



The impact of language style on consumers' reactions to online reviews



Laurie Wu ^a, Han Shen ^{b,*}, Alei Fan ^c, Anna S. Mattila ^d

^a School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Temple University, 1810 N. 13th Street, Speakman Hall 307, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA

^b Tourism Department, Fudan University, 220 Handan Rd, Yangpu, Shanghai, China

^c School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Purdue University, 900 W. State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA

^d School of Hospitality Management, The Pennsylvania State University, 224 Mateer Building, University Park, PA 16802, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- The current research examines the novel impact of an online review's language style (figurative vs. literal) on consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions toward a reviewed business.
- Contradictory to previous marketing research, this research found that figurative language doesn't offer significant advantages in terms of persuasive power.
- Reviewer expertise level was found to moderate the impact of review's language style on consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions.
- Serial mediation tests show that the causal link between language typicality and reviewer's perceived expertise explains the language style effect.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 December 2015

Received in revised form

2 August 2016

Accepted 7 September 2016

Keywords:

Language style

Online reviews

Reviewer expertise

Language Expectancy Theory

ABSTRACT

The current research examines the novel impact of an online review's language style (figurative vs. literal) on consumers' attitudes towards a hotel and their reservation intention. Previous marketing research advocated for the use of figurative language to advertise hedonic consumptions. Yet, we found that, in the context of online hotel reviews, figurative language doesn't offer significant advantages in terms of persuasive power. Specifically, our findings indicate that, when a review is posted by a reviewer with low expertise level, consumers actually exhibit lower levels of attitude and reservation intention if the review is written in figurative (vs. literal) language. When the reviewer possesses high expertise level, the language style effect was attenuated. Finally, serial mediation tests show that the causal link between language typicality → perceived reviewer expertise explains the language style effect on consumers' pre-purchase evaluations.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver."
(Proverbs 25:11)

"Perspicuity is the chief virtue of language." (Confucius)

We all know the power of words: how you say something is often times more important than what you say. Among many

factors that shape message framing, a fairly interesting but underexplored factor in tourism marketing research is language style. While certain language styles focus on direct indication of its literal meaning (e.g., literal language), others are defined by fun, playful and hedonic characteristics (e.g., figurative language). Will these differences in language style influence consumer attitudes and purchase intention towards a business?

The current research examines the linguistic effect in the context of online hotel reviews. In today's digital business environment, many people rely on information shared by other consumers to make purchase decisions (Ayeh, Au, and Law, 2013; Fang, Ye, Kucukusta, & Law, 2016; Filieri & McLeay, 2013; Kim, Mattila, and Balogu, 2011; Liu & Park, 2015; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Wu, Mattila, Wang, & Hanks, 2016; Zhang, Ye, Law, & Li, 2010;

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: laurie.wu@temple.edu (L. Wu), shen_han@fudan.edu.cn (H. Shen), fan182@purdue.edu (A. Fan), asm6@psu.edu (A.S. Mattila).

Zhang, Wu, and Mattila, 2016). Within the growing stream of research on online hotel reviews, little attention was devoted to the impact of language style on consumer decision-making (Xiang, Kim, Hu, & Fesenmaier, 2007).

Recent marketing research demonstrates that figurative language is more appropriate to express hedonic (vs. utilitarian) consumption experiences (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013). What remains unclear, however, is if reviews posted in figurative language (vs. literal language) indeed achieve better marketing outcomes for tourism and hospitality companies. Although many of us enjoy the playful style of figurative language, we may be seeking for something other than playfulness when reading online reviews. To that end, the sense of straightforwardness that is conveyed via literal language might be perceived as more helpful and trustworthy. Utilizing the Language Expectancy Theory (LET) as the overarching theoretical framework, the current research examines the impact of the review's language style (i.e., literal language vs. figurative language) on consumers' pre-purchase evaluations. Further, extending prior research, the current study examines how reviewer characteristic such as expertise level, moderates the language style effect.

