What Shall I Call Thee? the Impact of Brand Personality on Consumer Response to Formal and Informal Address

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In almost all languages, marketing communication can feature formal or informal address pronouns (e.g., tu or vous in French). Brand personality affects consumer response to formal and informal address. Informal address elicits more positive reactions when used by warmer brands, whereas formal address works better for more competent brands.

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Fun with Words: How Language Affects Consumer Response to Brands and Marketing Communications

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Paper #2: “What Shall I Call Thee? The Impact of Brand Personality on Consumer Response to Formal and Informal Address”
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Paper #4: “The Effect of Phonetic Embodiment on Attitudes towards Brand Names”
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SESSION OVERVIEW

This session presents work that deals with the most subtle of marketing communication effects: language. Language is an essential feature of marketing communication that colors and changes consumers’ experiences—even subtle differences in the way words are used can significantly impact consumers’ reactions to marketing communications. The four papers in this session are linked by a focus on the importance of language for the success of branding and product positioning endeavors. Taken together, they demonstrate that every word matters. Nouns and verbs are not the only words that have an impact; small, seemingly unimportant words such as pronouns, prepositions, and conjunctions should be carefully chosen as well. The aim of this session is to provide a picture of current theoretical perspectives on language effects in consumer research and to explore the breadth of linguistic elements from which these effects originate.

The papers are organized by a descending order of the size of linguistic unit analysis. The first two papers consider the tone in which consumers are addressed. The first paper deals with imperative messages such as “Buy now!” Moore and colleagues show that consumers in committed brand relationships are more likely to perceive imperatives in advertisements as a threat to their freedom and experience reactance against the message. The second paper looks at the pronouns with which consumers are addressed. Lenoir and colleagues find that in languages that possess a distinction between informal and formal address pronouns (such as tu and vous in French or tú and usted in Spanish), brands that are perceived as warm, sincere, exciting or low-end benefit more from addressing consumers informally than brands that are perceived as competent, sophisticated or high-end.

In contrast, the third paper exposes small words which can be easily overlooked: prepositions and conjunctions. Patrick and Haws demonstrate how a subtle word change—using “with” instead of “and”—influences perceptions of product combinations: while “and” acts as a bridge between two different products, “with” binds products that complement each other and suggests that one item is of greater value than the other. Finally, the fourth paper arrives at the smallest unit of linguistic analysis: the sound. Kronrod and colleagues demonstrate the embodied power of the phonetic structure of brand names, showing that the movements of the organs in the mouth backward or forward when articulating brand names impact attitudes towards the brand names.

We expect this session to be of interest to a substantial proportion of the ACR community, particularly appealing to researchers working in the areas of branding and advertising. Language is a tool we all have personal experience with, and we anticipate an interesting discussion around the extent to which subtle differences in language affect consumers’ responses. Because the four papers investigate different units of linguistic analysis utilizing an array of theoretical perspectives, they provide a substantive contribution to an underexplored - and fun! - field of our research discipline.

Buy Now! Brand Relationships & Consumer Responses to Imperative Advertising

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Marketing communications often use restrictive messages that contain imperative language, such as “Call today!” or “Buy now!” Such imperative communications can be perceived as restrictions of consumers’ freedom, and commonly result in negative consumer responses (Dillard, Palmer, and Kinney 1995; Goldsmith 2007; Miller et al. 2007). Yet, imperative ads are frequently used. A content analysis of America’s top ten magazines showed that 72% of print ads contained at least one imperative message (e.g., “Buy Now!” and “Call Today!”), and that each ad contained, on average, two such messages. Thus, we re-examine the effectiveness of advertising that uses imperative language.

We take a novel approach by combining reactance theory with consumer-brand relationship theory. We examine two key consumer-brand relationship types—committed and uncommitted (Fournier 1998; Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004)—and explore how each type impacts reactance to imperative ads. We do so by focusing on a variable that is central to reactance theory and relevant to brand relationship theory: threat perception.

