



Watch Your Tone: How a Brand's Tone of Voice on Social Media Influences Consumer Responses☆

Renato Hübner Barcelos^{*} & Danilo C. Dantas & Sylvain Sénécal

HEC Montreal, 3000 Chemin de la Côte-Sainte-Catherine, Montreal, QC H3T 2A7, Canada

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Abstract

Social media platforms enable firms to communicate directly and often publicly with individual consumers. In this research, comprising four online studies, the authors investigate how the tone of voice used by firms (human vs. corporate) influences purchase intentions on social media. Findings suggest that a human tone of voice is not always the firm's best option. Study 1a ($N = 174$) shows that using a human voice, instead of the more traditional corporate voice, can increase a consumer's hedonic value on social media and also purchase intentions. However, that influence of a human voice on purchase intentions is stronger when the consumer is looking at a brand page with a hedonic goal in mind (versus a utilitarian one). Study 1b ($N = 342$) shows that the presence of several negative comments about a brand on social media acts as a boundary condition, nullifying the influence of a human voice on purchase intentions. Studies 2a ($N = 154$) and 2b ($N = 202$) show in different settings that using a human voice can even reduce purchase intentions in contexts of high situational involvement, due to perceptions of risk associated with humanness. The results contribute to the literature surrounding the effects of conversational human voice, while also providing managers with a set of guidelines to help inform and identify which tone of voice is best adapted to each communications scenario.

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Introduction

The popularity of social media such as Facebook and Twitter with both consumers and companies has opened up opportunities for new business models and forms of online branding and social commerce. Worldwide spending on social media advertising has increased by 27% from 2015 to 2016, and social media users should reach 2.95 billion by 2020 (Statista 2017a, 2017b). However, while social media have become an important tool for branding and customer marketing, many questions remain concerning the best ways for brands to represent themselves or address their customers in this highly interactive, both personal and public, conversational environment. Given that social media enable more direct contact with

customers, should a brand present in a more personal and human way in these contexts? Alternatively, should a brand keep its distance and adopt a less intimate approach?

In the professional press, many experts argue that brands should use a more human tone of voice on social media (Lund and Sutton 2014). However, there is still little evidence that this informal style is the optimal way to communicate with all consumers. Given the reports that brands are increasingly employing an informal style in their social media communications (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, and de Vries 2015), the lack of research on its effects on key aspects of consumer–brand relationships is striking. Even within the same industry, there is no consensus among companies as to the most appropriate tone of voice. For example, Visa's brand page on Facebook (@Visa) more often adopts a traditional corporate style of communication, addressing customers using formal language: “Hi [customer]. Thank you for your interest in a Visa card. All Visa cards are issued by our client financial institutions. Each one of them has its own criteria for issuing cards, fees & T&C.” On the other hand, MasterCard's brand page (@MasterCard) adopts a much more

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^{*} Corresponding author at: HEC Montreal, 3000 Chemin de la Côte-Sainte-Catherine, office 4506, Montreal, QC H3T 2A7, Canada.

E-mail addresses: renato.hubner-barcelos@hec.ca (R.H. Barcelos), danilo.dantas@hec.ca (D.C. Dantas), sylvain.senecal@hec.ca (S. Sénécal).

informal and casual language, expressing emotions and using emoticons: “Hi [customer]! Do you have a MasterCard? If so, we may have a small #PricelessSurprise for you ☺ Hope you have an excellent long weekend!”

While these differences in communication style are associated with each brand’s positioning, they essentially represent the concept of a conversational human voice, which refers to a tone of voice making the company or brand feel closer, more real and human (Kelleher 2009; Park and Cameron 2014). The tone of voice concept has deserved some attention in customer service literature, in which it belongs to the “humanics” category of clues about a product or service (Berry, Carbone, and Haeckel 2002). Such clues tend to address emotions rather than reason, and are just as important to the customer experience as the functional clues. When customers deal with frontline employees or call centers, the tone of voice, and general friendliness of the company’s agent becomes a direct extension of the brand, and even a personification of the company (Brown and Maxwell 2002). However, in interactive marketing research, the concept of a conversational human voice is still a relatively underexplored concept though it has deserved growing attention due to evidence in the literature suggesting that it increases consumer engagement and brand evaluations (Schamari and Schaefer 2015; Van Noort and Willemsen 2012).

