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Second Person Pronouns Enhance Consumer Involvement and Brand Attitude ☆

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Abstract

Online brand messaging, e.g., blogging or posting on social media platforms, has an important role in digital marketing strategy. Such messaging is largely text based and provides an opportunity for brands to interact with many consumers simultaneously. The marketing literature, however, has yet to provide sufficient guidance on effective online brand messaging strategies. In particular, research has yet to address how the inclusion of second person pronouns in online brand messaging affects relevant consumer outcomes. The present research proposes that second person pronouns should work to enhance consumer involvement and brand attitude as a result of increasing the extent that consumers engage in self-referencing. A field study involving actual brand posts on Facebook and two subsequent experiments provide support for this hypothesis. In addition, drawing on cultural dimensions theory, individual levels of collectivism are identified as a boundary condition. The presence (vs. absence) of second person pronouns in online brand messaging enhances involvement and brand attitude for consumers that are lower, but not higher, in collectivism. The results provide marketers with needed guidance for creating effective online brand messaging.
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Keywords: Second person pronoun; Self-referencing; Consumer involvement; Brand attitude; Collectivism

Introduction

Enhancing consumer involvement and brand attitude through online brand messaging remains an ongoing challenge for digital marketers. Brand-to-consumer messaging is increasingly emphasized in firms' digital marketing strategies. Content-based marketing strategies such as blogging or posting on popular social media platforms, for example, have become staples of digital marketing practice. However, despite the popularity of such online brand messaging, the literature has yet to provide sufficient guidance on effective messaging strategies. Some strategies, such as incorporating video content, are discussed by practitioners (e.g., Rampton 2014) but strategies resulting from theory-based research are scarce. In the present research, we address this gap in the literature by drawing on research on psycholinguistics and cultural differences to understand how the use of second person pronouns (e.g., "you") in online brand messaging might enhance consumer involvement and brand attitude.

Research shows that addressing consumers directly creates a sense of personalization, which in turn has a positive impact on how consumers respond to marketing communications (Roberts 2003; Vesanen 2007). Sahni, Zou, and Chintagunta (forthcoming), for instance, found that adding the first name of customers to the subject line of emails used in direct-to-consumer marketing increased the probability of consumers opening the email by 20% and increased sales by 31%. However, online brand messaging cannot always be personalized for individual consumers. When blogging or posting on Facebook, for example, brands are tasked

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with creating generic content that speaks, not to individual, but to a multitude of consumers simultaneously. Recognizing this limitation, the present research tests an alternative strategy to augment consumer involvement with online brand messaging based on the inclusion of second person pronouns.

The results of an initial study using field data and two subsequent experiments suggest that the inclusion of second person pronouns in online brand messaging (e.g., blogs, social media posts) enhances consumer involvement and attitude toward the brand. This effect of second person pronouns on consumer involvement is found to be mediated by consumer self-referencing. Online brand messages that include a second person pronoun increase consumer involvement as a result of increasing the extent that consumers engage in self-referencing. This increase in consumer involvement, in turn, is found to enhance consumers' attitude toward the brand. This effect of second person pronouns on consumer involvement and brand attitude, however, is not found to hold for all consumers. Drawing on cultural dimensions theory (e.g., Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010), the final study finds that individual levels of collectivism establish a boundary condition for the observed effects. Brand messaging with (vs. without) second person pronouns only enhance involvement and brand attitude among consumer that are lower (vs. higher) in collectivism.

Conceptual Framework

Brands are allocating increasingly larger portions of their marketing budget to influence consumers through online brand messaging. According to a survey of marketing executives, spending on online marketing activities increased 234% from 2009 to 2016 and now accounts for approximately 11.7% of marketing budgets, on average (Moorman 2016a, 2016b). Online brand messaging benefits brands by allowing them to communicate with a large number of consumers at a relatively low cost. On Facebook, for instance, brands can post messages to their official brand page that are then streamed to the brand's fans and visitors. Such online brand-to-consumer communications provide brands with a powerful means for facilitating emotional attachment in consumers and the possibility of widespread sharing of their brand content (Sashi 2012; Zheng et al. 2015).

Despite the emphases on videos, images, links, hashtags, etc., words serve as the foundation for online messaging. Whether messaging occurs through blogging, tweeting, or posting on Facebook, word choice remains crucial for effectively speaking to consumers. On Facebook, for instance, words provide meaning and context to brand messages posted to a brand's timeline. When blogging, words take center stage to convey often more complex brand messages. When constructing brand messages the focus is typically on content words such as verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. Content words are essential to communicate meaning, in developing mental imagery, and in directing the attention of the reader (Chung and Pennebaker 2007).

In addition to content words, however, brand messaging also includes function words. Function words, such as pronouns, provide the reader with auxiliary information such as who is the creator and intended recipient of the message. The marketing literature has only begun to address how function words might affect the success of brand messaging. Moreover, existing research only addresses how first person pronouns such as "we" and "I" affect consumers. Because second person pronouns (e.g., you, you'd, you'll, you're, you've, your) also play an important role in communication (Pennebaker 2011), the present research focuses on the effect of using second person pronouns in brand messaging.

The literature suggests that the use of pronouns has an important effect on marketing communication outcomes. For example, recent research identifies contexts in which using first person pronouns such as "we" (Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012), "I" (Packard, Moore, and McFerran 2014), and "my" (Kachersky and Palermo 2013) benefit brand communications. Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi (2012), for instance, found that using the pronoun "we" in advertisements enhanced brand attitudes by creating a sense of closeness with the brand. They explain that in emotionally close and committed relationships, people often refer to themselves and another person as "we" rather than by addressing their self and the other person separately (Brown and Gilman 1960). In turn, because "we" is used frequently in close relationships, a generalized positive response develops to the word. Packard, Moore, and McFerran (2014), on the other hand, focused on the positive effect of using the pronoun "I" when responding to customer complaints. When compared to firms that do not self-reference by using the word "I," using the word "I" had a positive effect on customer satisfaction. They suggest that perceptions of firm empathy and agency drive this effect.