Threat perception is the degree to which consumers feel that a restriction or imperative poses a meaningful threat to their freedom: the higher the perceived threat to freedom, the higher the likelihood of reactance (Brehm 1966). We suggest that consumer-brand relationship type influences threat perception. Specifically, consumer-brand relationships may influence how negatively consumers think their relationship with the brand will be impacted if they do not comply with an imperative. We argue that the negative consequences of non-compliance are greater in committed consumer-brand relationships. In committed relationships, consumers who do not comply with imperatives run the risk of violating relationship norms, experiencing negative emotions such as guilt, or damaging the relationship (Aaker
et al. 2004; Fournier 1998). In contrast, these negative consequences of non-compliance do not apply in uncommitted relationships (Aaker et al. 2004; Fournier 1998). Thus, consumers in committed relationships should view imperatives as more threatening. This higher perceived threat should create greater pressure to comply, resulting in greater reactance (Brehm 1966).

In other words, due to greater threat perception in committed (relative to uncommitted) brand relationships, pressure to comply should increase when an imperative is presented, and greater reactance should result. Due to this increased reactance, consumers should dislike imperative ads more when they come from a committed, as compared to an uncommitted, brand partner. To examine this prediction, we compare consumers’ liking of imperative and non-imperative ads from both types of brand partners. In six studies, we examine when imperative ads will elicit negative responses from consumers (i.e., decreased ad liking) and when they will not. We demonstrate that reactance underlies our effects, and that these effects are mediated by threat perception and pressure to comply. We also identify and test moderating variables that attenuate our effects.

Our first studies compared consumers’ reactions to imperative versus non-imperative ads.

In study 1a, participants identified a clothing brand with which they had a committed or an uncommitted relationship (using relationships definitions from Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel, 2004 and Rusult, Martz and Agnew, 1998), and viewed an imperative or a non-imperative ad for the brand. The ads were identical except that the imperative ad included a “Buy now!” message. We found a brand-relationship by ad interaction. Participants liked the imperative ad from a committed brand partner less than the non-imperative ad from the same brand partner, while participants liked the imperative ad from the uncommitted brand partner just as well as the non-imperative ad. We replicated these findings in studies 1b and 1c using a different imperative (“Visit us!”) and different dependent variables. Study 1b measured participants’ likelihood of visiting the store/brand in question; study 1c asked participants to allocate $25 between a brand gift card and cash (they were entered to win their chosen allocation in a lottery).

Study 2 added a measure of individual reactance (Hong and Faedda 1996) and embedded imperative and non-imperative ads for pre-tested committed and uncommitted brand partners into a magazine that participants read. As predicted, our results replicated for high, but not low reactance individuals, suggesting that reactance underlies these findings.

In study 3, we examined threat perception as a mediator of consumers’ responses to imperative ads. Participants identified a personal hygiene brand with which they had either a committed or an uncommitted relationship, and then saw an imperative ad from that brand. We measured threat perception in a two-step process: first, we assessed consumers’ perceptions of the negative consequences (e.g., guilt, negative emotion) of not complying with their brand partners’ imperative. We then measured consumers’ likelihood of complying with their brand partners’ imperative. As expected, participants who identified committed brand partners perceived greater negative consequences of non-compliance, which predicted increased likelihood of compliance. Both mediators negatively predicted ad liking. Finally, negative consequences and compliance mediated the effects of relationship type on ad liking using a two-step serial mediation model, demonstrating the hypothesized role of threat perception.

Our final two studies investigated two variables that should reduce the negative impact of imperative language from committed brand partners. In study 4, we removed the relationship threat by allowing some participants to affirm their committed or uncommitted brand relationship prior to viewing an imperative or a non-imperative ad. When consumers in committed (but not uncommitted) relationships affirmed their relationships, they no longer responded negatively to imperative ads. In study 5, we used an imperative message that is already part of a committed relationship contract, and contrasted ads using “buy now” versus “buy from us” imperatives. Since consumers in committed relationships already comply with loyalty restrictions (“buy from us”), they do not react negatively to such imperative ads.

