

“You can say ‘you’ to me!”

The cross-cultural effects of formal and informal pronominal addressing in webcare conversations



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Abstract

Due to the informal nature of social media brands tend to adopt an informal communication style. However, there is scientific reason to assume that an informal tone of voice is not always beneficial. Many languages use different types of second-person pronouns to convey different levels of (in)formality, a linguistic phenomenon absent in English. While Germans seem to be reluctant to informal pronominal addressing from brands on social media, using informal 2PS pronouns is normal in egalitarian cultures like the Dutch. In this cross-cultural study, we investigated whether informal (vs. formal) pronominal addressing increases the likeability of a brand responding to a consumer compliment (positive electronic word-of-mouth) or complaint (negative eWOM) on Facebook. Firstly, we assumed that using formal (vs. informal) 2PS pronouns would violate the expectations of the consumer, which in turn would decrease the likeability of the brand. Secondly, a brand which uses informal (vs. formal) 2PS pronouns would be perceived closer by the consumer, which in turn would increase the likability of the brand. Additionally, we examined whether this effect is influenced by consumers' cultural background or the valence of the original consumer message. In a 2 (informal vs. formal addressing) x 2 (German vs. Dutch) x 2 (positive vs. negative eWOM) between subjects experiment ($N = 352$) we showed that, generally speaking, using informal second-person pronouns does not increase the likeability of the brand. More precisely, informal addressing is not more expected, but perceived as more appropriate, which in turn increases brand likeability. However, this mediation effect might only hold for positive eWOM. In contrast, informal pronominal can be harmful for the likeability of the brand when responding to a complaint. We did not find any significant differences between Dutch and German consumers. Additionally, informal addressing does not bring the brand closer to the consumer.

Keywords: electronic word-of-mouth, Conversational Human Voice, informality, pronominal addressing, cross-cultural differences, expectancy violations, psychological closeness

Introduction

As social media are generally perceived as an informal environment, brands tend to adopt an informal communication style (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & De Vries, 2015) to create a feeling of closeness with the users (Delin, 2005). For example, the social media account of a German police department used to address its followers with the informal pronoun “Du”. However, after a provincial resolution all official police accounts were required to use formal pronominal addressing instead (Müller, 2015). The Facebook post in which the police informed its followers about the new communication style received a lot of attention from the social media community. While some users appreciated the formal “Sie” just as much online as they do offline, many users were disappointed about this switch. They felt that the informal “Du” was more appropriate on Facebook and played a substantial role in creating closeness between the police and the citizens (Müller, 2015; Polizei NRW Essen, 2015).

This example is particularly interesting because Germans are known for their polite and hierarchy-sensitive manner of communication. While using informal second-person pronouns (hereafter: 2PS pronouns) is normal in some cultures, for instance Dutch or Swedish (Clyne, Kretzenbacher, Norrby, & Schüpbach, 2006; Plevoets, Speelman, & Geeraerts, 2008), Germans seem to be more reluctant to informal addressing. In 2011, 44% of respondents of a representative survey among German social media users preferred to be addressed with the formal “Sie” by companies on social media (Keylens, 2011). This issue is highly-discussed on German online marketing blogs (e.g. Hintz, 2013; Media by nature, 2017) and a related Google search yields over 35,700 search results. In contrast, the same search in Dutch revealed hardly any relatable entries. It appears that the appropriateness of informal addressing on social media might be influenced by someone’s cultural background. Thus, the question arises whether the predominantly negative reactions to the switch by the German police are exceptional for the German culture or representing an attitudinal change.

Thanks to the internet and social media it is nowadays particularly easy for brands to expand their business to another country. Oftentimes, however, they are unaware of cultural differences. The Duitsland Instituut Amsterdam (2011) estimated that Dutch companies lose approximately 8 billion euros per year due to linguistic and cultural deficiencies. Brands need to understand the “rules of the game” when operating in a different country. Consumers expect companies to respect social norms and rules regarding communication (Burgoon, Denning, & Roberts, 2002), and these expectations are partly influenced by their cultural background (Averbeck, 2010; Burgoon et al., 2002). When a brand’s communication style violates consumer expectations, this should make the brand less likeable in the view of the consumer.

A current stream in the literature suggests that a more human and informal tone of voice is beneficial for companies (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, Buyukcan-Tetik, & Beukeboom, 2015; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher, & Miller, 2006). Hence, adapting to the informal social media environment by addressing consumers informally should be in line with the expectations of social media users. Moreover, informal 2PS pronouns are reserved for closer relationships (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2010). Brands may use informal pronominal addressing to create a feeling of closeness with the consumer (Schüpbach et al., 2007), which in turn is supposed to make the brand more likeable. Could this explain the disapproval of German users to the change in addressing by the German police? Or do Germans, generally speaking, not appreciate an informal communication style from brands?

The choice of pronominal addressing does not only affect brand's general activities on social media, but as well determines how they interact with consumers on a personal level. As communication on social media is not a one-way street, users frequently reach out to brands, both publicly and privately. Therefore, nowadays most companies active on social media have so-called webcare teams responsible for responding to these messages which are commonly defined as electronic word-of-mouth (hereafter: eWOM; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). We usually distinguish three types of eWOM messages: compliments, questions and complaints. Since other social media users can oftentimes watch these consumers-brand interactions, the correct handling of customer messages on social media is essential. Reading positive or negative comments regarding a brand from other users affects consumer's perception of the brand (e.g. Doh & Hwang, 2009; Lee, Rodgers & Kim, 2009; Lee & Youn, 2009). Hence, we assume that consumers empathize with other users when reading their positive or negative experiences with a brand. When the brand then responds to the consumer message in an inappropriate way, for example by addressing the consumer informally, is this potentially harmful for the likeability of the brand?

In this paper, we investigate cross-cultural effects of using informal (vs. formal) second-person pronouns in webcare responses on the likeability of a brand. In particular, we examine whether the choice of a certain type of 2PS pronoun violates consumers' expectations regarding language use and influences their feeling of closeness with the brand. Besides, we take the context of the message into account. By investigating the moderating effect of eWOM valence, we extend the limited literature on webcare and electronic word-of-mouth. In addition, findings from prior research suggest that the effectiveness of using an informal and human tone of voice might be influenced by intercultural differences (Kniesel & Waiguny, 2016). This study is to our knowledge the first to account for possible cross-cultural effects. Comparing the

preferences of Dutch and German social media users is particularly interesting because their languages and cultures are closely related (Chambers & Wilkie, 2014; Ribbert & Ten Thije, 2007). The appropriate use of 2PS pronouns on social media is a highly discussed topic in Germany. However, if we consider the earlier example of the German police, the question arises whether this discussion is still necessary. In case that we are observing an attitudinal change, previous findings regarding the German culture might not be up to date anymore. By investigating one aspect of informality we contribute to a better understanding of cross-cultural issues related to informal brand communication on social media in general and in webcare in particular.

Theoretical Framework

The aim of this study is to investigate possible cross-cultural effects of informal pronominal addressing in webcare responses on brand likeability. Therefore, we will first provide a short introduction to the topic of webcare and eWOM in general and the current state in research how brands should communicate with consumers in social media. Secondly, we will explain the difference between informal and formal addressing. Based on this foundation we can explore how the use of different second-person pronouns might violate consumer expectations regarding language use and increase or decrease the feeling of closeness between consumer and brand. Building on empirical research and theoretical concepts such as the *Language expectancy theory*, the *Attribution theory* and *psychological closeness* we will illustrate how an expectancy violation and/or a feeling of closeness can influence the likeability of the brand. Finally, we will explore the moderating effects of cultural background and eWOM valence on the previously hypothesized relationships.

Webcare and eWOM: understanding the context of this study

While a brand's general activities on social media focus on a wider audience, brands are on a regular basis (directly) addressed by consumers with questions, complaints, or compliments. These brand-directed messages can be defined as electronic word-of-mouth (or eWOM), as they are "positive or negative statement[s] made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which [are] made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). We distinguish three different types of eWOM messages given the situation the consumers find themselves in. Firstly, when a consumer has had a negative experience with the company, he might complain to the brand. This is defined as negative electronic word-of-mouth (hereafter:

NeWOM; Willemsen, Neijens, & Bronner, 2013). In contrast, after a pleasant experience the consumer might want to compliment the brand publicly on social media, which is theoretically termed as positive electronic word-of-mouth (hereafter: PeWOM; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2014). In addition, the consumer might reach out to the company for advice or clarification (Joireman, Grégoire, Devezer, & Tripp, 2013), which are classified as neutral eWOM messages. In this paper, we specifically focus on the differences between positive and negative eWOM.

When addressing the brand directly in their message, companies are expected to react in a helpful and prompt manner regardless of the valence of the eWOM message. The act of monitoring the web to identify these messages from consumers and entering into a direct conversation with the particular customer is what Van Noort and Willemsen (2012) call “webcare”. One of its fundamental functions is customer care, i.e. identifying and handling customers’ problems and questions to keep the customer satisfied (Van Noort, Willemsen, Kerkhof, & Verhoeven, 2014). In that sense, social media are another channel for customers to get in contact with the company, similar to email or phone. However, when customers decide to address the company publicly, webcare goes beyond customer care. Since other users can witness if and how the organization engages in a conversation with the particular customer, webcare additionally fulfills the function of reputation management and PR. Several studies have shown that good webcare positively influences consumers’ perception of the company (e.g. Demmers, Van Dolen, and Weltevreden, 2014; Joireman et al., 2013; Schamari & Schaefer, 2015; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). For example, participants evaluated a brand significantly more positively when the company responded to a NeWOM message compared to when the company did not respond (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). In a similar vein, Demmers et al. (2014) showed that responding to PeWOM leads to higher customer satisfaction than no response. Finally, analyzing consumer comments about the brand can provide valuable insights into how consumers feel and think about the brand and its products. Therefore, good webcare can offer the company fruitful marketing opportunities. (Van Noort et al., 2014). In sum, the ultimate goal of webcare is to satisfy the consumer and, hereby, preserve or improve the company’s reputation.

Conversational Human Voice in webcare responses to eWOM

In recent years, there has been an increasing academic interest in webcare. It is widely accepted that companies should not ignore messages from customers on social media, regardless of whether the message is positive or negative, but beyond that, research on webcare responses to eWOM is still in its infancy. Prior research in this field has focused on answering

four main questions, namely what, when, where and how companies should respond (Van Noort et al., 2014). These studies have, for example, explored the effect of webcare for different response strategies (e.g. Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014), for solicited or unsolicited responses (e.g. Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; Demmers et al., 2014), on different platforms (e.g. Schamari & Schaefers, 2015; Demmers et al., 2014) and using different communication styles (e.g. Gretry et al., 2017). While the majority of the abovementioned studies has focused on the use of response strategies, the effect of using different communication styles has as well received some attention. However, the results from the different studies focusing on this topic are conflicting with each other (compare e.g. Crijns, Cauberghe, Hudders, & Claeys, 2017; Kerkhof, Beugels, Utz, & Beukeboom, 2011; Kniesel & Waiguny, 2016), indicating that different factors might influence the effect of using a different communication styles, for example cultural background (Kniesel & Waiguny, 2016). Therefore, this study is, to our knowledge, the first to focus on intercultural differences in how companies should communicate with their customers on social media.

Before delving into cross-cultural differences, we should first understand the effects of using a certain communication style in responses to eWOM messages. Interestingly, most of these studies investigating this topic build their framework around Kelleher's concept Conversational Human Voice (hereafter: CHV), which he defines as "an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization's publics based on interactions between individuals in the organization and individuals in publics" (2009, p.177). It is commonly assumed that employing CHV in conversations with consumers is beneficial for the company, as it makes the company sound more human. This, in turn, can positively influence relational outcomes such as trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher, & Miller, 2006) and consumer perceptions regarding the reputation of the brand (Dijkmans et al., 2015). However, research on the effectiveness of using CHV in the context of webcare is still limited.

Despite its popularity, the concept has certain limitations. Firstly, literature on CHV has a strong Anglo-American and Dutch focus and might not be applicable to other languages and cultures. For example, Kniesel and Waiguny (2016) showed that a response to a negative hotel review was evaluated more positively for a response written by a staff member in a corporate tone rather than a response written by a manager in a more human voice. Kniesel and Waiguny argue that the unexpected interaction of staff members' position and tone of voice could be attributed to cultural differences in communication styles, as their experiment was conducted with Austrian participants in German. Compared to the English language, Germans tend to use

more content- than relationship-oriented language (House, 1996). Kniesel and Waiguny assume that “[t]hese differences may serve to explain why the human voice in a German-speaking country like Austria is less important than suggested” (2016, p.91). Their findings suggest that the positive effect of employing CHV might be dampened by consumers’ cultural background. Therefore, when researching the different aspects of Conversational Human Voice, researchers should keep in mind possible cross-cultural effects.

Additionally, the definition leaves room for different interpretations what Conversational Human Voice exactly entails (Gretry et al., 2017). This is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, some studies measure the perceived level of CHV as dependent or mediating variable (e.g. Dijkmans et al., 2015; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher, & Miller, 2006). However, the proposed items to measure CHV are subjective, ambiguous and sometimes difficult to understand. As CHV was designed to measure the effect of an engaging communication style on relation outcomes, Kelleher does not provide operational guidelines on how such a style can be achieved (Gretry et al., 2017; Huibers, & Verhoeven, 2014). Therefore, we find great differences between the different studies that manipulate the level of Conversational Human Voice in the brand responses. For example, to personalize the message Demmers et al. (2014) manipulated the amount of personal information about the customer in the conversation while Gretry et al. (2017) explicitly addressed the customer with his (first) name. In contrast, Kerkhof et al. (2011) used first-person pronouns (I or we) to refer to the organization and explicitly mentioned the responsible webcare employee in the response to evoke the impression of talking to a “real person”. The different ways of measuring and operationalizing CHV make it difficult, if not impossible, to compare the results of these studies with each other. However, this is necessary to work towards a unanimous definition and understanding of the concept of Conversational Human Voice.

According to Van Noort et al. (2014) one of the tactics to operationalize CHV suggested in the literature is *informality*. They define informal language as “casual and expressive language that is exchanged in everyday conversations, and contrasts in these senses with the declarative and neutralized language that is often used in formal corporate communications” (Van Noort et al., 2014, p. 91). In other words, an informal communication style is characterized by a casual tone of voice, as it is typical in everyday interactions between (usually) equal conversations partners. In both academic and popular literature, a more human or informal communication style is said to be the key to success in the digital age (e.g. Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, Kelleher, 2009; Van Belleghem, 2012), as social media are perceived as an informal environment (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & De Vries, 2015). For example, Kaplan and Haenlein

(2010), who identified challenges and opportunities in social media, advised marketers to be unprofessional, meaning that they should “try to blend in with other users” (p.67). With a more informal, less professional style of communicating companies hope to be perceived as closer to and more intimate with the customer, which in turn is said to be beneficial for the relationship with the customers (Delin, 2005; Gretry et al., 2017). However, not only do we know little about the effectiveness of such an informal way of communicating (Barcelos, Dantas, & Sénécal, 2018), but results from the few studies investigating this topic suggests that a more informal tone can even be harmful. For example, Gretry et al. (2017) found that an informal communication style decreases consumer trust when the consumer is unfamiliar with the brand. In a similar vein, Barcelos et al. (2018) showed that a human, more informal communication style on social media can backfire if the company offers high-involvement or high-risk products or services. Therefore, more research is necessary to understand how and when companies can be informal in the communication with their customers.

