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The thin line between believability and persuasiveness

Concrete versus abstract language in shaping a company's Social Media Marketing Communication strategy

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To my beloved parents

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Introduction

In light of their incredible growth and diffusion, Social Media are reining an authentic sea change in Marketing Communication. Blogs, forums, and social networking sites represent today's cosmopolitan *agoras* where people meet and discuss about their topics of interest, exchanging opinions, advice, and warnings with each others. Such constant interaction among consumers and the rapid growth of the electronic word-of-mouth, hereafter eWOM (e.g., Hennig-Thurau, T., et al., 2004; Jansen, B. J., et al., 2009) can no longer be ignored. Small as well as medium and large companies, indeed, can gain dramatic visibility and reach large audience through the use of Social Media potentialities. However, they become exposed to the sharp look of the consumers 2.0 who do not hesitate to tell their negative brand experiences, not just in a vengeful attitude toward the company, but instead because of a willingness to share useful information and warn other unaware peers. The scope and extent of eWOM may turn a disappointed customer into a real "killer" of the brand, drastically damaging a company's reputation and jeopardizing its future sales. Therefore, it is crucial to carefully design a Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC) strategy aimed at exploiting the great opportunities of online tools such as social networking sites, while stemming the dangers of negative (and pandemic) eWOM conversations.

WOM Marketing (WOMM), as firms' intentional (and effective) influencing of consumer-to-consumer (c2c) communications, represents the ultimate ambition of those companies that have understood the true power of WOM (e.g., Kozinets, R. V., *et al.*, 2010).

However, hitherto traditional research in marketing communication has not adequately approached this issue: both the academic and managerial debates on WOM, in fact, have tended to merely describe it in rather generic terms, as a sort of black box, without really answering the questions that the reality and scientific studies have posed in recent years. WOM and the "newborn" eWOM, in particular, represents an increasingly complex phenomenon with a multifaceted nature. Academics and practitioners indeed shall start to distinguish and study the

single facets of WOM, finally leaving aside useless platitudes (De Angelis, M., 2012).

One of the most interesting and fascinating aspects of eWOM is the study of the language used in the online conversations among consumers, and among companies and consumers as well, finally assessing the direct effects of language on consumer behaviour, attitude change, and ultimately purchase intentions. A proper language differentiation within the SMMC may result to be decisive for companies.

Therefore, embracing the well-known linguistic categories and their inner psychological properties (Semin, G. R., and Fiedler, K., 1988), the present work aims to demonstrate the crucial role played by the language used by the companies and consumers in their communications via Social Media. By leveraging the constructs of message *believability* and *persuasiveness* as empirically observed in Linguistic, Neuropsychology, and Marketing Communication research, the two experiments presented here are the first to our knowledge to assess language persuasiveness and purchase intentions within the Social Media environment accounting for two factors which have been found to greatly affect consumer behaviour, namely *product category* and *brand attachment*.

1 eWOM and the evolution of social communication

Today's rise of Social Media has led to a real proliferation of new and growing marketing channels which represent great opportunities for companies (Geyskens, I., *et al.*, 2002). However, if they want to catch the Social Media wave, companies can no longer postpone to adjust their "traditional" marketing communication strategies and focus on the new consumer traits and preferences (Kotler, P., *et al.*, 2012). Luckily these are now available for companies on Social Media platforms such as blogs, communities, social networking sites, and the like, where consumers post, share, appreciate and complain every day, at anytime, and ultimately about everything. Every day, there are 2.4 billion online conversations that involve a brand, and 3.3 billion mentions of brands that comes out to about 1.4 impressions per conversation[1]. The voice of consumers has become so powerful to be considered a true social revolution.

Surely, it represents a radical trend change in light of what Marketing Communication was just few years ago. Larger companies indeed were used to prepare their advertising, launching TV spots with famous stars as testimonials and populating cities with their placards, then wait for the consumers' reaction to their new products. Generally, smaller companies could not afford such expensive channels, and relied mainly on mail, radio advertising, more recently SMS, and email to keep their customers updated on the company's new proposals, and not to be forgotten.

The progress of Information Technology has made it possible for everybody to be visible, the Internet opening a window on the world. Millions of small companies which may never have advertised before today can, altogether representing a huge "new Long Tail ad market"[2]. These companies have now the extraordinary opportunity to interact with their own customers, asking for their suggestions, and receiving prompt feedback from them.

[1] According to "Word of Mouth and the Internet" released by Google/Keller Fay Group in 2011.

[2] Chris Anderson, editor-in-chief of Wired Magazine and author of "The Long Tail" (2007), reports the words of Eric Schmidt who describes Google as a "Long Tail company", serving these millions of small-to-midsized customers, many of which have never used traditional advertising sales.

Nowadays Marketing Communication is radically different: not only because there are more communication channels, with companies doing less broadcasting and more narrowcasting (the so called "Media fragmentation"), but especially because of the increased power and pervasiveness of WOM, also called consumer-to-consumer (c2c), or peer-to-peer (p2p) communication.

WOM refers to the flow of online as well as offline conversations that consumers start and nurture about products and services (e.g. Richardson, N., and Gosnay, R. M., 2010). Ninety-four per cent of these conversations (and 93% of WOM brand impressions) still occur face-to-face, i.e., they take place offline. Anyway, the Internet has been shown to be the most important source of content at all phases (before, during and after conversation), Search impacting more than 15% of all WOM conversations (with Google directly informing 146 million brand conversations per day). According to Google/Keller Fay Group (2011), more than half of consumers are "highly likely" to purchase an item based on WOM conversations[3].

WOM has recently become the most valuable mean of Marketing Communication for firms (e.g., Buttle, F. A., 1998; Trusov, M., *et al.*, 2009; Castronovo, C., and Huang, L., 2012), affecting purchasing behaviour despite the industry of reference (Dye, R., 2000). Indeed, WOM long-term elasticity (i.e., the percentage change in a company's sales due to a 1% increase in WOM conversations) has been found to be substantially higher (0.53) than the mean long-term advertising elasticity (0.24[4]), the former being 20 times larger than that of marketing events, while 30 times that of media appearances. Aside from strongly affecting customer acquisitions, WOM results to be more effective than traditional advertising channels in influencing purchase decisions (Herr, *et al.*, 1991; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004) and retaining customers over time. WOM referrals, indeed, present "substantially longer carryover effects than traditional marketing activities", namely about 21 days versus 3-7 days (Trusov, M., *et al.*, 2009).

[3] In particular, as reported by the same study, WOM impressions generated by Search are 25% more credible (and 17% more likely to lead to purchase) than those generated by Social Media websites.

[4] As reported by Sethuraman *et al.* in "How Well does advertising Work? Generalizations from meta-analysis of Brand advertising elasticities", 2011. The average short term advertising elasticity instead is .12 –which is substantially lower than the prior meta-analytic mean of .22, meaning that there has been a decline in the advertising elasticity over time.

For all these reasons WOM must be carefully monitored by companies, then included[5] in an Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategy as a crucial asset (e.g., Castronovo, C., and Huang, L., 2012; Kotler, P., *et al.*, 2012).

WOM in the form of either opinions or advice has always been influential as a critical driver of consumer purchase intention. However, the Social Media hub has extended so much the scope and influence of eWOM, social networking sites dramatically favouring viral marketing, and WOM promotions being just as effective - if not more effective – than traditional ones, to the extent that companies can be exalted and sullied at one time for what they do, and especially for what and how they communicate to consumers, which are now active online users.

Therefore, companies should leverage eWOM. But first they have to learn how to do that, since *being social* cannot be improvised.

Social Media brand engagement activities are currently on top of many business executives' agenda. However, 40% of companies admits to have no training or governance of Social Media (2012 Business statistics by AgentMedia); even larger companies do not allocate money on them (i.e., neither marketing nor communication budget envisages an entry for Facebook, Twitter, or other Social Media), and before going live no strategy is planned out to handle them.

SMMC must be thought and perceived by online users as *believable* and at the same time *persuasive* in order to influence consumer purchase decisions.

First step in shaping a SMMC strategy (hereafter SMMCS) is the understanding of which language to use. How to structure a message on Social Media from a linguistic point of view, in fact, can be decisive. The choice of the language starting from the words to employ is thorny, and require a number of pilot studies to conduct ex ante.

In this sense, the SMMC literature is rather young. *Protos euretes* companies in this field have started from scratch, at their expenses, sometimes putting the overall company's reputation at risk.

[5] The opinion that WOM must be included in a company's IMC strategy (Kotler; Castronovo, *et al.,* 2012) seems to prevail on that of a WOM as substitute of traditional marketing communication tools, which are definitely losing effectiveness (Trusov, M., *et al.,* 2009) but still they cannot be entirely abandoned.

However, there exist related and longstanding disciplines such as Linguistic, Social Psychology, and Neuropsychology which can be addressed in order to gain precious insight for managers. Such literature is ample, but also rather fragmented and sometimes even ambiguous. Concepts such as *believability* and *persuasiveness* in SMMC for instance are pillar, but their determinants and effects have yet to be studied.

What makes a message believable, which words in particular? What about persuasiveness, which kind of language is more persuasive? Which are ultimately the effects of both believability and persuasiveness on consumer purchase intentions?

The present work will try to answer all these questions, drawing from the theories and methodologies available, and empirically demonstrating the effects of language differentiation on persuasiveness, i.e., on consumer purchase intentions.

2 Get linked or get lost: the Social Media call

"Social Media spark a revelation that we, the people, have a voice, and through the democratization of content and ideas we can once again unite around common passions, inspire movements, and ignite change."

Brian Solis, principal at Altimeter Group

"We build tools to help people connect with the people they want and share what they want, and by doing this we are extending people's capacity to build and maintain relationships."

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook founder and CEO

Nowadays it seems unlikely to spend a whole day without using or mentioning the words "Social Media" so far they have become a pervasive component of our lives.

Social Media in the forms of social networking sites, creativity works sharing sites, user-sponsored sites, business networking sites, virtual game worlds and many others[6] now represent familiar spaces shared and crowded by the most diverse audience, social networking sites being the top online activity worldwide.

It is clearly not a *fad*, as someone would doubt[7], in light of their global and cross-generational appeal.

Among the most popular Social Media[8], Facebook alone accounts for 1.06 billion monthly active users, 680 million mobile users, more than 50 million pages and 10 million apps, followed by YouTube with 1 billion users and 4 billion views per day, and Twitter with more than 200 million active users among its 500 million total users.

[6]Most common examples of Social Media as enlisted by Mangold, W.G. and Faulds, D.J. in their "Social media: The new hybrid element of the promotion mix", Business Horizons (2009) 52, 357—365

[7]The NY Times dedicates its Room for Debate to Creep of Social Media (available on: http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/06/19/are-social-networks-just-a-fad-6/the-creep-of-social-media-raises-big-questions)

[8] Full list available on: http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/resource-how-many-people-use-the-top-social-media/

This is not even a *teen* phenomenon, since the average Social Media user is just under 37 years old[9], with a 40.5 years-old average Facebook user (about two years older than the previous survey made 2.5 years ago), and a 37.3 years-old average Twitter user (about two years younger compared to the previous survey).

While these two social networking sites show the same gender distribution - 40% male and 60% female, 17 out of the 24 top Social Media considered (71%) have more female than male users. Most male-dominated Social Media are Slashdot (87% males), Hacker News (77% males), and Stack Overflow (76% males), in general the more tech-focused sites, while most female-dominated sites are Pinterest (79% females), Goodreads (70% females) and Blogger (66% females).

Since 2006, the average time per person spent on social networking sites has more than doubled, from 2.7 hours to 6.9 hours per month (Fox, Z., 2012). Facebook still dominates the scene with 6.75 hours per month, followed by Tumblr and Pinterest (1.5 hours), Twitter (21 minutes), LinkedIn (17 minutes), and Google+ (3 minutes). According to a 2013 study released by Ipsos Open Thinking Exchange, the average online American spends two hours a day social networking from a computer, tablet and/or mobile phone, 18-34-year-old Americans spending 3.8 hours a day. Women are in general the most active, spending about 40% more daily time than their male counterparts on Social Media.

All over the world 44% of online users are Asian, with China accounting for 485 million people. With more than 90%, Philippines scores the highest Social Media penetration, followed by Australia at 89%, and Indonesia at 88%. In particular, a 2012 online survey conducted by Ipsos OTX shows that Indonesians and Saudi Arabians spend the most time on social networking sites, at an average of 5.1 hours daily, followed by the Turks (4.9 hours), Argentineans (4.7 hours), and Russians (4.6 hours).

But this is not just a matter of numbers and statistics. Social Media are changing the way we communicate, share experiences, work, travel, love. They are ultimately reshaping the way we were supposed to live.

9 Social network demographics in 2012 available on: http://royal.pingdom.com/2012/08/21/report-social-network-demographics-in-2012/. Among the other interesting statistics, we can infer that Twitter's user base is getting younger, while Facebook's one is getting older.

From their perspective, companies risk to be relegated to the sidelines as passive observers, pilloried by keen consumers, and overridden by those competitors which have understood how to take advantage of (a wise use of) Social Media.

Prior research from Ipsos OTX show that 57% of business owners interviewed keep in the know about brands and products via Social Media, regularly checking out their brand pages.

Social Media brand engagement activities are currently on top of many business executives' agenda.

A 2012 survey[10] of 600 small business owners across the United States reports that 90% of them are actively engaged in social networking sites. Gaining and targeting prospective customers is deemed as the most valuable benefit of networking online. Small businesses need to go where their audience is, and this *is* actually online. Indeed, nearly all consumers (97%) today use the Internet to research products or services, company names, or business owners in their local area (BIA Kelsey, 2010). More than half of consumers (55%) agree that they stay informed about brands and products through social networking[11]. According to the 2012 e-Commerce consumer behaviour report, before buying, about 60% of online consumers check other users' opinions and reviews on trusted Social Media platforms, 89% affirming to be definitely satisfied with their purchase experiences. Also before *offline* purchases, 46% of respondents reported to always look for information *online* (while 48% "sometimes", and only 6% of them "never")[12].

