LUISS Guido Carli

LIBERA UNIVERSITÀ INTERNAZIONALE DEGLI STUDI SOCIALI

Department of Business and Management   *Chair of Marketing Management*

The thin line between believability and persuasiveness

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

SUPERVISOR
Prof. Michele Costabile

CANDIDATE
Chiara Alessandrini
639111

CO-SUPERVISOR
Prof. Alberto Marcati

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Introduction

Hitherto both the academic and managerial debates have tended to describe word of mouth (WOM) in rather generic terms, as a sort of black box, without really answering the questions that the reality and the scientific research have posed in recent years. WOM and the "newborn" eWOM indeed represent an increasingly complex reality with a multifaceted nature (e.g., De Angelis, M., 2012). This research focused on one of its most interesting and fascinating aspect, i.e. the language used by consumers, as well as companies, in their eWOM conversations and Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC). Drawing from well established theories in Linguistic (e.g., Semin and Fiedler, 1988), Neuropsychology (e.g., Paivio, A., 1991) and more recently Marketing Communication (e.g., Schellekens, G., *et al.* 2010), language differentiation has been found to be crucial also within the Social Media environment. Through the design of two experiments, the present work demonstrated that for product categories for which consumers have homogeneous preferences concrete language results to be more persuasive than abstract one. Conversely, for heterogeneous consumer preferences abstract language appears to be more persuasive than concrete one. Our second study, instead, showed that concrete language better suits consumers which have a low level of brand attachment, being perceived as more believable thus influencing their final purchase intentions more than abstract language.

Keywords: WOM, eWOM, SMMC, LCM, believability, persuasiveness, product category, consumer preferences, brand attachment

1 eWOM and the evolution of Social Communication

Social Media are driving a real sea change in Marketing Communication. Blogs, forums, and social networking sites are the new cosmopolitan *agoras* where people meet, 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 by companies. Indeed, 50% of Web users are used to follow brands via Social Media, and 36% of Social Media users habitually posts brand-related content (AgentMedia, 2012). Only in Italy, 8 million consumers modify their purchase decisions based on the information retrieved through Social Media, 15 million fully trusting judgments about products and services reported on blogs and forums (Mimesi, 2012). Ultimately, before, after and even during online as well as offline purchasing experiences, the consumers 2.0 rely on Social Media and their online peers, i.e. virtual friends, but in most cases complete strangers (eConsultancy, 2009). From the companies' perspective, 75% of them currently uses Twitter as marketing channel, but a meaningful percentage of them (around 40%) admits to have no training nor governance of Social Media within their organizational structure.

The progress of IT 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 long tail ad market[1]. These companies have now the extraordinary opportunity to interact with their own customers, asking for their suggestions, and receiving prompt feedback from them. In this way, however, companies become exposed to the sharp look of increasingly active consumers 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 reached by eWOM may ultimately turn a disappointed customer into a real "killer" of the brand, drastically damaging a company's reputation and jeopardizing its future sales. Companies can no longer be blind and abstain from this reality, but they need to truly

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[1] 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.

review their traditional marketing communication tools and metrics in order to capture (and quantify) the power of eWOM, assessing its direct effects on final sales (e.g., Brown, J., *et al.*, 2007).

Therefore, it is crucial for companies to carefully design a Social Media Marketing Communication strategy (SMMCS) aimed at exploiting the great opportunities, while stemming the dangers of negative (and pandemic) eWOM conversations.