In sum, consumers respond negatively to imperative advertising from committed but not uncommitted brand partners due to differences in threat perception. The current work introduces relationship variables to reactance theory, and clarifies when and why different restrictions from different relationship partners elicit negative responses to imperative language in advertising.

**What Shall I Call Thee? The Impact of Brand Personality on Consumer Response to Formal and Informal Address**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

In recent years, marketing researchers have become aware of the impact of linguistic factors on the effectiveness of marketing communication. Thus far, however, interest in sociolinguistic factors in monolingual contexts has, with some exceptions (Kronrod, Grinstein and Wathieu 2012a and 2012b; Sela, Sarialabi and Wheeler, 2012), been relatively limited. In particular, the impact of formal and informal address remains to be understood. In marketing communication, address choices - that is, deciding to address another person formally or informally - are everywhere. Today, English speakers rarely wonder whether it would be more appropriate to say you or thou to one another. But in many languages, different address pronouns are still used in formal and in informal situations: think for instance of the Spanish usted and tu, the French vous and tu, the German Sie and Du, the Dutch u and jij, or the Russian vy and ty. Globally, among the 10 languages counting more than 100 million native speakers - a list which includes Mandarin, Castilian Spanish, Hindi-Urdu, Bengali, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, and Punjabi - Modern English is the only one, together with some dialects of Arabic, to not possess such a distinction.

This contrast is known as the T-V distinction, after the Latin forms Tu and Vos (Brown and Gilman, 1960/2003). The T pronoun is typically used to express solidarity, directness and informality, whereas the V pronoun is used to express respect, distance, and formality. In many cases, both pronouns are used in marketing communication. This means that for billions of consumers worldwide, both formal and informal address pronouns constitute an omnipresent feature of communication in the marketplace. This is especially the case in advertising – and yet we do not understand the consequences of formal and informal address use for consumers’ attitudes. On what basis should advertisers decide which type of address to use? In this paper, we explore the impact of brand positioning on consumers’ expectations for, and reactions to, address pronouns.

Marketers have to decide on the most appropriate form of address for a particular communication depending on the context, taking into account language-specific norms as well as other factors such as target characteristics. We argue that address can also be chosen to reflect a brand’s positioning and values - and that making address choices that are consistent with these values will have a positive impact on consumer response. We expect that informal “T” address will elicit more positive responses when the brand is perceived as warm, sincere, exciting or low-end than when it is not,
whereas formal “V” address will elicit more positive address when the brand is perceived as competent, sophisticated, or high-end than when it is not.

In study 1, we show that informal address is more consistent with the positioning of warm brands, whereas formal address is more consistent with the positioning of competent brands, as reflected in consumers’ preferences. A first group of Dutch participants rated a series of brands selected among the Interbrand Best Global Brands on warmth and competence. Then, for each brand, other participants expressed their preference for either formal or informal address in the brand’s communication. Both perceived warmth and competence had a significant effect on preference for formal address, with high perceived competence associated with a greater preference for formal address and higher perceived warmth associated with a greater preference for informal address.

In study 2a and 2b, we investigate the impact of brand personality on address expectations and preferences. In study 2a, we looked at the impact of a brand’s association with excitement or competence. Russian participants were shown a magazine ad for a fictional jeans brand called “YourJeans”, which was presented as either exciting or competent. Participants translated the brand name and the slogan into Russian. Responses were coded as using the formal (ты) or the informal pronoun (ты). A logistic regression analysis revealed a significant association between brand personality and address translation formality: in the competence condition, 29.1% of the translations used formal address. In the excitement condition, only 7.8% of the translations used formal address. In study 2b, we explored the impact of perceived sophistication and sincerity on address preferences. Chanel and Moët & Chandon (sophisticated) and Dove and Nutella (sincere) were selected by pretest. For each brand, Dutch and Dutch-speaking Belgian participants chose a slogan from a set of formal and informal slogans. A repeated-measures logistic regression revealed a significant effect of brand on address preference. Formal address was selected 58.2% of the time for Chanel and 57.5% of the time for Moët & Chandon, but only 42.9% of the time for Dove and 42.9% of the time for Nutella.