Focusing on Italy, the WEB Index, a WWW Foundation, reports[13] that in 2012 51% of consumers was influenced by other users' opinions and reviews found online. Without accounting for social networking sites, more than half of Italian consumers (51%) has commented online their purchase experiences (against a global average of 62%). Moreover, 66% of Italian consumers affirmed to be very

[10]Findings available on: http://www.manta.com/media/marketing_3D_091212.

[11]From "Socialogue: It Pays To Be Social!" Available on: http://www.ipsos-na.com/news-polls/pressrelease.aspx?id=5974

[12]For more information about the report: http://www.contactlab.com/paper_netcomm/mail/76/872/ecommerce-consumer-behaviour-report.html.

[13]Latest statistics are available on: http://thewebindex.org/.

satisfied about products and services purchased online (Casaleggio Associati, 2011)[14], with around 12 million trusting Social Networks for their purchasing decisions. Even inside brick and mortar stores, 15 million admit to use the Web and look for information about brands, products, prices, and so on. They completely trust what they read in blogs, forums and other Social Media about products and services. Furthermore, 8 million Italian consumers state that they usually modify their purchasing decisions after reading information retrieved from Social Media.

Outside Italy, 71% of online consumers monitors previous reviews of other users, with 77% of them modifying their purchase intentions accordingly. Consumers tend to trust not only the opinions of people they personally know (90%), but also those of completely strangers (70%).

According to the 117 companies surveyed by the e-tailing Group (2009), customer reviews are deemed as the most effective social tactic to increase sales, followed by Q & A services and Facebook pages through which companies interact with their online customers.

It is crucial for today's businesses to build awareness of themselves and their company *online*. Nevertheless, companies and small businesses in particular risk to be overwhelmed by the complex dynamics of Social Media.

For this reason, the choice of the Social Media must be shrewd, and preceded by a study of its basic rules and functioning.

Secondly, Social Media must not be thought as "straightforward advertising and selling" (Kaplan, A. M., and Haenlein, M., 2009). Companies must find their own way to truly engage and entertain their customers online, providing them with valuable contents. In fact, it has been noticed that the more a company posts "smart and higher-level contents" on its Facebook page, the more appreciation and engagement its own fans show.

Currently, we can find successful examples of company Facebook pages or Twitter profiles. In this sense, Coca Cola with about 70 million "Likes", Disney (more than 44 million), Converse (almost 37 million), but also smaller and very dynamic businesses are making great use of their Facebook pages, actively

[14]Full article available on: http://www.casaleggio.it/pubblicazioni/focus/lutente-italiano-dellecommerce.php.

engaging fans, generating buzz and energizing their brands, thus truly understanding what *going social* really means **(**Goldman, J., 2012).

Figure 1. Coca-Cola and Converse: two successful examples of company Facebook pages

As *in fieri* social revolution and potential source of tremendous revenues for companies, Social Media also represent a break with the traditional means of Marketing Communication. Before the advent of Web 2.0 (which ultimately allows Social Media to exist), indeed, companies relied on a rather one-way communication with their customers. Traditional marketing vehicles were[15]:

1) Media, i.e., any mass distribution broadcast or publication with a large audience, that is television, radio, Internet banner ads, magazines, newspapers, billboards, etc.;
2) Mail;
3) Telephone;
4) Fax or email;
5) Direct contact;
6) Referral.

Social Media have paved the way for new emerging forms of Marketing Communication which have *de facto* empowered consumers, letting them become real market players who can reach (and be reached by) almost everyone, anywhere and anytime (Hennig-Thurau, T., *et al.*, 2010).

[15] Article Source: http://EzineArticles.com/2422011

As spaces where sharing experiences, opinions and recommendations, Social Media extremely favour eWOM.

Consumers now receive information about their brands of interest not only coming from the "official" channels (i.e., all corporate communication), but also from their trusted peers (such as relatives, friends, and even people they do not know who are occasionally met on the Social Media), in the forms of positive feedback, warnings related to a disappointing customer experience, fashion tips, and so on, all of them having in common a communication form which is definitely less formal than that we were used to just few years ago (i.e., in the Web 1.0 era). Social Media have exponentially multiplied the possibilities of c2c communication, and WOMM is increasingly becoming a viable, even if ambitious, alternative (Kozinets, R.V., *et al.*, 2010). However, before leveraging WOMM campaigns, and in light of its multiple complexities, marketers should rethink their online as well as offline strategies, since the adoption of Social Media marketing methods imply a critical situation of "networked coproduction of narratives", where consumers are co-producers of value and meaning for companies.

Consumers' online voice can be so influential and uncontrollable that companies are required to be extremely careful from the very beginning in tracking them.

As stated above, in fact, Social Media are a double edged sword. They can definitely attract many new customers, let a product "take off" and achieve widespread prominence (e.g. Libai, B., *et al.*, 2010). However, users are free to bluntly write whatever they think and feel - often without any censorship - about products, services, brands, and ultimately about everything. Such a *democratization* of the Web may sometimes end up in serious damages for a company's brand image, if those employees who are in charge for SMMC management (e.g., the customer service department) do not have prompt and convincing answers for them.

According to the BBC News UK, "a new trend appears to be emerging in which people are taking to Social Media platforms to air their grievances": 36% of the 2,000 respondents have used a Social Media platform to contact a big company in April 2012. Moreover, about 65% of them said they believed Social Media was a

better way to communicate with companies than call centres. This opinion was not restricted to young people, as 27% of respondents aged 55 and above had contacted companies via Social Media[16].

"Social media can bring a business and its customers much closer", Eva Keogan, Head of Innovation at Fishburn Hedges, states. However, while Social Media may be seen as a convenient "call centre replacement", companies must develop strategies to deal with the plethora of complaints they will be inevitably exposed to. Once they have implemented a system which allows customers to contact directly and publicly the company (e.g., the company Facebook page), or they have started a conversation with users online, there must be someone in charge of carefully following what is going on there, monitoring the system and intervening if necessary.

This necessity is further stressed by the latest business statistics for Social Media (AgentMedia, 2012), according to which:

- 50% of people follow brands via Social Media;
- 36% of Social Media users post brand-related content;
- 66% of Social Media users believe Twitter influences purchases;
- 75% of companies now use Twitter as a marketing channel;
- 40% of companies admit to having no training or governance of Social Media.

Indeed, today's ubiquity of smartphones has contributed to facilitate people interaction and sharing on Social Media. Facebook and Twitter report that more than half of their users regularly access the social network via mobile[17]. Every 60 seconds on Facebook there are: 510,000 posted comments, 293,000 status updates, and 136,000 uploaded photos. More than one billion tweets are sent every 2-3 days across Twitter (Honigman, B., 2012). Just to have an idea of the global scope and magnitude of the phenomenon, figure 2 displays a real-time data visualization of all tweets worldwide, as provided by Tweetping web site.

[16]Full article available on: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18081651

[17]Sources: AllFacebook.com and Microsoft tag.

Figure 2. Real-time data visualization of Twitter activity across the globe by Tweetping.net

Like all new forms of communication, Social Media have introduced a new jargon. In this regard, Wikipedia has recently published an A-Z "Glossary of blogging" where neologisms such as "Mommy blog", "RSS", "TrackBack", and many others are explained to the *initiates* of the Social Media world[18].

Among them, the new Social Media term "bashtag", coined and popularized by K. Hill (Forbes' blogger), refers to what happens when a company (e.g., McDonald's) starts a promotional corporate Twitter hashtag (i.e., #McDStories), paying for the privilege of having its hashtag promoted on the Twitter homepage, and consumers use it to ultimately criticise the company (Madrigal, A. C., 2012). The following are only some of McDonald's customers' tweets spread out via Social Media[19]:

- "Dude, I used to work at McDonald's. The#McDStories I could tell would raise your hair" (via Twitter)
- "One time I walked into McDonald's and I could smell Type 2 diabetes floating in the air and I threw up. #McDStories" (via Twitter)

[18] The full list of blogging terms is available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_blogging#B

[19] For further details about the Belkin scandal: http://news.cnet.com/8301-1001_3-10145399-92.html; about McDonald's and #McDStories: http://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2012/01/24/mcdstories-when-a-hashtag-becomes-a-bashtag/

- "These #McDStories never get old, kinda like a box of McDonald's 10 piece Chicken McNuggets left in the sun for a week." (via the LA Times)
- "#McDStories I lost 50lbs in 6 months after I quit working and eating at McDonald's" (via The Daily Mail).

Protos euretes companies in this field had no "gothas" to learn from. They have started from scratch at their expenses, sometimes making terrible mistakes. It is worth remembering Belkin's apology for paid review scandal, or the employee of Burger King who was fired after having posted a picture in which he trampled on the baskets of the lettuce for sandwiches[20].

Like a tattoo on the skin, every online comment remains attached to the company's brand image. This indeed may be damaged further by the negligence or failure to respond back on time to customers' complaints or inquiries.

As shown by the abovementioned statistics, despite 38% of CEOs label Social Media a high priority, currently even larger companies do not allocate money for Social Media (i.e. neither marketing nor communication budget envisages an entry for Facebook, Twitter, or other Social Media), and before going *live* no strategy is planned out to handle it.

Today marketers and top managers are increasingly aware of the potentialities of SMMC. However, Social Media cannot be thought just as a hybrid element to be added to the company's promotion mix in order to approach customers at relatively lower costs, and talk with them. Managers, indeed, have not always understood that a valuable SMMC is possible only with a change in the business model so far adopted. Some authors have defined it as a *cultural paradigm shift* (Shulkin, R., 2013) in the overall marketing thinking.

Even in measuring the ROI of their SMMC, managers must consider that Social Media efforts are developed in the context of the so called 4 C's which ultimately drive consumers' use of Social Media, namely *connections*, *creation*, *consumption* and *control* (Hoffman, D.L., and Fodor, M., 2010). As previously stated, consumers' possibilities of connection and interaction have been exponentially increased by the Social Media platforms. Here online consumers create unique

[20] He was identified after fifteen minutes thanks to the reaction of the users online.

content whose main characters are their brands of interest. This content, whether coming from a negative or positive experience with the brand, is extremely valuable. Other consumers rely on their peers' opinions and advice: also depending on the product category, communicator closeness, information diagnosticity (De Angelis, M., *et al.*, 2013), and other factors, they are ultimately influenced in their final decisions, that is they are led to purchase the product (or service) suggested in eWOM conversations.

Apart from the exceptions, a company does not earn money as it gains more Facebook fans, or Twitter followers. Social networking sites, and Social Media in general, are just a marketing medium, not the objective. Purchase intentions and actual sales are what a company ultimately assesses, this being the final goal of a SMMC strategy. Measuring them is quite difficult as the Social Media environment (despite traditional marketing communication one) is largely *consumers* – not marketers - *controlled*, and hitherto very few studies have investigated the relationship among eWOM and purchase intentions. Traditional marketing metrics are not deemed to be very appropriate as they do not emphasize the distinctive characteristics of Social Media (Hoffman, D.L., and Fodor, M., 2010)[21], and also the same SMMC literature is rather young and not thorough in this sense.

Therefore, our work turns to different disciplines, such as Linguistic and Neuropsychology, which may appear far from economics and business at first blush. However, it must be kept in mind that Marketing Communication, and SMMC in particular, (should) start where consumers talk: from what (and how) they say about their brand and product experiences.

The abovementioned disciplines have been chosen since the *individual*, that is the way she processes and perceives the message received, has always been the central focus of investigation. This in fact represents an essential first step in understanding the dynamics of eWOM conversations, towards the final goal of identifying the determinants of consumer purchase intentions, and gaining precious insight and implications for managers who deal with SMMC.

[21] The authors propose new relevant metrics for Social Media applications (e.g. blogs, forums and discussion boards, product reviews, social networks, video and photo sharing), organized by key Social Media performance objectives (i.e. brand awareness, brand engagement, WOM).

Hence, this work will first show the importance of language within the SMMC, and particularly what it is meant with “language differentiation”, distinguishing linguistic categories and their related psychological properties. Second, it will investigate how the individual perception of the message content changes according to the type of language used, unveiling the so called “concreteness effects” as known in the scientific literature. Third, it will define the two concepts of *believability* and *persuasiveness* within the Social Media environment. Finally, the empirical analysis we conducted will uncover the intimate relationship among language persuasiveness and consumer purchase intentions.

3 The relevance of language in Social Media Marketing Communication

As stated so far, even if offline WOM still prevails, eWOM has been witnessing an exponential growth mostly due to Social Media continuous progress. Indeed, online c2c conversations have become dramatically influential in consumers' everyday life, ultimately driving their purchase decisions. Companies can no longer be blind and abstain from this reality, but they need to truly revise their traditional marketing communication tools and metrics in order to be sure they are really able to capture the power of eWOM for their brands, and quantify its impact on their actual and future sales (e.g., Brown, J., *et al.*, 2007).

Companies' real challenge today is getting people talking about brands in a positive way, and not getting brands to talk to people. Moving away from the traditional 1960s formula of one-sided information, companies shall start to have authentic conversation with their online consumers, as they ultimately want brands to have a "real human voice they can ask to when something goes wrong"[22].

Customers listening is still fundamental, and one of the most important things a brand must keep on doing online, but it is no longer enough. If a brand is just broadcasting its own agenda, it is not truly engaging in a conversation (Goldman, J., 2012).

Companies indeed shall "join the cocktail party". Dave Kerpen, speaker and CEO of Likeable Local, compares Social Media to the world's largest cocktail party[23] "where anyone can listen to others talking and join the conversation with anyone else about any topic of their choice". As in-person cocktail party, likeable as well as not-so-likeable people may be met: "people who tell great stories and people who bore you to death". Many companies act on Social Media like the latter category of people at the cocktail party, exclusively talking about themselves, without asking other people what they want to have a conversation about.

[22]Full article available on: http://www.forbes.com/sites/gyro/2012/04/26/why-consumer-to-consumer-communication-wins/

[23]D. Kerpen is author of the NY Times bestseller "Likeable Social Media: How to Delight Your Customers, Create an Irresistible Brand, and Be Generally Amazing on Facebook (And Other Social Networks)" published in 2011.