2   The relevance of language differentiation within the Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC)

One of the most interesting and fascinating aspects of eWOM is the study of the language used within online conversations by consumers and companies as well, and more specifically the (direct) effects of this language on consumer behaviour, attitude change, and ultimately purchase intentions. Indeed, a proper language differentiation may result to be beneficial and even crucial for companies which are shaping their own SMMCS. Drawing from theories and disciplines such as Linguistic and Neuropsychology which at first glance may appear far from economics and business, the present work empirically demonstrates the intimate relationship among the language used in WOM and consumer purchase intentions. In particular, we embraced the well known concreteness-abstractness dimension and the Linguist Category Model (LCM) by Semin and Fiedler (1988), which represents a pillar in this field, being a framework for investigating not only the language people use to describe interpersonal behaviour, but also that employed in descriptions of product experiences by consumers. According to the LCM, we can distinguish four linguistic categories: Descriptive Action Verbs (DAVs), Interpretive Action Verbs (IAVs), State Verbs (SVs), and Adjectives (Adjs). They are organized on a continuum of concreteness-abstractness, presenting a number of psychological implications, as shown in the following figure:
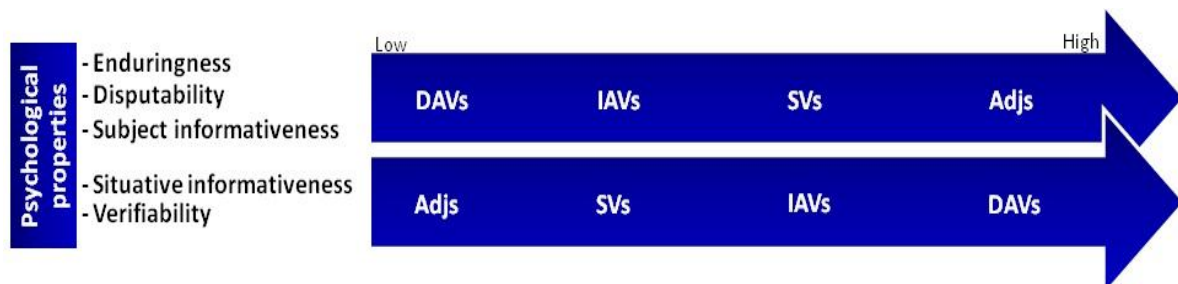

Figure 1. Linguistic categories and their psychological properties by Semin and Fiedler (1988)

The LCM paved the way for following research in various fields, more recently in Marketing Communication (e.g., Eisend, M., 2006; Barber, J., 2009). What is interesting to stress here is that recipients' inference about a message changes according to the stimulus (i.e. concepts and word meanings) received, whether it can be ascribed to a linguistic category rather than another. In particular, concrete words (i.e., DAVs and IAVs) have been found to benefit of faster recognition in reading and general superior encoding (Paivio, A., 1969)[2]. More recent studies in Social Psychology (e.g., Borgida, E., and Nisbett, R. E., 1977; Loomis, R. L., 2010) have shown that concrete words are imagined more vividly, thus resulting easier to comprehend, and evoking feelings of familiarity. As a result, concrete language has been found to favour the perception of the truth, regardless of the actual truth contained in the message (e.g., Vrij, *et al.,* 2004). Namely, given the very same message content, concrete statements are judged by recipients as more probably true than abstract ones.

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[2] 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.

A number of studies in this field, mainly carried out for face to face conversations and traditional channels of Marketing Communication like advertising (e.g., Rossiter, J. R., and Percy, L., 1985[3]) has confirmed that *concrete language* tends to substantially increase the *believability* (intended as perceived truth) of the message.

However, the concept of believability inevitably changes when coming to SMMC, being Social Media a consumer-driven environment where companies' messages may be constantly questioned (and potentially by everybody).

On the other extreme of this continuum, Schellekens and her colleagues (2010) combined in a very innovative endeavour[4] the study of the language used in WOM, product attitude and purchase intentions, ultimately finding that the use of *abstract language* (i.e., SVs and Adjs) in positive (negative) WOM confers greater *persuasiveness* to the message, directly influencing consumer purchase intentions.

Therefore, in which circumstances does concrete language result to be more persuasive than abstract one? To what extent does the type of language used in WOM and SMMC influence consumer purchase intentions? What makes a message believable? Is believability enough to trigger purchase decisions?

3 Empirical Analysis

Through the design of two experiments, the present work empirically assessed language persuasiveness accounting for two factors that definitively affect consumers' inference about the message, namely *product category* and *brand attachment*.