Such research reveals important implications for the use of first person pronouns; however, it also leaves open the question as whether second person pronouns may also affect the effectiveness of brand messaging. Second person pronouns are special in that they implicate the reader. Brand messaging that includes a second person pronoun is directed at the consumer — it speaks directly to the consumer (e.g., Are *you* paying attention?).

Prior research suggests that second person pronouns may influence consumer involvement. Consumer involvement refers to the perceived relevance of a message based on the inherent needs, values, and interests of consumers (Mittal and Lee 1989; Zaichkowsky 1985). Consumer involvement influences depth of message processing (Andrews, Durvasula, and Akhter 1990), emotional attachment to the brand (Sashi 2012; Zheng et al. 2015), and subsequent consumer–brand interactions (Richins and Bloch 1986; Zaichkowsky 1985). When brand messaging elicits high involvement in consumers they are more likely to promote the brand and its content, for example, by sharing it with others online (Berger and Milkman 2012) or by interacting with it on social media platforms such as Facebook using site-features such as "likes," "comments," and "shares" (Mochon et al. 2017).

Given the positive consumer outcomes that can result from consumer involvement, it is important to consider how brand

messaging can be structured so as to elicit it. Traditionally, marketers have found success at increasing involvement though the inclusion of images or videos in their brand messages (e.g., Rampton 2014). In addition, marketers have found the personalization of brand messages to increase consumer involvement (Roberts 2003; Vesanen 2007). Including the name of the consumer in brand to consumer communications, for example, has been found to result in higher response rates for direct marketing campaigns (e.g., Sahni, Zou, and Chintagunta forthcoming). However, the inclusion of specific consumer names in brand messaging limits the ability of the message to speak to a larger audience.

When blogging or posting content on social media, for instance, brands must create messages that address not a single consumer but a multitude of consumers. The use of second person pronouns may provide another, albeit subtle, avenue for increasing consumer involvement when targeting multiple, rather than individual, consumers.

Second person pronouns have been found to direct attention inward toward the person reading the message (Pennebaker 2011). In addition, research finds that one way to increase consumer involvement through brand messages is to increase the extent that consumers process the message by relating the message to his or her own self (Martin, Lee, and Yang 2004). Such research suggests that the inclusion of second person pronouns in brand messaging may help to elicit consumer involvement. This possibility is formally stated by the following hypothesis:

H1. When compared to brand messages that do not use second person pronouns, brand messages that use second person pronouns will result in higher levels of consumer involvement.

Should the inclusion of second person pronouns in brand messaging increase consumer involvement there remains the question as to what is driving this relationship. What is the underlying process? Previous research suggests that brand messaging that speaks to the consumer can elicit self-referencing (e.g., Martin, Lee, and Yang 2004). Self-referencing refers to the extent that consumers encode and relate information to themselves (Rogers, Kuiper, and Kirker 1977). Asking consumers to reflect on their personal experiences with a brand (Bower and Gilligan 1979; Debevec and Iyer 1988; Debevec and Romeo 1992; Yalch and Sternthal 1984) and by featuring models in advertisements that are similar to consumers (Martin, Lee, and Yang 2004) have been shown to increase the extent that consumers engage in self-referencing. In addition to such evidence that second person pronouns may increase self-referencing, there is also evidence that self-referencing may affect consumer involvement.

Although the connection between self-referencing and consumer involvement has not been directly studied, the literature provides some evidence for this relationship. Martin, Lee, and Yang (2004), for instance, found a positive relationship between consumer self-referencing and a construct closely related to consumer involvement, i.e., brand attitudes (Zaichkowsky 1985). In their research, they manipulated self-referencing through the ethnicity of models featured in

advertisements and found that when compared to consumers of European descent, consumers of Asian descent exhibited more self-referencing when exposed to ads that featured Asian models. In turn, self-referencing exerted a positive effect on brand attitude.

Brand attitude has been shown to be a downstream consequence of consumer involvement (Richins and Bloch 1986; Zaichkowsky 1985). Brand to consumer communications that increase consumer involvement, for instance, have been shown to also result in more favorable brand attitude (Hollebeek 2011; Zaichkowsky 1985). Such research suggests that both consumer involvement and brand attitude might be affected by an increase in self-referencing. In addition, such research suggests a causal process in which second person pronouns elicit self-referencing which, in turn, enhances consumer involvement and brand attitude. This possibility is formally stated by the following hypothesis:

H2. Self-referencing and consumer involvement will mediate the effect of second person pronoun on brand attitude, such that brand messages with (vs. without) a second person pronoun will result in higher self-referencing, and then higher consumer involvement, and then higher brand attitude.

Should the serial mediation process proposed by H2 find support, then marketers are provided with insight on how second person pronouns affect consumer involvement and brand attitude. It is also important, however, to provide marketers with insight on when and under what contexts the usage of second person pronouns is most effective. In other words, it is important to identify boundary conditions for the proposed effects of second person pronouns. In this research, we focus on a cultural factor that may turn on, or turn off, the positive effect of second person pronouns on consumer involvement and brand attitude. More specifically, we focus on collectivism, which is a widely-used dimension of cultural variability for explaining similarities and differences in individual behavior. Collectivism refers to the extent that consumers see themselves as interdependent and embedded in their social groups (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis, Bontempo, and Villareal 1988; Triandis and Gelfand 1998).