Moreover, in all forms of communication, and especially in eWOM conversations with their so large audience, how something is said is *at least* as important as what is said (Hansen, J., and Wänke, M., 2010). The way an online conversation is structured matters, and the same terms can make the difference from the perspective of the message recipient, influencing brand perception and purchase intentions as well (Schellekens, G., *et al.,* 2010).
As stated in previous sections, the study of the language can help in managing eWOM conversations, and ultimately in shaping a company's SMMCS.

Language and linguistic categories have been widely studied. In particular, focusing on more general aspects of language use, the Linguistic Category Model (LCM) by Semin and Fiedler (1988) represents a well-established framework for investigating not only the language people use to describe interpersonal behaviours, but also that used in descriptions of product experiences by consumers, that is even outside the interpersonal domain.
According to the LCM, we can distinguish four linguistic categories:

1) Descriptive Action Verbs (DAVs): e.g., call, talk, stare, and the like;
2) Interpretive Action Verbs (IAVs): e.g., help, imitate, inhibit, cheat, etc.;
3) State Verbs (SVs): e.g., like, hate, envy, etc.;
4) Adjectives (Adjs), i.e. the mediate terms category introduced by Semin and Greenslade (1985) containing terms such as altruistic, brutal, friendly, youthful, and so on.

The psychological features that differentiate among the four categories on the concreteness-abstractness dimensions are:

1) Enduringness, meaning the extent to which the linguistic category in question permits the inference of any stable characteristic of a person;
2) Subject informativeness, referred to the amount of information about the subject conveyed by the linguistic category in question;
3) Situative informativeness, referred to the amount of information about the situation conveyed by the linguistic category in question;

4) Verifiability, meaning the degree to which sentences with DAVs, IAVs, SVs or Adjs can be objectively verified by a potential observer;
5) Disputability, concerning the contentiousness of the sentences containing either of these categories.

DAVs, IAVs, SVs and Adjs are organized on a continuum of *concreteness-abstractness*, presenting a number of general psychological implications, as shown in figure 3.

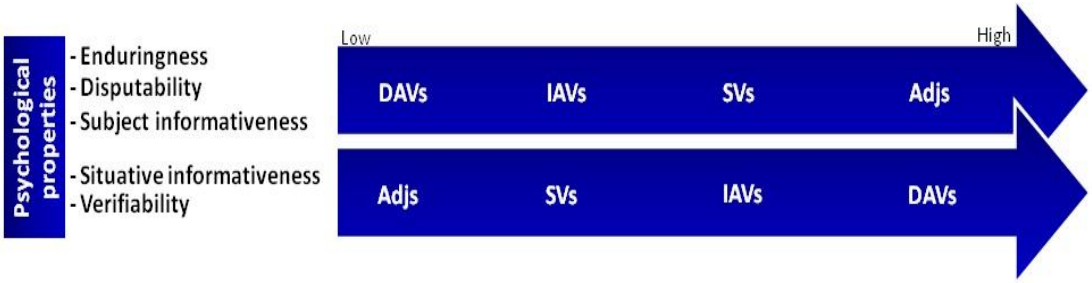


Figure 3. Linguistic categories and their psychological properties by Semin and Fiedler (1988)

Adjs are the most abstract terms, followed by SVs. Here we find the highest levels of enduringness, disputability and subject informativeness.

On the contrary, DAVs and IAVs represent the most concrete terms. They are perceived as related to rather temporary situations, while SVs refer to states of mind (such as love, hate, *etc.*) which are unanimously deemed as more stable (except for pathological situations). DAVs leave little room for disputability, also because of their high verifiability and situative informativeness. Lastly, while Adjs and SVs provide many information about the subject of the sentence, less information are conveyed by IAVs and very few information by DAVs.

It is now interesting to consider how, drawing from a purely linguistic classification, generalizations useful in many different fields can be made. As stated above, the study of the language is useful not only in the interpersonal domain and for neuropsychological purposes, but also towards a better understanding of eWOM conversations' dynamics (De Angelis, M., 2012). Here,

in particular, the language used may vary depending on valence, a priori expectations about the brand and previous experiences, consumers' product attitudes and buying intentions, and a number of other factors.

3.1 The concreteness-abstractness dimension

The concreteness-abstractness dimension has long represented a central focus of investigation in Linguistic, Neuropsychology, and more recently in Marketing Communication (e.g., Hansen, J., and Wänke, M., 2010; Schellekens, G., *et al.*, 2010). Here the work of Allan Urho Paivio[24] is pillar. Indeed, he has been one of the first scientist to define a stimulus' concreteness or abstractness according to its ability to trigger imagery. This, in turn, would determine the stimulus' ability to affect learning. Namely, the more a stimulus is concrete, the more likely it will evoke imagery, subsequently affecting learning.

Drawing from the subordination-superordination of categories (e.g., Johnson, M.D., and Kisielius, J., 1985), instead, abstractness is perceived as related to a superordinate category, i.e., "the more abstract a word is, the more likely it is to belong to a superordinate category". Abstract concepts indeed seem harder to understand than concrete ones, with reading times generally longer than those for concrete sentences (Schwanenflugel and Shoben, 1983), suggesting that recipients have more difficulties in the comprehension of abstract sentences (Schwanenflugel, P.J., et al., 1988).

Already in 1977 Borgida and Nesbett found that concrete information substantially impact the message recipients and their subsequent choices. In a demonstration of the inefficacy of abstract information, indeed, their results suggest that information is utilized in proportion to its vividness. Even if there is not a sole definition of *vividness* (Taylor, S. E., and Thompson, S. C., 1982), concrete language appears to be a constant feature in all of them (Keller, P. A.,

[24] Paivio is a Canadian cognitive psychologist (b. Thunder Bay, Ontario, 1925). Among the first scholars of the so-called *permanent memory* and systems of storage, and subsequent retrieval of the information in it, Paivio focused his investigation especially on the role of mental images and their relationship with forms of propositional encoding type. In 1971, he hypothesized the Dual-coding theory which posits that visual and verbal information are stored separately in long term memory.

and Block, L. G., 1997)[25]. Concrete words indeed are more likely to form connections with images, since they refer to objects or events that produce sensory experience (Cartwright, D.S., *et al.*, 1977). Abstract language instead may be equivocal and less effective persuasively than are specific or concrete words[26].

3.2 The concreteness effects

After decades of research in Linguistic and Neuropsychology with regard to knowledge storage and retrieval, there are currently two dominant currents. Starting from the work of Caramazza, Hillis and their colleagues (1990), the former states that "all meanings for objects, events, and concepts are stored and processed by *a common amodal semantic system*", while the latter – rooted in the theories of Paivio (1971, 1986, and 1991) and Shallice (1988, 1993), postulates that there exist *multiple semantic systems* which independently store and process semantic information (Holcomb, P. J., *et al.*, 1999).

Related to this debate, the so called *concreteness effects* - i.e., the observation that concrete terms are processed faster and more accurately than abstract ones in a variety of cognitive tasks - have long been investigated. So far, two models have prevailed in explaining the determinants of the concreteness effects: the Dual-coding theory (DCT) and the Context availability theory (CAT).

According to the DCT, there are two forms of knowledge which are used during comprehension and lexical decision: a *verbal representation*, consisting of verbal associates, and an *imaginal representation*, consisting of images. While concrete words are associated with information that are stored in both a verbal "linguistic" semantic system and a nonverbal "imagistic" semantic system, abstract words are associated with information stored only in the linguistic system. Namely, concrete words initially activate the linguistic system, but shortly thereafter they also activate the imagistic one. Abstract words, instead, have many fewer referential connections between the two systems, and predominantly activate linguistic representations (Holcomb, P. J., *et al.*, 1999), this meaning that concrete words

[25]Thus *concreteness being one of* vividness' *operationalizations* (Kisielius and Sternthal, 1984)
[26]From Chapter 19 of *The persuasion handbook*: "Language and persuasion" Hosman, L.A., 2009.

have the advantage to access the right hemisphere image based system *in addition to* the verbal system. Moreover, *lexical decisions* are faster for concrete sentences than for abstract ones as there are two potential sources of information, due to the availability of both imaginal and verbal representations for the former.
Therefore, the DCT predicts generally faster lexical decision times for concrete sentences than for abstract ones (Schwanenflugel, P. J., *et al.*, 1983).

On the other hand, according to the CAT by Bransford *et al.* (1974, 1978), concreteness effects do not arise from different types of informational codes or processing systems. The comprehension process heavily relies on *context*, which is a function of either the preceding discourse, or the comprehender's own mental knowledge base (i.e., the comprehender's semantic memory). Namely, the faster recognition of concrete words is explained by the larger contextual support they benefit of, and by a distinct, non-verbal system (Papagno, C., 2009).

So far, neither theory has prevailed on the other. However, a more recent article by Holcomb *et al.* (1994, and 1999) warnings that concreteness effects are not reducible to differences in supportive context. Both contextual and structural factors indeed play a role in language comprehension. Using the Event-related potential (ERP) technique[27] and in the absence of a supportive context, the authors reported different ERP results for concrete and abstract words, this arguing against the unitary view of Caramazza *et al.*, while confirming the existence of multiple semantics and undetermined level of brain complexity.
Great progress have been made in the lexical processing investigation: even though the precise localization of concrete vs. abstract terms processing in the human brain is still far from being clearly defined, Papagno *et al.* (2009) found that "abstract lexical entries are stored in the posterior part of the left temporal superior gyrus and possibly in the left frontal inferior gyrus, while the regions involved in storing concrete items include the right temporal cortex". By means of repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (rTMS), the authors investigated causality in the brain–behaviour relationship, and finally rejected Fiebach and

[27]An ERP is any *stereotyped electrophysiological response* to a stimulus, that is the brain's measured response after a specific sensory, cognitive, or motor event (Luck, S.J., 2005).

Friederici conclusions (2004)[28]. Concrete words are actually processed by a right hemispheric system, this representing a further confirmation of the DCT. Their findings suggest that both abstract and concrete words are handled by a bilateral network, but the involved regions differ from each other.

However, the DCT predicts concreteness effects in memory only on semantic tasks[29], namely tasks whose processing is based on word meaning. Nevertheless, more recent studies have empirically observed concreteness effects on nonsemantic tasks as well (Ruiz-Vargas, J. M., 1996). In order to understand the limits of the concreteness effects, intentional memory for concrete and abstract words has been investigated in three retrieval contexts, i.e., free recall, explicit word-stem completion, and implicit word-stem completion (Doest, L., and Semin, G. R., 2005). In both studies, concreteness effects have been encountered in free recall and explicit-word completion, but not in the implicit one. This result (i.e., the absence of concreteness effects in implicit word-stem completion) cannot be explained by the DCT which does not limit concreteness effects to particular retrieval context.

Further research is indeed necessary to finally explain the true determinants of concreteness effects. To sum up the neuropsychological studies and theories mentioned above, the concreteness effects which result in the (empirically observed) superior encoding of concrete words vs. abstract ones are due to:

1) the larger contextual support provided by the activation of both left parietal area and frontal associative area;
2) the additional activation of the nonverbal imagistic semantic system, in the right parietal lobe (Jessen, F., 2000).

3.3 The concept of believability

Decades of research have investigated the concept of believability, its determinants and effects on message recipients (e.g. Paivio, 1971; Bransford,

[28] That there is no evidence for a right hemispheric system specifically associated with concrete words.
[29] Or "conceptual orienting tasks" (Paivio, 1991).

1978; Holcomb *et al.*, 1994). However, such concept deserves some more clarifications in line with the purpose of our work. The definitions and conceptualizations of believability, in fact, are manifold (Eisend, M., 2006).

Hereafter, *believability* is meant as "perceived truth", or "credibility" with regard to a message. This is seen as a multidimensional concept which is linked to various communication sources. Previous research (e.g., Hovland, C. I., and Weiss, W., 1951) has mainly focused on the sender's own features, especially "trustworthiness", "competence" (or expertise, knowledge ability, qualification, and the like), or even "prestige", as primary determinants of believability, or *credibility sources*[30].

However, the focus of the present work is shifted from the sender's features to the language used in the online message. There are words, namely *concrete* words, which favour the perception of the truth, regardless of the actual truth contained in the message. A number of studies (e.g., Vrij, *et al.*, 2004) have highlighted the impact of linguistic concreteness on judgements of truth, ultimately defining the so called "truth advantage" of concrete statements. Such advantage is scientifically demonstrated: in Linguistic, being a result of the above mentioned psychological properties Semin, Fiedler and their colleagues have associated with concrete words (in particular those belonging to the categories of DAVs and IAVs), but also in Neuropsychology, concrete words[31] benefiting of faster recognition in reading and general superior encoding (Paivio, A., 1969)[32]. Finally, research in Social Psychology (e.g., Borgida, E., and Nisbett, R. E., 1977; Loomis, R. L., 2010) have shown that concrete words:

[30] In this direction, Martin Eisend proposes a "generalized" solution of the concept of source credibility and its underlying dimensions (2006), highlighting previous factor model studies' inconsistencies and weaknesses, summing up all known dimensions (49) of source credibility (e.g., personal integrity, knowledge ability, objectivity, prestige, *etc.*), coming to a final model for salesperson credibility made of three sufficient discriminant factors, namely trustworthiness, competence and attraction.

[31] The recent work of Adorni from the Department of Psychology of the Università degli Studi di Milano – Bicocca, "Dinamiche elettrofisiologiche nella lettura di parole: dall'analisi ortografica ai processi di elaborazione semantic" (2009) provides an update of past theories, concluding that while concrete and abstract words activate common neural circuits, the elaboration of concrete words is different because it involves a greater involvement of the visual extrastriate areas. The elaboration of abstract words instead implies a greater involvement of the prefrontal cortex.

[32] As shown in the previous section, concrete words benefit of an empirically observed superior encoding (Paivio, 1969), with generally faster lexical decision times, due to the fact that concrete language (unlike the abstract one) has access to the right hemisphere image based system in addition to the verbal system.

- Evoke feelings of familiarity (familiarity);
- Are easier to comprehend (comprehensibility);
- Are imagined more vividly (vividness).

Therefore, given the very same content of a message, concrete statements are judged by recipients as more probably true than abstract ones. Evoking more vivid and familiar images, and being easier to comprehend, messages containing concrete words are perceived as more likely to be true (i.e. believable) to the recipients than those containing abstract words, irrespective of the actual truth of the message proposed. Even during an interrogation, given the very same content of the arguments presented, the amount of vivid details reported by the defendants is considered by police officers as hints of their innocence (Akehurst, L., 1996).

