high. Study 3 reveals a three-way interaction between visual representation, self-presentation motivations, and a consumer's perceived power on usage intent. Study 4 replicates findings of Study 3, using an individual's need for status and the consumer's perceived power state on usage intent. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

2. Literature review and hypothesis

2.1. Use of language in services

Language is an important factor that customers use to determine the value of a service (Eiglier & Langeard, 1976; Grönroos, 1978; Bitner et al., 1997; Grönroos, 1978, 1984). Although the extent and nature of that communication can vary widely, language is a defining characteristic of a service encounter (Grönroos, 1978; Gummesson, 1979; Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). Whether it's a mobile application where sales and service are fully preconstructed and automated, or a spa service predicated on constant and direct interaction with service personnel, language is central to the quality of the service.

Language has an enormous impact on customers before, during, and after a service encounter (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012). Prior to engaging a service, a consumer often forms judgments and identity perceptions of the service based on the language used (Pavlenko, 2006). With more than half the world being multilingual (Luna & Peracchio, 2001), the selection of language to be used in service is important. Multilingual consumers often have a preference for services using their native language (Holmqvist, 2011) leading to behaviors such as higher tipping (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013) of, and more positive word-of-mouth (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014) for, the service provider. But such effects can also be nuanced, where the type and severity of an accent (Mai & Hoffmann, 2014) or how recently a consumer has acquired a language (Holmqvist, Van Vaerenbergh, & Dahlen, 2013) can vary the effect

of language. Judgments and perceptions resulting from language in a service encounter can affect the emotions of consumers (Puntoni, de Langhe, & van Osselaer, 2009; Krishna & Ahluwalia, 2008), determine the psychological distance between consumer and service provider (Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2010; Holmqvist, Guest, & Grönroos, 2015) and is key to a decision to engage with the service (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012). For example, research on advertising to bilingual consumers found that the use of native language is preferred not only due to higher fluency, but also because of the strong emotional association with loved ones (Noriega & Blair, 2008).

Similarly, the expression and encoding of language by consumers are not purely an exercise in generating or consuming words. Humans attach meaning to words as a dynamic manifestation not only of language but also of personality, context, and environment (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Environmental cues that alter meaning of language can include facial expressions, punctuation, volume, tone, and other factors. For instance, the phrase "It's so nice to meet you," takes on two different meanings if the person saying it is smiling (sincere) or rolling their eyes (sarcastic). Visual information in the presence of language informs the meaning inferred—even to the point of causing an opposite interpretation of the words.

Infants learn to interpret visual information that accompanies the use of language long before they can understand words (Sumby & Pollack, 1954). Such visual information by itself is enough for adults to discriminate between languages being spoken (Soto-Faraco et al., 2007) and conveys information that is separate and distinct from what is being said (Weikum et al., 2007). Logically, this interpretation of language and environmental elements also affects people's response (Davis & Brock, 1975). For example, when utilizing online media, the combination of language and graphics is subject to cultural norms where both dramatically affect the user experience in terms of ease of use, efficacy, and other factors (Sun, 2001; Badre, 2000).

In a service encounter, we believe that organization and arrangement of linguistic and visual elements communicate customer power (or a lack thereof), which will then affect the consumer's intent to use that service.

2.2. Interpretation of visual elements as metaphor

Evidence suggests that visual elements play a significant role in shaping receivers' perceptions of credibility (Burgoon, Birk, & Pfau, 1990), interpersonal warmth (Bayes, 1972), persuasive power (Mehrabian & Williams, 1969), concepts such as beauty (Sundar, Machleit, & Noseworthy, 2013), and even courtesy in service encounters (Ford, 1995). It is in this respect that visual elements as metaphors are an important tool of visual communication.

When visuals communicate with conventional wisdom and common experience, they are often interpreted as metaphors. For instance, physical closeness is perceived as personal closeness (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Conceptual metaphor theory suggests that visual metaphors can be verbalized internally (Forceville, 2006) and with higher fluency than their verbal counterparts (Tourangeau & Sternberg, 1982). Concepts such as time (Chae & Hoegg, 2013); social relationships (such as friends versus a dominant other; Huang, Li, & Zhang, 2013); happiness (Meier & Robinson, 2005); and perceptions of weight (Deng & Kahn, 2009), healthiness of product offerings (Romero & Biswas, 2016), power (Schubert, 2005), and eco-friendliness (Sundar & Kellaris, 2015, 2016) have been communicated through visual elements interpreted as metaphors. Those interpretations, in turn, can affect behavior. For example, as images of water connote hydration and health, the metaphorical link between water supply and higher energy influences perceptions of energy and performance on problem-solving tasks (Shalev, 2014). Hence, by utilizing contextual meaning of these images, the activation of a metaphorical link is leveraged.

There are many visual cues to power in popular culture. Images of genuflection or kissing a ring communicate an individual's submission