You and We: Causal Effects of Minor Language Variations on Brand Perceptions

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Marketers often try to promote consumers’ feelings of being in close relationships with brands by portraying the brands as intimate partners with consumers. But should this strategy always lead to more favorable attitudes? Three studies demonstrate that intimacy-implying language (e.g., saying “we” rather than “you and [the brand]”) can have either positive or negative effects on brand attitudes, depending on whether the implied intimacy is consistent with consumers’ perceptions of the relationship. The studies examine the moderating roles of brand category and specific individuals’ relationship histories with the brand, and show that these effects are mediated by perceived brand honesty.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

A great deal of research on consumer persuasion has focused on explicit factors such as the quality of arguments, the characteristics of the message source, or the perceiver’s motivation to process information, and the effects of these types of variables are well understood. However, little attention has been devoted to the effects of much more subtle features of marketing communications, such as minor language variations in the message, on persuasion. What effect, if any, do these more subtle factors have on consumer persuasion?

The present session seeks to provide an in-depth look at the significant effects of seemingly inconsequential wording variations on preferences, brand perceptions, and attitude change. For example, what are the mechanisms by which specific word use can influence the construction of preferences? Might different consumers respond to the same wording in different ways? The session will address these and other related questions as it works to deepen our understanding of the role of language in persuasion.

One of the interesting conclusions that emerge from the present session is that subtle language variations can influence consumers’ actual experiences when consuming products. Jongmin Kim, Jing Wang, Nathan Novemsky, and Ravi Dhar (paper 1) reveal in their research that asking product evaluation questions using fancy words (e.g., “velvety wine”) can increase actual liking for the product, as compared to logically equivalent but less fancy words (e.g. “smooth wine”). The research suggests that the use of fancy words activates associated knowledge in memory nonconsciously, which in turn biases the processing of ambiguous experiences in a confirmatory manner. In contrast, when fancy language is perceived as unambiguously inconsistent with the evaluation target, it can actually decrease liking for the product.

Another surprising finding is that minor wording variations can influence perceptions of real-life brands with which consumers have had long-lasting working relationships. Aner Sela and Christian Wheeler (paper 2) demonstrate how subtle changes in the use of relationship-impacting terms (e.g., “you and Wells Fargo” vs. “we”) can affect perceptions of brand attributes and, consequently, attitudes toward the brand among its customers. They find that subtle linguistic changes have different effects among current customers and non-customers of the brand, because these groups have different perceptions of the ongoing relationship with the brand. These effects depend further on the brand category and its associated relationship norms.

Finally, Nicole Mayer and Zakary Tormala (paper 3) examine the effect of minor language variations, such as saying “I feel” versus “I think”, on persuasion among people whose attitudes are either affectively or cognitively oriented. They find that when a persuasive message appears to reflect the source’s feelings versus thoughts, it will be more persuasive to recipients whose attitudes or general orientations are primarily affective versus cognitive, respectively.

Marketers carefully manage their communications with consumers in order to shape beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. The three papers in this session extend and deepen our understanding of the impact of seemingly inconsequential language variations and how they interact with concrete features of the target (e.g., product quality), perceptions of consumer-brand relationships, and consumers’ affective vs. cognitive orientations. Thus, the session speaks to the importance of tailoring the exact message wording to the situation. It would be of interest to researchers and marketers interested in consumer persuasion and implicit social cognition.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Persuasion under the Radar: Effects of Question Wording on Product Evaluation”

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Consumers’ preferences are often constructed and largely determined by the task characteristics, the choice context, and the description of options (e.g. Simonson, 2008). Some research suggests that if the task or context is perceived as being manipulated by a marketer and having persuasive intent, consumers are likely to protect themselves from the marketing actions (Friestad and Wright, 1984). The present research reveals that asking evaluation questions on scales that are associated with high quality (e.g. velvety) vs. regular quality products (e.g. smooth) can influence preferences for the product in a nonconscious manner. Specifically, consumers who rated a product on dimensions described using fancy words (e.g., How velvety would you say the texture of the wine is?) make more positive evaluations than those who rated the same product on dimensions described using typical words (e.g., How smooth would you say the texture of the wine is?). We posit that the effects occur because answering the rating questions evokes a mental representation of the product without any suspicion. By answering the rating questions people engage in positive hypothesis testing (e.g. Klayman and Ha, 1987) and test the possibility that the product has the provided set of attributes. This increases the accessibility of the fancy/non-fancy attributes of the product and this accessible knowledge is used in overall evaluations of the product (Strack and Mussweiler, 1997). We demonstrate these language effects across a series of studies.