3.1 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 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, our hypotheses predict that concrete language will result to be more persuasive in the case of homogeneous consumer preferences, while abstract one would be better for (online) messages which address heterogeneous consumer preferences. 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.

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 2), respectively about a dental floss for homogeneous preferences, and a restaurant for heterogeneous preferences.

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[3] 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.
[4] 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)

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 2. 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[5]. 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

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

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 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 the following figure.
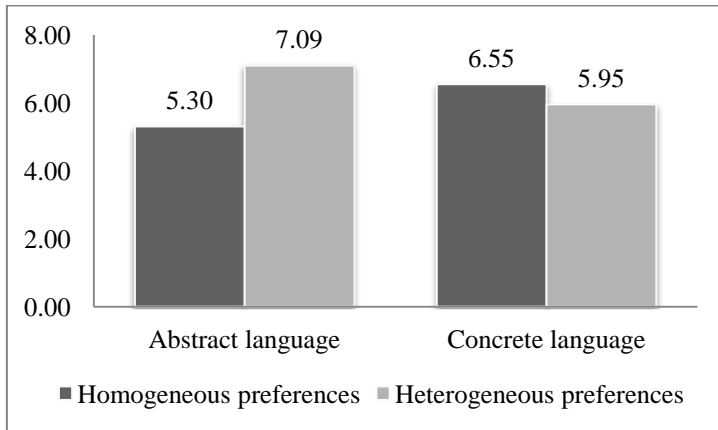

Figure 3. Persuasiveness as a function of language and product category

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 SMMCS, 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.

3.2 Study II

Whereas Study I has shown the intimate relationship among language persuasiveness and consumer preferences, confirming that concrete language influences consumer purchase intentions more than abstract language when addressing homogeneous consumer preferences, while abstract language resulting more persuasive than concrete language for heterogeneous ones, 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). Indeed, 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[6]. 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.

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 icon, thus enjoying a very high brand awareness. Everybody knows NIKE: people are used to mention it – and not just as a case study,

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[6] Being high commitment and brand love just further outcomes of high brand attachment (MacInnis, D., *et al.*, 2009).

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 5 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.

Figure 4. 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 5. 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).
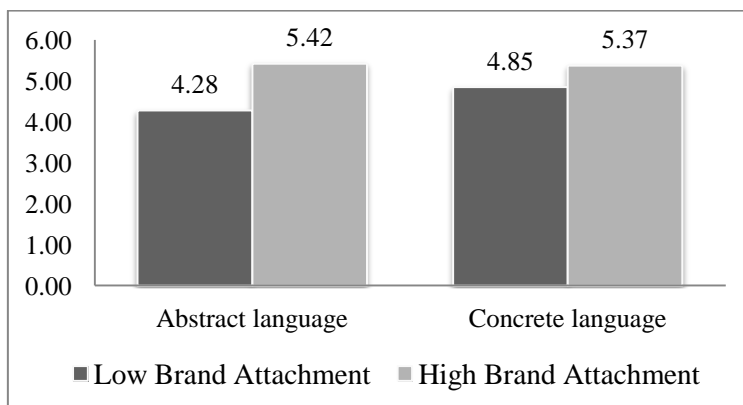

Figure 6. Persuasiveness as a function of language and degree of consumer BA

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.

4 General discussion and managerial implications

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. Specifically, we distinguished between cases in which it would be preferable to use a concrete rather than an abstract language, and vice versa, accounting for two factors which definitely affect consumers' inference about the (online) message, i.e. product category and brand attachment (BA).