Pre-purchase evaluations represent a crucial step along the consumers' decision-making process (Bettman, Johnson, & Payne, 1991). Based on information collected via both external and internal information search, consumers evaluate the consumption object and such pre-purchase evaluations further determine if a purchase will be made (Bettman et al., 1991). Pre-purchase evaluations typically include, but are not limited to, constructs such as attitude, value perception and purchase intention. Among various types of pre-purchase evaluations, both attitude and purchase intention are frequently used in marketing research to reflect the persuasive power of promotional messages (Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010; Zhang et al., 2016). Attitude reflects a consumers' overall favorability perception about a product or a business. Purchase intention indicates the level of interest a consumer has to purchase a product or patronage a business. These two constructs are typically used together to test the persuasive power of a promotional messages, with higher values indicating greater persuasion (e.g., Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010). As the current research is interested in the persuasive power of online hotel reviews, we chose to measure consumers' attitude and reservation intention towards the reviewed hotel as indicators of consumers' pre-purchase evaluations.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Figurative vs. literal language

Figurative and literal language are two commonly used language styles in marketing promotions. Figurative language refers to the usage of language to convey an additional connotation beyond that of their literal meanings (Fogelin, 1988). While literal language means exactly what it says, figurative language uses various linguistics techniques such as simile, metaphor, word play, or hyperbole to describe things in order to achieve new, altered, or more complicated understanding (Fogelin, 1988).

A stream of previous marketing literature has demonstrated the comparative advantage of figurative language (vs. literal language) in marketing communication (Chang & Yen, 2013; Kronrod & Danziger, 2013; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999, 2003; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2009). In the advertising literature, prior research found that figurative language can elicit positive feelings towards the advertising stimuli and result in higher levels of attitude and purchase intention (Chang & Yen, 2013; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999, 2003; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2009).

Recently, linguistic research suggests that the advantage of

figurative language (vs. literal language) is conditioned on the communication context. A key difference between figurative language and literal language lies in the context-defined norm of communication (Gibbs, 2008; Ireland & Pennebaker, 2010; Kronrod & Danziger, 2013; Shen, 2002). Compared with literal language, figurative language is perceived as more emotional and affect-rich, and therefore, it is regarded as more appropriate to communicate emotional experiences rather than rational and functional experiences (Gibbs, 2008; Ireland & Pennebaker, 2010; Shen, 2002).

More tangent to the current research, Kronrod and Danziger (2013) found that, in the online reviews context, figurative language is considered more conversationally-normative to communicate about hedonic rather than utilitarian consumption experiences. Conversely, literal language is more appropriate when the consumption object is utilitarian rather than hedonic. Although such findings seem to support the usage of figurative language in the context of experiential services, Kronrod and Danziger (2013) did not directly compare the effect of figurative language vs. literal language on consumer responses. A direct comparison of figurative language vs. literal language would help us understand if, within the experiential services context, consumers indeed respond better to reviews written in figurative language. If so, hospitality businesses should actively encourage consumers to use figurative rather than literal language when posting online reviews. The current research extends Kronrod and Danziger's (2013) work by comparing consumer responses to online hotel reviews that are posted in figurative vs. literal language.

2.2. The moderating role of Reviewer's expertise level: perspective of Language Expectancy Theory (LET)

To compare the persuasive power of figurative vs. literal language, one should first understand the norm of language usage. According to Language Expectancy Theory (LET), language is a rules-based system and people develop expected norms regarding whether or not certain language is considered appropriate to be used in a given social context (Burgoon, 1995). In general, conforming to language usage norms creates positive responses from message recipients and results in enhanced persuasive outcomes (Krishna & Ahluwalia, 2008).

When the usage of language is regarded as inappropriate or norm-breaking, it does not always hurt the message's persuasive outcomes (Burgoon, 1995; Burgoon & Jones, 1976). Previous research demonstrates that the expertise level of the message source determines if inappropriate usage of language worsens the persuasive outcomes (Burgoon & Jones, 1976). While individuals with low expertise levels are restricted to use norm-conforming language strategies, individuals with high expertise levels have considerable freedom to choose from varied language styles (Burgoon, 1995; Burgoon & Jones, 1976; Jensen, Averbek, Zhang, & Wright, 2013). Therefore, when low expertise individuals violate language usage norms, message recipients often exhibit negative responses. Yet, when high expertise individuals violate language usage norms, it does not necessarily hurt the message's persuasive outcomes.

Based on the above literature, we propose that the reviewer's expertise level should moderate the impact of review language style on consumer responses toward the online review. Guided by the theoretical framework of LET, the current research examines the impact of two variables on consumer responses to online hotel reviews: language style (figurative vs. literal) and reviewer expertise level (low vs. high). We argue that while figurative language (vs. literal language) results in lower persuasive outcomes for reviewers with low expertise level, such a language style effect will not occur among reviewers with high expertise level.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7421246>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7421246>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)