Cultural orientations such as individualism versus collectivism exert broad influence over social perception and social behavior. For example, more collectivistic consumers tend to subordinate their own personal goals to the goals of their in-groups. Less collectivistic consumers, on the other hand, subordinate in-group goals to their own personal goals (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis, Bontempo, and Villareal 1988; Triandis and Gelfand 1998). Collectivism also exerts an influence over consumers' understanding and construction of the self. Consumers that are higher in collectivism, for instance, see themselves as dynamic entities, defined by their social relationships and environment (Triandis, Bontempo, and Villareal 1988; Triandis and Gelfand 1998). Less collectivistic consumers, on the other hand, see themselves as stable entities that are autonomous and independent of others (Triandis,

Bontempo, and Villareal 1988; Triandis and Gelfand 1998). As a result, less collectivistic consumers tend to construct their self-concepts based on individual traits and characteristics, rather than on their relationships with others (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis, Bontempo, and Villareal 1988; Triandis and Gelfand 1998).

Importantly, consumers' collectivism levels have been found to influence how consumers respond to brand messaging. Han and Shavitt (1994), for instance, found that messages focused on group benefits, rather than individual benefits, were more effective when targeting more (vs. less) collectivistic consumers. On the other hand, messages focused on individual benefits were found to be more effective for less collectivistic consumers.

Messages that include second person pronouns inherently emphasize the individual and have been found to direct attention inward, toward the reader (Pennebaker 2011). As a result, brand messaging that includes second person pronouns may be more effective for less (vs. more) collectivistic consumers. More collectivistic consumers, on the other hand, see themselves as intimately connected to their in-groups and, as a result, tend to be more focused on their in-groups rather than on the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis, McCusker, and Hui 1990). As a result, second person pronouns may not enhance consumer involvement and brand attitude when directed at consumers that are more (vs. less) collectivistic. This possibility is also supported by research that finds that the effectiveness of communications is lessened when it is incongruent with the cultural values of consumers (Uskul and Oyserman 2010). Based on such reasoning, we submit the following hypothesis:

H3. The effect of second person pronouns on consumer involvement and brand attitude is moderated by individual levels of collectivism, such that brand messages with second person pronouns will increase consumer involvement and brand attitude for less collectivistic consumers but not for more collectivistic consumers.

Study 1

The goal of study 1 was to assess whether the hypothesized relationship (H1) between second person pronouns and consumer involvement exists for actual brand-to-consumer interactions in the online environment. Field data was collected from the popular social networking site Facebook. The data consists of the posts made by brands on their Facebook timeline and the number of likes, comments, and shares for each brand post. This data was then used to assess whether the presence of second person pronouns in brand posts results in higher consumer involvement with the brand post.

Field Data

The field data was collected in partnership with UnMetric. com. The sample included a total of 4,124 brand posts (Table 1). The brand posts were created by a total of ten brands

(Allstate, Citibank, Farmers, McDonald's, Monster Energy, North Face, Olympic Games, Reebok, Samsung Mobile, Skittles). The sample included all brand posts posted by these brands on their respective Facebook timelines from June 30, 2013 through June 30, 2014 (13 months). Brand posts are created by the brand and posted to their official Facebook timeline to communicate with consumers on Facebook. Brand posts contained text such as the following brand post by McDonald's: "Meat meet mouth. Mouth meet meat." Of the brand posts collected, 7.7% ($n = 317$) included only text, 9.2% ($n = 378$) included text and a link (e.g., www. voiceofmcdonalds.com), 9.3% ($n = 385$) included text and a video, and 73.8% ($n = 3,044$) included text and an image. Brand posts varied in their word count (range: 1 to 199, $M = 24.39$, $SD = 15.82$).

Subsequent to their posting on Facebook, consumers can interact with brand posts by liking the brand post, sharing the brand post, and commenting on the brand post. The number of "likes," "shares," and "comments" corresponding to each brand post was also collected. Consumer involvement is difficult to directly assess using field data. As a result, the present research used the "likes," "shares," and "comments" associated with brand posts as a behavioral proxy for consumer involvement with brand messaging. Assessing consumer involvement in this way is supported by prior research that suggests that consumer involvement is closely associated with interacting with brands in social media (Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014).

There was a total of 20,692,838 "likes" for all brand posts combined and the number of "likes" per brand post varied (range: 0 to 544,632, $M = 5,017.66$, $SD = 23,258.61$, *Skewness* = 14.02). There was a total of 844,690 "shares" for all brand posts combined and the number of "shares" per brand post varied (range: 0 to 26,953, $M = 204.82$, $SD = 932.08$, *Skewness* = 14.49). There was a total of 452,557 "comments" for all brand posts combined and the number of "comments" per brand post varied (range: 0 to 20,563, $M = 109.74$, $SD = 699.88$, *Skewness* = 17.74).

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of field data.

Brand name	Total brand posts	% brand posts with second person pronoun	Average word count
Allstate	440	32%	17.49
Citibank	295	21%	29.72
Farmers	500	44%	26.58
McDonalds	341	21%	15.47
Monster Energy	500	14%	22.24
North Face	500	16%	41.51
Olympic Games	500	10%	37.77
Reebok	258	24%	18.16
Samsung Mobile	396	18%	17.64
Skittles	394	25%	13.45

Analysis of Field Data

Text-based analysis was used to determine the presence or absence of second person pronouns in the text of the brand posts. This analysis was conducted using software, Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), developed for the analysis of text and in particular the presence of function words including second person pronouns (Chung and Pennebaker 2007; Pennebaker 2011). This software includes a dictionary of second person pronouns and their variants, and codes the following words as second person pronouns: "you, youd, you'd, youll, you'll, your, youre, you're, yours, you've, youve, thee, thine, thou, thoust, thy, ya, yall, y'all, and ye" (Chung and Pennebaker 2007). The presence (vs. absence) of at least one of these words in the text of a brand post signaled the presence (vs. absence) of a second person pronoun in the brand post. The majority, 77.7% (n = 3,203), of the brand posts did not contain a second person pronoun, whereas 22.3% (n = 921) did contain a second person pronoun.