Pronominal addressing as aspect of informality

Within the field of Conversational Human Voice, the informality aspect has not yet been investigated thoroughly. While previous studies examined informality in combination with other CHV tactics (e.g. Kerkhof et al., 2011; Kniesel & Waiguny, 2016). Gretry et al. (2017) were the first to focus on the effects of informal language use in webcare independently. They identified different linguistic features which they used to manipulate the informality of their materials. For example, the use of emoticons, informal vocabulary, contractions, or active voice can enhance the informality of a message. In their study, participants in the informal condition saw this response from the company to a consumer compliment: “Awww! Thanks Elizabeth! We’re flattered!! :)” In contrast, in the formal condition, the company responded with “Thank you. the comment is appreciated.” Additionally, using first- or second-person pronouns can be another indicator for an informal communication style (Gretry et al., 2017). For instance, Kerkhof et al. (2011) showed that, instead of referring to the brand in the third person, using first-person pronouns such as “I” and “we” increased the level of perceived CHV in a webcare response. Hence, by using different informal features a company’s communication style can not only sound less formal, but as well more human.

While all these features are interesting to investigate, we can observe a special phenomenon for one of these features across different languages. In modern English, the second-person pronoun “you” does not imply (in)formality and is, therefore, no linguistic cue for a(n in)formal tone of voice (Cook, 2014). In contrast, 25% of all languages know different

types of pronouns to express formality and politeness, and 18% of the languages distinguish two types of second-person pronouns (hereafter 2PS pronouns). Deriving from the Latin pronouns *tu* and *vos*, this phenomenon is generally described as the *T–V distinction*: the informal T form and the formal V form (Brown & Gilman, 1960). The distinction was inherited and adopted in other European languages (e.g. German, Dutch, Spanish, or French) and can also be found in non-European languages such as Chinese or Quechua (Helmbrecht, 2003). Using a particular 2PS pronoun indicates certain levels of power and solidarity (Brown & Gilman, 1960). Therefore, the presence of a certain type of 2PS pronouns hints on the formality of a held conversation and provides information about the relationship between sender and receiver. Since formal language is perceived as more polite than informal language, the use of formal 2PS pronouns is more appropriate in situations in which communication partners are not acquainted and/or there is a difference in status (Brown & Gilman, 1960; Cook, 2014). As most research on *Conversational Human Voice* is conducted in English (Kniesel & Waiguny, 2016), we do not know much about how using informal 2PS pronouns influences the relationship between consumer and company.

Interestingly, since the concept of the T–V distinction is closely related to power and status, we encounter cross-cultural differences in the perception of when the T form (informal) or the V form (formal) are appropriate (Schüpbach et al., 2007). For example, peninsular Spanish distinguishes clearly between *tu* (T form) and *usted* (V form) depending on the relationship between two people. In contrast, *usted* replaces the informal *tu* in some Latin-American Spanish-speaking countries, for example Colombia, without losing its informal valence (e.g. Correa, 2012). We cannot only observe variations in 2PS pronoun use across different countries, but also over time. In Swedish the V form *ni* disappeared from the daily language use during the 1960s and 1970s and was widely replaced by the T form *du*, (Clyne et al., 2006; Clyne, Norrby, & Warren, 2009). This indicates that the appropriateness of using informal or formal 2PS pronouns in a specific context cannot only differ between cultures. It might as well change within one culture in the course of time, which could be a possible explanation for the negative reactions to the switch in addressing by the German police.

Investigating the effect of using different 2PS pronouns in webcare conversations is particularly interesting for several reasons. Firstly, the difference between both forms is clearly visible, and depending on the situation speakers usually choose one of two at the beginning of a conversation. Secondly, by using informal pronouns companies may attempt to reduce the distance with the consumer (Schüpbach et al., 2007). We will address the consequences of doing so later. Thirdly, choosing a form which does not match the context of the conversation,

might be perceived as inappropriate, impolite, unusual or outdated by the receiver (Clyne et al., 2006). Therefore, using informal pronouns may easily backfire for a company when their communication style does not meet the expectations of the consumer. This topic will be addressed next.

Expectancy violations and brand likeability

So far we have seen that the perceived appropriateness of informal addressing is contextual. According to the *Language Expectancy Theory* (hereafter: LET) by Burgoon et al. (2002), people have developed cultural and sociological expectations about language use, which influence the extent to which they find a message appropriate and persuasive. The theory proposes different scenarios: If the language used in the message does not comply with their cultural rules and norms, the message will violate their expectations. This expectancy violation can be perceived as positive or negative. On the one hand, a *negative violation of expectations* occurs when the brand unexpectedly ignores communication rules. This undermines the credibility of the sender and limits the persuasiveness of the message. The message is perceived as inappropriate, which can result in an attitude change opposite to what was intended. On the other hand, an expectancy violation can also be positive. Firstly, this might occur “when the enacted behavior is better or more preferred than that which was expected in the situation” (Burgoon et al., 2002, p.121). Secondly, a *positive violation of expectations* might occur when a sender who previously failed to adhere to certain social norms surprisingly respects these rules more closely than expected (Burgoon et al., 2002). We can, thus, conclude that whether a brand’s communication style is perceived as appropriate depends on whether it adheres to social rules regarding communication in the eyes of the consumer.

The previously mentioned study of Gretry et al. (2017) can serve as an example to illustrate the different scenarios suggested in the LET. They showed that the perceived appropriateness of webcare responses mediated the interaction effect of informality and brand familiarity on brand trust. Based on the LET, the use of an informal communication style was perceived appropriate due to two reasons. Firstly, the participants were familiar with the brand’s communication style. Therefore, the informal tone of voice met the expectations of the participants. Secondly, the familiar brand was perceived as a credible communicator, who has more freedom in their language use than less credible communicators. They “have ‘wider bandwidth’, i.e., can enact a larger variety of behavior without violating expectations in the negative direction” (Buller et al., 2000, p. 104). Hence, the participants were more forgiving to familiar than unfamiliar brands for using an informal tone. In contrast, when the participants

were unfamiliar with the brand, the informal style did not correspond with their expectation of how a company should respond. We thus assume that an expectancy violation consists of three components: the expectedness of the message, the appreciation of the message, and the resulting perceived appropriateness of the message. As far as we are concerned, earlier studies in this field, such as Gretry et al. (2017), have not build upon the concept of language expectancy violations and have not taken these factors into account. By investigating language expectancy violations in the context of webcare we take a new approach and, hereby, hope to close a gap in the literature, namely which factors determine the effectiveness of different communication styles.

Attribution theories can serve to explain possible consequences for brands after an expectancy violation. These theories assume that whenever something surprising or negative happens, a person will make inferences about the possible cause of this event . Whenever someone has reason to believe that the other person is responsible for this, he will perceive the other as less likeable (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Nguyen, Melewar, and Chen (2013) translate the theory into consumer-brand context. After an expectancy violation, for example the inappropriate use of formal language, the consumer will make inferences whether the company's blunder could be attributed to negative intentions. Whenever this is the case, the brand will be perceived as less likeable. This perception is grasped in the concept of *brand likeability*, which they define as "a perception of appeal to a brand that is based on defining characteristics of the source stimuli, including credibility, attractiveness, [...] and determined by the psychological evaluation process" (Nguyen et al., 2013, p.44). In other words, different inferences made about different characteristics of the brand influence to what extent a consumer perceives the brand as likeable.

Nguyen, Choudhury, and Melewar (2015) suggest that brand likeability is an early and important indicator of brand evaluation, as it can grasp the very first impression of a brand. Based on an extensive literature review, Nguyen et al. (2013) propose that brand likeability precedes desired outcomes, such as brand love, satisfaction, or reputation. For example, satisfaction is considered to be a post-purchase measure (Ekinici, Dawes, & Massey, 2008), while consumers are more likely to make a purchase from a brand when they like that brand (Nguyen et al., 2015). Most webcare studies focus on brand-related concepts which result from brand likeability. Schamari and Schaefer (2015), for example, examined the relationship between PeWOM and consumer engagement intentions with the brand. Likewise, Crijns et al. (2017) investigated the effects of message personalizations in response to consumer messages on brand reputation. However, according to Nguyen et al. (2013) brand reputation relates more

to a perception of “being famous” rather than “being likeable”. Therefore, we assume that in a situation in which a consumer is not very familiar with a brand, he will still form perceptions of the likeability of the brand, which, in turn, can influence consumer attitudes and behaviors. Hence, brand likeability is a good and early indicator of consumer perceptions, even if the brand is unfamiliar to him.

Based on the LET as well as the Attribution theory, users should expect companies to adopt a more informal tone of voice on social media, as these are generally perceived as informal environments (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & De Vries, 2015). A more informal tone, operationalized by the use of informal 2PS pronouns, corresponds with the unwritten conversational rules and norms in the social media environment. In line with the majority of studies building upon Conversational Human Voice, using a more formal tone of voice would, therefore, be a negative expectancy violation. Consequently, when a consumer perceives the language use as inappropriate, he will make negative inferences about why the company has chosen to ignore conversational rules on social media. In turn, the company will appear less likeable. The effect of pronominal addressing on brand likeability mediated by expectancy violation is summarized in our first two hypotheses:

H₁: In webcare conversations, using formal (vs. informal) 2PS pronouns will decrease the likeability of the brand.

H₂: In webcare conversations, using formal (vs. informal) 2PS pronouns violates the expectations of the consumer, which in turn will decrease the likeability of the brand.

Psychological closeness and brand likeability

When two persons are not acquainted, they will use a more formal tone of voice than two friends. Therefore, there is another factor we expect to mediate the relationship between pronominal addressing and brand likeability, namely *psychological closeness*. According to Buunk, Dijkstra, Bosch, Dijkstra, and Barelds (2012) the concept of psychological closeness entails “a feeling of interpersonal connectedness with others” (p. 279). In face-to-face communication, closeness or *physical propinquity* is associated with a feeling of involvement. Being physically close in a face-to-face conversation invites the communication partner to converse and create this feeling of connectedness (Walther, 2011; Walther & Bazarova, 2008). Technology enables us to create this feeling of closeness while being physically absent, for instance when making a phone call. This feeling of closeness in electronic communication is what Korzenny (1978) termed *electronic propinquity*: “the degree of perceived closeness of

another person or group of people” (Korzenny & Bauer, 1981, p. 481). It is important to note that this definition still leaves room for interpretation about the underlying notion of closeness. Korzenny himself defined electronic propinquity as electronic presence (Korzenny, 1978; Korzenny & Bauer, 1981). We, however, interpret propinquity or closeness as a feeling of connectedness with the communication partner rather than a mere feeling of presence of the other person.

While in face-to-face interactions communicators can make use of a great variety of cues to create (psychological) closeness, in text-based webcare conversations only a small amount of relational information is available and can be transmitted to establish closeness (Korzenny & Bauer, 1981; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Therefore, text-based media have smaller *bandwidth* than, for instance, face-to-face conversations (Korzenny, 1978). When the number of cues available is limited, it is assumed that, firstly, relationships take longer to develop, and secondly, more importance is placed on the cues which are available (Walther, 1992). For example, Byron and Baldrige (2007) showed that “e-mail recipients actively search for information about the sender and use available cues to form their judgments” (p. 153) about the likeability of the sender of the email. Consequently, in text-based conversations consumers will use the available information, i.e. what the company says and how it is said, to make inferences about their relationship with the brand. The adoption of a formal and polite communication style establishes a certain distance between brand and consumer, and they will feel less connected to each other (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Gretry et al., 2017; Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2010). In contrast, when a brand employs a more informal communication style, it attempts to humanize the brand. The brand hopes to be perceived as a close friend rather than a distant, faceless organization. The attribution of human characteristics and features to a non-human organization is theoretically termed *brand anthropomorphism* (Aggarwal & McGill, 2011). The use of informal language cues, such as informal 2PS pronouns, attempts to anthropomorphize the brand and, hereby, to reduce distance (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008; Puzakova & Aggarwal, 2015; Schüpbach et al., 2007) between the brand and the consumer. We, thus, assume that the use of a certain type of 2PS pronoun is an important indicator of psychological closeness in electronic communication.

Using informal pronouns assumingly increases the psychological closeness between consumer and brand, but does this make the company more likeable as well? The commonly used term “close relationship” suggests that closeness and likeability are interrelated. According to Korzenny (1978) likeability seem to emerge from closeness: “[...] relationships that emerge seem to be a function of propinquity” (p. 6). For example, a study among preschool

children showed that physical closeness is a reason to like a friend (Hayes, 1978). However, it seems to be a chicken-and-egg-dilemma whether we like someone because we feel close to that person or whether we feel close because we like the person. Many studies treat likeability and closeness as positive interpersonal impressions and evaluate them separately from each other (e.g. Sprecher, Treger, & Wondra, 2013), but to our knowledge no studies have shown a predictive link between the two. Therefore, we cannot base our assumptions on previous findings, but we need to consider a wider picture.

We have previously seen that using informal pronouns is an attempt to make the brand sound more human to increase the psychological closeness, or how they describe it to reduce the psychological distance between consumer and brand (Epley et al., 2008; Puzakova & Aggarwal, 2015). Above that, the goal of anthropomorphising the brand is to make the brand more likeable (Aggarwal & McGill, 2011). Additionally, brand anthropomorphism explains a substantial part of variance in brand love (Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014), which is a concept closely related to brand likeability (Nguyen et al., 2013). We, thus, hypothesize that psychological closeness mediates the effect of informal pronoun use on brand likeability because using informal 2PS makes the brand sound more human and closeby:

H₃: In webcare conversations, a brand which uses informal (vs. formal) 2PS pronouns is perceived closer by the consumer, which in turn will increase the likability of the brand.