In study 3, we focus on the role of low-end and high-end positioning in moderating the effect of address on consumers’ attitudes. Participants were approached in office and public transportation settings in the Netherlands and evaluated a printed ad for a fictional low-end or high-end sunglasses brand. The address pronoun (t vs. jij) changed to implement formal or informal address. A floodlight analysis (Spiller, Fitzsimons, Lynch, and McClelland, 2013) revealed a significant interaction effect of address pronoun and positioning on purchase intention in consumers aged 29.46 and above, on attitude towards the ad in consumers aged 33.52 and above, and on attitude towards the slogan in consumers aged 47.06 and above. These results suggest that older age does not simply result in a greater preference for formal address, but rather in a greater sensitivity to address appropriateness.

In conclusion, the distinction between a formal address pronoun “V” and an informal address pronoun “T” is a feature of the marketplace for billions of consumers worldwide, and advertisers have to decide which of the two is more appropriate for a particular ad. We show that the characteristics of the target consumers are not the only factors that need to be taken into account. The brand itself matters as well. Our findings show that brand positioning is not only a predictor of address expectations, but also moderates the effect of address choice on consumers’ attitudes.

“And” Bridges, “With” Bonds: A Lexical Inferencing-based Framework for Influencing Perceptions of Product Combinations

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Will a consumer prefer eggs with ham or eggs and ham? In linguistic analysis, words can be categorized as content words (e.g., “eggs”, “ham”) or function words (e.g. “and”, “with”; Chung and Pennebaker 2007). Function words include prepositions, articles, conjunctions, and pronouns that hold the content words together to form meaningful sentences. Function words are often considered devoid of meaning and are hence overlooked. The current research examines the conjunctions “and” and “with”, and proposes that although these are used interchangeably, they differentially signal integration and therefore value when used to communicate product combinations.

Our central thesis is that the conjunction “and” bridges two products together, without necessarily integrating them (purely conjunctive role) whereas “with” goes beyond bridging and actually bonds the products together in an integrative manner. This level of product integration is of particular relevance when the products themselves are unequal in value, and the prepositional role of “with” serves to indicate both unequalvaluations and better integration from having the products bundled together. Further, since individuals differ in their propensity to attend to subtle differences in language (Chung and Pennebaker 2007), we argue that an individual’s processing style might explain the effect of conjunction use on the valuation of product combinations. We expect that a holistic processing style should result in less attention to the function words and the valuation they connote, while an analytic processing style should result in greater attention to the semantic meaning the conjunction conveys.

In sum, we expect that (1) the conjunction “with” connotes greater value than “and” when products are complementary, yet unequal in value (2) this effect emerges when consumers are primed to use a more analytical processing style, and (3) other cues of integration may facilitate or diminish these differences in the effectiveness of “with” and “and” in communicating value or perceived enjoyment to consumers.

In Study 1a, the 126 undergraduate participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions following a 2 (conjunction: “with” vs. “and”) X 2 (product combination: unequal value (steak/salad) vs. equal value (soup/salad)). After being presented with one of the four product combination options, they indicated their perceived value of the product combination. Results revealed significant main effects for both equal versus unequal bundles and for conjunction cue, such that “with” was higher than “and”. These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction showing that while combination cue did not affect the equal value combination, “with” was perceived more favorably than “and” for the unequal value combination. As predicted, this study demonstrates that for unequal value combinations, “with” results in higher perceived value than “and”. In a follow-up study (study 1b), we used non-food combinations and asked participants to evaluate an audio system and controller. Again, the product bundle connected by “with” was perceived as more attractive than the one joined by “and” again implying the enhanced value through the integrative function of “with”.