The independent variable, second person pronoun, was created by coding brand posts without a second person pronoun as 0 and those with a second person pronoun as 1. The dependent variable, involvement, was created by summing the number of "likes," "shares," and "comments" for each brand post. This summation was positively skewed ($Skewness$ = 14.02, SE = .04) and was thus log-transformed (for a similar log-transformation procedure, see de Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012). Control variables including brand, post content, and word count were also created. The brand variable was created by dummy coding each of the 10 brands. The post content variable was created by dummy coding each brand post according to whether it included only text, text and a link, text and an image, or text and a video. The word count variable was created by summing the number of words contained in each brand post.

A one-factor ANCOVA was used to assess whether the presence (vs. absence) of second person pronouns in brand posts is associated with higher consumer involvement with the brand post. The model included brand, post content, and word count as covariates. The model revealed a significant effect of second person pronoun on consumer involvement with the brand post (F(1, 4,119) = 49.79, p < .001). As predicted, brand posts that contained a second person pronoun were associated with higher consumer involvement (M = 2.64, SE = .04) than were those without a second person pronoun (M = 2.44, SE = .02). Each of the control variables also had significant effects on consumer involvement (ps < .001).

Additional one-factor ANCOVA models were also estimated to assess whether the presence (vs. absence) of second person pronouns in brand posts is positively associated with higher likes, shares, and comments independently. As described previously, the "likes," "shares," and "comments" associated with the brand posts were positively skewed. Thus, they were log-transformed (e.g., de Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012) to create like, share, and comment scores. As in the previous model, brand, post content, and word count were included as covariates and had significant main effects

(ps < .001) on the dependent variable of interest in each model. Importantly, the independent variable, the presence (vs. absence) of second person pronouns, was also found to have a significant effect on the dependent variable of interest in each model.

Brand posts with a second person pronoun had higher like scores (M = 2.48, SD = 1.07) than those without a second person pronoun (M = 2.37, SD = 1.26, F(1, 4,119) = 28.61, p < .001). Brand posts with a second person pronoun had higher share scores (M = 1.11, SD = .86) than those without a second person pronoun (M = .94, SD = .88, F(1, 4,119) = 75.43, p < .001). Brand posts with a second person pronoun had higher comment scores (M = 1.62, SD = .85) than those without a second person pronoun (M = 1.21, SD = 1.02, F(1, 4,119) = 117.92, p < .001). The results of these models, suggest that the presence (vs. absence) of second person pronouns in brand posts has a positive effect on the extent that consumers will interact with the brand post by liking the post, sharing the post, and commenting on the post.

Discussion

The results offer compelling, albeit preliminary, evidence in support of H1 that the presence of second person pronouns in online brand messaging results in higher consumer involvement. This relationship between second person pronoun and consumer involvement was found using field data that involved real-world consumer interactions with actual brand messaging. The dataset was robust and included all of the Facebook posts by 10 different brands for a period of 13 months. The brands represent different sectors of the marketplace, and the brands offer a wide variety of products and services — ranging from hamburgers to insurance. The data sample was also robust in size, consisting of 4,124 brand posts, 20,692,838 "likes," 844,690 "shares," and 452,557 "comments".

From this field data, the study found the presence (vs. absence) of second person pronouns in brand posts on Facebook to significantly increase the extent that consumers liked, shared, or commented in relation to the brand post. This effect persisted even when controlling for the brand that created the post, the content of the post in addition to text (i.e., images, videos, links) and the number of words in the brand post. This finding may come as a surprise to marketing managers. Of the 4,124 brand posts considered in the study, only 22.3% (n = 921) included a second person pronoun. The majority of brand posts (77.7%, n = 3,203) did not include a second person pronoun. This discrepancy indicates that managers are currently unaware of the ability of second person pronouns at enhancing consumer involvement.

Despite this initial finding, however, the present study leaves open a number of important questions. As a result of using field data, the study was not able to determine whether there is a causal relationship between second person pronouns and consumer involvement. Also, as a result of using field data, the study was forced to control for exogenous factors via the inclusion of covariates rather than experimentally limiting the possibility of exogenous contamination by holding constant all

factors other than those under investigation. From a theoretical perspective, the study also fails to assess the effect of second person pronouns on an established scale of consumer involvement (e.g., Zaichkowsky 1994).

In the study, actual consumer behavior (i.e., likes, shares, comments) was used as a proxy for consumer involvement. However, marketers more generally may question whether second person pronouns have similar effects on more traditional marketing metrics in regard to brand messaging such as involvement and brand attitude. In addition, marketers may question the process by which second person pronouns affect subsequent consumer outcomes. Identifying the process underlying the observed effect is also important for identifying boundary conditions of the effect and its application in novel environments. To address these questions an experiment is needed that manipulates the presence of second person pronouns in brand messages, while holding constant extraneous factors, to assess its direct and indirect effects on relevant consumer outcomes.

Study 2

The previous study found a positive relationship between the use of second person pronouns in brand messaging and consumer involvement. Study 2 expands on this result in two important ways. First, study 2 utilizes an experiment to assess whether the relationship between using second person pronouns and consumer involvement is causal rather than correlational. Second, study 2 helps identify the underlying process through which second person pronouns influence consumer involvement. Specifically, study 2 tests whether the use of second person pronouns exerts a direct effect on consumer self-referencing and whether self-referencing, in turn, influences consumer involvement.

Of importance to brand managers, study 2 also tests whether the indirect effect of second person pronouns on consumer involvement has downstream consequences on brand attitude. If second person pronouns exert a positive effect on self-referencing and if self-referencing exerts a positive effect on consumer involvement, then second person pronouns should indirectly affect brand attitude by way of self-referencing and consumer involvement. In study 2, these proposed direct (H1) and indirect (H2) effects are tested by randomly assigning participants to view Facebook posts that do or do not contain a second person pronoun. Established scales are then used to assess consumer involvement, brand attitude, and self-referencing. The results are analyzed using a serial mediation model.

Method

Participants

A total of 208 participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for a small payment (age range = 20 to 73, $M = 37.21$, $SD = 11.46$; 50.5% female). All participants were located in the United States and their primary language was English.