Previous studies in this field have been carried out mainly for face to face conversations and traditional (one way) channels of marketing communication like advertising (e.g., Rossiter, J. R., and Percy, L., 1985[33]).

However, the concept of believability inevitably changes when coming to SMMC. As stated above, indeed, Social Media represent a consumer-driven environment, where the possibilities of interaction among users have exponentially increased, and online posts and communication from a company may be constantly questioned (potentially by everybody). Communication itself is different, as it is no longer one-way (from the company to the rather passive consumer), but rather two-way (from the company to the extremely proactive consumer, and back to the company).

Moreover, if factors like tie strengths and homophily crucially affect offline WOM transmission and effectiveness[34], eWOM deserves a separate discussion. Here, in fact, consumers are mainly exposed to opinions and advice of complete

[33] Here the authors sustains a new interpretation of previous approaches, extending the context of advertising communication models to incorporate the other inputs that advertising managers need, and finally producing eight basic advertising communication models.

[34] In their 2007 article released by the Journal of Interactive Marketing Volume 21, number 3, "Word of Mouth Communication within online communities: conceptualizing the online social network", Jo Brown and his colleagues investigate eWOM behavior using a social network perspective, finally showing that homophily is not particularly relevant in an online context, and also individual-to-individual social ties are less relevant in an online environment than an offline one. Source credibility related to Web site factors instead still represents a predominant component when assessing the believability of online messages.

strangers. Then, online, *source credibility* intended as source expertise and source bias changes considerably (Brown, J., *et al.,* 2007).

In order to measure the effectiveness of eWOM and towards the above mentioned WOMM[35], it seems extremely useful to go back to basics, and assess the effects of language differentiation on consumer purchase intentions. Notwithstanding the peculiarities of the online context, the present work will demonstrate that here concreteness effects are not weakened, concrete language remaining an effective vehicle of believability[36]. We will also clarify in which circumstances an online message perceived as believable is enough to trigger attitude change (thus resulting also persuasive), in which others another type of language is found to be more effective, and finally when language differentiation within SMMC has no significant effect on consumer purchase intentions.

[35] As defined in previous section WOMM is intended as marketers' influencing of WOM conversations

[36] Of course the relationship cannot be deemed true *a priori*. Following studies will take into account two factors (i.e. the degree of *brand attachment* and *product category* as explained below) which have been found to potentially affect recipients' perception of both believability and persuasion of the online message.

3.4 The concept of persuasiveness

"Then the case is the same in all the other arts for the orator and his rhetoric: there is no need to know the truth of the actual matters, but one merely needs to have discovered some device of persuasiveness which will make one appear to those who do not know to know better than those who know."

Plato, *Gorgias*

Persuasiveness is an old and extremely fascinating concept which represents a central topic of discussion in all social science disciplines. Persuasiveness, indeed, is employed in negotiation and leadership activities. It is said to be essential for the work of advertisers as well as salespeople. Persuasiveness is even more pervasive than most can realize (Kipnis, D., and Schmidt, S., 1985).

Aside from great writers and philosophers, the routes of persuasiveness have been recently retraced to assess their influence on consumers' new attitudes, intentions, and behaviours (e.g., Petty, R. E., 2008), and so elaborate new persuasiveness tactics and strategies (e.g., Goldstein, N. J., *et al.*, 2008).

In Social Psychology, and particularly for persuasiveness researchers the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) by Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo represents a true guiding star[37]. The ELM indeed is a theory of "attitude change", with *attitude* standing for the general evaluation a person holds with regard to herself, other people, objects and issues (e.g., Thurstone, L. L., 1928; Petty, R. E., and Cacioppo, J. T., 1986). Attitudes have been found to be relatively enduring, resistant, and predictive of behaviour (e.g., Petty, R. E., and Cacioppo, J. T., 1986; Haugtvedt, C. P., and Petty, R. E., 1992; Ajzen, I., 2005). Then *attitude change* simply means that a person's evaluation is modified.

Persuasive communication leads to attitude change. In particular, "the probability of effective persuasiveness depends on how successful the communication is at bringing to mind a relevant mental representation" (i.e. the *elaboration likelihood*). In their study of attitude change and persuasiveness, Petty and

[37] Presented in 1981 as a "fairly general framework for organizing, categorizing, and understanding the basic processes underlying the effectiveness of persuasive communications", the same Richard E. Petty and his colleagues has revisited the model in "Thought Confidence as a Determinant of Persuasion: The Self-validation Hypothesis" (2002).

Cacioppo have outlined two distinct routes to persuasiveness, respectively a central and a peripheral route which represent positions on a continuous dimension (i.e. the *elaboration continuum*), ranging from "no thought about the issue-relevant information presented" (low elaboration likelihood) to "complete elaboration of every argument and integration of this into the recipient's attitude schema" (high elaboration likelihood). More specifically, central route processes involve recipients' careful and thoughtful scrutiny of the message presented, with attitude change mainly affected by argument quality.

Peripheral route processes instead occur in the absence of argument processing, that is under conditions of low elaboration likelihood. Here attitude change does not need recipients' scrutiny of the true merits of the message presented, being triggered mostly by simple (peripheral) cues in the persuasiveness context (e.g., an attractive source).

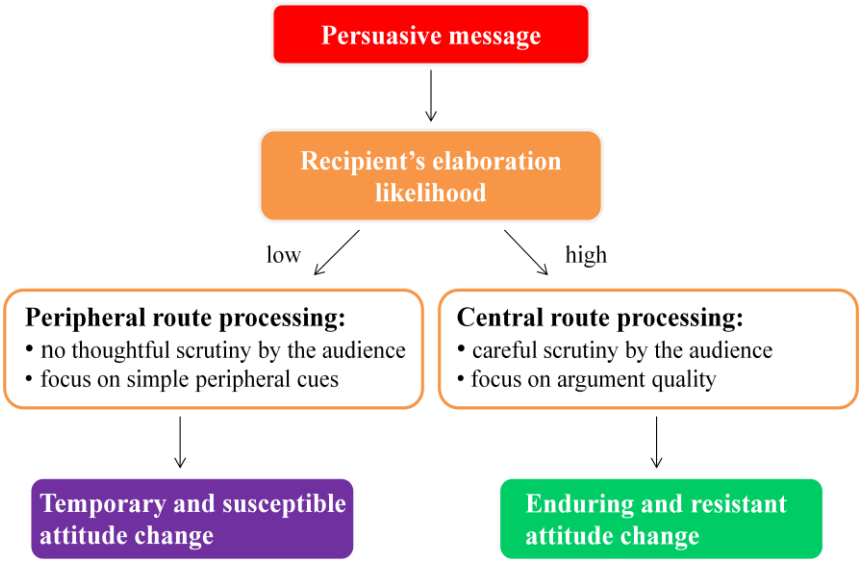


Figure 4. Persuasiveness and attitude change according to the Elaboration Likelihood Model by Petty and Cacioppo (1986)

Like for the concept of believability, the factors which favours the perception of persuasiveness lie both on the receiver and the sender side, namely the message source, its actual content, the communication channel, and the like.

Whether or not the actual content of the message is scrutinized by the recipients (Petty, R. E., *et al.*, 1984), persuasiveness has been found to be a function of the persuasive arguments presented[38]. Indeed, the persuasiveness of a message has been found to be augmented by the number of arguments proposed, as the recipients of the message have more arguments to think about, and are more likely to generate favourable issue-relevant thoughts (Calder, *et al.*, 1974). Moreover, the same source credibility introduced in the previous section, and in particular the characteristics of expertness and trustworthiness (Shelby, A. N., 1986) have been found to increase the persuasiveness of the message.

However, setting apart the myriad of factors affecting persuasiveness[39], which is not the actual objective of the present work, the true linkage among language and persuasiveness of the message in the Social Media setting will be investigated drawing upon previous research as well as latest studies.

The concept of persuasiveness in fact has been evolving together with the new and emerging communication vehicles. Whether firms, politicians, or just individuals, today's successful persuaders should know which words to use in order to create the desired response in both their offline and online audience.

Sometimes, indeed, given the very same content, a post written by an online user about a brand results extremely more persuasive than one released by the company itself.

How can it be possible? Surely, the "source credibility", namely the identity of the message senders with their different degree of expertise, trustworthiness, variance of opinions, etc. matters (e.g., Hovland, and Weiss, 1951; McGuire; Sternthal, 1978; Applbauma, R.L., and Anatola, K.W.E., 2009). However, it has been empirically shown that the verbal packaging greatly influences the persuasiveness of the message (e.g. Lowrey, 1992). In particular, as John Rohn has emphasized[40], *true persuasiveness* comes from putting more of one person's experiences,

[38] According to the Authors, whether recipients are unmotivated or unable to scrutinize the content of the message, the simple rule "the more arguments the better" is applied.

[39] An exhaustive thought not very up-to-date wrap up of the existent approaches to persuasion is provided by Annette N. Shelby in "The Theoretical Bases of Persuasion: A Critical Introduction": the Learning theory, Consistency theory, Perceptual theory, and Functional theory are reviewed by the author in order to provide practical implications for business communication.

[40] The well-know American entrepreneur and motivational speaker author of "Five Major Pieces to the Life Puzzle" (1991)

feelings, and emotions into everything is communicated, since "words have an effect, but words loaded with emotion have a *powerful* effect".

The above mentioned work of Schellekens *et al.* (2010) combines in a very innovative endeavour[41] the study of the language (i.e., the linguistic categories along the concreteness-abstractness dimension as drawn from the LCM) that consumers use in WOM, product attitude and purchase intentions, thus recognizing the importance of not just what people say in WOM conversations but also *how* they say that, and the relationships among language and consumer experiences. The authors have interestingly found that the degree of language abstraction used in descriptions of product experiences is affected by consumers' *a priori* expectations about the brand in question (confirming what Maass *et al.* for instance had previously postulated[42]). However, language abstractness seems to affect – thanks to the above mentioned psychological properties of SVs and Adjs[43]- recipients' product attitudes and purchase intentions more than language concreteness.

This last category of findings has paved the way to further investigation about the crucial relationships among persuasive (i.e. abstract) language and consumer purchase intentions. Our work will confirm that abstractness effects are not weakened in the online settings. Moreover, it will show in which particular circumstances abstract language results to be more persuasive than concrete one, ultimately directing purchase intentions.

[41] This research is "the first to apply the linguistic category model outside the context of (inter)personal domain", and specifically to the field of WOM. So far, indeed, little attention has been put on the language consumers use to describe their product experiences in their online conversations (e.g., Xiang, Z, *et al.*, 2007).

[42] In their studies of language use and linguistic intergroup bias (1989 and 1995).

[43] As presented in the third section of the present work.

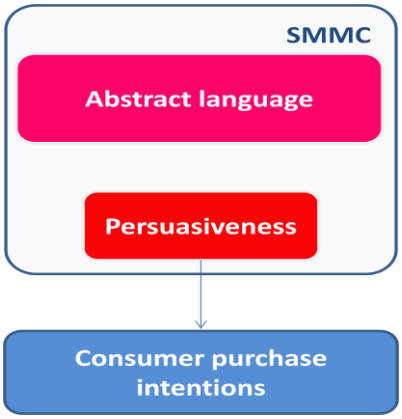


Figure 5. Abstract language and consumer purchase intentions within the SMMC

4 Empirical analysis

Previous sections have highlighted the close relationship between *concrete language* and *believability* (i.e. perceived truth) of the message (Hansen, J., and Wänke, M., 2010), demonstrating. in particular, the robust scientific foundation of the *concreteness effects*, i.e. the observation that concrete terms are processed faster and more accurately than abstract ones in a variety of cognitive tasks (e.g., Paivio, 1971; Bransford, 1978; Holcomb *et al.*, 1994).

However, even though concrete language benefits of the above mentioned "truth advantage" (i.e. the recipients of a message written in concrete language are more likely to perceive the message content as true, regardless of its actual truth), it is not clear whether believable messages directly trigger purchase (believability boosting persuasiveness), and under which conditions within SMMC.

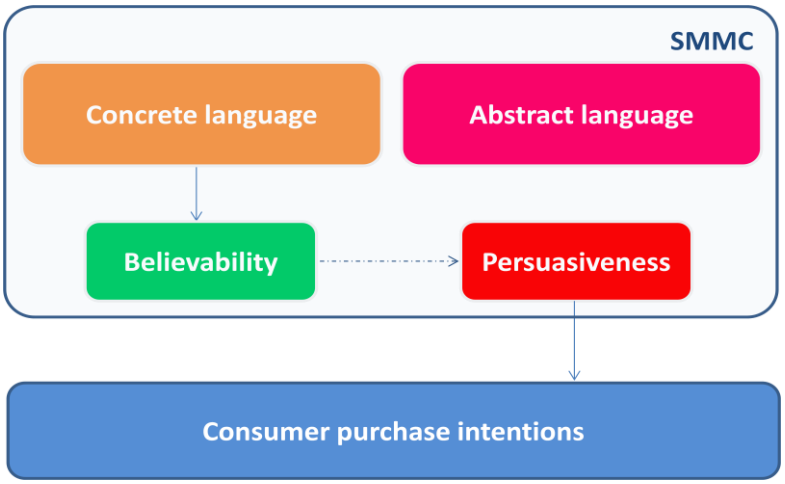


Figure 6. Concrete language and consumer purchase intentions within the SMMC

G. Schellekens and her colleagues' interesting findings in the context of WOM (2010), instead, have paved the way for further studies in SMMC with respect to

language abstractness[44]. Here the main focus of investigation is the message *persuasiveness*, capable of producing attitude change, thus directing consumer purchase intentions.

As anticipated in previous sections, the two following studies will take place within the Social Media environment. More specifically, the choice of Facebook has not been random: Section 1, indeed, has highlighted the great potentialities of this social networking site, in terms of (active) users, usage (time spent on Facebook), but also because of the possibilities of interaction with other Social Media realities (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) that Facebook offers.