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[7]. 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 particularly focused on the so called *concreteness effects*[8] which 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 7. 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 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

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[7] The methodology used and design of experiments are described in more detail in the Appendix.
[8] In Linguistic and Neuropsychology 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.

conversations[9], stand behind the greater persuasiveness of concrete language when addressing homogeneous consumer preferences proven by Study I.
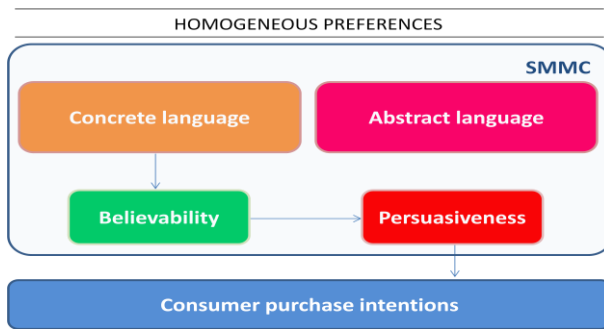

Figure 8. Concrete language persuasiveness and homogeneous consumer preferences

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 which the company is promoting online. Therefore, linguistic 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, relax, disappointment, disgust, etc.) related to the brand experience. Hence 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 preferences, as outlined in the following figure.
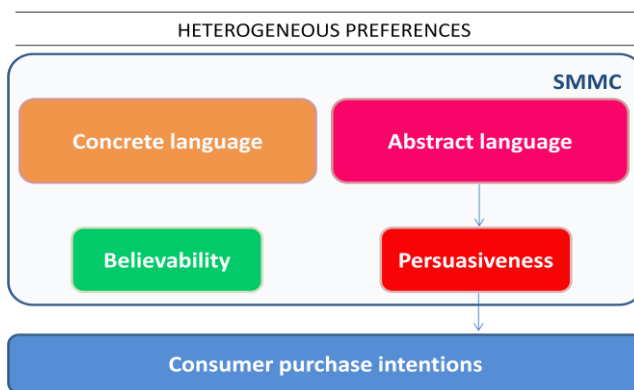

Figure 9. Abstract language persuasiveness and heterogeneous consumer preferences

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 recipients' perception, that is *brand attachment* (BA). This construct is central in Marketing Management. In fact, embodying the evolution of the consumer-brand relationship over time, BA allows companies and marketers to better assess brand equity and future sales, representing the most suitable variable for our analysis.

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[9] 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)

Therefore, Study II showed that the degree of BA 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 BA are more likely to be led to purchase by concrete rather than abstract language. Among these consumers, some do not know the product features as they have never experienced it, or only few times. Some others do not feel attracted, and prefer other competing brands which fit better with their own personality and lifestyle. Lastly some of them 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 unveiled in Study I, they are persuaded more by a concrete language, rather than by an abstract one. Behind low BA 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.
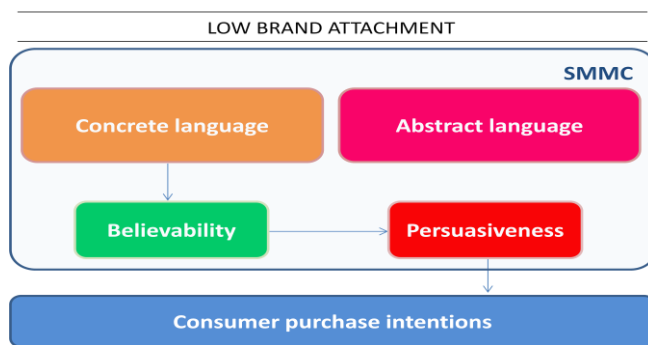

Figure 10. Language persuasiveness and degree of BA

Conversely, when interacting with consumers who know very well the characteristics of the product (or service) being promoted, who have probably experienced it many times, and are already loyal and strongly committed to its brand, language differentiation does not affect further purchase decisions, 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.

5 Appendix

5.1 Methodology overview

Our methodology, or "philosophy of research" as defined by Kicinger and Wiegand[10], 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 our hypotheses, 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. These 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" 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. Once the random sample of subjects is obtained and subjects are assigned to the various experimental conditions, the treatment can be administered, that is the values of the independent variable(s) are varied 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. We could create two conditions, or more than two (for reasons primarily of robustness of the results). 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

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

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, 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 BA. 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 5.

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 BA) 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 BA 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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