Experimental Design and Procedure

Participants were exposed to an ostensible Facebook post promoting a financial service. The posts varied according to the study's 2 (second person pronoun: present, absent) × 2 (study replicate: version 1, version 2) between-subjects experimental design. Two versions of the posts with second person pronouns absent or present were included in the experiment to test the robustness of the effect. Thus participants saw one of the following four posts from a company named Universal Inc.: "Maximize your savings!," "Maximize savings!," "Save your money.," or "Save money." Other than the manipulation, the brand posts were identical (i.e., brand logo, font, color, and format). See Fig. 1 and Appendix A for stimuli.

Measures

Self-referencing was measured with a seven-item scale that includes items such as "I can easily picture myself using a product offered by the brand" (Martin, Lee, and Yang 2004). Participants responded to these items using a seven-point scale with 1 "strongly disagree" and 7 "strongly agree" as endpoints (*alpha* = .92). Consumer involvement was measured using a ten-item consumer involvement scale (Zaichkowsky 1994). Specifically, participants responded to the statement "To me, this post is..." with bipolar responses measured on seven-point scales (e.g., "uninvolving/involving"; *alpha* = .97). Brand attitudes were also measured (Torres and Brigs 2007). Participants responded to the statement "To me, the brand that posted this on Facebook is..." using bipolar scales (e.g., "appealing/unappealing" and "bad/good"; *alpha* = .96). Complete scales are included in Appendix B.

Results

Before testing whether self-referencing mediates the effect of second person pronoun on consumer involvement, we conducted a 2 (second person pronoun) × 2 (study replicate) ANOVA to determine whether the effect of second person pronoun on consumer involvement depended on the version of the post. If the effect of second person pronoun on consumer involvement is robust, then the presence (vs. absence) of second person pronoun should have a positive effect on consumer involvement for both versions of the Facebook posts. In line with study 1, the ANOVA results show that consumer involvement was significantly higher when a second person pronoun was present versus absent ($M = 3.59$ vs. $M = 3.00$; $F(3, 204) = 5.21$, $p < .05$). The replicate version did not have an effect on involvement ($F(3, 204) = .61$, $p = .43$). The results also show that the effect of second person pronoun was similar across the study replicates (interaction: $F(3, 204) = .38$, $p = .54$).

Having established that the effect of second person pronoun on consumer involvement is similar for each replicate condition, the study replicates were combined for the mediation model analysis (Hayes 2013, model 4). For this model, the pronoun condition was included as the independent variable, self-referencing as the mediator, and consumer involvement as the dependent variable. As can be seen in Fig. 2, the presence

Fig. 1. Example of study 2 Facebook brand post stimulus presented to participants in the second person pronoun present condition (see Appendix B for all stimuli).

(vs. absence) of second person pronoun exerted a positive effect on self-referencing ($B = .59$, $t = 2.44$, $p < .01$) and self-referencing exerted a positive effect on consumer involvement ($B = .92$, $t = 24.60$, $p < .001$). A bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect ($B_{ab} = .05$) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was completely above zero (.12 to .98). Moreover, there was no evidence that second person pronoun influenced consumer involvement independent of its effect on self-referencing ($c = .04$, $t = .34$, $p = .73$). These results support the prediction that self-referencing fully mediates the positive effect of second person pronoun on involvement.

The next analysis examined whether the effect of second person pronoun on self-referencing and consumer involvement has downstream consequences on brand attitudes. This causal chain was tested with a serial mediation model (Hayes 2013, model 6). As can be seen in Fig. 3, the model included second person pronoun as the independent variable, self-referencing as the first mediator, consumer involvement as the second mediator, and brand attitude as the dependent variable. The results support the predicted process. The direct effect of consumer involvement on brand attitude was significant ($B = .41$, $t = 4.23$, $p < .001$) and a bootstrap analysis revealed that the indirect effect of second person pronoun on brand attitude, through self-referencing and then through consumer involvement was significant ($B_{abd} = .22$, C.I.: .05 to .47), supporting H2. The results also suggest that second person pronoun has no direct effect on brand attitude after accounting for self-referencing and consumer involvement ($c = .16$, $t = .26$, $p = .26$).

Discussion

The results of study 2 build on the previous results in several important ways. The experimental design, for example, provides evidence for a causal relationship between the use of

second person pronouns and consumer involvement. Moreover, the results suggest an underlying process through which second person pronouns influence consumer involvement. The results suggest that second person pronouns exert their effect on consumer involvement by influencing self-referencing, while also indicating that this relationship has important downstream consequences on brand attitude. The final study works to extend these findings by identifying a factor that moderates the effect of second person pronouns on consumer involvement and brand attitude.

Study 3

The objective of this final study is to identify a boundary condition for the effects observed in the previous studies. As discussed, second person pronouns direct attention inward toward the recipient of the message (Pennebaker 2011). Such messaging is likely effective for less collectivistic consumers because they prefer to see themselves in individualistic terms (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis, McCusker, and Hui 1990). On the other hand, such messaging may be less effective for more collectivistic consumers because they prefer to keep their focus on others, rather than on the self (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010; Triandis, McCusker, and Hui 1990). Based on such reasoning, this final study tests (H3) whether brand messaging that uses second person pronouns exerts an indirect effect on brand attitude, through consumer involvement, for consumers that are low to moderate in collectivism, but not for those that are high in collectivism.