The moderating effect of cultural background

Until now, we assume that using informal pronouns in webcare responses is beneficial for the brand, as it is the norm on social media. Therefore, using formal pronouns violates the expectations of the consumer, which in turn will decrease the likeability of the brand. The Language Expectancy Theory assumes that the effects of violating these consumer expectations should not differ across cultures (Burgoon et al., 2002). While an important assumption of the LET is that expectations about language use derive from certain shared cultural and sociological values, the LET does not explain how these values are formed and is, thus, not suited to explain cultural differences in expectations of language use (Burgoon et al., 2002). However, whether someone finds a certain message appropriate is as well influenced by his cultural and sociological background (Averbeck, 2010; Burgoon et al., 2002; Gudykunst et al., 1996). Expectations of language use are learned and can vary across cultures (Cargile, Giles, Ryan, & Bradac, 1994). For example, we have already seen that German social media users appear to be more reluctant toward informal addressing (Keylens, 2011). As someone's cultural background

influences his preferred way of communicating, it is doubtful that using informal 2PS pronouns on social media has similar positive effects across different languages and cultures.

In particular, Wierzbicka suggested that “formality is a cross-cultural issue and appropriate levels of formality may, thus, differ across different cultural speaking frames” (2003, p. 49), indicating that language expectations concerning the use of an informal tone of voice are no exception. For example, a study investigating the influence of language use on power dynamics in multinational teams found that Germans used formal 2PS pronouns significantly more often than any other languages (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2017). In contrast, in the egalitarian Dutch culture it is particularly normal to address everyone (on the workfloor) with the informal pronoun “jij” (Plevoets et al., 2008; Thesing, 2016). These differences in preference between Germany and the Netherlands can as well be observed in brand communication on social media. Burkhardt (2014) investigated the use of Twitter as a marketing tool by four Dutch and four German telecommunication operators. The results, as presented in Figure 1, show that Dutch operators did not use the formal 2PS pronoun “u” at all to address other Twitter users, while in 16% of German tweets the equivalent “Sie” was used. Interestingly, in 60% of the analyzed tweets, German operators avoided to address other users at all, which might indicate that the brands were unsure which form was appropriate. The results of the different studies suggest that the correct use of 2PS pronouns is of particular importance for German speakers, but where does this preference come from?

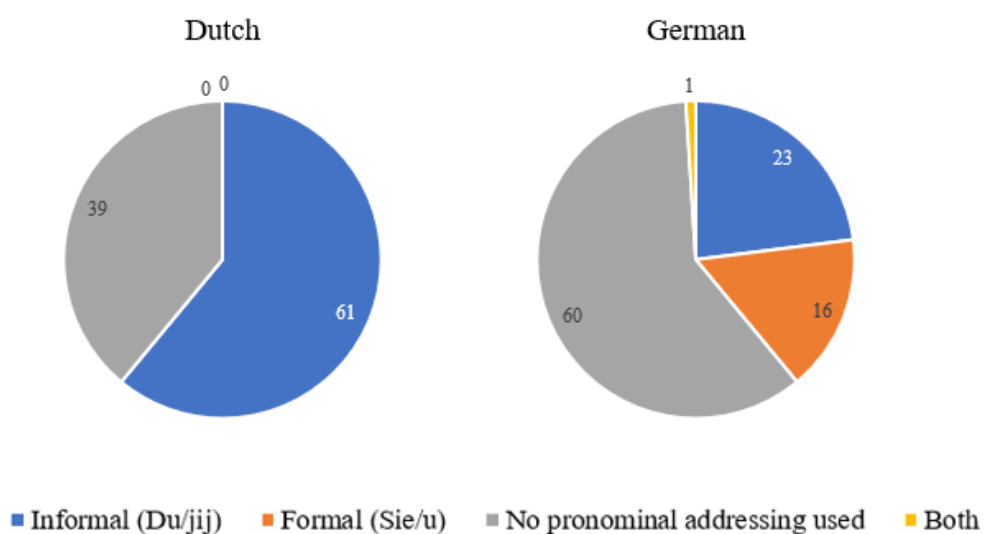


Figure 1. Pronominal addressing in tweets of German and Dutch company accounts (adapted from Burkhardt, 2014)

According to Tenzer and Pudelko (2017) the German preference for formal 2PS pronouns in a corporate context is due to the fact that Germany has a hierarchy-sensitive culture, in which language use is a means to convey differences in power. This is in line with the common notion in the literature that the T-V distinction is closely related to the perception of hierarchy in a culture (Kammas, Kazakis, & Sarantides, 2017). Schwartz (1999) suggested that hierarchical cultures rely on hierarchical relationships and expect members of that society to perform according to their ascribed role in the system. In contrast, in an egalitarian society every member of the society is perceived equal with similar rights and responsibilities. Likewise, Hofstede defines *power distance* as "the extent to which members of a society accept that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally" (1983, pp. 336-337). Importantly, Schwartz did not perceive *hierarchy* and *egalitarianism* as opposite ends of the same dimension, but rather as two independent scales (e.g. 1994, 1999). In contrast, other studies that build on Schwartz' cultural dimensions or Hofstede's dimension of power distance only use one scale to measure hierarchy and egalitarianism (e.g. Brett & Okumura, 1998; Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007). Oftentimes, Germany and the Netherlands score similar in these studies. For example, Germany scores a 35 on Hofstede's Power distance dimension, while the Netherlands scores 38 (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2015). As a higher score indicates a higher acceptance of unequally distributed power, this seems counterintuitive. Additionally, while being a hierarchy-sensitive culture, the use of formal language in German is egalitarian (Dunkel & Meierewert, 2004; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2017). Hence, we assume that these cultural measures do not grasp the fine differences in perception of hierarchy that might cause the different understanding of formality.

A comparison between Dutch and German social media users regarding their perception of appropriateness of informal addressing is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, deriving from the same language family, German and Dutch are typologically close (e.g. Chambers & Wilkie, 2014; Ribbert & Ten Thije, 2007). Additionally, both nations are culturally close. Therefore, it is easy to assume that Germans and Dutch "do not differ that much". However, the Duitsland Instituut Amsterdam (2011) assumed that Dutch companies lose approximately 8 billion euros per year due to linguistic and cultural deficiencies. Despite doubts concerning the representability of the study, it is undeniable that a profound understanding of the business partner's cultural and linguistic preferences is essential. Research has shown that intercultural communication competence positively influences customer satisfaction (Ihtiyar & Ahmad, 2015). Hence, the success of a marketer's message can depend

on fine linguistic nuances and a deeper understanding of what customers from a specific country find appropriate.

While not being relevant in the Netherlands, the appropriateness of informal 2PS pronouns on the internet is a highly discussed topic in Germany, both in the practical and the academic field. In the early 2000s, it was widely accepted in the academic literature that the informal “Du” was the standard form of addressing on the web (Hess-Lüttich & Wilde, 2013; Kretzenbach, 2005). However, Kretzenbacher already refuted this assumption in 2005, as the findings of his research suggest that German users do not generally prefer informal addressing in internet-based communication. Based on their personal experiences some German bloggers advice that the choice of pronominal addressing should be made based on the corporate image or the social network in question rather than following a general trend (e.g. Hintz, 2013; Media by nature, 2017). However, the great variety of content published concerning the issue in recent years suggests that a consensus has not been reached yet, indicating that the use of informal pronouns by German brands on social media is still a delicate issue.

Finally, to our knowledge this study would be the first to investigate cross-cultural differences in webcare. The results from Burkhardt (2014) suggest that Dutch and German brands already intuitively use that type of pronominal addressing which is advisable based on scientific research. By measuring the appropriateness of 2PS pronouns experimentally, we can thus provide scientific evidence for common practices. Additionally, a better understanding of these differences might explain prior findings in webcare research, for example why Conversational Human Voice in webcare responses seems to be less effective in German-speaking countries (Kniesel & Waiguny, 2016). A comparison of both countries with regards to their perception of formality of 2PS pronouns seems to be an interesting and relevant starting point for future research.

Despite the informal nature of the social media environment, Germans seem to be more reluctant toward informal addressing by brands than Dutch people. As previously explained, we have several reasons to assume this: Firstly, 44% of German social media users prefer to be addressed with the formal “Sie” (Keylens, 2011). Secondly, German brands seem to respect this wish, while Dutch brands do not often use the formal “u” on social media. Thirdly, in a business context formal addressing is the norm in Germany (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2017). Therefore, we hypothesize that using informal 2PS pronouns in webcare is not appreciated by German consumers as much as it is by Dutch consumers. Addressing the consumer with the informal “Du” negatively violates the expectation of the German consumer, who will find the use of informal pronouns less appropriate. Additionally, Kniesel and Waiguny (2016) showed

that humanizing a brand is less effective in German-speaking countries. When the expectations of the German consumer are violated, it is then logical to conclude that the effect of humanizing the brand is less pronounced. In other words, when the use of informal pronouns is perceived as inappropriate, this will create distance between brand and consumer. Both, in turn, will decrease the likeability of the brand, which leads to Hypothesis 4 to 6:

H₄: The effect of using informal 2PS pronouns on brand likeability is less strong for German than for Dutch consumers.

H_{5a}: Using formal pronouns violates the expectations of Dutch consumers, which in turn will decrease the likeability of the brand.

H_{5b}: Using informal pronouns violates the expectations of German consumers, which in turn will decrease the likeability of the brand.

H_{6a}: Using informal pronouns creates psychological closeness with Dutch consumers, which in turn will increase the likeability of the brand.

H_{6b}: Using informal pronouns with German consumers to create psychological closeness is less effective, which in turn will decrease the likeability of the brand.

The moderating effect of eWOM valence

Besides the cultural background of the consumer, we expect another factor to have an impact on the perceived appropriateness of 2PS pronouns in webcare responses: the valence of the original consumer message. The Facebook news feed is designed in such a way that it shows users how other users interact with each other, with (brand-generated) pages, and with content. Therefore, users can be casually exposed to conversations between another (even unknown) user and a brand (Facebook Help Center, 2018). It is generally assumed in the literature that reading eWOM evokes empathy with the author of the message (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006). Hence, when a consumer is casually exposed to a conversation between another consumer and a brand he will empathize with this person and form an opinion about the brand based on the other user's positive or negative experience.

We find evidence for this process of empathy in the results of studies investigating the effect of eWOM (e.g. Demmers et al., 2014; Doh & Hwang, 2009; Lee et al., 2009; Lee & Youn, 2009). For example, reading positive comments regarding a brand from other users has a positive effect on the consumer's perception of the brand and other relational outcomes (Demmers et al., 2014). Doh and Hwang (2009) showed that when the ratio of positive to negative reviews increased, respondents were more likely to purchase the product. Likewise,

consumers are more willing to recommend a product when they have read a positive rather than negative review (Lee & Youn, 2009). In a similar vein, findings from a study by Lee, Rodgers and Kim (2009) indicate that the attitude toward a brand decreases when the negativity of the eWOM message increases. Hence, there is enough evidence to assume that the valence of the eWOM message has a strong effect on consumers' brand perceptions. Therefore, we expect a similar effect for brand likeability.

Different studies have investigated how reading positive and negative eWOM messages influences consumer perceptions of the brand. However, to our knowledge no study has compared the effects of the valence of these eWOM messages on the readers' assessment of the appropriateness of the webcare response. In other words, we do not know how the valence of a message from another consumer to a brand affect how consumers evaluate the brand's response to this experience. The Language Expectancy Theory could help to explain the assumed effects of eWOM valence on brand likeability. In case of a complaint, the consumer will empathize with the author who is venting his negative feelings toward the brand. As someone's expectations regarding language are based on his previous knowledge about the brand (Burgoon et al., 2002), he will take the negative experience of the author into account when evaluating the brand response. Using informal pronouns might then be perceived as inappropriate and impolite, for example because it is perceived as disrespectful (Narisa, 2014) and an unsuited attempt to increase psychological closeness with the consumer (Schüpbach et al., 2007). Hence, we assume that informal addressing in responses to NeWOM negatively violates the expectations of the consumer, limiting the persuasiveness of the message, which in turn makes the brand less likeable.

In contrast, the primary motive for social media users to post PeWOM messages is to vent positive feelings (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). In particular, when someone directs the message specifically to the brand, the compliment is a means to increase the psychological closeness to the brand, which deepens the consumer-brand relationship (Boxer, 1993; Wolfson, 1990). As a more informal tone of voice is generally reserved for closer relationships (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Gretry et al., 2017; Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2010), the use of informal 2PS pronouns by the brand will reinforce the close relationship between consumer and brand. Since the author of the eWOM message is enthusiastic about the brand, these positive feelings will spill over (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006) and the consumer will feel closer to the brand, too. Therefore, the brand is permitted more freedom in its communication, as the Language Expectancy theory suggests (Buller et al., 2000, p. 104).

Therefore, we hypothesize that the consumer will feel closer to the brand and perceive the use of informal 2PS pronouns as appropriate.

Investigating how the valence of the original eWOM message influences perceptions regarding the appropriateness of the communication style in the webcare response is interesting for a number of reasons. While consumers send three times more PeWOM messages than NeWOM messages (East, Hammond, & Wright 2007), brands oftentimes do not respond to PeWOM messages (Van Os, Hachmang, Derksen, Keuning, 2016). As responding to PeWOM appears to be beneficial, this is a lost opportunity for brands to increase customer satisfaction (Demmers et al., 2014). Besides, our literature review showed that, firstly, only a handful of studies compare the effects of positive with negative eWOM, and secondly, especially research on positive eWOM is limited. A comparison of the effects of eWOM valence can provide valuable insights into the substantial differences between consumer reactions to both types. Hereby, we can particularly contribute to the limited literature on eWOM valence in general and PeWOM in particular.

In sum, we assume that the positive effect of informal addressing is enhanced or weakened by the valence of the original eWOM message. This effect is mediated by consumer perceptions whether the brand's communication styles violates their expectations and/or increases psychological closeness with the brand. The conceptual model of this study in Figure 2 visualizes our hypotheses, which can be summarized as follows:

H₇: The effect of using informal 2PS pronouns on brand likeability is less strong for NeWOM than for PeWOM.

H_{8a}: Using informal pronouns when replying to NeWOM violates the expectations of the consumers, which in turn will decrease the likeability of the brand.

H_{8b}: Using formal pronouns when replying to PeWOM violates the expectations of the consumers, which in turn will decrease the likeability of the brand.

H_{9a}: Using informal pronouns when replying to NeWOM to create psychological closeness is less effective, which in turn will decrease the likeability of the brand.

H_{9b}: Using informal pronouns when replying to PeWOM creates psychological closeness with the consumers, which in turn will increase the likeability of the brand.