In Study 2, we focused on unequal bundles only and measured processing style to test our hypothesis regarding the underlying process of our effect. The 118 participants were presented with one of two prix fixe brunch menus in which they either chose between “A: eggs with ham” and “B: eggs and bacon” OR “A: eggs and ham” and “B: eggs with bacon”. The results revealed the expected main effect,
such that individuals preferred option A (eggs with ham) in the first menu and option B (eggs with bacon) in the second menu. Spotlight analysis revealed a significant interaction between conjunction use and processing style on option preference, suggesting that analytic processors were more likely to discern the differences between conjunction use.

In Study 3, 225 participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (conjunction: and vs. with) X 2 (thinking style: analytic vs. holistic) between-subjects design. Participants first completed a priming task to induce a holistic or analytic thinking style. Next participants were exposed to an advertisement for a frozen entrée product positioned as “Grilled Peppercorn Steak and/or Vegetable Medley” depending on condition. Participants responded to two items regarding their perceived satisfaction with the entrée. Results revealed a significant interaction between combination cue and thinking style prime. Specifically, only those participants in an analytical mindset showed increased preferences for the “with” combination, providing evidence that only when more attention is paid to the subtle language cues in one’s environment does the combination cue matter.

In Study 4, 177 MTurk participants viewed a product combination of chips and salsa in which complementarity was influenced through matched or mismatched brands. Results revealed a significant interaction between conjunction and brand match/mismatch, such that when the brands were coordinated, “with” led to higher evaluations than did “and”, but the opposite was true when the brands were mismatched.

Finally, in Study 5 (n = 132), we manipulated a separate cue of integration by presenting two food products (peppercorn steak and vegetable medley) either on one plate or two along with our manipulation of conjunctive cue (“with” vs. “and”). The results revealed that the visual cues were more powerful than the subtle cues of language, as the presentation of two separate plates was evaluated more favorably in conjunction with “and” rather than with “with” and the typical pattern of results in which “with” was preferred to “and” was eliminated by the visual plate cues.

Overall, the current research adds to a growing literature on the powerful effects that subtle language differences have on consumer preferences. Our results underscore the importance of investigating the functioning of often-ignored function words like “and” and “with” in language use.

The Effect of Phonetic Embodiment on Attitudes towards Brand Names

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Rising in a global culture, brand names today oftentimes lack meaning to avoid specific connotations. Therefore marketers create innovative nonsense brand names for their products. The purpose of this work is to explore the possible effects of the phonetic structure of nonsense brand names on brand attitudes. In this work we employ an innovative approach introducing research on embodiment into research on phonetic symbolism.

Research on sound symbolism has demonstrated that sounds create meaning and may affect attitudes towards brand names. For example, Sapir (1929) showed that while back vowels (e.g. mal) are associated with large size, front vowels (e.g. mil) are associated with small sizes. Yorkston and Menon (2004) found that the brand name Frosh for an ice cream was preferred over the brand name Frish, as it was perceived as smoother, richer, and creamier than the Frish name. Recently, Lowrey and Shrum (2007) showed that participants prefer a fictitious brand name whose vowels are associated with attributes which are desirable for the category (e.g. sharpness for a knife).

The works on phonetic symbolism demonstrate the importance of the role played by phonetic sounds to construct meanings. However, to the best of our knowledge no previous work has inquired into the effect of the movement of the articulation organs within the space of the oral cavity while pronouncing the phonemes of a brand name. This question is the focus of the current work.

To answer this question we introduce research in embodied cognition, which ties bodily movements to the creation of, and effect on, attitudes and affect. For example, in Chen and Bargh’s (1999) classic work, positive attitudes were more accessible in the participants’ minds when they were pulling a lever towards them, as opposed to pushing it away.

