The Intent to Persuade: Spontaneous Emotionality in Word-Of-Mouth Communications

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Little research examines how the intent to persuade others transforms consumers’ communications. Using a computational linguistic approach, three large-scale experiments demonstrate that intending to persuade others leads individuals to spontaneously intensify the emotionality of their language – even in situations where unemotional appeals have been shown to be relatively more effective.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consumers provide online product reviews for reasons that range from a desire to help others to an effort to boost their own ego (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). One prominent self-serving motive among consumers is an intent to persuade others (Berger 2014). For example, individuals who want a restaurant to succeed might post and share a review to persuade others to dine there. Despite the recognition that people can be driven by the intent to persuade, far less research examines how this motive transforms how people communicate their views to others. To address this gap, we propose that the intent to persuade leads to subtle but detectable shifts in consumers’ emotionality. Moreover, we demonstrate people turn to emotionality even when such appeals can backfire.

The Intent to Persuade: A Catalyst for Emotionality
Influential models of emotion posit that emotions evolved not only to provide information to the person experiencing the emotion (Pham 2004), but also to influence others (Van Kleef 2009; Frijda and Mesquita 1994). Although research shows that emotional appeals from others can affect participants’ behavior (e.g., Van Kleef, De Dreu, and Manstead 2004; Clark and Taraban 1991), there is a relative lack of research demonstrating whether and when individuals themselves spontaneously increase their emotionality to impact others. In the present work, we propose and explore the idea that the intent to persuade acts as a catalyst for consumers to spontaneously engage in the use of emotionality. An obstacle to answering this question for consumer communications is that many communications in the modern world occur primarily through text (e.g., online reviews), thereby making the measurement of emotionality difficult. However, Rocklage and Fazio (2015, 2016) have recently developed the Evaluative Lexicon (EL) – a computational linguistic tool that enables researchers to quantify language in terms of its implied emotionality. The EL allows researchers to quantify differences between more emotional adjectives such as “wonderful” and “lovable” versus more cognitive adjectives such as “helpful” and “excellent.” The EL has been validated through in-laboratory experiments as well as in natural, archival text.

The Current Research
Experiment 1 examined the link between the intent to persuade and emotionality. Participants wrote a review for one of 20 products (n = 778). To examine the extent of individuals’ use of emotionality in persuasion, we utilized topics that varied both in emotionality (hedonic versus utilitarian products) as well as content (books versus non-book products). All participants wrote a 5-star review. However, those in the “Persuade” condition were given the additional instructions to persuade others to purchase the product. Moreover, we compared the emotionality of these reviews to real-world 5-star reviews of the same products from Amazon.com (n = 840). These reviews provide a naturalistic baseline for the emotionality expressed toward these products. Across the 20 products, participants with the intent to persuade used greater emotionality compared to both those in the control condition as well as the real-world Amazon.com reviews.

Experiment 2 (n = 288) was designed to provide a further test of the relationship between the intent to persuade and emotionality. Moreover, it has been theorized that using emotionality to affect others can often be enacted without much deliberation due to its relatively overlearned association with impacting others’ behaviors (Frijda and Mesquita 1994). Therefore, we also manipulated the cognitive load participants experienced. To begin, we ensured that all participants had equal knowledge of the product they would write about. To this end, we had participants recall a novel they had read that they would issue 5 stars. Next, we manipulated cognitive load via a secondary task. Finally, we manipulated the intent to persuade more naturally via a referral program. Specifically, we informed half of the participants they would be paid $1.00 for each future participant who selected their book based on their review. We replicated the results from Experiment 1: individuals with the intent to persuade expressed greater emotionality than those in the control condition. Moreover, these results were not moderated by cognitive load; even under high load individuals used greater emotionality.

The pervasiveness of these effects raise the possibility that consumers may rely on emotional arguments even in situations when such appeals may be suboptimal. Previous work indicates rational appeals are more impactful on audiences with cognitively-based attitudes (Fabrigar and Petty 1999) and that emotional appeals can even backfire with cognitive audiences (Haddock et al. 2008). Will people continue to use more emotional appeals even when emotional appeals could backfire? Experiment 3 tested this possibility.

In Experiment 3, we used a similar procedure to Experiment 2 but we added conditions to test the effect of audience. Based on the results from a pilot study, we conducted a preregistered experiment (https://osf.io/vbuqn/). There were four conditions in the experiment (n = 781). Two of the conditions (control and “Persuade – No Group”) provided similar instructions as in Experiment 2. However, two additional “Persuade” conditions were given specific groups to persuade. Based on pretesting, those in the “Emotionalists” condition were told their reviews would be shared with artists, dancers, and musicians from a group named “The Emotionalists.” Those in the “Rationalists” condition were told they would be shared with a group of scientists, mathematicians, and economic analysts named “The Society for Applied Rationality and Mathematics.” We replicated the results of Experiment 2: those incentivized to persuade used greater emotionality than the control condition. Most importantly, we found that those in the “Rationalists” condition also used greater emotionality compared to those in the control condition. Thus, despite previous research demonstrating the effectiveness of more rational, unemotional appeals for such individuals, participants continued to utilize emotionality.

Discussion
Although prior work has enumerated the motives consumers have for sharing information, little work has examined the consequences of these motives. We find that the intent to persuade led consumers to spontaneously intensify the emotionality of their language. This result occurred across topics and even in situations where emotional appeals might backfire. We also provide evidence that using emotionality may represent a default approach to persuasion that requires relatively few cognitive resources to implement.
REFERENCES