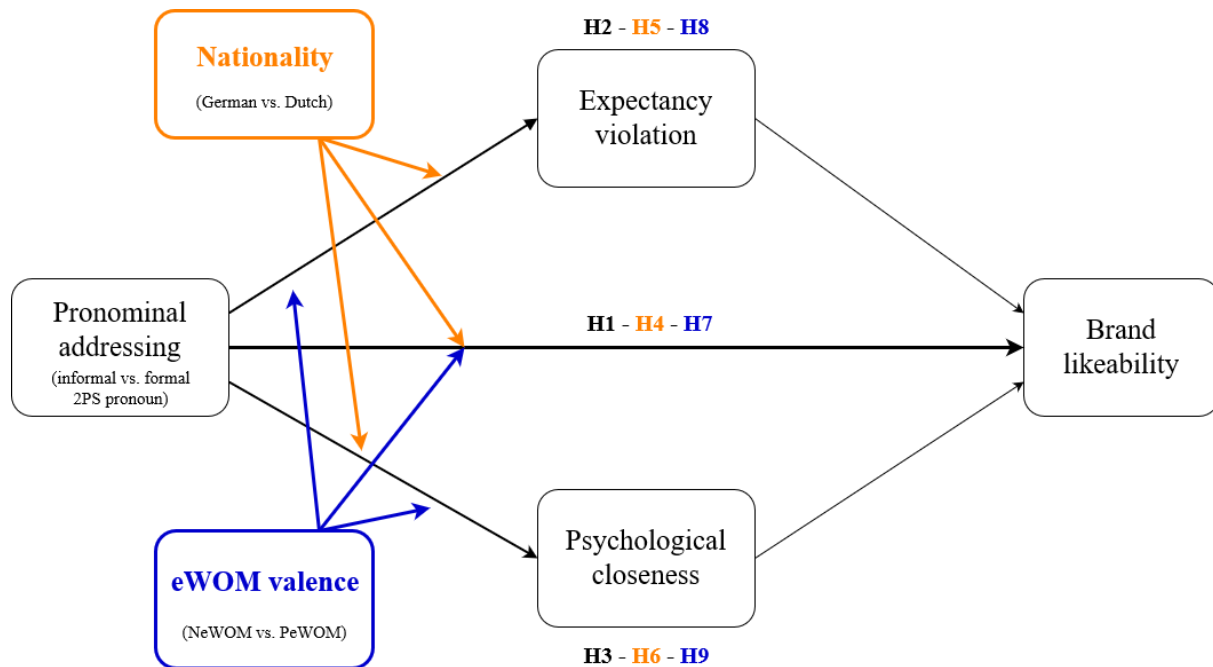


Figure 2. Conceptual model of this study

Method

Study design

To investigate the cross-cultural effects of informal addressing on brand likeability, a 2 (nationality: Dutch vs. German) x 2 (pronominal addressing: informal vs. formal) x 2 (eWOM valence: NeWOM vs. PeWOM) between-subject experiment was conducted. Therefore, eight versions of the same online survey were created, in which both Dutch and German participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. We measured participants' perceptions regarding the likeability of the brand, the appropriateness of informal addressing, and the psychological closeness with the brand.

Participants

We recruited 360 participants. 5 participants had both nationalities, and 3 participants were neither Dutch or German. Since only a very small number of participants fell into one of the two latter categories, we decided to exclude these from the further analysis. Our final sample consisted of 352 participants, of which 180 Dutch and 172 Germans. 29% of participants were male ($N = 102$) and 71% were female ($N = 250$). Their mean age was 33.70 years, ranging between 18 and 79 years. The majority of the participants had a university degree (63.1%, $N = 222$), followed by a professional education (20.7%, $N = 73$) and a highschool diploma with university entry qualification (10.8%, $N = 38$). The smallest group had a highschool diploma

without university entry qualification (5.4%, $N = 19$). 89.2% ($N = 314$) of participants were active on Facebook, while only a minority had no Facebook account (7.4%, $N = 26$) or had deleted their account (3.4%, $N = 12$). While 76.7% ($N = 270$) of all participants had previously seen a company's response to a consumer's message on social media, only about one quarter of our participants ($N = 70$) had posted a complaint or compliment directed at a company themselves. 70% (13.9% of total sample, $N = 49$) of them had as well received a response from the company.

Participants in the different experimental conditions did not significantly differ in regards of age ($F(7, 145.97) = 0.48, p = .852$) and gender ($\chi^2(7) = 6.10, p = .529$). However, a chi-square test revealed a significant association between experimental condition and participant's level of education, $\chi^2(21) = 35.87, p = .012$. Therefore, we later examined the influence of education on the outcome variables in order to rule out possible confounding effects of education level.

Materials

Participants read two fictional conversations consisting of a consumer comment and a corresponding company response. The conversations were dressed like interactions on Facebook, as any Facebook user could encounter in their personal news feed. The name of the consumer, the name of the company as well as the responding employee, and if named any details about the ordered product were blanked out to ensure that respondents were not influenced by pre-existing knowledge of or attitudes toward the brand or the consumer. We have chosen Facebook as platform for this study, as this social medium is currently the most popular in both countries. For instance, Germany counts approximately 30 million active Facebook users, which represents approximately 37% of the country's population (Facebook, 2017; Worldometers, 2017a). Similarly, Facebook is estimated to have 10.4 million active Dutch users, representing 61% of the country's population (van der Veer, Boeke, & Peters, 2017; Worldometers, 2017b).

The experimental conversations were based on real consumer-brand interactions on Facebook. Each participant saw either two complaints (NeWOM) or two compliments (PeWOM) and the corresponding company responses. We showed every participant two conversations to minimize the effect of other confounding factors, for example a feeling of aversion to the customer and his communication style. Ideally, it was indistinguishable whether the same or two different companies were addressed. The context of the eWOM messages were related to the customer service of the company, to be as general as possible. In all conversations

Customer message



Informal response



Formal response



Figure 3. Example of the material in the PeWOM condition

the customer had reached out to the customer service with a problem with their order. In the message, the consumer spoke of a pleasant or disappointing experience with the brand's customer service. In the PeWOM condition the problem was solved in a quick and helpful manner by the customer service employee. In the NeWOM condition, however, the service was poor and the customer service was not able or willing to solve the problem. The main difference between both conditions was the use of positive and negative wordings to convey a feeling of satisfaction or disappointment. For example, Figure 3 and 4 show that we used words such as “friendly”, “very helpful” and “excellent” in the compliment, and wordings such as “very disappointed”, “not able”, “compensation for this chaos” and a thumbs-down emoji in the complaint. The customer messages did not contain any 2PS pronouns to ensure that participants would not be influenced by the customer's choice.

In both languages, based on the original company response we produced two different responses per customer message. Formal addressing in the response was manipulated by changing the grammatical person. We used the formal pronouns “u” (Dutch) and “Sie”

Customer message

 Ik ben **erg teleurgesteld** over de klantenservice van **!**
Ik had verkeerde **!** ontvangen en deze netjes geretourneerd en
opgestuurd. Vandaag kreeg ik al de tweede aanmaning inclusief
aanmaningskosten voor **!** die ik nooit heb gezien. Ondanks dat ik
enkele keren gemaïld en gebeld heb, **lukt het de klantenservice niet** de
retournering goed in te boeken. Ik verwacht een gepaste **tegemoetkoming**
voor deze chaos. Zeker een 
Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 5 oktober om 15:09

Informal response

 Hallo **!**, wat vervelend. Het spijt ons dat **je** deze
ervaring heeft gehad. Kan **je** ons een persoonlijk bericht met het
bestelnummer sturen? We zoeken graag voor **je** uit hoe we **jou**
kunnen helpen en tegemoet kunnen komen. Wij kijken uit naar **jouw**
bericht! Groeten, **!** CustomerCare
Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 5 oktober om 15:23

Formal response

 Hallo **!**, wat vervelend. Het spijt ons dat **u** deze
ervaring heeft gehad. Kunt **u** ons een persoonlijk bericht met het
bestelnummer sturen? We zoeken graag voor **u** uit hoe we **u** kunnen
helpen en tegemoet kunnen komen. Wij kijken uit naar **uw** bericht!
Groeten, **!** CustomerCare
Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 5 oktober om 15:23

Figure 4. Example of the material in the NeWOM condition

(German) or the informal pronouns “jij” (Dutch) and “Du” (German) and their corresponding reflexive and possessive pronouns. Additionally, we made sure that verbs were grammatically aligned. The final conversations contained each 5 2PS pronouns and were comparable in length (44 to 50 words). The original conversations were shortened to make them easier to read and process and to reduce the number of distracting words. The material consisting of two complaints and two compliments and corresponding informal and formal company responses in both languages can be found in Appendix A.

Importantly, instructions and questions in the entire survey were phrased in such a way that the use of any 2PS pronoun was avoided. For example, instead of asking “What is your age?” as it is often done in surveys, the question simply stated “My age”. This was done to ensure that our choice of pronominal addressing would not unconsciously prime respondents for one type of 2PS pronouns.

Procedure

We used Qualtrics to design eight version of the same online survey. Participants were then approached directly via our own network and using snowball sampling. Firstly, they were asked to indicate their nationality. They could choose from four options (“I am Dutch/German/both/other”). Participants selecting German or Dutch were directed to their corresponding language path. As explained before, it was decided later to exclude any participants with a double or different nationality.

In a short introduction participants were informed about the handling of their data and anonymity and asked for consent. Participants were then randomly and equally assigned to one of the four conditions. They saw a comment from a Facebook user directed at the company followed by the company’s response. They were asked to answer the items measuring the mediators and the dependent variable. Each participant saw two conversations from their respective condition, which were separated by a filler task. The aim of this task was to distract the participant before continuing with the second conversation. Therefore, the task was completely unrelated to the topic/aim of the study. We showed four color blocks to our participants, of which one had a slightly different tone. Participants were asked to identify the odd color block. In total, participants had to complete 5 of these questions before they could continue with the second conversation. The order of the conversations were randomized. In the analysis we used the mean of both conversations to measure the mediators and the dependent variable. After the participants had seen both conversations, they were asked to answer questions regarding the manipulation and the underlying assumptions. The survey ended with questions regarding the participants’ demographics, Facebook use and eWOM behavior. Finally, participants were thanked for their participation. The duration of the survey was approximately 10 minutes.

Measures

Expectancy violation. To measure the three components of an expectancy violation we identified before we combined items from three scales into one scale. The first subscale *Expectedness of the message* is defined as “the extent to which the content of the message was not what one would predict” (Averbeck, 2010, p. 364). The scale consisted of two items, such as “This message was completely unexpected”. Secondly, the subscale *Appreciation of the message* was used “to capture whether the message was considered positive or negative” (Averbeck, 2010, p. 364). The two items, such as “I liked the message a lot”, were taken from Afifi and Metts (1998) and adapted to the context of the study. The two subscales were

completed with items from the *Perceived appropriateness* scale by Gretry et al. (2017), including “This message is appropriate”. By combining items from these three scales, it was possible to assess whether the use of informal/formal addressing violated the participants’ expectations, whether the message was perceived as positive or negative, and whether this reduced or increased the perceived appropriateness of the message. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

Since we propose a new scale to measure expectancy violations, we performed a factor analysis to see if the six items measuring the expectedness, the appreciation, and the perceived appropriateness of the message could be combined together. The results of the analysis provided two factors which in combination explained 78.64% of the variance for the entire set of variables. Factor 1 explained 47.64% of the variances with an eigenvalue of 2.86, whereas Factor 2 explained 31.00% of the variance with an eigenvalue of 1.86. Factor 1 represents the items for appreciation and appropriateness with factor loadings higher than .79. This indicates that the aspects of appreciation and appropriateness are closely related. In other words, when respondents liked a message, they as well found it appropriate, and vice versa. The 4 items of this new scale called *Appropriateness of the message* formed a one-dimensional scale with a reliable Cronbach’s alpha of .91. Factor 2 represents the items for expectancy, with factor loadings higher than .95. The two items of this new scale called *Expectedness of the message* formed a one-dimensional scale with a reliable Cronbach’s alpha of .86. These results were of great importance for our hypotheses and main analysis. Since the factor analysis showed that the scale to measure an expectancy violation consists of two constructs, namely the expectedness and the appropriateness of the message, we analyzed both constructs separately in the main analysis.

Psychological closeness. The perceived psychological closeness between company and participant were measured using a scale proposed by Liebrecht, van Hooijdonk, and Willemsen (in preparation) combining items from prior studies (Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008; Korzenny & Bauer, 1981; Wilson, Boyer O’Leary, Metiu, & Jett, 2008). Since the brand name was disguised, participants should not have any previous knowledge about the brand. Therefore, we assumed that participants would have trouble to rate the item “I feel connected to the organization”. Hence, we used four items to measure psychological closeness with the brand: “It feels like the company is distant to the consumer”; “It feels like I can communicate with the company in an honest and friendly manner”; “It feels like the company encourages the consumer to communicate”; “I have the feeling that the organization is nearby the consumers”. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to

strongly agree (7). Since the scale is relatively new and has not yet been widely used, we again performed a factor analysis before computing the reliability of this scale. As expected, one factor explained 74.91% of the variance for the entire set of variables, with an eigenvalue of 3.00. This factor combined the four items of *psychological closeness* with factor loadings higher than .78¹. The scale had a high reliability, Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$.

Brand likeability. To measure the dependent variable brand likeability, we followed a similar approach as Nguyen et al. (2015). They developed a brand likeability scale by adapting the Reysen Likeability scale, which is designed to capture the likeability of a person. However, since Nguyen et al.'s (2015) brand likeability scale measures the likeability of a physical retailer, their scale is not suited in an online context. The Reysen Likeability scale consists of eleven items, of which six can be translated into an online customer-brand context. It was decided to not include "warm" and "similar to me". Firstly, "warm" was perceived to be a metaphorical translation of friendliness. Secondly, as the name of the brand was disguised, participants should not hold enough information to judge whether the brand was similar to themselves. Accordingly, brand likeability was measured using four items: "This brand is friendly/likeable/approachable/knowledgeable." All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Since the scale is new and has not yet been widely used, we once more performed a factor analysis before computing the reliability of this scale. As expected, one factor explained 78.56% of the variance for the entire set of variables, with an eigenvalue of 3.14. This factor combined the four items of psychological closeness with factor loadings higher than .77². The four items of this new scale formed a one-dimensional scale with a reliable Cronbach's alpha of .91.

Manipulation check. To test whether our manipulation was successful, we used one item from Gretry et al.'s (2017) *Perceived formality* scale. "The company's communication style is formal." was measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

Assumption checks We additionally measured the underlying assumptions of our argumentation. Firstly, it is assumed that using the T-form is reserved for informal situation, while the V-form is appropriate in formal situations. Therefore, we asked participants to

¹ It is noteworthy that the percentage of 'nonredundant residuals with absolute values > 0.05' was 83%. Therefore, factor analysis might not be appropriate in this specific case. Results should be interpreted with caution.