In Study 1, participants were shown pictures of chocolates and asked to rate the product on five dimensions described using either fancy or non-fancy words (e.g. how velvety/smooth would the texture of the chocolates be?). Participants who rate the chocolates on fancy attributes indicate that they would like the chocolate more and that they are more likely to purchase the chocolates. In study 2, we find that the effects persist even after direct experience with a product. Participants in this study were members of a Wine Club and were given a wine sample. They were randomly assigned to evaluate it on either the fancy or the non-fancy rating scales. Participants who evaluated the wine on fancy attributes (e.g. velvety, harmonious, lingering, etc) liked the wine more and were more likely to purchase the wine compared to those who rated it on non-fancy attributes (e.g. smooth, balanced, long-lasting, etc).

Study 3 and Study 4 replicate and extend these findings, identifying boundary conditions for the language effects. Study 3 shows that the language effect occurs only when the target product is ambiguous. This study manipulates ambiguity by presenting either agreeing or disagreeing expert opinions (Hoch and Ha, 1986). This information about the wine was provided to participants before a wine sample was given to them. In the ambiguous condition, participants read a set of scores varying widely across experts,
while participants in the unambiguous condition saw scores that were quite consistent across experts. The results show that only when the product is ambiguous, do we observe any effect of the language used in rating scales. When participants have information that is diagnostic of the product, the scales (fancy vs. non-fancy) have no effect on overall evaluation.

Study 4 examines another moderator for the language effect: fit between fancy scales and the product. Using fancy words that do not seem to fit the target product category may not result in a positive evaluation of the product. In this case, it is possible that the fancy rating scales can result in lower evaluations than a rating task involving less fancy words. To examine this moderating role of fit, we choose wine as a fancy product and Soju, a Korean lowbrow alcoholic beverage, as a non-fancy product (Study 4 was conducted in Korea). Participants were given a sample of either wine or Soju and asked to rate the product on either fancy or non-fancy scales. Replicating our previous results, participants are willing to pay more for wine when they answer the questions asking about fancy attributes. They even consumed more wine in the fancy scale condition. However, the effect of language on evaluation reversed for Soju. Participants were willing to pay less for Soju when they rated it on scales anchored by fancy words compared to those rating it on non-fancy scales. They also consumed less Soju in the fancy scale condition.

In summary, we posit that different language embedded in a ratings scale can influence preference for a product. These effects arise without any explicit claim about any aspect of the product. This is precisely why consumers keep their defenses down and do not consider the rating task a persuasion attempt (Williams et al., 2004). As result they may be more persuaded than if an explicit claim had been made.

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References

“You and We: Causal Effects of Minor Language Variations on Brand Perceptions”
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Marketers often desire to promote consumers’ feelings of being in a close relationship with the brands they market. Accordingly, they frequently portray brands as intimate partners with consumers, believing that this should lead to more favorable attitudes. This belief has intuitive appeal, but does it actually foster favorable brand perceptions? The present research examines this issue by studying whether subtle differences in marketing communications, such as using the terms “we” versus “you and us,” can affect attitudes and perceptions toward the brand. Although these types of terms are linguistically equivalent, we suggest that they can subtly convey information about a consumer’s relationship with the brand that can have either positive or negative effects.

Research on consumer-brand relationships has suggested that consumers often relate to brands in ways that correspond to different relationship profiles, each entailing different relational scripts and norms (Fournier 1998). This literature suggests that people may respond positively to brand actions that are perceived as consistent with the believed consumer-brand relationship, but might respond negatively when these actions are inconsistent with the relationship (Aggarwal 2004).

Consistent with earlier research (e.g., Brown and Gilman 1960), we expect more intimate and informal language use (e.g., “we”) to be perceived as consistent with consumer-brand relationships that are believed to be closer and based on shared goals. In contrast, we expect language that emphasizes the separateness of relationship partners (e.g., “you and I”) to be perceived as consistent with consumer-brand relationships that are more distant. We predict that language consistent with the believed consumer-brand relationship norms will lead to more favorable attitudes.