Figure 7. Facebook page potentialities: the example of NIKE

4.1. Product category

Several elements may affect consumers' inference about a promotional message. As previously stated, past research has examined the so called *credibility sources*,

[44] "Language Abstraction in Word of Mouth" represents one of the first attempts of "translation" of linguistic studies into the marketing communication field. Here the authors have found that the degree of language abstraction (e.g., the prevailing use of SVs and Adjs) in descriptions of product experiences affects recipients' inferences about the senders' product attitudes, and ultimately their attitudes and purchase intentions.

and other factors such as tie strengths, homophily, consumers' past experiences and a priori expectations, and so on, which have been found to affect the believability and persuasiveness of the message (e.g., Kozinets, R. V, *et al.*, 2010). Most of the factors enlisted have a different impact on consumer purchase intentions if considering the *online* arena. However, an aspect which certainly affect both offline and online marketing communication is the product category, as delineated by De Angelis and his colleagues in a recent working paper.

Different categories of products (or services) indeed enjoy different degrees of variation of consumer preferences: namely for some categories consumers show rather *homogeneous* preferences – i.e. low variation in their preferences (e.g., dental floss, dishwasher tablets, laundry detergent, and the like), while for other categories they report rather *heterogeneous* preferences – i.e. high variation in their preferences (e.g., restaurants, books, CDs, etc.).

Based on this reasoning, Study I will show how the message language should be effectively tailored according to the different product category considered, in order to direct purchase intentions. Hence the focus will be on the two extremes of this continuum, namely only on homogeneous vs. heterogeneous preferences; hereafter, indeed, "middle shades" will be set apart[45]. More specifically, *homogeneity* with regard to consumer preferences refer to a market where all consumers express the same preferences. Here companies will have very similar brand attributes and will tend to concentrate around the same standards. *Heterogeneity* with regard to consumer preferences, instead, pertains to a market where all consumers express preferences that are not concentrated, and de facto very diverse. In such market, the first mover will be positioned in order to result appealing for the maximum number of consumers. Followers will then position either very closely, starting to compete for market share in a heated fight, or in a more distant space in order to attract those consumers who are unsatisfied with the "middle brand(s)" (Kotler, P., *et al.*, 2012). Following figures show the different scenarios resulting from homogeneous versus heterogeneous consumer preferences with regard to brand attributes (i.e. the chart axes). More specifically,

[45] Here the classification Kotler *et al.* make in their "Marketing Management" book (2012) is embraced. With regard to market segmentation, indeed, the authors distinguish consumers' preferences, which may be either homogeneous, diffused, clustered or heterogeneous with regard to a product category.

the figure on the left considers the toilette paper product category, with length and softness as brand attributes; the right figure reflects instead the ice-cream product category with creaminess and sweetness as brand attributes considered. If random consumers of toilette paper and ice-cream would be asked to express their preferences with regard to those attributes, the resulting scenarios would more likely be similar to the following ones.

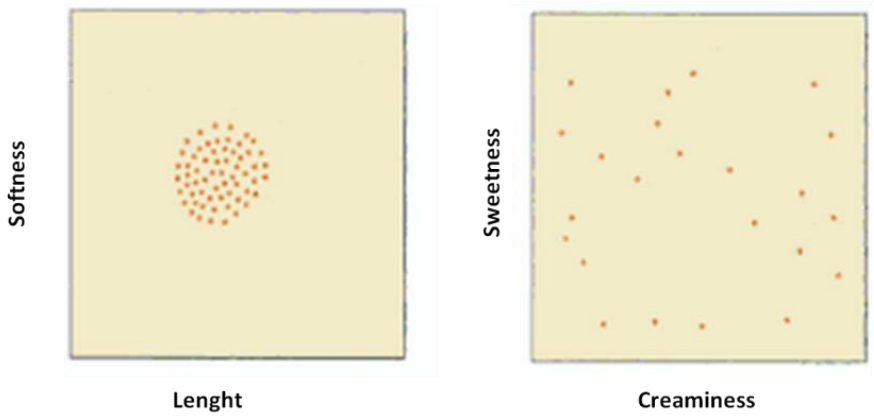


Figure 8. Homogeneous vs. heterogeneous consumer preferences (Kotler, P., *et al.*, 2012)

In light of these differences in consumer preferences, companies (should) adopt different marketing strategies and tailor their marketing communication efforts accordingly. Indeed, if it is common practice to address homogeneous preferences with a "mass" marketing strategy, heterogeneous preferences require a different approach, which is definitely more personalized (or customized[46]). Also SMMC must account for different consumer preferences. In particular, "language holds the key to understanding consumer preferences", Z. Xiang *et al.* asseverate after having compared the language used by consumers to describe their dining experiences with the one used by restaurant websites to promote themselves (2007). The language used to promote products for which consumers report

[46] When addressing heterogeneous consumer preferences, "customization" has been found to be very effective, significantly increasing consumer purchase intentions and willingness to pay (Franke, N., *et al.*, 2009).

homogeneous preferences, indeed, cannot be the same employed for heterogeneous preferences.

Hence, for the reasons so far expressed, Study I will unveil the close relationship among language and product categories, finally assessing their impact on consumer purchase intentions. More specifically, it will show that for a product category for which consumers have homogeneous preferences, the message should be written in concrete language rather than in abstract language. In fact, if consumers are indifferent among two or more brands which show mainly the same attributes and do not present other particular product features, SMMC shall leverage the so called "concreteness effects"[47], and particularly the believability of the message through the use of concrete words (i.e. DAVs and IAVs, which score high in verifiability and situative informativeness, as shown in Section 3), thus evoking feelings of familiarity and more vivid images[48] in order to positively influence purchase intentions.

On the contrary, when there is high variation in consumer preferences with regard to brand attributes (i.e. heterogeneous preferences), abstract language will influence final purchase intentions more than concrete language. Grounded in the individual introspective states (mental and affective), abstract words (i.e. SVs and ADJs[49]) in fact tend to be more emotionally loaded (Kousta *et al.*, 2011), finally resulting to be more persuasive than concrete words (Schellekens, G., *et al.*, 2010).

Hence, embracing the advice of Z. Xiang and Schellekens, a first hint about the relationship between language and consumer preferences can be drawn from the same reviews and comments consumers post on blogs, social networking sites and other Social Media about their own brand experiences.

Following figures report pieces of online comments written by consumers about six different products they have experienced. The first half of comments regards those products (respectively laundry detergent, highlighter, and dishwasher tablets) for which consumers typically show homogeneous preferences, while the

[47] According to the LCM of Semin and Fiedler (1988) described in Section 3.2.

[48] Even if imageability and concreteness are technically different psycholinguistic constructs, the correlation between them is so strong that many authors use these terms interchangeably (Reilly and Kean, 2007).

[49] Presented in detail in Section 3.

second half concerns those products (i.e. shampoo, movie, and hotel consumer reviews) for which they typically have heterogeneous preferences:

OK

★★★☆☆ - OK

neats posted this on Oct 21, 2009

Did a reasonably good job on performace, but didn't seem to tackle the hard stains ie- tomato sauce, kids texta, fruit juice as well as other brands. The product was very thick and gluggy so a lot of residue was left in the dispenser draw which then had to be cleaned out after each wash. With a quarter to a third of the product not even entering the washing machine I queried how well my clothes were actually being washed. I tried adding some water with the product to dilute it a bit but this only marginally improved things. Overall this product did not perform well in my electrolux front loader.

Product:
Stabilo Boss Highlighter
Date: 18/05/11
Rating: ★★★★★
Advantages: don't dry out, easy to use
Disadvantages: none

"(...) These highlighters always seem to be full of a really vibrant ink. Previously I've tried buying different brands like supermarket own brands but I've always regretted it. The ink doesn't seem to dry out in these pens unless you leave the lid off for a while. These pens always seem last a long time too, way longer than other competitive products."

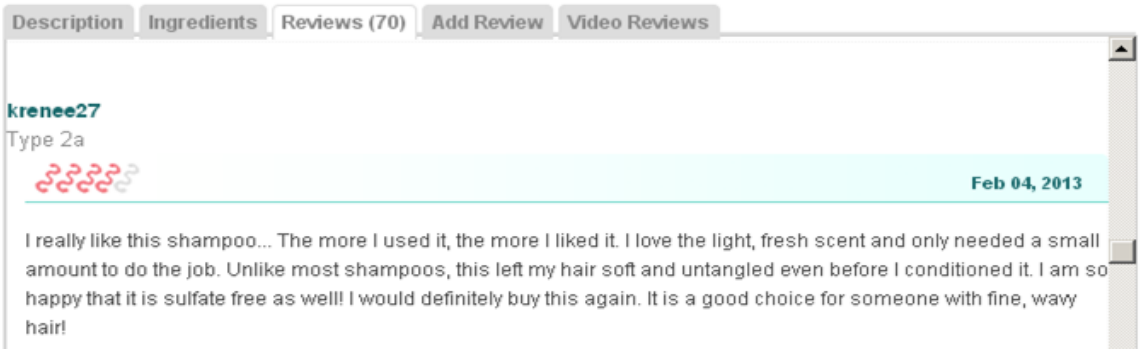
★☆☆☆☆ **not for my dishwasher**, January 12, 2013

By TERESA "Renaissance woman"

Amazon Verified Purchase (What's this?)

This review is from: **Finish Quantum Dishwasher Detergent, 45-Count (Health and Beauty)**

If you can consistently remember to dry the section of your dishwasher that holds these, they work adequately. However, if you miss even a little spot of moisture, they don't dissolve. It seems like a paradox, but the Finish tablet will still be sitting undissolved or only partially dissolved in the compartment after the cycle is over. Since my dishwasher works on the principle of water circulation, this isn't the right product for my machine. I'm going back to Cascade which doesn't give me this issue and in my machine always dissolves completely.



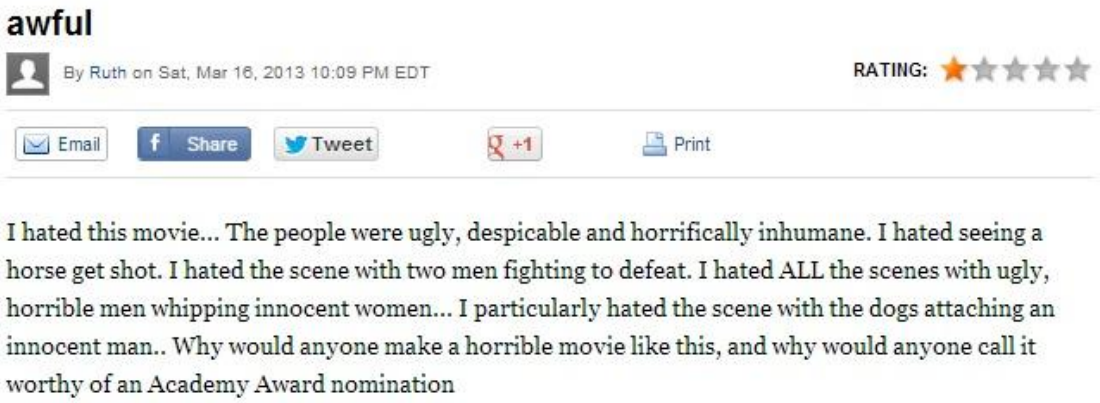


Figura 9. Examples of online consumer reviews

At a quick glance, it is straightforward to notice that the first half of the comments is more descriptive and detailed than the second one. Consumers in fact tend to explain the functioning and potential malfunctioning (e.g., *didn't seem to tackle the hard stains*) of the product, telling their experience through a vivid and rather pragmatic language, with a prevalence of DAVs and IAVs (e.g., *to work, dry, dissolve, dilute, last, perform,* and the like).

The language used to describe their experiences about a product category for which consumers typically have heterogeneous preferences is visibly different. Here indeed consumers tend to share feelings and emotions caused by the product experience (e.g., *we miss them now we're home!*), instead of describing the way they have used the product (or service), its ease-of-use, flaws, and the like. Abstract terms are king with an unquestionable prevalence of SVs and Adjs (e.g., *to like, love, hate,* and *fresh, soft, ugly, breathtaking,* and so on).

Consumers interact with their peers online, recommending products of any type, from laundry detergents to books, best hotels for spending the holidays, etc; sometimes they complain, showing their complete disappointment, other times they plug the extraordinary experience they have just lived. As stated at the beginning of the present work, these online voices have become tremendously powerful, and companies of any industry cannot afford to neglect them. Indeed, tracking online user reviews and especially monitoring complaints is a necessary starting point for a SMMC strategy. Not enough though.

The examples above have just demonstrated how consumers tend to use different concepts and word meanings according to the product or service they are talking about. Hence, product categories and related consumer preferences are clearly intertwined with (concrete vs. abstract) language.

Formally:

H1a: For product categories with low variation in consumer preferences (i.e. homogeneous preferences), concrete language will affect purchase intentions more than abstract language.

H1b: For product categories with high variation in consumer preferences (i.e. heterogeneous preferences), abstract language will affect purchase intentions more than concrete language.

4.2 Brand attachment

As stated in Section 1, the way people talk to each other about their brands of interest, and the same way in which companies interact with them have evolved over time. Social Media offer rather informal occasions where sharing opinions, advice, and emotions about new products or services, brand experiences, and so on. Consumer-brand relationship has changed as well (e.g., Muniz, A. M., and O'Guinn, T. C., 2001[50]), with consumers tending to relate to brands in much the same way in which they do with each other in a social context (Aggarwal, P., 2004), i.e. perceiving brands as actual human beings. Such brand anthropomorphization (e.g., Puzakova, M., *et al.*, 2009) has significant implications in SMMC. Indeed, the way a company (i.e. a brand) communicates on Social Media and the extent to which consumers feel connected to the brand are strictly interrelated. Therefore, the analysis of language effects on purchase intentions through the lens of believability and persuasiveness cannot ignore the degree of *attachment* that consumers show with regard to a brand.

The construct of brand attachment draws his definition from a rich history of research (e.g., Belk, R. W., 1988), basically referring to a *psychological state of mind* in which an individual feels connected to a brand via a strong cognitive and affective bond, to the extent that the brand represents an extension of the self (e.g., Thomson, M., *et al.*, 2005), i.e. the brand is deemed part of the consumer's self-concept.