² It is noteworthy that the percentage of 'nonredundant residuals with absolute values > 0.05' was exactly 50%. Therefore, factor analysis might not be appropriate in this specific case. Results should be interpreted with caution.

indicate whether they agree with the two following statements: “In formal situations, it is common to address someone with ‘u/Sie’.” and “In informal situations, it is common to address someone with ‘jij/Du’.” The items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The two items did not correlate, $r = 0.20$, $p = .703$, 95% CI [-0.09, 0.15]. Therefore, we examined both items separately in the main analysis, as we were interested whether Dutch and Germans have different perceptions regarding the appropriateness of 2PS pronouns in formal and informal situations.

Secondly, we measured the cultural dimensions of hierarchy and egalitarianism. We used 1 item per dimension: “In my country, you need to climb up a strict hierarchy to reach the top of an organization.” and “In my country, if you work hard enough, you can reach any position in society, regardless of whether you are rich or poor, male or female, non-migrant or migrant.” Both items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). As expected, the two items did not correlate with each other ($r = -0.04$, $p = .519$, 95% CI [-0.15, 0.08]). Therefore, we analyzed each item separately in the main analysis.

Additionally, we controlled for possible moderation effects of age, gender, education and social media use. Older people seem to be more reluctant to informal addressing (ANBO, 2016; Senioren Ratgeber, 2015), and people who do not use social media might not be used to the informal tone.

To ensure that all items hold the same meaning in both languages, all items were translated by the author and a second independent translator. The complete survey in Dutch and German including introduction and consent form, and an overview of all original scales can be found in Appendix B and C.

Results

To test the hypothesized effects of pronominal addressing on brand likeability we used the procedures developed by Preacher and Hayes (Hayes, 2013). We used four different PROCESS models to test our assumptions. Based on the results of the factor analysis, we examined expectedness of the webcare response and appropriateness of the webcare response separately from each other.

Manipulation check

To test whether we successfully manipulated the perceived formality of the company’s communication style across conditions, we performed an independent samples t-test. On

average, respondents in the informal condition perceived the communication style as significantly less formal ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.58$) than in the formal condition ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.53$). The results of our analysis show the company's communications style in the formal condition was perceived as more formal ($t(350) = -2.47$, $p = .014$, 95% CI [-0.72, -0.09]), indicating that our manipulation was successful.

Control variables

We controlled for possible moderation effects of age, gender, education and social media use. The control variables did not influence the significance of any of the following effects. Therefore, we will report the results of our main analysis without covariates in the models. The complete analysis can be found in Appendix D.

Outlier analysis

Across the 8 experimental conditions, we detected 19 outliers in brand likeability, expectedness and appropriateness of the message, and psychological closeness. 2 of these 19 outliers were extreme cases and 3 of the 19 were outliers on more than one of the four scales. However, deleting these outliers did not show to have much influence on the main analysis. Therefore, we decided to keep all outliers in the sample and analyze the complete dataset.

Mediation analysis

In Hypothesis 1, we assumed that using formal 2PS pronouns would decrease the likeability of the brand. Furthermore, hypothesis 2 proposed that this effect was mediated by participant's perception of expectancy violation, which is operationalized with two separate constructs, namely the expectedness and appropriateness of the webcare response. Finally, Hypothesis 3 stated that that this effect was mediated by psychological closeness.

To test the hypothesized direct effect of using informal 2PS pronouns on brand likeability (H1) as well as the mediation effect of the expectedness and appropriateness of the webcare response (H2) and psychological closeness (H3), PROCESS Model 4 was conducted with pronominal addressing as the independent variable (X), brand likeability as the outcome variable (Y), and expectedness of the webcare response, appropriateness of the webcare response, and psychological closeness as mediators (M).

Contrary to expectations, we did not find a significant total effect of pronominal addressing on brand likeability ($b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .444$), indicating that using formal 2PS pronouns ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 0.90$) in webcare conversations does not decrease brand

likeability compared to using informal 2PS pronouns ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 0.98$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

When adding the mediators to the model, the direct effect was still insignificant (0.09 , $SE = 0.06$, $p = .116$), and so was total indirect effect ($b = -0.16$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% BCa CI $[-0.32, 0.00]$). There was no significant difference between informal ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.19$) and formal addressing ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.21$) on the expectedness of the webcare response ($b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .600$). Likewise, the expectedness of the webcare response was not significantly related to the dependent variable brand likeability ($b = 0.00$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .929$). This disqualifies it as a possible mediator. Consequently, the indirect effect of pronominal addressing on brand likeability mediated by the expectedness of the webcare response was insignificant ($b = -0.00$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% BCa CI $[-0.01, 0.01]$). In contrast, the appropriateness of the webcare response was significantly higher ($b = -0.23$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .037$) when using informal pronouns ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.01$) compared to formal pronouns ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.21$). In addition, there was a significant positive relationship between the appropriateness of the webcare response and brand likeability ($b = 0.27$, $SE = 0.38$, $p < .001$). Additionally, the indirect effect of pronominal addressing on brand likeability was significant for appropriateness as mediator ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% BCa CI $[-0.13, -0.01]$). In sum, we found support for Hypothesis 2, but only for the construct appropriateness.

We then examined the effects of the second mediator psychological closeness. The effect of pronominal addressing on psychological closeness was not significant ($b = -0.17$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .100$). Using informal pronouns ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 0.91$) did not significantly increase the psychological closeness with the company compared to formal addressing ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.01$). Interestingly, psychological closeness was significantly related to brand likeability ($b = 0.59$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$), indicating that an increased feeling of closeness to the brand lead to a more positive evaluation of the brand. As we found support for the second part of H3, but not for the first part, this disqualifies psychological closeness as a possible mediator. Consequently, we did not find an indirect effect of pronominal addressing on brand likeability mediated by psychological closeness ($b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% BCa CI $[-0.22, 0.01]$). Although we showed that psychological closeness was a predictor of brand likeability, it did not mediate the relationship between pronominal addressing and brand likeability. Hence, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Moderated mediation with nationality as moderator

In Hypothesis 4, we assumed that the effect of using informal 2PS pronouns on brand likeability is less pronounced for German than for Dutch consumer. Additionally, in Hypothesis 5 we proposed that this effect was mediated by participant's perception of expectancy violation. The factor analysis already revealed that we should measure the expectedness and appropriateness of the webcare response separately. Finally, Hypothesis 6 stated that that this effect was mediated by psychological closeness. To test the hypothesized moderated mediation effect, we added participant's nationality as moderator (W) and conducted PROCESS Model 8.

Contrary to expectations, the analysis showed no significant interaction effect, $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .613$. Dutch participants did not rate the brand's likeability differently when the brand used informal 2PS pronouns ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 0.80$) compared to formal 2PS pronouns ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 0.93$, $b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .476$). Likewise, Germans did not perceive differently when the brand used informal 2PS pronouns ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.13$) compared to formal 2PS pronouns ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.84$, $b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .160$). We, thus, reject Hypothesis 4.

As we did not find support for the moderation effect of nationality (H4), the hypothesized moderated mediation effects were not significant either: The hypothesized indirect effects of pronominal addressing on brand likeability through the expectedness of the webcare response ($b = 0.00$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% BCa CI [-0.01, 0.02]), the appropriateness of the webcare response ($b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% BCa CI [-0.20, 0.03]), and psychological closeness ($b = -0.16$, $SE = 0.12$, 95% BCa CI [-0.41, 0.08]) were all insignificant. The control variables gender, age, and Facebook use did not influence the significance of any of the previously mentioned effects. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 and 6 were not supported.

Moderated mediation with eWOM valence as moderator

In Hypothesis 7, we assumed that the effect of using informal 2PS pronouns on brand likeability is less pronounced for complaints than for compliments. Additionally, in Hypothesis 8 we proposed that this effect was mediated by participant's perception of expectancy violation. The factor analysis already revealed that we should measure the expectedness and appropriateness of the webcare response separately. Finally, Hypothesis 9 stated that that this effect was mediated by psychological closeness. To test the hypothesized moderated mediation effect, we replaced participant's nationality with eWOM valence as moderator (W) and conducted PROCESS Model 8.

In line with Hypothesis 7, we found a significant interaction effect of pronominal addressing and eWOM valence, $b = -0.22$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .042$. Brand likeability was lowest when participants read a response with informal 2PS pronouns to a complaint ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.05$) followed by a response with formal 2PS pronouns to a complaint ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 0.89$) and to a compliment ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 0.85$). Brand likeability was highest when participants read a response with informal 2PS pronouns to a compliment ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 0.68$). Interestingly, the difference in brand likeability between informal and formal 2PS pronouns in the NeWOM condition was significant ($b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .016$), while it was insignificant in the PeWOM condition ($b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .652$). This indicates that using formal 2PS pronouns is only beneficial when replying to a complaint, providing partial support for hypothesis 7.

Although we found partial support for the moderation effect of eWOM valence (H7), the hypothesized moderated mediation effects were not significant: The hypothesized indirect effects of pronominal addressing on brand likeability through the expectedness of the webcare response ($b = 0.00$, $SE = 0.01$, 95% BCa CI [-0.02, 0.02]), the appropriateness of the webcare response ($b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% BCa CI [-0.19, 0.03]), and psychological closeness ($b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% BCa CI [-0.29, 0.16]) were all insignificant. However, we found a

Table 1

Means and standard deviations for the dependent variable and mediators in the NeWOM and PeWOM condition

	NeWOM			PeWOM		
	<u>Total</u>	<u>Informal</u>	<u>Formal</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Informal</u>	<u>Formal</u>
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		M (SD)	M (SD)
Brand likeability	4.77 (0.98)	4.74 (1.05)	4.81 (0.89)	5.43 (0.78)	5.56 (0.68)	5.29 (0.85)
<u>Mediators</u>						
Expectedness of the message	5.10 (1.10)	5.03 (1.07)	5.18 (1.13)	4.96 (1.29)	4.96 (1.32)	4.96 (1.27)
Appropriateness of the message	4.83 (1.05)	4.89 (1.01)	4.77 (1.09)	5.49 (0.92)	5.69 (0.84)	5.30 (0.97)
Psychological closeness	4.81 (0.96)	4.88 (0.91)	4.73 (1.00)	5.41 (0.88)	5.53 (0.79)	5.29 (0.95)

significant difference in appropriateness between informal and formal 2PS pronouns in the PeWOM condition only ($b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% BCa CI [-0.18, -0.03]). As Table 1 shows, informal addressing was perceived as more appropriate than using formal pronouns when responding to compliments. The control variables gender, age, and Facebook did not influence the significance of any of the previously mentioned effects. In sum, hypothesis 8 and 9 were not supported.

Assumption checks

To test the underlying assumptions in our argumentation, we measured the perceived appropriateness of pronominal addressing in formal and informal situations and the cultural dimensions of hierarchy and egalitarianism. As a correlation analysis showed that the items of each construct did not correlate, we analyzed each item separately.

Appropriateness of pronominal addressing To test the differences between Dutch and Germans respondents regarding their perception of appropriateness of informal addressing, we performed two independent samples t-tests. Respondents from both countries agreed that in formal situations it is common to address someone with “u” or “Sie” respectively ($t(327.55) = 0.88$, $p = .381$, 95% CI [-0.12, 3.51]³). In contrast, Germans were less certain about the appropriateness of informal pronouns ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.76$) in informal situations than Dutch respondents ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.36$, $t(321.63) = 8.54$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.13, 1.79]). These findings suggest that it is less clear to Germans in which situations informal 2PS pronouns are appropriate to use.

Hierarchy and egalitarianism To test the differences between Dutch and Germans respondents regarding their perception of hierarchy and egalitarianism, we performed two independent samples t-tests. German respondents perceived their country as significantly more hierarchical ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.25$) than Dutch respondents ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.53$, $t(342.10) = -2.46$, $p = .014$, 95% CI [-0.64, -0.08]). In contrast, Dutch respondents were significantly more egalitarian ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.69$) than German respondents ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.64$, $t(350) = 3.86$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.34, 1.03]). We can conclude that German and Dutch people differ in their perception of the distribution of power in their society.

³ However, as the confidence interval crosses zero, we cannot generalize to the population.

Discussion

On social media many companies adopt a rather informal communication style (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & De Vries, 2015), for example by addressing customers informally. It is commonly assumed in the literature that communicating with consumers in an informal, and therefore, more human tone of voice is beneficial for brands (e.g. Dijkmans et al., 2015; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher, & Miller, 2006). However, research on the effectiveness of using the so-called *Conversational Human Voice* in the context of webcare is still limited. Many languages, unlike English, distinguish between formal and informal pronominal addressing (Helmbrecht, 2003). Therefore, we investigated the effect of using informal (vs. formal) second-person pronouns to address consumers in eWOM messages. More specifically, we examined how the choice of 2PS pronouns influenced consumers' perceptions of the likeability of a brand. Our experiment showed that using informal 2PS pronouns, and hereby adapting the tone of voice to the social media environment, is not more beneficial for the brand's likeability than using formal 2PS pronouns. This contradicts the common academic notion that *Conversational Human Voice* is always advantageous (e.g. Dijkmans et al., 2015; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher, & Miller, 2006). It rather appears to be in line with the experience of different bloggers that a brand should choose that type of pronominal addressing which matches best with the corporate image of the brand (Hintz, 2013; Media by nature, 2017). Therefore, an informal communication style is not necessarily the best choice.

We as well investigated which underlying mechanisms might mediate the effect of using informal 2PS pronouns on brand likeability. Firstly, our experiment showed that social media users do not have specific expectations which type of pronominal addressing a brand should use. In other words, companies are not expected to adapt their communication style to the informal social media environment. This again rather provides support for the claim in the popular online literature to stick to the corporate image (e.g. Hintz, 2013; Media by nature, 2017) than the outspoken preference for an informal tone of voice in the academic literature (Dijkmans et al., 2015; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher, & Miller, 2006). Secondly, although consumers may not have expectations regarding the use of 2PS pronouns, they perceive informal pronominal addressing as more appropriate, which in turn makes the brand more likeable. At first sight, this seems to be contradictory to our previous results that using informal 2PS pronouns is not more beneficial than using formal pronouns. A more informal tone, operationalized by the use of informal 2PS pronouns, corresponds with the unwritten conversational rules and norms in the social media environment. However, as we will later discuss, this positive effect might only hold for webcare responses to positive eWOM. Finally,

we found evidence that switching from formal to informal addressing only is not enough to increase a feeling of closeness. Contrary to what is suggested in the literature (e.g. Epley et al., 2008; Puzakova & Aggarwal, 2015; Schüpbach et al., 2007) using informal 2PS pronouns does not bring the brand closer to the consumer and, thus, does not increase likeability.