Method

Participants

Recruitment and payment of participants were facilitated by ProlificAcademic.com. The study included an instructional
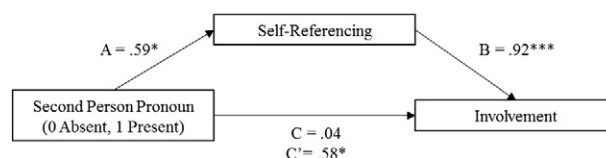

Fig. 2. The effect of second person pronoun (present vs. absent) on consumer involvement was fully mediated by self-referencing ($N = 208$). The figure includes unstandardized regression coefficients for the relationship between second person pronoun and consumer involvement as mediated by self-referencing. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.
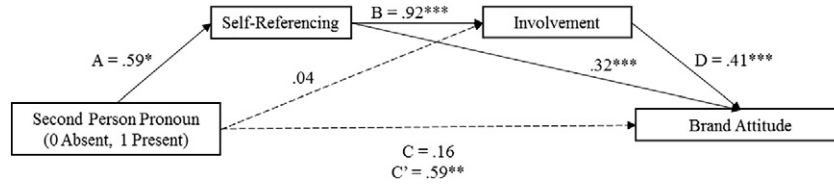
Fig. 3. The effect of second person pronoun (present vs. absent) on brand attitude was fully mediated in a serial (or multiple-step) mediation by self-referencing, and consumer involvement ($N = 208$). The figure includes unstandardized regression coefficients for the relationships between second person pronoun and brand attitude and mediating variables. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

manipulation check (IMC) to verify that participants were reading the instructions and questions (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, and Davidenko 2009). Thirteen participants failed the IMC and were excluded from subsequent analyses. Excluding these thirteen participants did not appreciably change the results. The final sample consisted of 199 participants from the U.S. ($M_{age} = 32.2$, range: 18–71, 40% female).

Experimental Design and Procedure

Participants in this experiment read a blog that promoted a cloud storage service. There were four different versions of the blog, which corresponded to the study's 2 (second person pronoun: present, absent) × 2 (message frame: positive, negative) between-subjects experimental design with collectivism measured as a continuous variable. The wording of the blogs varied by experimental condition. The blog in the second person pronoun present condition contained second person pronouns (e.g., "Think of all the valuable information that is saved on your computer"), whereas the blog in the pronoun absent condition did not (e.g., "Think of all the valuable information that is saved on the computer"). Message frame served as a replicate to test the robustness of the effect. In the positive message frame, the service was written to emphasize the positive outcomes of using the service (e.g., "Your pictures,

work documents, and important emails are safe"). In the negative message frame, the negative outcomes of not using the service were emphasized (e.g., "Your pictures, work documents, and important emails are lost forever"). Besides the second person pronoun and message frame manipulations, the blogs were identical (see Fig. 4 and Appendix C).

Measures

Consumer involvement and brand attitude were measured with the same scales described in study 2 (*alpha* = .95 for consumer involvement; .95 for brand attitude). Collectivism was measured using a six-item collectivism scale with 1 "strongly disagree" and 7 "strongly agree" as endpoints (Yoo, Donthu, and Lenartowicz 2011). The scale includes items such as "Individuals should sacrifice self-interest for the group" and "Group success is more important than individual success" (*alpha* = .93). A list of the items is included in the Appendix.

Results

To assess the robustness of the proposed effects, the analyses began with a 2 (second person pronoun) × 2 (message frame) ANOVA to determine whether framing a message as positive or negative influences how second person pronouns

Fig. 4. Example of study 3 blog post stimulus presented to participants in the second person pronoun present and positive message framing condition (see Appendix for all stimuli).

affect brand attitude. In line with our previous studies, brand messages that used second person pronouns resulted in higher brand attitude than did brand messages that did not use second person pronouns ($M = 4.62$ vs. $M = 4.23$; $F(3, 195) = 3.78$, $p < .05$). Message frame did not affect brand attitude ($F(3, 195) = 0.03$, $p = .86$), nor did the interaction ($F(3, 195) = 0.40$, $p = .53$). These results indicate that message frame did not influence the effect of second person pronouns on brand attitude, which increases the generalizability of using second person pronouns to enhance brand attitude. Because message frame did not influence the effect of second person pronouns on brand attitude, the positive and negative message frame conditions were combined for the following ANOVA and for the moderated mediation analysis.

Next, we examined the relationship between second person pronouns and consumer involvement by entering consumer involvement as the dependent variable in an ANOVA with second person pronoun (present vs. absent) as the independent variable. The ANOVA also included mean-centered collectivism and its interaction with second person pronoun as continuous predictor variables. The results reveal a main effect for second person pronoun, such that consumer involvement was significantly higher when second person pronouns were present versus absent in the message ($M = 4.31$ vs. $M = 3.93$; $F(3, 195) = 4.11$, $p < .05$). The main effect of collectivism was also significant ($F(3, 195) = 9.82$, $p < .01$), as was the interaction ($F(3, 195) = 4.84$, $p < .05$).

To understand the nature of this interaction, we conducted a spotlight analysis (Spiller et al. 2013) for participants low (1 SD below the mean), moderate (at the mean), and high on collectivism (1 SD above the mean). The results indicate that the presence of second person pronouns had a positive effect on consumer involvement for participants that ranked low ($B = .81$, $t = 2.99$, $p < .01$) and moderate on collectivism ($B = .39$, $t = 2.03$, $p < .05$), but not for those that ranked high on collectivism ($B = -.04$, $t = -0.15$, $p = .88$). These results support the prediction that using second person pronouns in brand messaging is an effective means of enhancing consumer involvement for consumers that are low to moderate on collectivism, but not for those that are high on collectivism.

To test whether second person pronouns exert an indirect effect on brand attitude for consumers that are low or moderate on collectivism, but not for consumers that are high on collectivism, we estimated a moderated mediation model (Hayes 2013, model 8). This model tested whether second person pronouns exert their effect on brand attitude by influencing consumer involvement and whether the direct effect of second person pronouns on consumer involvement is moderated by collectivism. Thus, the model included second person pronoun condition as the independent variable (coded -0.5 for pronouns absent, 0.5 for pronouns present), consumer involvement as the mediator (mean-centered), and brand attitude as the dependent variable. Collectivism (mean-centered) was entered as a predictor of consumer involvement, as well as a collectivism by second person pronoun interaction term. This model is illustrated in Fig. 5.