Several factors can affect the perceived closeness between consumers and brands. Specifically, consumers may associate some product categories with a relationship based on closeness, cooperation, and shared goals. Other product categories, however, may be associated with a more distant relationship, one that is based less on mutual goals and more on “zero-sum” behavior. Another important dimension concerns whether one is a customer of the brand or not. Whereas existing brand customers may have specific expectations of their relationship with the brand and corresponding communication norms, non-customers may have different expectations.

In sum, we examine the following questions. First, can subtle changes in the use of relationship-implying terms (e.g., “you and [the brand]” vs. “we”) affect perceptions of brand attributes and, consequently, attitudes toward the brand? Second, do these subtle changes have different effects among current customers and non-customers of the brand? Third, do these effects depend further on the brand category and its associated relationship norms?

We test two mediation hypotheses for these effects. First, the effect of language on attitudes could be mediated by perceptions of brand honesty. Specifically, when the intimacy implied by language is in harmony with consumers’ perception of their ongoing relationship with the brand, the brand may be perceived as more trustworthy and consequently more favorable overall. However, when the language is inconsistent with the relationship, the brand might be perceived as less trustworthy, leading to less favorable attitudes. Alternatively, people could respond more favorably to relationship-congruent language simply because it is easier to process (i.e., fluent), being consistent with their expectation (Lee and Labroo 2004; Schwarz 2004).

To test our hypotheses, we first conducted a pretest, which suggested that people tend to perceive their working relationships with their bank as relatively close and intimate, but perceive their relationships with a health insurance provider as more distant.

Consequently, in experiment 1, we predicted that existing customers, but not non-customers, of a prominent banking brand would have more favorable attitudes toward the brand when a message referred to the brand and the consumer as “we” than when it referred to the brand and the consumer as “you and [the brand]”.
Participants read a short message about a prominent banking brand, allegedly taken from an advertisement. Some participants read a message that used the phrase “you and [the brand],” whereas others read a message in which “you and [the brand]” was replaced with “we”. Then, they were asked to rate their attitudes toward the brand. At the end of the experiment, participants were asked whether they were actually banking with the brand.

As hypothesized, consumers with an ongoing working relationship with the banking brand reported more favorable attitudes when the message used the pronoun “we”. Conversely, non-customers had somewhat more positive attitudes toward the brand when the message used the term “you and Wells Fargo”.

Experiment 2 replicated the results of experiment 1, using the same procedure with additional banking brands, and tested our two mediation hypotheses. Mediated moderation analyses suggested that the moderated effect of language and customer status on attitudes was fully mediated by perceived brand honesty. In contrast, although the interaction of language and customer status predicted fluency, fluency was not a significant predictor of attitudes.

Experiment 3 used a banking brand and a health insurance brand as our stimuli. We predicted that referring to the brand and the consumer as “we”—rather than “you and [the brand]”—would lead to more favorable attitudes among existing customers when the brand is a bank. In contrast, we predicted that using “we” would lead to less favorable attitudes when the brand is a health insurance provider, because our pretest indicated that these brands are perceived as partners in a distant relationship. We also predicted that non-customers in both categories would prefer less intimate language. The results of this experiment support our hypotheses, suggesting opposite effects of language on attitudes toward the bank vs. health insurance brands. Furthermore, these effects were mediated by perceived brand honesty in both cases.

The present research contributes to the literature on language in interpersonal cognition by suggesting that language conveys meaning and influences attitudes not just directly, in an assimilative manner (e.g., Fitzsimons and Kay 2004), but also through implicit assessments of the congruity between the language and prior beliefs about the relationship. From a practical viewpoint, these findings promote the idea that marketers should not only think of their consumers as relationship partners in general, but also mind the differences in how specific types of consumers relate to their brands in the context of its product category.

References

“Think’ Versus ‘Feel’ Framing Effects in Persuasion”
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When people express opinions or share ideas, they often do so by referencing their thoughts or feelings. When attempting to persuade someone to adopt a new product, for example, one might frame the exact same substantive argument in terms of thoughts (e.g., “I think this camera is the best on the market”) or feelings (e.g., “I feel that this camera is the best on the market”) without changing the essence of the appeal. Whether one says “I think” or “I feel,” or even “my thought is” or “my feeling is,” the common assumption is that one is introducing a statement that reflects one’s subjective impression of an object or issue. The current research explores the possibility that although think and feel message frames are used interchangeably, their effects might not be interchangeable at all. In particular, we investigate whether think and feel message frames might be differentially persuasive, even when the substantive content of the message itself is held constant.