In addition, the results from previous studies (Barcelos et al., 2018; Gretry et al., 2017; Kniesel & Waiguny, 2016) gave us reason to assume that the effectiveness of using informal 2PS pronouns might be moderated by different contextual factors, among other consumers' cultural background. Therefore, we investigated possible cross-cultural effects between Dutch and German social media users. Contrary to expectations, we did not find a moderation effect of culture. Likewise, we did not find any moderated mediation effects. Our findings suggest that, firstly, Dutch people are insensitive to changes in pronominal addressing. Given the egalitarian Dutch culture, their general preference to address everyone informally even in a business context (Plevoets et al., 2008; Thesing, 2016) and the absence of the formal "u" in Dutch corporate tweets (Burkhardt, 2014) this is somewhat surprising. More interestingly even, the same holds for Germans. German brands which use informal instead of formal 2PS pronouns are not perceived as less likeable. This contradicts findings from an earlier survey in which approximately half of German social media users preferred to be formally addressed (Keylens, 2011). As the survey was conducted in 2011, we can thus observe a change in preference over time. While Germans did not appreciate informal addressing by brand on social media six years ago, they have got accustomed to a more informal tone of voice from brands.

Besides consumers' cultural background, we expected the valence of the eWOM message to be one of the factors determining the effect of being informal on social media. Our experiment showed that formal pronominal addressing can be beneficial for the brand when the original consumer message was negative. We find a possible explanation for this in the Language expectancy theory. The theory states that the degree to which people find a message appropriate and persuasive depends on whether this message complies with cultural rules and norms. This violation can either be positive or negative (Burgoon et al., 2002). In the case of a complaint, the use of formal 2PS pronouns might result in a positive violation of the expectations of the consumer. The brand had previously failed to meet the expectations of the consumer, but in the response respects communication rules more closely than the consumer expected, resulting in a more positive evaluation of the brand. In contrast, in the case of PeWOM, using informal or formal 2PS pronouns did not influence the likeability of the brand. This is in line with Buller et al. (2000) who suggested that credible communicators have more freedom in their language use. As the brand already impressed the consumer with its actions,

the choice of informal or formal addressing may not influence the consumer's perception regarding the likeability of the brand. However, our results suggest that the use of informal 2PS pronouns is perceived as more appropriate in responses to compliments. In our sample this did not increase the likeability of the brand. Although we could not find a predictive link in this particular case, our general results suggest that using informal addressing can positively influence consumers' perception when responding to positive eWOM. Besides this assumed relationship, we did not find any moderated mediation effects. All in all, our study provided evidence that informal addressing is not harmful for brands unless the brand is responding to negative word-of-mouth.

Limitations

Four important limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, and most importantly, in our materials we adapted existing webcare responses from brands. Therefore, the communication style of the actual brand might have affected the perceived appropriateness of these responses. If the brand's tone of voice is perceived as rather informal, respondents might have perceived the response with formal addressing as unnatural. Likewise, informal addressing might not fit a response in a rather formal tone of voice. Despite our effort to find representable consumer-brand interactions such a mismatch might have affected the reliability of our materials.

Secondly, we identified two different types of Conversational Human Voice research: those measuring perceptions of CHV and those manipulating the level of CHV. Our study classifies as the latter. As we had concerns regarding the understandability and objectivity of the items proposed by Kelleher (2009) to measure Conversational Human Voice, we did not measure participants' perceptions of CHV. Hence, we did not empirically prove that informal pronominal addressing makes a brand sound more human.

Thirdly, we face the same problem as most other cross-cultural studies. The majority of items had to be translated from English into Dutch and German. By having all items additionally translated by a second independent translator, we attempted to ensure that all items hold the same meaning in both languages. However, all actions taken can only minimize the risk that participants with different languages interpret items differently.

Finally, the majority of the participants are highly-educated. Although the level of education of participants did not significantly influence the effects in our main analysis, we cannot rule out the possibility that this limits the generalizability of our study. As university

students are more familiar with these types of experiments, this might have influenced their general understanding of the purpose of our study.

Theoretical implications

This study extends the current literature in several ways. Generally speaking, we contribute to a better understanding of how brands should communicate with consumers on social media in general and in webcare conversations in particular. Hereby, we can shed a new light on the mixed results of prior studies on this topic (e.g. Crijns et al., 2017; Gretry et al., 2017; Kerkhof et al., 2011; Kniesel & Waiguny, 2016). We do this by identifying possible factors and mediators influencing the effectiveness of different communication styles.

Conversational Human Voice. Firstly, we refute the common notion in the literature that an informal communication style is always beneficial for the brand. Based on our results one might doubt the suitability of employing Conversational Human Voice in every context. Our findings contribute to a better understanding what Conversational Human Voice exactly entails. In other words, by researching the different tactics to employ human voice as proposed by Van Noort et al. (2014) we help working toward a unanimous definition of the concept and a better understanding when such a communication style is appropriate.

As our findings suggest that informal pronominal addressing is perceived as more appropriate than formal pronominal addressing, one might conclude that we found proof for the effectiveness of Conversational Human Voice. However, considering that using informal 2PS pronouns did not increase brand likeability nor was it more expected, one should be cautious with this conclusion. Our findings rather suggest that within the concept of Conversational Human Voice underlying mechanisms exist which counteract each other. For example, our results provide scientific support for the experience and advice of German bloggers, namely that the choice of pronominal addressing should be based on the brand's desired image (Hintz, 2013; Media by nature, 2017). More research is needed to empirically prove this assumption. Additionally, it would be helpful to understand which factors determine the fit between a company's identity and a Conversational Human Voice. For example, future research might build upon Gretry et al.'s (2017) brand familiarity study.

Brand likeability. Secondly, we provide new empirical support for the concept of brand likeability, as it was proposed by Nguyen et al. (2013). By adapting the Reysen Likeability scale, we have created a scale which is suited to measure the likeability of a brand in an online customer-brand context. This makes the concept of brand likeability particularly apt for webcare research, as it has proven to be a reliable indicator of consumer perceptions, even if

the brand is unfamiliar to him. Additionally, we have identified two antecedents of brand likeability, namely the perceived appropriateness of a brand message as well as the feeling of psychological closeness with the brand. Interestingly, as an expectancy violation consist of two aspects, namely the expectedness and the appropriateness of a message, one would assume that both of them would influence the likeability of the brand. However, our analysis showed that only the appropriateness of a message is related to brand likeability. In other words, even if a message is unexpected, as long as it is perceived as appropriate, the message does not violate the expectations of the receiver. Additionally, we showed that when a receiver likes a message, he as well finds it appropriate, and vice versa. Moreover, when a consumer feels close to a brand, he as well perceives the brand as more likeable. Although we could not find evidence that using informal pronouns is a successful technique to increase the feeling of closeness with the consumer (as suggested by e.g. Boxer, 1993; Wolfson, 1990), we are to our knowledge the first to show that closeness is a reliable predictor of likeability. This supports Korzenny's (1978) assumption that likeability seems to emerge from closeness.

Cross-cultural effects. Thirdly, it is, to our knowledge, the first study to investigate possible cross-cultural effects in webcare. The fact that we did not find a particular difference between German and Dutch consumers is surprising, as it contradicts findings from an earlier survey in which approximately half of German social media users preferred to be formally addressed (Keylens, 2011). As the survey was conducted in 2011, we can thus observe a change in preference over time. While Germans did not appreciate informal addressing by brand on social media six years ago, they have got accustomed to a more informal tone of voice from brands. This attitudinal change has important theoretical implications: Previous findings regarding the German culture might not be up to date anymore. De Mooij and Hofstede argued in 2002 that globalization and digitization will not lead to a convergence in consumer behavior. However, given the observed change in attitude this assumption might not hold anymore 15 years later. More research is needed to understand how a connected world influences cultural-dependent consumer preferences.

Here, we should reconsider the earlier example of the German police. In the introduction we were wondering whether the predominantly negative reactions to the switch by the German police are exceptional for the German culture or representing an attitudinal change. Based on our results, one would expect that it should not make a difference whether the police uses formal or informal 2PS pronouns. However, the switch from informal to formal addressing received mostly negative reactions (Müller, 2015; Polizei NRW Essen, 2015). This is in fact not so surprising if we consider that on social media informal addressing is generally perceived as

more appropriate. Additionally, Gretry et al. (2017) showed that being informal on social media is beneficial for familiar brands. Most of the reactions to the posts presumably comes from followers of the police, who should be familiar with the account. We can conclude that the disapproval regarding the new addressing rules for the German police reflects a change in attitude. German and Dutch perceptions regarding the appropriate use of informal addressing have converged, at least on social media.

Precisely because we did not find any significant differences between German and Dutch consumers, we encourage other researchers to investigate other cultures. We suggest comparing nationalities which know a T–V distinction in their language, but are not culturally close, as they are for example positioned at the opposite ends of Hofstede’s Power distance scale. Besides, it might be fruitful to investigate the effect of pronominal addressing in languages which have different rules regarding the use of 2PS pronouns in different countries, for instance Spanish in Spain and Colombia (Correa, 2012) or Dutch and Flemish. Besides, it might be interesting to investigate cross-cultural differences in webcare regarding the use of informal language in general. This could provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of Conversational Human Voice in different languages and cultures as suggested by Kniesel and Waiguny (2016).

Besides, it is noteworthy that Germans appear to be more hierarchical-focused, while Dutch are more egalitarian. While this is in line with communication studies (e.g. Dunkel & Meierewert, 2004; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2017), it contradicts empirical results testing cultural dimensions such as Hofstede’s Power distance (Hofstede et al., 2015). Although one may say that we only used one item to measure each cultural dimension, we would counter that we attempted to grasp the crux of these concepts in our items. Our findings suggest that these cultural dimensions may not be suited to examine differences between two cultures as close as the German and the Dutch.

eWOM Valence. Finally, we extend the existing literature on brand communication on social media by comparing the different effects of NeWOM and PeWOM. While most prior studies focus on NeWOM (e.g. Joireman et al., 2013; Kerkhof et al., 2011; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; Willemsen et al., 2013), our research provides interesting insights into the differences between both types of electronic word-of-mouth. Our findings are in line with the limited number of studies on PeWOM, providing evidence for the positive effect of reading other consumer’s compliments on individual perceptions about the brand (e.g. Demmers et al., 2014; Doh & Hwang (2009); Lee et al. (2009); Lee & Youn, 2009). In contrast, using informal address in a complaint can be harmful for the likeability of the brand. Therefore, we show that

the valence of the original eWOM message influences perceptions regarding the appropriateness of the communication style in the following response from the brand. In addition, as we found that formal addressing is in particular beneficial when responding to NeWOM, the question arises which psychological processes might cause this effect. Is informal addressing of a person complaining perceived as disrespectful (Narisa, 2014)? Which inferences do consumers make about the brand which do not comply with communication rules on social media? We suggest that a deeper understanding of consumer attributions and inferences is necessary here.

Practical implications

Our findings have implications for managers, especially when they are involved in German-Dutch cross-border projects. The good news for them is that neither Dutch nor Germans seem to prefer a certain type of pronominal addressing on social media. Reconsidering the results of Burkhardt (2014) Dutch telecommunication operators did not use the formal “u” on social media at all. However, our results suggest that it is not necessary for brands to be informal. Formal pronominal addressing might be a better match with the corporate image and communication style of the company, for example when offering high-involvement or high-risk products or services (Barcelos et al., 2018). Brands thus do not need to adapt to the informal tone of the social media environment, but can stick to their formal identity without being punished by social media users. Nonetheless, informal addressing is perceived as more appropriate and might make the brand more likeable. Still we believe that managers and marketers should ask themselves which type of nominal addressing matches best with the image the brand wants to convey on social media. As Burkhardt (2014) showed that 39% of Dutch and 60% of German corporate tweets did not contain any 2PS pronouns at all, brands seemed to avoid making a clear choice. However, as our analysis generally showed no significant differences between informal and formal addressing, this seems to be unnecessary.

It is noteworthy that the only case in which informal addressing decreased the likeability of the brand was when a company responded to a complaint. Therefore, it seems to be a logical advice to use formal 2PS pronouns in response to negative eWOM and informal 2PS pronouns in response to any other message on social media. However, such a conclusion might be drawn too quickly. Since our participants saw one conversation at a time, we do not know how social media users react when they see the brand constantly changing its way of addressing users. This might be perceived as inconsistent and unprofessional. Further research would be needed to rule out such effects.

Finally, we have shown that an increased feeling of closeness and connectedness between brand and consumer makes the brand more likeable. However, it is not sufficient to only switch from informal to formal pronominal addressing if a brand wants to increase this feeling of closeness. The company should consider other tactics to reduce the distance with the consumer. This, however, has not been investigated thoroughly. Hence, further research is needed to discover how exactly brands can create closeness with consumers on social media.

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Appendix

Appendix A Material

NeWOM Conversation 1

Customer message

I am really disappointed about the customer service hotline. After paying I found out that I had made a mistake. The customer service employee was not helpful at all and seemed not to have any patience for me and my problem. I don't even know now if I will received my order at all!!