On social media, the brand’s tone of voice can be particularly important during initial encounters, when consumers form opinions about new and unfamiliar brands. In such situations, non-verbal cues, such as communication style, play a central role in reducing uncertainties and influencing assessments of the brand’s trustworthiness (Keeling, McGoldrick, and Beatty 2010). The way brands communicate with consumers can be thus decisive in shaping consumer attitudes and determining whether the relationship will progress beyond the initial encounters (Keeling, McGoldrick, and Beatty 2010). Nevertheless, some studies have shown that a personal and human communication style can negatively influence consumer attitudes (Gretry et al. 2017; Steinmann, Mau, and Schramm-Klein 2015), while others have found only limited effects (Verhagen et al. 2014). We suggest that these contradictory findings may be due to situational elements that have been overlooked in prior research.

Consequently, the present research aims to fill this gap in the literature by demonstrating how the adoption of a human voice by companies in their social media communications can influence consumer response towards the brand. In our investigation, we also consider the effect of interactions between the humanness in the tone of voice used for the brand and characteristics of the consumption context (namely the type of consumer goal and level of situational involvement) unaccounted for in previous studies, and which could explain these disparate findings. As a matter of fact, the type of consumer goal and the level of situational involvement are associated respectively with the hedonic value of the online experience and the perceived risk about the purchase, two constructs in consumer behavior known for influencing consumer responses towards the brand in online environments (for example, Dawson, Bloch, and Ridgway 1990; Eroglu,

Machleit, and Davis 2003; Pöyry, Parvinen, and Malmivaara 2013). Using four online experiments, we show that adopting a human (tone of) voice, instead of the more traditional corporate (tone of) voice, can increase a consumer’s hedonic value on social media and also purchase intentions. However, in this notional framework, using a human voice does not increase purchase intentions for brands in utilitarian contexts (while it does in hedonic contexts), and it can even reduce purchase intentions in contexts of high situational involvement, due to perceptions of risk associated with humanness.

Hence, this research contributes to the incipient and still limited body of research in online marketing by exploring constructs related to humanness in communication on social media using an experimental approach (Gretry et al. 2017; Schamari and Schaefer 2015; Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012). Our results shed some light on the effects of social presence and conversational human voice, showing that the effect of a human voice may be positive, negative or negligible depending on the consumption context. Furthermore, this investigation has managerial relevance as it informs managers on how to better communicate with consumers on social media in order to obtain more positive consumer responses. Since the products or services offered by the brand may be purchased to satisfy a hedonic or utilitarian goal, and be associated with different levels of situational involvement, the boundary conditions we tested have practical value. In this sense, we provide a set of guidelines to help managers identify which tone of voice is more appropriate according to specific contexts. Since social media constitute public environments in which communication between a brand and its customers is visible to all others, any consumer reading the conversations may also form an opinion about the brand. Hence, the tone of voice used by the brand can influence not only the consumers directly involved in the communication on social media but also all other consumers exposed to the conversation.

Human Voice in Online Brand Communications

Even though brands are not human participants per se, consumers can relate and react to them as if they were (Fournier 1998). On social media, the brand is always personified to a certain degree because it is an actor interacting with consumers on the same level as any other user, and using a discernible pattern of communication when talking to them. The stylistic choices in this pattern of communication – the tone of voice – include attributes such as humanness and closeness that underlie the concept of a conversational human voice (Kelleher 2009). Conversational human voice was originally defined as “an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization’s public based on interaction between individuals in the organization and individuals in publics” (Kelleher 2009). For the objectives of this research, we follow a conceptualization of “human voice” similar to Park and Cameron’s (2014) and define it as a more natural, close, and human style of online communication, opposed to “corporate voice”, which is the more distant and formal style traditionally used by companies. In practice, companies can use a tone of voice

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