Brand attachment shall not be confused with *brand attitude*. In fact, while the former involves the brand's linkage to the self, thus leading to more powerful and

[50] Their article in particular introduces the idea of *brand community*, described as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand".

cross-time brand behaviours and exchanges, the latter is just a person's evaluation of a product (or service). Capturing both consumers' heart and mind, attachment better predicts actual behaviour than attitude, which does not successfully captures the heart component. Furthermore, intense attachment drives consumers to be committed and willing to invest in the brand, predicting positive effects on brand loyalty and favourable WOM. Lastly, brand attachments have been found to be more stable than attitudes, which generally exhibit temporal instability (Park, C. W., *et al.*, 2010).

Also brand attachment significantly differs from *commitment*, the latter being a sort of psychological pledge towards a long-term relationship with the brand, namely an intention to remain loyal to the brand in the future (e.g., Moorman *et al.*, 1992). Therefore, commitment is just another outcome of brand attachment, which indeed predicts also a pledge to engage in long-term relationships with the brand.

Finally, brand attachment is also more reliable than *brand love*, even if there are similarities among the two constructs – strong attachment and love sharing common features such as trust, caring, honesty, and the like (MacInnis, D. J., *et al.*, 2009). Brand love indeed may be associated only to positively valenced brand attachment, as it implies just a positive valence, while attachment has both positive and negative valence[51].

For all these reasons, the construct of brand attachment appears to be paramount for marketers (allowing them to better assess brand-equity and future sales)[52], and more robust than the others so far mentioned for the present analysis[53].

As stated in the beginning of this section, brand attachment may affect whether consumers perceive information to be more or less believable and persuasive, thus influencing final purchase intentions. Specifically, online consumers which show a low level of attachment toward the brand in question are more likely to be led to purchase by a more concrete language rather than by a more abstract language.

[51] For a more in-depth analysis see from page 383 of the "Handbook of Brand Relationships" by Deborah J. MacInnis, *et al.* (2009).

[52] Ultimately, in fact, there is a proven strong relationship among consumers' attachment, commitment to the brand, willingness to engage in difficult behaviors which require investments in time, money, reputation and so on.

[53] For more details about brand attachment causes and effects, consult: "Brand Attachment: Constructs, Consequences and Causes" by C. Whan Park, *et al.* (2006).

Behind a low level of brand attachment in fact there may be lack of knowledge (i.e. low brand awareness), but also scepticism[54] - and sometimes even suspicion - towards the brand, its attributes and products. For these reasons a low level of brand attachment will require a very high level of believability in the online messages proposed by the company.

On the contrary, online consumers reporting a high level of brand attachment know very well the characteristics of the product (or service), as they have already (and maybe repeatedly) experienced the brand. As previously illustrated, among the outcomes of high brand attachment there are strong commitment and even brand love. For these reasons, this set of consumers will not been affected by the concreteness of the language used in the SMMC, that is they will not buy more just because they perceive the messages they read as more believable. Formally:

H2a: For consumers who have a low attachment to the brand, concrete language will influence purchase intentions more than abstract language.

H2b: For consumers who have a high attachment to the brand, concrete language will not influence purchase intentions more than abstract language.

The empirical analysis supporting the present work is based upon the observation that language, by increasing the persuasiveness of the message, crucially affects purchase intentions within the Social Media environment. More specifically, the following studies will account for the two aforementioned factors that substantially influence consumers' inference about the message, respectively product category and brand attachment.

Before getting to the heart of the main experiments, a pre-test to assess the actual concreteness (abstractness) of the statements was conducting using a different sample of online respondents (in order to avoid any bias toward the main experiments).

The remainder of this work is structured as follows. Study I will highlight language effects on purchase intentions (i.e. on the message *persuasiveness*) when

[54] When referred to consumer attitude towards a brand, *scepticism* stands for the tendency to disbelieve the informational claims of advertising (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998).

considering product categories towards which consumers typically report either homogeneous or heterogeneous preferences.

Afterwards, Study II will unveil how language should vary along the concreteness-abstractness dimension in order to result more persuasive and influence more effectively consumer purchase intentions according to the different level of brand attachment.

The present work will end with a general discussion of the main findings and managerial implications, together with suggestions for future research.

4.3 Study I

The goal of Study I was to determine the impact of concrete versus abstract language on consumer purchase intentions. Namely we aimed at showing how and to what extent an online message may result persuasive and trigger purchase according to the product category[55] considered. Indeed, as unveiled in Section 4.1, in their offline as well as eWOM conversations, consumers are used to employ concepts and word meanings that are very different whether they are talking about a product category for which they have homogeneous or heterogeneous preferences. Following this empirical evidence[56], our hypotheses predict that concrete language will result to be more persuasive - thus more effectively triggering purchases - in the case of homogeneous consumer preferences, while abstract language would be better for (online) messages which address heterogeneous consumer preferences.

Method

Materials. Two statements were created in their abstract and concrete versions for the present study. The subjects of the statements were selected among the "extreme" product categories (e.g., Kotler, P., *et al.*, 2012), in order to replicate pure homogeneous vs. heterogeneous consumer preferences. Indeed we submitted to our respondents fictitious messages posted by online users on Social Media (as shown by figure 10), respectively about a dental floss for homogeneous preferences, and a restaurant for heterogeneous preferences.

[55] As delineated by De Angelis *et al.* (2013) and investigated in detail in Section 4.1.
[56] A number of examples about the power of eWOM is displayed in previous sections.

Consumer preferences	Subject	Concrete version	Abstract version
Homogeneous	Dental floss	This dental floss combines a special filament with a polymer coating for an easy and comfortable removal of the plaque	With this dental floss you will be able to clean you mouth comfortably
Heterogeneous	Restaurant	I am very satisfied with the restaurant I went to last weekend. It had good meat, large portions of food, and the waiter was ready to refill the glass water. You should try it	The restaurant I went to last weekend was excellent. Unique atmosphere, tasty food, nice service. You should try it!

Figure 10. Study I statements in their concrete and abstract phrasings

Pretest. Before starting the main study, thirty respondents drawn from a different subject pool took part in a pretest which aimed at ensuring that recipients would have perceived the concreteness (abstractness) of the statements as intended. In fact, even if statements were formulated according to the LMC by Semin and Fiedler (1988), this does not necessarily implied that participants also perceived language concreteness (abstractness) to decrease from the highest (lowest) level (DAV), to the second level (IAV), the third level (SV), and lastly the lowest (highest) level of language concreteness (abstractness), i.e. Adjs.

Therefore, we assessed respondents' perception of the message language by asking them to rate each statement from 1 (*most concrete*) to 4 (*most abstract word class*), as envisaged in Hansen and Wänke scale (2010). The comparison among the two sets of concrete vs. abstract statements revealed that the abstract set was indeed perceived as more abstract ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.73$) than the concrete set ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.89$), $p < .05$, as intended.

Procedure. Eighty-six respondents participated in this study in exchange for monetary compensation. They were provided with a 2 (language: concrete vs. abstract) x 2 (product category: homogeneous vs. heterogeneous consumer preferences) between subjects design. Participants were recruited online via

Amazon's Mechanical Turk, while scenarios were created using the Qualtrics, a well-known platform to design experiments and surveys. Participants were first asked to read the two statements in either their concrete or abstract version (4 statements in total), given the experimental condition they had been randomly assigned to.

We chose *persuasiveness* as our dependent variable, being this a good proxy for assessing purchase intentions[57]. Hence, for each statement, participants were asked to rate persuasiveness on a scale ranging from 1 (*not persuasive at all)* to 9 (*very persuasive*).

Results and discussion. We analyzed the data using a two-way ANOVA in order to determine the main effect of contributions of each independent variable, but also to identify if there was a significant interaction effect between them. Therefore, persuasiveness was expressed as a function of language (coded 0 for abstract language, and 1 for concrete language), product category (coded 0 for homogeneous preferences, and 1 for heterogeneous preferences), and their interaction. A significant main effect of product category ($F(1,82) = 2.463$, $p < .1$) emerged. This was qualified by a two-way interaction between language and product category ($F(1,82) = 9.813$, $p < .05$). However, no significant main effect of language emerged ($F(1,82) = .016$, n.s.).

Consistent both with H1a and H1b, indeed, participants perceived concrete language as more persuasive ($M = 6.55$, $SD = 1.565$) than abstract language ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 2.032$) when considering homogeneous preferences, while abstract language was judged as more persuasive ($M = 7.10$, $SD = 1{,}300$) than concrete language ($M = 5.95$, $SD = 2.038$) when addressing heterogeneous preferences.

More specifically, focusing on the interaction term, the more concrete the language for homogeneous preferences, the higher the persuasiveness of the online message ($M = 6.545$, $SD = .376$, while for abstract language: $M = 5.304$, $SD = .368$). Vice versa, for heterogeneous preferences, persuasiveness appears to

[57] The construct of persuasiveness has been extensively described in Section 3.4.

clearly increase with the abstractness of the language used (M = 7.095, SD = .385, while for concrete language: M = 5.95, SD = .394), as displayed in Figure 11.

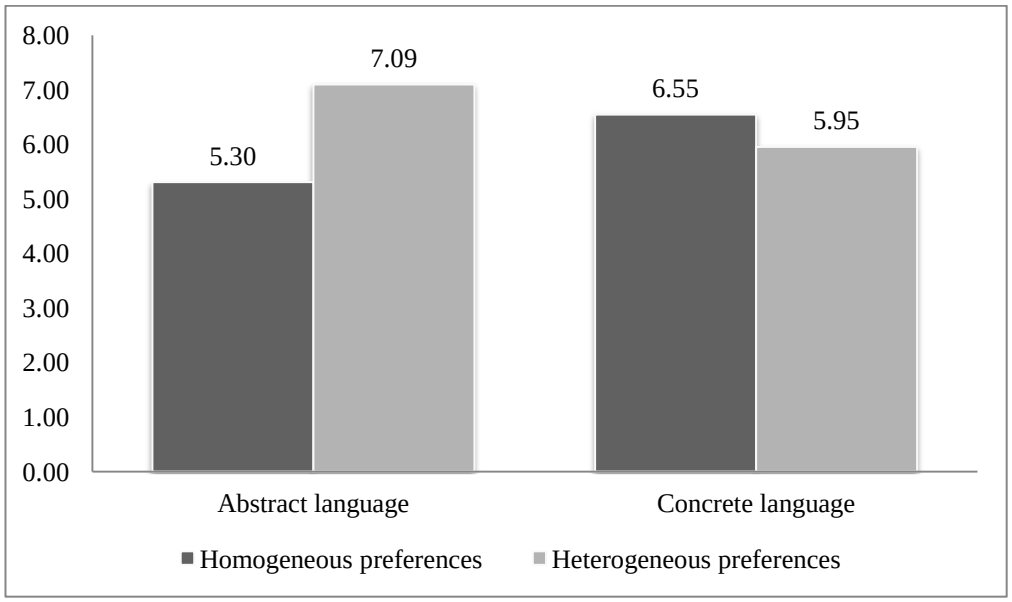


Figure 11. Persuasiveness as a function of language and product category

The aforementioned results provide converging evidence that purchase intentions vary as a function of the language used within the SMMC and the product category considered. Therefore, in order to shape an effective SMMC strategy, great attention shall be put on the fine tuning among language and product category, ultimately delivering a concrete message when consumer preferences are homogeneous, while an abstract message when these are heterogeneous.

4.4 Study II

Whereas Study I has shown the intimate relationship among language persuasiveness and consumer preferences, confirming that concrete language influences more purchase intentions than abstract language when considering homogeneous consumer preferences, while abstract language resulting more persuasive than concrete language for heterogeneous consumer preferences, in Study II the relationship between language and persuasiveness will be investigated accounting for a further factor which is deemed to affect consumers' inference about the (online) message, namely brand attachment (hereafter BA).

As previously noted, to be persuasive in front of consumers who show a rather low level of BA, a message must first be perceived as believable, providing details and vivid representations of the product (or service) promoted via Social Media, thus being written in a more concrete language.

Such amount of details and vividness is no longer necessary to persuade those consumers who are already strongly committed to and even in love with the brand[58]. Hence, a SMMC which addresses consumers with a rather high level of BA does not require a language as concrete as that employed for a lower level of BA. By increasing the degree of BA, indeed, language becomes less influential, concreteness (abstractness) of the (online) message not triggering further purchases.

Method

Materials. We used nine statements in Study II. The subject of all statements was the NIKE Free, the latest model of running shoes as released by NIKE Inc.. As it was for the choice of the Social Media (i.e. the Facebook setting as for Study I), we opted for this subject as it appeared to be an extremely cross-gender, generational and cultural product, namely ideal for an online survey. Moreover the brand behind these shoes is one of the best-known in the world, a truly global

[58] Being high commitment and brand love just further outcomes of high brand attachment, as explained in detail in Section 4.2.

icon, thus enjoying a very high brand awareness. Everybody knows NIKE: people are used to mention it – and not just as a case study, or a benchmark in an Economics and business class, but in their social beings, recalling its spots, the famous characters in them, embodying its motto. However, while there are NIKE lovers, who usually buy NIKE items for their sport training and free time, there are other people who definitely know this multinational company, but that are not interested in purchasing its products, not being attached to its brand. Perhaps they do not buy NIKE since they prefer cheaper alternatives, because of a "matter of style", and they are attached to different (competing) brands, or maybe as a sort of protest against its controversial corporate policies (Nold, N., 2013). For all these reasons, this brand seemed us to be a perfect tester for a study which aims at investigating language persuasiveness while accounting for the BA factor.

Pretest. Before submitting the nine statements we had prepared to our respondents, a pretest was performed. As in Study I, the perceived concreteness (abstractness) of the statements was examined in a subject pool composed of seventy-five respondents drawn from a different population than those participating to the main study. Indeed, even if statements were formulated according to the LCM by Semin and Fiedler (1988), this did not necessarily imply that participants would have perceived the language used in the statements as intended. Therefore, to verify that the two versions of statements (concrete vs. abstract) differed in level of concreteness, respondents rated each statement on a concreteness/abstractness scale drawn from Hansen and Wänke (2010, 1= *most concrete* to 4= *most abstract word class*). The comparison between the concrete and abstract sets of statements revealed that the abstract set was indeed perceived as more abstract (M = 2.88, SD = 0.19) than the concrete set (M = 2.62, SD = 0.11), $p < .001$, as expected.