The results show that second person pronouns exerted a positive effect on consumer involvement ($B = .39$, $t = 2.03$,

$p < .05$), as did collectivism ($B = .23$, $t = 3.10$, $p < .01$). Similar to the results reported in the preceding ANOVA, these results provide support for H3 by demonstrating that the effect of second person pronouns on consumer involvement depended on the participants' level of collectivism (interaction term: $B = -.33$, $t = -2.20$, $p < .05$). Moreover, consumer involvement exerted a positive effect on brand attitude ($B = .84$, $t = 19.85$, $p < .001$). Next, we examine how the second person pronoun by collectivism interaction influences the indirect effects of second person pronouns on brand attitude.

To test whether the indirect effect of second person pronouns on brand attitude (through consumer involvement) is significant for participants low and moderate on collectivism, but not for participants high on collectivism, we estimated bias-corrected confidence intervals of the indirect effects for participants low (1 SD below the mean), moderate (at the mean) and high on collectivism (1 SD above the mean). The confidence intervals for the indirect effects were entirely above zero for participants low on collectivism ($B_{ab} = .67$, 95% C.I.: .20 to 1.17) and for participants moderate on collectivism ($B_{ab} = .32$, 95% C.I.: .01 to .64). Conversely, the confidence interval was not entirely above or below zero for participants high on collectivism ($B_{ab} = -.03$, 95% C.I.: $-.48$ to .43). Additionally, there was no evidence that second person pronouns influenced brand attitude after controlling for consumer involvement for participants low ($c = .23$, $t = 1.37$, $p = .17$), moderate ($c = .07$, $t = .57$, $p = .57$), or high on collectivism ($c = -.10$, $t = -.59$, $p = .55$). In sum, these results indicate that second person pronouns only affect brand attitude for consumers low to moderate on collectivism and that consumer involvement fully mediates this effect.

Discussion

These results build on the previous studies by identifying a factor that moderates the effectiveness of using second person pronouns in brand messaging. Specifically, consumers' collectivism levels can turn on, or off, the otherwise positive effect of using second person pronouns in brand messaging. For consumers that have low to moderate collectivistic values, second person pronouns had a positive effect on consumer involvement which, in turn, exerted a positive effect on brand attitude. On the other hand, for consumers with high levels of collectivistic values, second person pronouns did not affect consumer involvement nor brand attitude.

General Discussion

Three studies find initial evidence for a positive effect of using second person pronouns in brand messages on consumer involvement and brand attitude. Using 13 months of field data consisting of brand messages posted on the official brand pages of 10 different brands, the first study found that, when compared to brand posts that did not use second person pronouns, brand posts with second person pronouns were associated with higher consumer involvement. The second
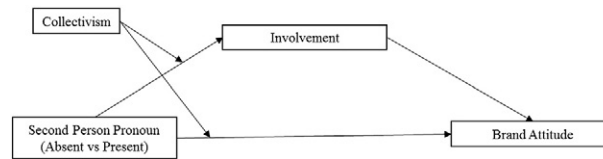
Fig. 5. Moderated mediation model.

study demonstrated that self-referencing mediates the effect of second person pronouns on consumer involvement and that this mediation process has important downstream consequences on brand attitude. In the final study, collectivism is identified as a boundary condition. The presence, versus absence, of second person pronouns in online brand messaging increased consumer involvement and brand attitude for consumers that are lower, but not for those that are higher, in collectivism.

Theoretical Implications

These findings add to the literature in several ways. A key contribution is in expanding growing research on the viability of function words in marketing communication. Researchers have only recently begun to study how function words, such as pronouns, influence brand-to-consumer communication. Moreover, to date, the literature only reveals positive effects for brands using first person pronouns, including "we" (Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012), "I" (Packard, Moore, and McFerran 2014), and "my" (Kachersky and Palermo 2013). The present research adds to this literature by introducing second person pronouns as a simple and viable strategy for increasing the effectiveness of online brand messaging.

This research also contributes to the literature by bridging research on language and self-referencing. Although various marketing practices, such as featuring advertising models that match the ethnicity of the target audience, have been shown to elicit self-referencing (Martin, Lee, and Yang 2004), the present research finds that second person pronouns can also affect the extent that consumers encode and relate marketing information to the self. There are likely additional word-based strategies for increasing self-referencing. Identifying such words is a worthwhile agenda for future research given the ability for an increase in self-referencing to enhance important consumer outcomes.

Another contribution of the present research is in merging the literature on cultural dimensions theory with that on language usage in marketing communication. The cultural dimension of collectivism is known to influence many aspects of social- and self-perception (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis, Bontempo, and Villareal 1988; Triandis and Gelfand 1998). The present research finds collectivism also affects how consumers respond to second person pronouns in brand messages. Less collectivistic consumers are known to construct their self-concept based on individual traits, rather than on their relationships with others (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis and Gelfand 1998). More collectivistic consumers, however,

define themselves based on their relationships with others. As a result, usage of second person pronouns may be less congruent with the cultural values of more collectivistic consumers. Such reasoning is in line with the present research which finds that more (vs. less) collectivistic consumers are less responsive to brand messages containing second person pronouns.

Managerial Implications

In addition to its theoretical implications, the present research also has implications for practice. Spending on digital marketing is expected to reach 20.9% of marketing budgets in the next five years — up from 5.6% in 2009. Despite this rapidly growing dedication to digital media, however, only 3.4% of managers currently think that digital marketing activities contribute significantly to firm performance (Moorman 2016a, b). Such opinion is arguably bolstered by a lack of academic marketing literature addressing the needs of today's digital marketer. The present research helps to address this need by finding a simple solution for increasing the effectiveness of online brand messaging.

The present findings suggest that brand managers should carefully consider the construction and word choice of their online brand messages. The simple inclusion of one or more second person pronouns is likely to increase consumer involvement and brand attitude. This was found to be the case in a variety of online brand messaging contexts. The presence of second person pronouns in Facebook brand posts boosted consumer involvement and their presence in brand blog posts increased brand attitude as a result of increasing consumer involvement. Further, the effect was found to persist regardless of whether the brand message was positively or negatively framed. Overall, these findings suggest that the effect of second person pronouns on these consumer outcomes is robust to a variety of brand messaging applications.