Webcare response

Dear [REDACTED], sorry to hear that you had this experience with our customer service! Could you tell us what went wrong when placing the order? You can as well send a private message 😊. We are looking forward to your reply. Best regards, Joost van Coolblue

Dutch

Customer Message



Ik ben heel ontevreden met de klantenservice via telefoon. Na het betalen viel me op dat ik een foutje had gemaakt in de bestelling. De medewerkster van de klantenservice was absoluut niet behulpzaam en leek überhaupt geen geduld voor mij en mijn probleem te hebben. Ik weet nu niet eens of ik mijn bestelling überhaupt zal ontvangen!!
Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 7 november om 16:14

Informal webcare response



Beste [REDACTED], wat vervelend dat je deze ervaring hebt gehad met onze klantenservice! Zou je ons willen vertellen wat er mis is gegaan bij het plaatsen van jouw bestelling? Je mag ons uiteraard ook een privébericht sturen 😊. Wij kijken uit naar jouw bericht!
Groeten, [REDACTED] van [REDACTED]
Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 7 november om 16:41

Formal webcare response



Beste [REDACTED], wat vervelend dat u deze ervaring hebt gehad met onze klantenservice! Zou u ons willen vertellen wat er mis is gegaan bij het plaatsen van uw bestelling? U mag ons uiteraard ook een privébericht sturen 😊. Wij kijken uit naar uw bericht!
Groeten, [REDACTED] van [REDACTED]
Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 7 november om 16:41

German

Customer Message

 Ich bin sehr unzufrieden mit der Kundenservicehotline. Nach dem Bezahlen ist mir aufgefallen, dass ich beim Bestellen einen Fehler gemacht habe. Die Mitarbeiterin des Kundenservice war total nicht hilfsbereit und schien überhaupt keine Geduld für mich und mein Problem zu haben. Ich weiß jetzt nicht einmal, ob ich meine Bestellung überhaupt erhalte!!
Gefällt mir · Antworten · Nachricht senden · 7. November um 16:14

Informal webcare response

 Liebe [Name], wie ärgerlich, dass du diese Erfahrung mit unserem Kundenservice gemacht hast! Kannst du uns erklären, was bei deiner Bestellung schief gegangen ist? Du kannst uns natürlich auch privat eine Nachricht schicken 😊. Wir freuen uns auf deine Nachricht! Viele Grüße, [Name] von [Name]
Gefällt mir · Antworten · Nachricht senden · 7. November um 16:41

Formal webcare response

 Liebe [Name], wie ärgerlich, dass Sie diese Erfahrung mit unserem Kundenservice gemacht hast! Können Sie uns erklären, was bei Ihrer Bestellung schief gegangen ist? Sie können uns natürlich auch privat eine Nachricht schicken 😊. Wir freuen uns auf Ihre Nachricht! Viele Grüße, [Name] von [Name]
Gefällt mir · Antworten · Nachricht senden · 7. November um 16:41

NeWOM Conversation 2

Customer message

I am really disappointed about the customer service of Zalando! I received the wrong shoes that I returned as I should. Today I received already the 2nd remind inclusive fees for shoes I have never even seen. Although I have emailed and called multiple times, the customer service is not able to book the reclamation correctly. I expect an adequate compensation for this chaos. Definitely a 🗨️

Webcare response

Dear [REDACTED], what an awful situation. My apologies that you have experienced this, Please send me a personal message with your order number. I will check for you how we can help and compensate you. I am looking forward to your message. Best regards,
[REDACTED]

Dutch

Customer Message

 [REDACTED] Ik ben erg teleurgesteld over de klantenservice van [REDACTED]! Ik had verkeerde [REDACTED] ontvangen en deze netjes geretourneerd en opgestuurd. Vandaag kreeg ik al de tweede aanmaning inclusief aanmaningskosten voor [REDACTED] die ik nooit heb gezien. Ondanks dat ik enkele keren gemaïld en gebeld heb, lukt het de klantenservice niet de retournering goed in te boeken. Ik verwacht een gepaste tegemoetkoming voor deze chaos. Zeker een 🗨️
Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 5 oktober om 15:09

Informal webcare response

 [REDACTED] Hallo [REDACTED], wat vervelend. Het spijt ons dat u deze ervaring heeft gehad. Kunt u ons een persoonlijk bericht met het bestelnummer sturen? We zoeken graag voor u uit hoe we u kunnen helpen en tegemoet kunnen komen. Wij kijken uit naar uw bericht!
Groeten, [REDACTED] CustomerCare
Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 5 oktober om 15:23

Formal webcare response

 [REDACTED] Hallo [REDACTED], wat vervelend. Het spijt ons dat je deze ervaring heeft gehad. Kan je ons een persoonlijk bericht met het bestelnummer sturen? We zoeken graag voor je uit hoe we jou kunnen helpen en tegemoet kunnen komen. Wij kijken uit naar jouw bericht! Groeten, [REDACTED] CustomerCare
Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 5 oktober om 15:23

German

Customer Message



Ich bin sehr enttäuscht vom Kundenservice von [REDACTED]! Ich habe falsche [REDACTED] erhalten und diese ordnungsgemäß reklamiert und zurückgeschickt. Heute habe ich bereits die 2. Mahnung samt Mahngebühren erhalten für [REDACTED], die ich nie gesehen habe. Trotz mehreren Emails und Anrufen meinerseits schafft der Kundenservice es nicht, die Retoure ordentlich zu verbuchen. Ich erwarte für dieses Chaos eine angemessene Entschädigung! Definitiv 🗨️

Gefällt mir · Antworten · Nachricht senden · 5. Oktober um 15:09

Informal webcare response



Hallo [REDACTED], das klingt wirklich sehr ärgerlich. Es tut mir leid, dass du diese Erfahrung machen musstest. Kannst du uns eine persönliche Nachricht mit der Bestellnummer schicken? Wir schauen gerne für dich nach, wie wir dir helfen und entgegenkommen kann. Wir freuen uns auf deine Nachricht! Viele Grüße,
[REDACTED] CustomerCare

Gefällt mir · Antworten · Nachricht senden · 5. Oktober um 15:23

Formal webcare response



Hallo [REDACTED], das klingt wirklich sehr ärgerlich. Es tut mir leid, dass Sie diese Erfahrung machen mussten. Können Sie uns eine persönliche Nachricht mit der Bestellnummer schicken? Wir schauen gerne für Sie nach, wie wir Ihnen helfen und entgegenkommen kann. Wir freuen uns auf Ihre Nachricht! Viele Grüße, [REDACTED] CustomerCare

Gefällt mir · Antworten · Nachricht senden · 5. Oktober um 15:23

PeWOM Conversation 1

Customer message

Something went wrong with my payment, so my order seemed not to be placed. I called the customer service (around 22.00 h) and talk to a friendly young lady who was really helpful. She checked my data and solved the problem quickly and professionally. The next day I could pick up the package at the pick-up point. Excellent service!

Webcare response

Dear [REDACTED], nice to hear that you are satisfied with us and our service. Many thanks for writing this review. I wish you a lot of fun with your purchase and hope to see you back soon. Best regards, [REDACTED]

Dutch

Customer Message



[REDACTED] Er ging iets fout na de betaling en de order leek niet geplaatst te zijn. Ik heb gebeld met de klantenservice (tegen 22.00 uur) en ik kreeg een aardige jonge dame die zeer behulpzaam was. Zij heeft mijn gegevens gecontroleerd en het probleem heel snel en professioneel opgelost. De volgende dag kon ik het pakje bij het afhaalpunt ophalen. Super service!

Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 7 november om 16:14

Informal webcare response



[REDACTED] Beste [REDACTED], wat fijn om te lezen dat u zo blij met ons en onze service bent. Ontzettend bedankt dat u deze review hebt geschreven. Wij wensen u heel veel plezier van uw mooie aankoop en hopen dat we u weer snel bij ons zullen zien. Groeten, [REDACTED] van [REDACTED]

Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 7 november om 16:41

Formal webcare response




[REDACTED] Beste [REDACTED], wat fijn om te lezen dat je zo blij met ons en onze service bent. Ontzettend bedankt dat je deze review hebt geschreven. Wij wensen je heel veel plezier van jouw mooie aankoop en hopen dat we je weer snel bij ons zullen zien. Groeten, [REDACTED] van [REDACTED]

Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 7 november om 16:41





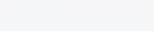
German

Customer Message

  Beim Bezahlen ist ein Fehler passiert, weswegen meine Bestellung nicht akzeptiert wurde. Ich habe den Kundenservice angerufen (gegen 22.00 Uhr) und mit einer freundlichen jungen Dame gesprochen, die sehr hilfsbereit war. Sie hat meine Daten kontrolliert und das Problem sehr schnell und professionell gelöst. Am nächsten Tag konnte ich das Päckchen beim Paketshop abholen. Super Service!


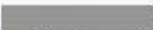

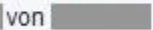
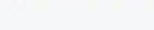
[Gefällt mir](#) · [Antworten](#) · [Nachricht senden](#) · 7. November um 16:14

Informal webcare response

  Liebe , wie schön zu hören, dass Sie so zufrieden mit uns und unserem Service sind. Vielen Dank, dass Sie diese Bewertung geschrieben haben. Wir wünschen Ihnen ganz viel Spaß mit Ihrem Kauf und hoffen, dass wir Sie schnell wiedersehen werden. Viele Grüße,  von 

[Gefällt mir](#) · [Antworten](#) · [Nachricht senden](#) · 7. November um 16:41

Formal webcare response

  Liebe , wie schön zu hören, dass du so zufrieden mit uns und unserem Service bist. Vielen Dank, dass du diese Bewertung geschrieben hast. Wir wünschen dir ganz viel Spaß mit deinem Kauf und hoffen, dass wir dich schnell wiedersehen werden. Viele Grüße,  von 

[Gefällt mir](#) · [Antworten](#) · [Nachricht senden](#) · 7. November um 16:41

PeWOM Conversation 2

Customer message

Because I ordered the wrong [REDACTED], I called the customer service last Tuesday. The employee I has on the phone really deserves a compliment!!! Mr medewerker did everything to solve my problem quickly and professionally. I could return the [REDACTED] without any problems. Everything was fixed really quickly. Compliments!

Webcare response

Dear [REDACTED], many thanks for taking the time to write this review. We are really happy to hear that you are satisfied with our service and we will of course forward your compliments to our colleagues. Have a lot of fun with your order. Best regards, [REDACTED]

Dutch

Customer Message



[REDACTED] Omdat ik een verkeerde [REDACTED] besteld had, heb ik afgelopen dinsdag met de klantenservice gebeld. De medewerker die ik aan de telefoon kreeg, verdient echt een compliment!!! Meneer [REDACTED] heeft er alles aan gedaan om voor mij dit probleem snel en vakkundig op te lossen. Ik heb zonder problemen mijn [REDACTED] om kunnen ruilen. Alles was heel snel geregeld. Mijn complimenten daarvoor!

Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 5 oktober om 15:09

Informal webcare response



[REDACTED] Hallo [REDACTED], ontzettend bedankt dat je de tijd hebt genomen voor het schrijven van jouw review. We zijn heel erg blij dat je zo tevreden bent met onze service en zullen jouw complimenten natuurlijk doorgeven aan onze collega. Heel veel plezier met je bestelling! Groeten, [REDACTED] CustomerCare

Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 5 oktober om 15:23

Formal webcare response



[REDACTED] Hallo [REDACTED], ontzettend bedankt dat u de tijd hebt genomen voor het schrijven van uw review. We zijn heel erg blij dat u zo tevreden bent met onze service en zullen uw complimenten natuurlijk doorgeven aan onze collega. Heel veel plezier met uw bestelling! Groeten, [REDACTED] CustomerCare

Leuk · Beantwoorden · Chatbericht · 5 oktober om 15:23

German

Customer Message



Da ich eine falsche bestellt hatte, habe ich letzten Dienstag den Kundenservice angerufen. Der Mitarbeiter, den ich am Telefon hatte, verdient echt ein Kompliment!!! Herr hat alles dafür getan, um mein Problem schnell und fachkundig zu lösen. Ich konnte ohne Probleme meine umtauschen. Alles wurde sehr schnell geregelt. Mein Kompliment!

Gefällt mir · Antworten · Nachricht senden · 5. Oktober um 15:09

Informal webcare response



Hallo , vielen lieben Dank, dass du dir die Zeit genommen hast, eine Bewertung zu schreiben. Wir freuen uns sehr, dass du mit unserem Service so zufrieden bist und werden dein Kompliment selbstverständlich an unseren Kollegen weiterleiten. Ganz viel Spaß mit deiner Bestellung! Viele Grüße,

CustomerCare

Gefällt mir · Antworten · Nachricht senden · 5. Oktober um 15:23

Formal webcare response



Hallo , vielen lieben Dank, dass Sie sich die Zeit genommen hast, eine Bewertung zu schreiben. Wir freuen uns sehr, dass Sie mit unserem Service so zufrieden bist und werden Ihr Kompliment selbstverständlich an unseren Kollegen weiterleiten. Ganz viel Spaß mit Ihrer Bestellung! Viele Grüße,

CustomerCare

Gefällt mir · Antworten · Nachricht senden · 5. Oktober um 15:23

Appendix B Complete survey

Introduction

Dutch

Beste deelnemer,
mijn naam is Alea Sophie Küppers en ik studeer Communicatie- & Informatiewetenschappen aan de Universiteit van Tilburg. Deze enquête maakt deel uit van mijn masterscriptie. Het invullen van de enquête duurt ongeveer 5 tot 10 minuten. Alvast bedankt voor de deelname!

German

Lieber Teilnehmer,
mein Name ist Alea Sophie Küppers und ich studiere Kommunikations- & Informationswissenschaften an der Universität Tilburg. Diese Umfrage ist Teil meiner Masterarbeit. Das Ausfüllen der Umfrage dauert ungefähr 5 bis 10 Minuten. Vorab vielen Dank fürs Teilnehmen!

English

Dear participant,
my name is Alea Sophie Küppers and I study Communication & Information Sciences at Tilburg University. This survey is part of my master thesis. Completing the survey takes approximately 5 to 10 minutes. In advance many thanks for participating!

Nationality

Mijn nationaliteit/meine Nationalität/my nationality

- Nederlands
- Deutsch
- Beide nationaliteiten/beide Nationalitäten (a)
- Nog Nederlands nog Duits/weder niederländisch noch deutsch/neither Dutch nor German (b)

a) Preferred language

- Ik kan mij het beste in het Nederlands uitdrukken.
- Ich kann mich am besten auf Deutsch ausdrücken.

b) Other nationality

- Ik voel mij in Nederland thuis en spreek vloeiend Nederlands.
- Ich fühle mich in Deutschland zuhause und spreche fließend Deutsch.
- I do not live in the Netherlands nor in Germany and/or I do not speak either language fluently. (*end of survey*)

Informed consent

Dutch

Toestemmingsverklaring deelname

"Ik stem geheel vrijwillig in met deelname aan dit onderzoek. Ik behoud daarbij het recht deze instemming weer in te trekken zonder dat ik daarvoor een reden hoeft te geven. Ik besef dat ik op elk moment mag stoppen met het onderzoek.

Als mijn onderzoeksresultaten worden gebruikt in wetenschappelijke publicaties, of op een andere manier openbaar worden gemaakt, dan zal dit volledig geanonimiseerd gebeuren. Mijn persoonsgegevens worden niet door derden ingezien zonder mijn uitdrukkelijke toestemming.

Als ik meer informatie wil, nu of in de toekomst, dan kan ik me wenden tot "

Ik begrijp de bovenstaande tekst en ga akkoord met deelname aan het onderzoek.

- ja
- nee (*end of survey*)

German

Einverständniserklärung Teilnahme

"Ich habe mich freiwillig dazu entschieden, an dieser Studie teilzunehmen. Ich kann meine Einwilligung jederzeit ohne Angaben von Gründen widerrufen. Ich weiß, dass ich zu jedem Zeitpunkt die Umfrage beenden kann.

Bei der Veröffentlichung in einer wissenschaftlichen Zeitschrift wird aus den Daten nicht hervorgehen, dass ich an dieser Umfrage teilgenommen haben. Es wird gewährleistet, dass meine Daten nicht ohne meine Einverständniserklärung an Dritte weitergegeben werden.

Für mehr Informationen zur Studie kann ich mich jederzeit wenden an

Ich habe den oben stehenden Text gelesen und stimme der Teilnahme an dieser Studie zu.

- Ja
- Nein (*end of survey*)

Conversations

Dutch

Hierna wordt een bericht van een klant aan een bedrijf getoond. De klant heeft het bericht publiekelijk op de Facebook-pagina van het bedrijf geplaatst. Het bedrijf heeft hierop ook gereageerd. Ik ben benieuwd hoe het antwoord van het bedrijf door buitenstaanders wordt beoordeeld. Vandaar dat ik na het tonen van het antwoord een aantal vragen ga stellen. Om de privacy van de betrokken partijen te beschermen zijn alle aanwijzingen naar de klant en het bedrijf onherkenbaar gemaakt.