Procedure. Eighty-five respondents (33 women and 52 men) took part in this study in exchange for money. They were provided with a 2 (language: concrete vs. abstract) x 2 (brand attachment, BA: low vs. high) design. Participants were recruited online via Amazon's Mechanical Turk, while scenarios were created

using the Qualtrics. Participants were first asked to read the nine statements in either their concrete or abstract version, given the experimental condition they had been randomly assigned to. These statements are reported in the following figure.

The participants' degree of BA instead was assessed through the Two-Factor Model of Brand Attachment as proposed by Park *et al.* (2010). Figure 13 displays the full list of items as submitted to our respondents.

As in Study I, persuasiveness represented our dependent variable. Specifically, participants evaluated the persuasiveness of each statement on a scale ranging from 1 (*not persuasive at all)* to 9 (*very persuasive*). However, we considered the mean of the persuasiveness levels of the nine statements since the reliability analysis we conducted revealed a high internal consistency among the statements ($\alpha = .828$).

Finally some demographical data were gathered, and the participants were thanked and debriefed.

Example	Concrete version	Abstract version
1	Sasha Kerigayasky invented Nike Free advanced technology, aimed at reducing the compression with the ground, thus strengthening the foot muscles.	Nike Free advanced technology was invented by Sasha Kerigayasky who has long studied how to strengthen the foot muscles.
2	Each Nike Free shoe has a thick and squared sole which decreases the blows on the backbone, and allows you to run in maximum security.	All Nike Free shoes have a special sole which decreases the blows on the backbone, and allows you to run in extreme safety.
3	Nike Free Trainer 5.0 iD provides an optimal fit and grip that ensures maximum resistance to wear while running, lifting weights, or doing harder exercises.	With Nike Free Trainer 5.0 iD you will run, lift weights and make exercises in the most strenuous conditions, thanks to their ideal fit and maximum wear resistance.
4	Nike Free shoes will totally fit with your personal training thanks to their multi-surface sole, wide color palette, and dedicated iD.	With Nike Free you will create your own style by choosing between different types of sole, colors and personal iD. Your Nike Free will be synchronized to the rhythm of your feet.
5	Nike Free allows you to draw on a wide range of details.	Nike Free: feel free to master the details.
6	If you are keen about running, Nike Free is the model Nike has designed for you.	Nike Free: thought for those who cannot live without running and feeling *free*.
7	Whether you prefer to run outdoors or on the treadmill, the new Nike Free shoes will grant you to greatly improve your sports performance.	With the new Nike Free shoes you will definitively improve your sports performance, resulting in a higher quality indoor and outdoor running.
8	The new Nike Free shoes allow you to run in total comfort and for long distances, without fear of any strains, cramps or other muscle inflammation.	With the new Nike Free you'll keep on running in absolute comfort and without fear of strains, cramps or other inflammation.
9	Nike launched Nike Free shoes in 2004, after having monitored some athletes running barefoot on the golf courses at Stanford University, in order to mold a shoe able to go along with the natural movement of the foot without compromising its protection.	Nike Free shoes have been launched in 2004, after a careful study of barefoot runners. Nike's goal was the creation of a shoe able to ease and protect the natural movement of the foot.

Figure 12. Study II statements in their concrete and abstract phrasings

Items

1. *To what extent is* NIKE *part of you and who you are?*
2. *To what extent do you feel personally connected to* NIKE*?*
3. *To what extent do you feel emotionally bonded to* NIKE*?*
4. *To what extent is* NIKE *part of you?*
5. *To what extent does* NIKE *say something to other people about who you are?*
6. *To what extent are your thoughts and feelings toward* NIKE *often automatic, coming to mind seemingly on their own?*
7. *To what extent do your thoughts and feelings toward* NIKE *come to your mind naturally and instantly?*
8. *To what extent do your thoughts and feelings toward* NIKE *come to mind so naturally and instantly that you don't have much control over them?*
9. *To what extent does the word* NIKE *automatically evoke many good thoughts about the past, present, and future?*
10. *To what extent to you have many thoughts about* NIKE*?*

Figure 13. Items used to assess the degree of BA according to the Two-Factor Model of Brand Attachment by Park *et al.* (2010)

Results and discussion. Data were analyzed with a regression model, in which persuasiveness was expressed as a function of language (coded 0 for abstract language, and 1 for concrete language), BA (as a continuous, mean-centred variable), and the interaction term. The analysis revealed a marginally significant main effect of language (b = .261, $t(81)$ = 1.723, p < .1) and BA (b = .285, $t(81)$ = 5.149, p < .01). Furthermore, the main effect of language was qualified by a significant two-way interaction between the two independent variables (b = -.156, $t(81)$ = -2.059, p < .05). In order to explore the interaction between language persuasiveness and BA more closely, a simple slope analysis was performed at one standard deviation above and below the mean of BA. Consistent with H1a, for

participants showing a low degree of BA (1 SD below the mean) concrete language resulted more persuasive than abstract language (t = 2.6449, p = .0098), while for those showing a high degree of BA (1 SD above the mean) no significant main effect of abstract language emerged (t = -0.2397, p = .8112).
For illustrative purposes, following figure plots the results at one SD above and below the mean of BA (Aiken, L. S., and West, S. G., 1991).

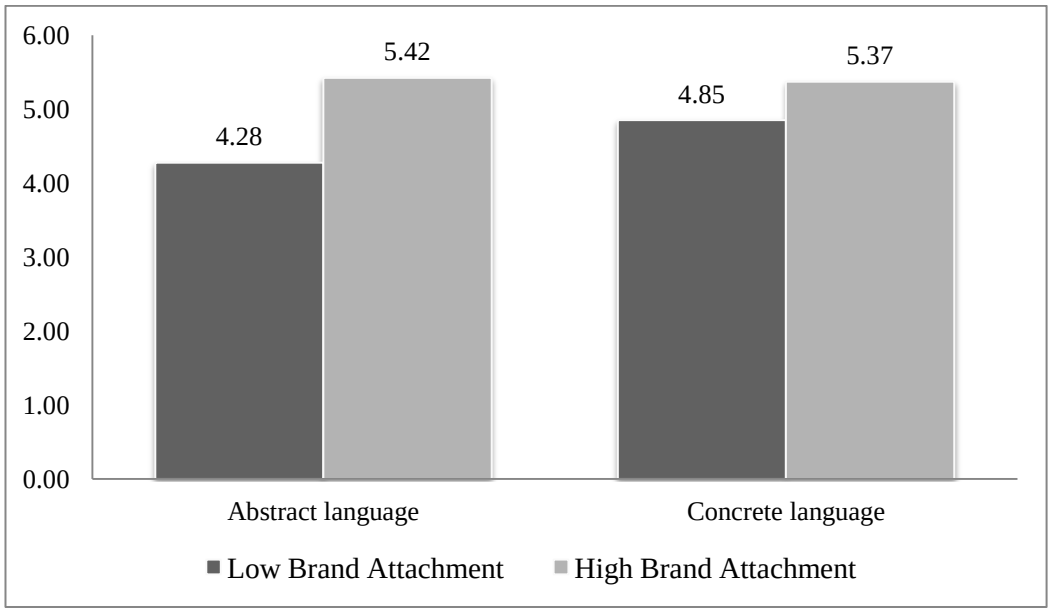


Figure 14. Persuasiveness as a function of language and degree of consumer BA

Overall, the results of Study II support our hypotheses, suggesting that companies should tailor their SMMC accounting also for the different level of BA. In particular, for those consumers who report a rather low attachment to the brand, companies shall formulate a message written in a more concrete language, since it has been shown that such concreteness increases the persuasiveness of the message, thus influencing more effectively final purchase intentions. Also our second hypothesis has been confirmed, being language less influential for those consumers who report a high level of BA.

5. General discussion and managerial implications

The present research is the first to our knowledge to investigate the role of language persuasiveness within the Social Media environment accounting for two factors which have been found to greatly affect consumer behaviour, namely product category and brand attachment (BA). After having introduced the distinction among concrete and abstract language from a purely linguistic perspective, we passed to explore the intimate relationships among the four linguistic categories by Semin and Fiedler (1988) and the two well-known constructs of believability and persuasiveness as presented by the Neuropsychological literature. The goal of the present work was to demonstrate the crucial importance of language when shaping a Social Media Marketing Communication Strategy (SMMCS), especially in light of the dramatic increase of eWOM, which currently represents the most powerful communication tool for both individuals and firms (e.g., Kozinets, R. V., *et al.,* 2010; De Angelis, M., 2012). Studying both sides of the coin - namely consumers sharing on Social Media, and companies in their interaction with them, actual and potential customers, what they communicate abound their brands, and especially *how* - is central in a SMMCS, having substantial repercussions for a company's overall reputation and future sales.

In order to truly understand the complex eWOM reality, and not to stop at mere descriptions and clichés, we demonstrated going back to basics to what extent language differentiation is crucial within SMMC. More specifically, we distinguished between cases in which it would be preferable to use a concrete rather than an abstract language, and vice versa.

Among the plethora of factors which we could have chosen that certainly affect consumers' inference about the (online) message, two of them especially grabbed our attention, namely product category and BA, mainly because of the scope and extent of these two constructs, as described in details respectively in sections 4.1 and 4.2.

The goal of both Study I and II, indeed, was to assess *persuasiveness*, considered as a proxy for consumer purchase intentions. In Study I, persuasiveness was

measured as a function of language and product category. Study II, instead, focused on the effects that language and BA ultimately have on the message persuasiveness[59]. Both studies confirmed our expectations, in all the hypotheses presented. Embracing the abstractness-concreteness dimension and the psychological properties of the linguistic categories which lay on it, we focused on both the so called concreteness and abstractness effects. Particularly the former[60] have been representing a fertile ground for Marketing Communication research (Hansen and Wänke, 2010).

In the present work we demonstrated that *concreteness effects* are not weakened in the Social Media environment. Online as well as offline, indeed, a more concrete language increases the *believability* (i.e., the perceived truth) of the message because of the abovementioned properties of familiarity, comprehensibility and vividness it benefits of. Finally, the construct of believability has been found to intimately relate to the persuasiveness of the message, as foreseen by our hypotheses and displayed in the following figure.

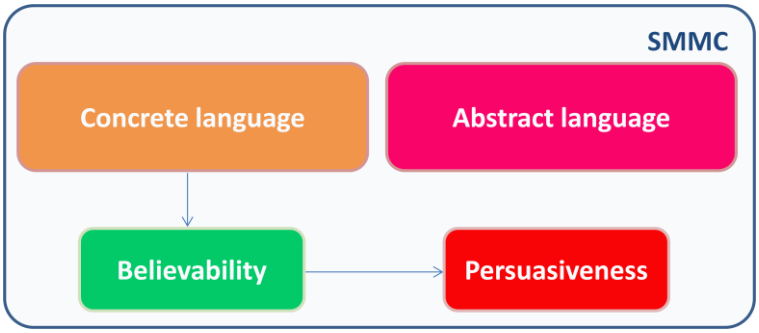


Figure 15. Concreteness effects within the SMMC

Study I, in particular, has shown that a more concrete language makes the difference when considering product categories for which consumers typically have homogeneous preferences, considerably increasing the persuasiveness of the

[59] Methodology used and design of experiments are described in more detail in the following Appendix.
[60] As outlined in Section 3.2, in Linguistic and (Neuro) Psychology literature, "concreteness effects" refer to the observation that concrete terms are processed faster and more accurately than abstract ones in a variety of cognitive tasks thus leading *ceteris paribus* to an advantage of concrete language over abstract language.

online message. Along the concreteness-abstractness dimension, indeed, linguistic categories which score high in concreteness (i.e., DAVs and IAVs) are characterized by high verifiability and situative informativeness, and by low disputability, meaning that message recipients can easily and objectively verify the content message, which provides a lot of information about the situation and functionalities of the product (or service) that is promoted. Furthermore, concrete language leaves little room for disputability, intended as the likelihood of disagreement about the propositions contained in the message (Semin and Fiedler, 1988). These are the linguistic and psychological reasons that, together with the empirical evidence drawn from c2c online conversations[61], stand behind the greater persuasiveness of concrete language when addressing homogeneous consumer preferences proven by Study I.

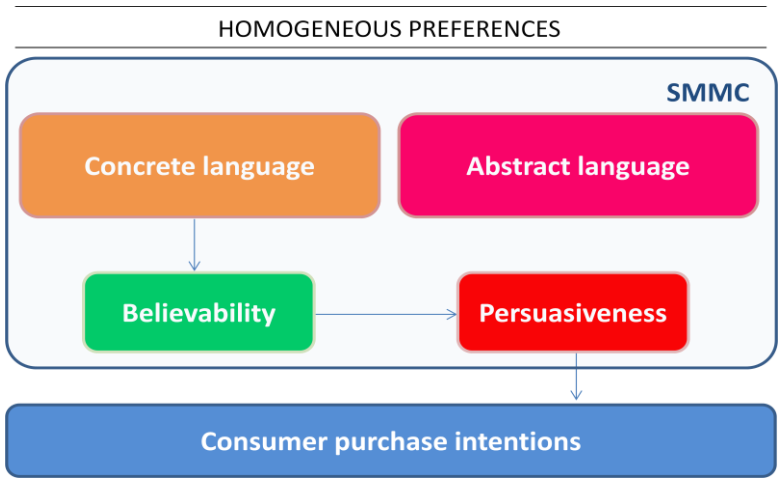


Figure 16. Concrete language persuasiveness and homogeneous consumer preferences

On the other hand, when considering heterogeneous preferences, consumers do not need abundance of details, or practical explanations of the product functionalities. Consumers instead want to "breath" the experience of the product (or service) which the company is promoting online. Therefore, linguistic

[61] In Section 4.1 we reported slices of online consumer reviews and comments about product categories for which consumer preferences are absolutely homogeneous (i.e., laundry detergent, highlighter, and dishwasher tablets)

categories which score high in abstractness (i.e., SVs and Adjs) contribute to make the message more emotional and appealing for its recipients, being characterized by higher enduringness and subject information than concrete terms, thus providing the message with a sense of temporal stability and many information about the message subjects and their own sensations (e.g., wellness, comfort, relax, disappointment, disgust, etc.) related to the brand experience. As confirmed by the evidence provided in Section 4.1., where real consumer reviews have been gathered and analyzed in terms of linguistic structure, concepts and word meanings, the language used here is visibly different from that used for homogeneous preferences. Consumers tend (and like) to share feelings and emotions arising from the brand experience. In particular, the consumer 2.0 shows a strong willingness to share the positive information (Mimesi, 2012).