Over the years, considerable research attention has been paid to the notion that attitudes can vary in their underlying cognitive or affective bases. Moreover, this distinction has important implications for persuasion. In general, affective attitudes are more susceptible to persuasion by affective messages, whereas cognitive attitudes are more susceptible to persuasion by cognitive messages (e.g., Drolet and Aaker 2002; Edell and Burke 1987; Edwards 1990; Fabrigar and Petty 1999; Haddock et al., 2008). In the current research, we propose that even when one receives the exact same arguments from a persuasive message, believing those arguments reflect their source’s thoughts or feelings can interact with one’s own cognitive/affective orientation to determine persuasion. Our primary hypothesis is that messages that appear to reflect their source’s feelings (thoughts) will be more persuasive when the target attitude or message recipient is primarily affective (cognitive) in orientation. Furthermore, building on past research linking matching, or fit, effects with processing fluency (e.g., Lee and Aaker 2004), we propose that this effect will be mediated by ease of processing. That is, matched messages will be experienced as easier to process than mismatched messages, and this ease will translate into greater persuasion.

In Study 1, we introduced participants to the topic of blood donation and assessed their initial cognitive versus affective orientations toward the issue. Following this assessment, we presented both cognitive and affective individuals with a persuasive message advocating frequent blood donation. This message contained numerous arguments in favor of blood donation, and these arguments were framed in terms of their source’s thoughts or feelings. For instance, in the “feel” condition, the message opened with the line: “I feel that donating blood is one of the most important contributions I can make to society.” By contrast, in the “think” condition, the opening line was: “I think that donating blood is one of the most important contributions I can make to society.” Aside from the use of the word “think” or “feel” throughout the message, the content of the arguments was identical. Immediately following the message, participants reported their intentions to donate blood in the future. As hypothesized, we obtained a significant interaction between initial orientation and message frame. Cognitively oriented individuals reported greater intention to donate blood following the “think” message, whereas affectively oriented individuals reported greater intention to donate blood following the “feel” message.

Study 2 had several aims: to manipulate affective versus cognitive orientation, to directly measure attitudes following the persuasive message, and to test the processing fluency mechanism. This study essentially replicated Study 1, but we primed affective
versus cognitive orientation by giving participants an initial message, negative toward blood donation, that was affective (e.g., “The nurse gripped my arm with one hand and slid the large spike of the needle into my skin.”) or cognitive (e.g., “I learned some surprising facts about human biology that make me think blood donation would be unwise.”) in tone. Following this prime, participants received the “think” or “feel” advocacy from Study 1, reported attitudes, and indicated how easy it was to process and comprehend the second (positive) message. Results indicated a significant interaction on both attitudes and ease of processing. When participants received the affective prime, they reported more favorable attitudes toward blood donation, and greater processing ease, in response to the “feel” rather than “think” message. When participants received the cognitive prime, these effects were reversed. Furthermore, perceived ease of processing mediated the attitude effect.

Finally, Study 3 tested a practical application of these findings by presenting male and female consumers with an advertisement containing think- or feel-framed arguments. Past research suggests that women self-identify as experiencing and expressing more intense emotions than do men and that women are more attuned than men to the emotions of others (for a review see Hall and Schmid Mast 2008). In a pilot study, we confirmed that women self-reported being more emotionally oriented than did men. Consistent with this notion, Study 3 revealed that female participants were more persuaded by the feel-framed advertisement, whereas male participants were more persuaded by the think-framed advertisement.

In summary, using both measured and manipulated approaches, we found that attitudes and message recipients with cognitive (affective) orientations were more susceptible to persuasion by arguments framed in terms of their source’s thoughts (feelings). This effect was particularly striking given that the substantive content of the arguments was exactly the same across conditions. Moreover, the persuasion outcome was mediated by processing fluency. Participants found it easier to process the matched rather than mismatched message, and they attributed this feeling of ease to the message’s persuasiveness. Implications for attitude structure and consumer behavior are discussed.

References