However, despite its generality to messaging context and frame, the effect of second person pronouns on involvement and brand attitude is not necessarily robust to cultural differences, namely collectivism. As a result, managers are urged to consider the cultural orientation of their message recipients prior to inclusion of second person pronouns in their messaging. Indeed, managers already recognize the need for subtle and personalized marketing communication to address the needs of consumers from various backgrounds (Taylor, Lewin, and Strutton 2011). Similarly, we find that cultural orientation moderates the otherwise robust effects of second person pronouns.

Less collectivistic consumers, for instance, respond more favorably to second person pronouns. As a result, marketers targeting consumers living in less collectivistic cultures, such as those in North America and Western Europe, may benefit from using second person pronouns in their brand messaging. On the other hand, more collectivistic consumers respond less favorably to second person pronouns. As a result, marketers targeting consumers in more collectivistic cultures, such as those in Asia and Latin America, may benefit from not including second person pronouns in their brand messages. Current online advertising technologies should aid marketers in delivering optimal messages to consumers with different cultural values and orientations.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of the current study is that it focused solely on the English language in assessing the effects of using second person pronouns in brand messaging. In English, second person pronoun usage is independent of the relationship that exists between a dyad. Non-English languages, however, such as Spanish, French, and Chinese, have formal and informal versions of second person pronouns. In Spanish, for instance, the English word "you" translates to "tu" or "usted." "Usted" serves as the more formal version of "you" and conveys respect for the other person. "Tu," on the other hand, serves as a less formal version of "you" and conveys similarity between speakers. Future research could explore the possible implications of using second person pronouns in brand messaging in other languages, such as those with formal and informal versions. Based on the present research, the extent that non-English second person pronouns influence consumer involvement may depend on the extent that they elicit self-referencing and the collectivism level of the consumer.

Another limitation of the present research is that it focused solely on second person pronouns. There are likely other messaging strategies involving function words that are also advisable. However, as described, the literature on this topic is in its infancy. With the addition of the present research, only the effects of first (e.g., Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012) and now second pronouns have been addressed in the marketing literature. There is an opportunity for future research to examine additional ways in which cultural factors may interact with the usage of function words in brand messaging. For example, given collectivistic consumers' focus on their in-groups (e.g., Markus and Kitayama 1991), they may respond more favorably than less collectivistic consumers to brand messaging that includes pronouns such as "we" and "us". Cultural dimensions other than collectivism, e.g., femininity, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, may also affect how consumers respond to the use of pronouns in brand messaging (e.g., Hofstede 2001; Soares, Farhangmehr, and Shoham 2007; Steenkamp, Hofstede, and Wedel 1999). Such research is important given the prevalence of function words in brand messaging and the increasingly global nature of brand communications.

Appendix A

Appendix B

B.1. Involvement Scale

In your opinion, this Facebook [blog] post is: 1 = Unimportant, 7 = Important; 1 = Boring, 7 = Interesting; 1 = Irrelevant, 7 = Relevant; 1 = Unexciting, 7 = Interesting; 1 = Means nothing, 7 = Means a lot to me; 1 = Unappealing, 7 = Appealing; 1 = Mundane, 7 = Fascinating; 1 = Worthless, 7 = Valuable; 1 = Uninvolving, 7 = Involving; 1 = Not Needed, 7 = Needed.

B.2. Self-referencing Scale

How much do you agree with the following statements about the Facebook [blog] post (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)? The post made me think about my personal experiences with the product; The post seemed to relate to me personally; I can easily relate myself to the post; The post seemed to be written with me in mind; I can easily form similarity judgments between myself and the post; I can easily picture myself using a product offered by the brand; The post speaks for a group of which I am a member.

B.3. Attitude Toward the Brand Scale

The brand that created this Facebook [blog] post is: 1 = Unappealing, 7 = Appealing; 1 = Bad, 7 = Good; 1 = Dislike, 7 = Like; 1 = Unfavorable, 7 = Favorable; 1 = Unpleasant, 7 = Pleasant.

B.4. Collectivism Scale

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree): Individuals should sacrifice self-interest for the group; individuals should stick with the group even through difficulties; group welfare is more important than individual rewards; group success is more important than individual success; individuals should only pursue their goals after considering the welfare of the group; group loyalty should be encouraged even if individual goals suffer.

Appendix C
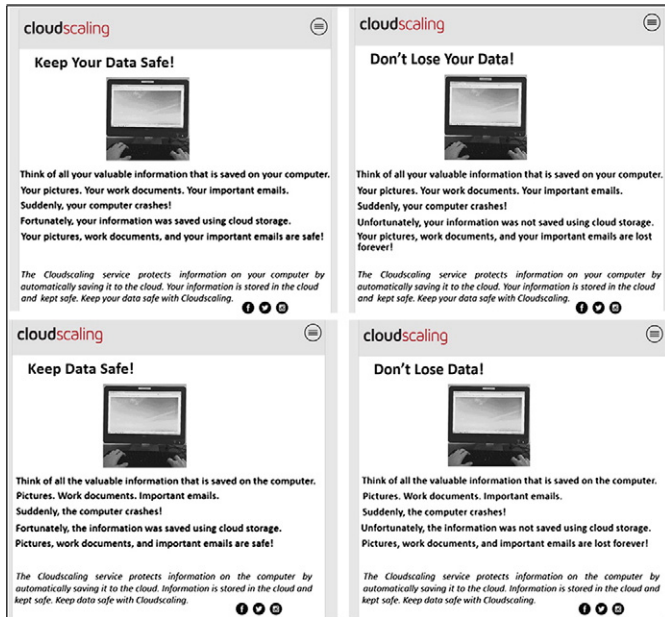
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