Study I has indeed confirmed also our second hypothesis (H1b) uncovering the main significant effect of abstract language when addressing heterogeneous consumer preferences, as outlined in the following figure.

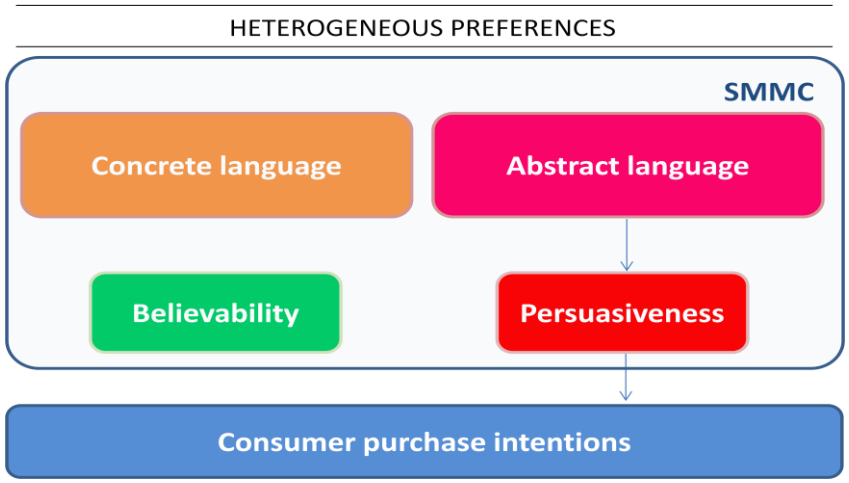


Figure 17. Abstract language persuasiveness and heterogeneous consumer preferences

Whereas Study I demonstrated that persuasiveness increases through the use of a more concrete language when addressing homogeneous preferences, while through a more abstract language when consumer preferences are heterogeneous, Study II considered a further variable which affects consumers' inference about the online message, that is *brand attachment*. This construct is central in Marketing Management, as illustrated in Section 4.2.. In fact, embodying the evolution of the consumer-brand relationship over time, brand attachment – which shall not be confused with brand commitment, attitude, nor love – allows companies and marketers to better assess brand equity and future sales as well, representing the most suitable variable for our analysis.

Therefore, Study II showed that the degree of brand attachment strongly affects the perception consumers have about the online message, i.e., its believability and persuasiveness, ultimately influencing their purchase intentions.

More specifically, this study demonstrated that online consumers which show a low level of brand attachment are more likely to be led to purchase by concrete rather than abstract language. As anticipated in Section 4.2., a low level of brand attachment may be due to lack of knowledge (i.e. low brand awareness), but also to scepticism, and sometimes even suspicion towards the company. Among those consumers who present a low level of brand attachment, there are some that do not know the product features: they may have never experienced the brand, or just few times, without feeling attracted. Maybe, they prefer other competing brands which fit better with their personality and lifestyle. There may be some others, instead, that do not trust the brand, or even worse are against its corporate policies (the abovementioned case of NIKE is meaningful in this sense), and so on. Language believability is essential for this kind of consumers. First, indeed, they must feel comfortable with the product (or service) and its characteristics, then they will be able to evaluate (or revalue) the brand. What this kind of consumers really appreciates is a concrete language, with no frills and rather straightforward, able to explain why the product and its brand should be preferred to those of their direct competitors. The reasons adduced for homogeneous consumers preferences apply here as well. Indeed, consumers who have homogeneous preferences with regard to a certain product category are indifferent among similar brands, and

actually present a very low level of attachment towards the brand under investigation. As stressed by Study I, they are persuaded more by a concrete language, rather than by an abstract one. Behind low brand attachment there may be just indifference, but also bad feelings towards the company's name. In both cases, however, our experiments have shown that concrete language leads these consumers to purchase, resulting to be more persuasive than abstract language.

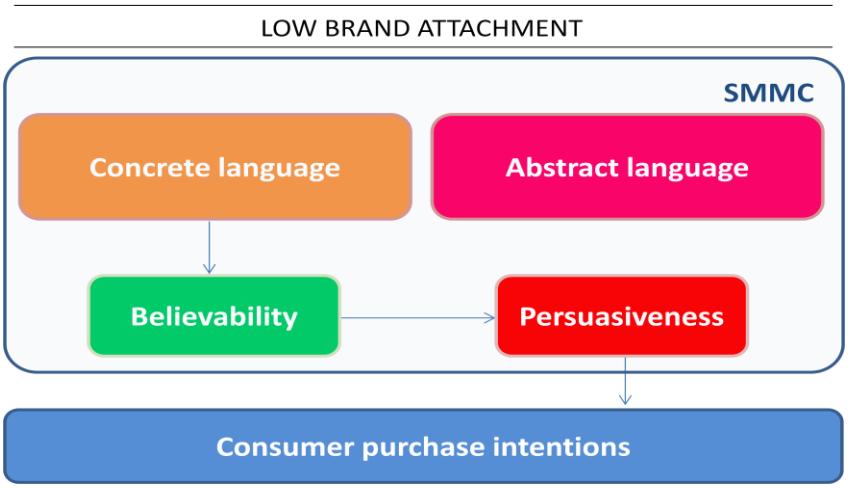


Figure 18. Language persuasiveness and degree of BA

On the contrary, as predicted by our last hypothesis (H2b), online consumers reporting a high level of brand attachment are not significantly affected by the language used in SMMC. Indeed, they know very well the characteristics of the product (or service) being promoted. They have probably experienced it many times, being already loyal and strongly committed to its brand. Study II confirmed that for high brand attachment, the effect of language is not significant, as intended.

Research limitations. The present work paves the way for further research in the field of eWOM and SMMC. The complexities and the multifaceted nature of WOM require a number of efforts in many directions, being language only one facet of it (De Angelis, 2012).

More insights can be certainly drawn from the disciplines and theories cited above. Indeed, a comprehensive framework for assessing persuasiveness (i.e., consumer purchase intentions) shall be created for helping those managers who want to follow the insidious path of SMMC, understand where to invest and how much to expect from their investments in Social Media.

Main limitation of the present work can be recognized in the same choice of only two factors. It would be necessary to study other interactions of the language and the following effects on persuasiveness. In Study II, in fact, we did not consider medium levels of brand attachment, but only low and high degree of it. Indeed, it would be interesting to observe until which level of brand attachment concrete language results to be persuasive, and at which point it becomes indifferent instead. Also in Study I, for simplicity we restricted our focus on *pure* homogeneous and heterogeneous consumer preferences, leaving aside the "middle shades". It would be worthwhile investigating these "hybrid" consumer preferences in conjunction to language, then measure persuasiveness.

As anticipated in Section 4.1, consumer preferences are not crystallized, but they evolve, at different paces, over time. Products (or services) belonging to categories for which consumers had used to show homogeneous preferences, being indifferent among similar brands, today have been witnessing an increse in sophistication, and ultimately *customization* of their market (Nikolaus, F., *et al.*, 2009). By pursuing strong product and brand diversification to avoid price wars and escape from the red ocean where they were struggling toward a blue one (Kim, C., and Mauborgne, R., 2004), companies have also activated a change in their actual and potential customers' expectations which in turn has led to a shift in the continuum of consumer preferences with a substantial increase in their heterogeneity.

Taking the same online consumer reviews as example, companies can learn the true ways of persuasiveness within the Social Media environment. States of mind, feelings and emotions carried by abstract language can ultimately move consumers, when the message believability is not enough to persuade.

Appendix

Methodology overview. Our methodology, or "philosophy of research" as defined by Kicinger and Wiegand[62], originated with a question (i.e., *To what extent does the type of language used influence the persuasiveness of an online message, that is consumer purchase intentions?*) which required a clear articulation of a goal (i.e., the *persuasiveness* assessment) to be reached after having followed a specific procedure (or method), finally gathering and interpreting our data. Hence, in order to validate the hypotheses presented at the end of sections 4.1 and 4.2, and provide them with a robust empirical foundation, we turned to the design of experiments (DOE, or experimental design) as methodology for our work (e.g., Corbetta, P., 1993 and 2003). This choice was dictated by the number of advantages provided by the DOE. Indeed, experiments allow to explore an issue of relevance, compare two or more related aspects, explain how and why some property works, finally demonstrating a point, proof of concept, etc., and validating theoretical results. Furthermore, through experiments we are able to isolate cause-effect relationships between the variables under investigation. These are properly classified into independent variables (in our experiments respectively language and product category for Study I, while language and brand attachment for Study II), namely those which are expected to produce a certain effect on the dependent variable (persuasiveness in both our experiments) according to the theory (or theories) of reference. In other words, through the experiments performed, we measured the effects of the independent variables on the dependent one.

Experiments generally begin with the division of the subjects who were selected for the survey into several groups. Consider first the simple case with two groups, only one independent variable, and one dependent variable. The peculiarity of this experimental design (which is also that of more complex experimental designs) is that groups are formed in such a way that the subjects included in both groups appear to be very similar except for the independent variable (the "treatment"

[62]From "Experimental Design & Methodology. *Basic lessons in empiricism*", retrieved from http://www.cs.gmu.edu/~eclab/papers/lecture-pres/expdes.pdf.

variable, as defined in the technical terminology), which assumes different values (or levels) in the two groups. In this way, where it is noted that the dependent variable (the so called "effect" variable) assumes different values in surveys carried out in each of the groups subsequent to the treatment, it can be reasonably argued that this difference is attributable solely to the independent variable examined. The reliability of the hypothesis that the subjects in the different groups can be considered to be similar except for the value assumed by the independent variable is granted by the use of randomization. This indeed is embodied both in the use of the technique of random sampling of subjects from the reference population and in the random attribution of the subjects that are part of the said sample to the different groups. By equalizing the treatment variables in the DOE, in fact, randomization represents a pre requisite for statistical tests of significance, and an effective way of (operational, procedural and person) confounding reduction (e.g., Jager, K. J., *et al.*, 2007).

In DOEs with more than two groups of subjects each group corresponds to an experimental condition. The basic idea underlying the randomized experimental design is that individual differences between the individuals selected and assigned to the different conditions (e.g., age, sex, culture, income, and the like) are distributed uniformly in the various groups, and thus cannot differ in average within the various groups. Therefore, they would not be able to explain potential differences found in the dependent variable.

Once the random sample of subjects is obtained and subjects are assigned to the various experimental conditions, we proceed to administer the treatment, that is we vary the value of the independent variable(s) in order to verify if there are any variations in the variable effect, which would be attributed solely and exclusively to the independent variable. In our particular case, we wanted to examine whether the persuasiveness of an online message was increased by the type of language used in it, or not. In this case, we have an independent variable, i.e., language, and a dependent variable, i.e., persuasiveness. We could create two conditions, or more than two. For instance, if we had decided (for reasons primarily of robustness of the results) to use three conditions, this would have involved the random sampling of individuals from a given population (for example, students

from our university) and their random assignment to three different groups, corresponding to the three conditions used for testing the effects. In our case, however, drawing from the linguistic and psychological literature, we embraced the well-established concreteness-abstractness dimension. Hence, we distinguished our independent variable into two conditions, namely concrete vs. abstract language. From an operational point of view, we had an independent variable operationalized in two different levels.

With regard to our dependent variable, persuasiveness, indeed, we had a similar problem of operationalization, that is the choice of which method to use for the detection of consumers' inference about the online message. In this sense, a common method requires the use of scales (i.e., *scaling*) which allows to detect how positive is the respondents' judgment is about the product, or, alternatively, how high their intention or desire to buy the product promoted through the online message is. As described by Corbetta (1999), scaling represents a set of procedures developed to measure concepts that are rather complex and not directly observable. Indeed, the only way to measure and quantify them is through the use of a consistent and organic set of indicators drawn from the literature and methodologies available, always putting in place policies to control their effectiveness and the overall consistency and completeness of the procedure.

A scale is indeed a consistent set of items which are deemed indicators of a more general concept. This technique is mainly employed in the measurement of attitudes, where the individual is the unit of the analysis, attitude the general concept (as defined in Section 3.4), and opinions, as the empirically detectable expression of an attitude, are the specific concepts. For instance, in both our studies, respondents were asked to rate the persuasiveness of each statement on a scale ranging from 1 (*not persuasive at all)* to 9 (*very persuasive*). Also language had been assessed in the pretest through a different scale - drawn from Hansen and Wänke (2010) - ranging from 1 (*most concrete*) to 4 (*most abstract language*). Moreover, in Study II we used a further scale to measure the degree of brand attachment. In this case we employed the Two-Factor Model of Brand Attachment as proposed by Park *et al.* (2010). Here respondents were provided

with the full lists of the 10 items and answered to all the questions envisaged by their authors, as displayed in figure 13.

After having chosen the appropriate scales for the variables under investigation, the survey was ready to be submitted to our respondents. As described in the study procedure, participants were asked to rate the persuasiveness of all statements in both their concrete and abstract versions, thus all answering to the same questions.

The two DOEs presented in this work are both characterized by two independent variables and one dependent variable. Notwithstanding the complexity of SMMC persuasiveness we wanted to focus our attention on two factors which definitely affect consumers' inference about the message language, namely product category and brand attachment. The presence of two factors in the analysis indeed allowed us to study not only the effects that each independent variable has on the dependent one (i.e., the "main" effect), but the so called "interaction" effect as well, namely the effect that language and product category (or brand attachment) jointly exercise on persuasiveness.

The variations of the two factors in the different experimental conditions occurred through the so called "manipulation". This technique implies the direct intervention of the researcher who lets the treatment variables assume different values or levels in the different experimental conditions in order to determine if it is the cause of the effect. In this way we manipulated language, product category and brand attachment in order to assess the persuasiveness of the online messages as perceived by our respondents (i.e., the goal of this work, as declared at the beginning of the present overview), and ultimately answer to our initial research question.

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