Following the research on sound symbolism and embodied cognition, we suggest that there may be a phenomenon of phonetic embodiment, whereby the movement of the organs in the oral cavity during the articulation of a brand name may affect attitudes regarding that name. Specifically, movement from front sounds like “i” and “b” towards back sounds like “u” and “k” simulates food accepting/swallowing. To the contrary, movement of the organs from back sounds to front sounds simulates food rejection/spitting. We suggest that names with back-to-front (bf) oral movements (like Goomie) will elicit more negative attitudes than brand names where the sounds are ordered in a front-to-back (fb) direction of the articulation organs (like Meego), due to the movement of articulation organs inside the oral cavity.

Four studies investigate this process. In study 1 we demonstrate the basic phenomenon. Participants indicated their intent to purchase one of two brand names, based on their names only: Goomy (bf) and Feeco (fb). Then, participants indicated their preference between two companies – Picoo (fb) and Gobi (bf) – on company evaluation items, such as “has better customer support”, “can sell for higher price”, sounds more credible”. Participants also indicated their preference to purchase one of the brand names. Consistent with our hypothesis, results suggest that for all tasks the front-to-back (fb) words, names, and brand names elicited more positive attitudes than the back-to-front (bf) words, names, and brand names. As predicted, the likelihood to purchase Feeco was significantly higher than the likelihood to purchase Goomy; and Pikoo (fb) company was more highly evaluated than Gobi (bf) company.

In study 2 we tested the possible moderation of product category for this phenomenon. Specifically, we assumed that food products, embodied as an intake motion (fb) may impact the effect we found in study 1. We compared the same tasks for food and non-food products. All food/non-food comparisons were between subjects, whereas articulation direction comparisons were within subject. Participants first evaluated the quality, popularity, and likelihood to try any of 6 items in a menu of cocktails (movies), some of which were fb (e.g. Kobim) and some fb (e.g. Megu). Next, they predicted the success of 2 new products in their category – soup (soap) – having either fb (Goven) or fb (Megu) phonetic structure direction. Finally, participants indicated their trust for two brand names (Maitoug (fb) and Kuanbei (bf)) in one of two categories (snacks or hand cream). Results replicated the findings in study 1, suggesting that brand names with a fb articulation direction elicit higher attitudes than brand names with bf articulation direction. However, this effect was attenuated and non-significant for all food products in all comparisons.

Study 3 extends the findings of study 2 by comparing non-food products (e.g. pen) with two types of food: edible (e.g. sandwich) and spoiled (e.g. molded sandwich). The purpose of this study was to further test the phonetic embodiment hypothesis in the case of food products. Results of this study support our prediction that food
products bias the phonetic embodiment effect towards always-intake: participants consistently preferred fb brand names for non-food products, had no preference for articulation direction for food products, and preference for bf brand names for spoiled food.

Finally, in study 4 we tested the mechanism of approach-avoidance associated with the phonetic embodiment effect of nonsense brand names. Participants were biased to prefer fb(bf) brand names for non-food products after viewing (un)pleasant/ approach (avoidance) pictures. These results were replicated in a physical approach-avoidance task (pushing/pulling a table top). Study 4 emphasizes the underlying mechanism responsible for the phonetic embodiment effect.

Our findings indicate that brand names which are comprised of sounds that create a movement of the articulation organs from the back(front) to the front(back) have a negative (positive) effect on attitudes, because the movement simulates food rejection(intake), which activates avoidance (approach) mechanism. In support for these results, the effect of articulation direction is attenuated in food products, as the intake embodied movement interferes with the direction of movement dictated by the sounds. Further research that will explore the effect of other product categories, as well as the combination of articulation direction and meaning, may reveal additional aspects to the question of the effect of articulation direction on attitudes towards brand names.

REFERENCES