Een klant heeft dit bericht op de Facebook-pagina van een bedrijf geplaatst:

CUSTOMER MESSAGE (PeWOM or NeWOM)

Het bedrijf heeft vervolgens op dat bericht gereageerd:

WEBCARE RESPONSE (informal or formal)

Geef bij de volgende stellingen aan: "Ik ben het in de volgende mate eens met de volgende stellingen."

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Helemaal mee oneens	Mee oneens	Beetje mee oneens	Neutraal	Beetje mee eens	Mee eens	Helemaal mee eens

German

Als nächstes wird eine Nachricht eines Kunden an ein Unternehmen gezeigt. Der Kunde hat die Nachricht öffentlich auf der Facebook-Seite des Unternehmens gepostet. Das Unternehmen hat anschließend auf diese Nachricht geantwortet. Mich interessiert, wie Dritte die Antwort des Unternehmens beurteilen. Daher stelle ich, nachdem die Antwort gezeigt wurde, einige Fragen. Um die Privatsphäre der Beteiligten zu schützen, wurden alle Hinweise auf den Kunden oder das Unternehmen unkenntlich gemacht.

Ein Kunde hat diese Nachricht auf der Facebook-Seite eines Unternehmens gepostet:
 CUSTOMER MESSAGE (PeWOM or NeWOM)

Das Unternehmen hat anschließend auf diese Nachricht geantwortet:
 WEBCARE RESPONSE (informal or formal)

Bitte die folgenden Aussagen beurteilen: „Ich stimme den Aussagen im folgenden Maße zu.“

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Stimme gar nicht zu	Stimme nicht zu	Stimme eher nicht zu	Neutral	Stimme eher zu	Stimme zu	Stimme völlig zu

Measures

Mediator 1: Expectancy violation

<u>English</u>	<u>Dutch</u>	<u>German</u>
<i>Perceived expectedness of the message</i>		
This message was completely unexpected.	Dit bericht was volledig onverwacht.	Diese Nachricht war total unerwartet.
This message surprised me a great deal.	Dit bericht heeft mij erg verrast.	Diese Nachricht hat mich sehr überrascht.

Appreciation of the message

I liked the message a lot.	Ik vond het bericht heel leuk.	Diese Nachricht hat mir sehr gefallen.
I'd rather never receive such a message from the company.	Ik zou liever niet zo'n bericht van het bedrijf willen ontvangen.	Ich würde so eine Nachricht lieber nicht von der Firma empfangen.

Perceived appropriateness of the message

This message corresponds to how I expect the company to communicate with the consumer.	Dit bericht komt overeen met mijn verwachtingen hoe het bedrijf met de klant moet communiceren.	Diese Nachricht stimmt mit meinen Erwartungen überein, wie die Firma mit dem Kunden kommunizieren sollte.
This message is appropriate.	Dit bericht was gepast.	Diese Nachricht war angemessen.

Mediator 2: Perceived propinquity

<u>English</u>	<u>Dutch</u>	<u>German</u>
Based on company response:	Op basis van het antwoord van het bedrijf:	Aufgrund der Antwort des Unternehmens:
It feels like the company is distant to the consumer.	Heb ik het gevoel dat het bedrijf afstandelijk overkomt.	Habe ich das Gefühl, dass das Unternehmen distanziert wirkt.
It feels like I can communicate with the company in an honest and friendly manner.	Heb ik het gevoel dat ik op een eerlijke en open manier kan communiceren met het bedrijf.	Habe ich das Gefühl, dass ich offen und ehrlich mit dem Unternehmen kommunizieren kann.
It feels like the company encourages the consumer to communicate.	Heb ik het gevoel dat het bedrijf de communicatie met klanten aanmoedigt.	Habe ich das Gefühl, dass das Unternehmen die Kommunikation mit Kunden ermuntert.
I have the feeling that the organization is nearby the consumers.	Heb ik het gevoel dat het bedrijf dichtbij de klanten staat.	Habe ich das Gefühl, dass das Unternehmen kundennah ist.

Dependent variable: Brand likeability

<u>English</u>	<u>Dutch</u>	<u>German</u>
This company is friendly	Het bedrijf is vriendelijk.	Das Unternehmen ist freundlich.
This company is likeable	Het bedrijf is sympathiek.	Das Unternehmen ist sympathisch.
This company is approachable.	Het bedrijf is toegankelijk.	Das Unternehmen ist zugänglich.
This company is knowledgeable.	Het bedrijf heeft kennis van zaken.	Das Unternehmen ist kenntnisreich.

Distraction task

Dutch

Hierna staan vier kleurvlakken afgebeeld. Één van de vier vlakken heeft net een andere kleur.
Graag het betreffende vlak aanklikken.

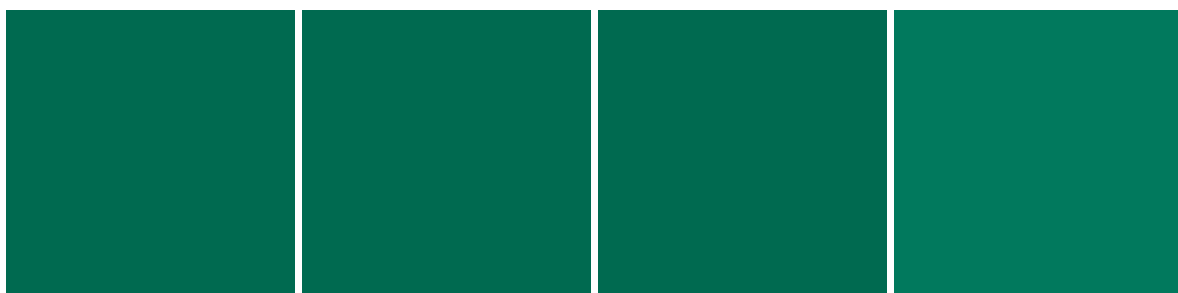
Welk vlak heeft een andere kleur?

German

Als nächstes werden vier Farbfelder gezeigt. Die Farbe eines dieser vier Farbfelder weicht etwas von den übrigen ab. Bitte das entsprechende Feld auswählen.

Welches Feld hat eine andere Farbe?

For example:



Manipulation & assumption checks

<u>English</u>	<u>Dutch</u>	<u>German</u>
<i>Informality of the employed communication style</i>		
The company's communication style is formal.	/De manier waarop het bedrijf communiceert is formeel.	Der Umgangston des Unternehmens ist formell.
<i>Appropriateness of pronominal addressing in formal and informal situations</i>		
In formal situations, it is common to address someone with "u/Sie".	In formele situaties is het gebruikelijk om iemand met "u" aan te spreken.	In formellen Situationen ist es normal, jemanden zu siezen.
In informal situations, it is common to address someone with "du/jij".	In informele situaties is het gebruikelijk om iemand met "jij" aan te spreken.	In informellen Situationen ist es normal, jemanden zu duzen.
<i>Cultural dimensions</i>		
<i>Hierarchy</i>	Of men nou rijk of arm, man of vrouw, Nederlander of migrant is, in Nederland kan iedereen bereiken wat hij of zij wil als men hard genoeg werkt.	In Deutschland kann jeder, egal ob arm oder reich, Mann oder Frau, mit oder ohne Migrationshintergrund, erreichen, was man will, wenn man hart genug dafür arbeitet.
<i>Egalitarianism</i>	In Nederland kan men meestal de top van een organisatie alleen bereiken door de verschillende stappen in een hiërarchie te volgen.	In Deutschland muss man sich in einer strikten Hierarchie hocharbeiten, um an die Spitze eines Unternehmen zu gelangen.

Demographics

<u>English</u>	<u>Dutch</u>	<u>German</u>
Age	Mijn leeftijd: _____ (bv. 25)	Mein Alter: _____ (z.B. 25)
Gender	Mijn geslacht Man Vrouw	Mein Geschlecht Mann Frau

Highest education	Mijn hoogst genoten opleiding	Meine höchste/aktuelle Schulausbildung
	VMBO	Hauptschulabschluss
	HAVO	Mittlere Reife
	VWO	Fachabitur/Abitur
	MBO	(Abgeschlossene) Berufsausbildung
	HBO/WO	(Abgeschlossenes) Studium
	Anders, namelijk....	Anders, nämlich

Social Media use

<u>English</u>	<u>Dutch</u>	<u>German</u>
Facebook Account	Ik heb een Facebook-account. Ja Nee, ik heb mijn account verwijderd. Nee, ik heb nooit een account gehad. (<i>end survey</i>)	Ich habe einen Facebook-Account. Ja Nein, ich haben meinen Account gelöscht. Nein, ich hatte noch nie einen Account. (<i>end survey</i>)
Have you ever posted a complaint or compliment to a company's Facebook page?	Ik heb wel eens een klacht of compliment geplaatst op het Facebookpagina van een bedrijf. Ja Nee	Ich habe schon einmal eine Beschwerde oder Kompliment auf der Facebookseite eines Unternehmen gepostet. Ja Nein
Have you received a response from the company?	Ik heb vervolgens ook eens een reactie gekregen van het bedrijf. Ja Nee	Ich habe anschließend auch schon einmal eine Antwort von dem Unternehmen erhalten. Ja Nein
Have you ever seen a company responding to another user's complaint or compliment?	Ik heb wel eens op Facebook gezien dat een bedrijf op een klacht of compliment van iemand anders heeft gereageerd. Ja Nee	Ich habe schon einmal auf Facebook gesehen, dass ein Unternehmen auf eine Beschwerde oder ein Kompliment eines anderen Nutzers reagiert hat. Ja Nee

Appendix C Original scales

We used different scales (items) to measure the dependent variable brand likeability, the mediators expectancy violation and psychological closeness, and out underlying assumptions. Some items of these scales did not fit the context of this studies and were adapted or deleted.

<u>Item</u>	<u>Action</u>
Mediator 1: Expectancy violation	
<i>Expectedness of the message</i>	
This message was completely unexpected.	Used without adaptation.
This message was not expected at all.	Deleted because exact rephrase of previous item.
This message surprised me a great deal.	Used without adaptation.
<i>Appreciation of the message</i>	
This message made me feel like the company cares about the consumer.	Deleted because item does not measure <i>violation valence</i> .
This message was a very positive behavior.	Deleted because it was difficult to understand.
I liked the message a lot.	Used without adaptation.
I'd rather never again see such a message from the company.	Rephrased: I'd prefer to not receive such a message from the company.
<i>Perceived appropriateness of the message</i>	
This message met my expectations.	Deleted because it measures <i>violation expectedness</i> .
This message corresponds to how I expect the company to communicate with the consumer.	Used without adaptation.
This message is appropriate.	Used without adaptation.
Mediator 2: Psychological closeness	
I feel connected to the organization.	Deleted because it is too extreme.
It feels like the company is distant to the consumer.	Used without adaptation.

It feels like I can communicate with the company in an honest and friendly manner.	Used without adaptation.
It feels like the company encourages the consumer to communicate.	Used without adaptation.
I have the feeling that the organization is nearby the consumers.	Used without adaptation.

Dependent variable: Brand likeability

This person is friendly.	Rephrased: This company is
This person is likeable.	Rephrased: This company is
This person is warm.	Deleted because item measures friendliness.
This person is approachable.	Rephrased: This company is
I would ask this person for advice.	Deleted because not suitable for an online customer-brand context.
I would like this person as a coworker.	Deleted because not suitable for an online customer-brand context.
I would like this person as a roommate.	Deleted because not suitable for an online customer-brand context.
I would like to be friends with this person.	Deleted because not suitable for an online customer-brand context.
This person is physically attractive.	Deleted because not suitable for an online customer-brand context.
This person is similar to me.	Deleted because item does not necessarily measure likeability.
This person is knowledgeable.	Rephrased: This company is

Manipulation check: Formality of the employed communication style

The company's communication style is formal/informal.	Rephrased: The company's communication style is formal.
---	---

Appendix D Analysis of control variables

We controlled for possible moderation effects of age, gender, education and social media use.

Effect of control variables on the outcome variables

Age. Pearson's correlation test revealed a significant association of age with our outcome variable brand likeability ($r = -.17, p = .002$, 95% CI [-0.28, -0.07]) and two of the three mediators: expectedness ($r = -.23, p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.33, -0.12]) and appropriateness of the message ($r = -.18, p = .001$, 95% CI [-0.29, -0.07]). The third mediator psychological closeness was on the edge of turning significant, $r = -.10, p = .057$, 95% CI [-0.21, -0.01]. Therefore, we controlled for possible age effects when testing our hypothesis in the main analysis.

Gender. An independent samples t-test revealed a significant effect of gender on our dependent variable brand likeability, $t(350) = -2.29, p = .023$, 95% CI [-0.48, -0.04], but not on the mediators ($p > .058$). Due to the significant effect on our dependent variable, we decided to include gender as control variable in the further analysis.

Education. We performed another one-way ANOVA to test the effect of different levels of education on our dependent variable brand likeability and the three mediators. The analysis revealed no significant effects on brand likeability ($F(3, 57.56) = 1.27, p = .295$), appropriateness of the message ($F(3, 348) = 1.36, p = .254$), and psychological closeness ($F(3, 58.484) = 0.83, p < .485$). We found a significant effect of education on expectedness of the message, $F(3, 348) = 4.95, p = .002$. However, Tukey HSD only revealed significant differences in expectedness of the message between participants with the lowest (high school diploma) and highest level of education (university degree), $Mdiff = -0.98, p = .003$. Since only a small number of participants belonged to the former group, we decided to not include education as control variable in the main analysis.

Facebook use. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of Facebook use on three of the four outcome variables: brand likeability ($F(2, 21.13) = 6.14, p = .008$), appropriateness of the message ($F(2, 21.35) = 10.12, p = .001$), and psychological closeness ($F(2, 349) = 8.50, p < .001$). On these three scales, participants having a Facebook account scored significantly different than participants who had deleted their account or never had an account, as Table X shows. As PROCESS does not support multicategorical control variables, we decided to combine the last two levels into one category. The new dichotomous variable Facebook use consisted of two levels, namely yes and no. We then performed an independent

samples t-test with this new variable. Again, the analysis revealed a significant effect of Facebook use on brand likeability ($t(40.57) = -3.41, p = .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.20, -0.35]$), appropriateness of the message ($t(41.71) = -4.57, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.45, -0.59]$), and psychological closeness ($t(350) = -4.13, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.06, -0.30]$). Hence, we controlled for possible moderation effects of participants' facebook use in the main analysis.

Effect of control variables on statistical models

Firstly, we ran the analysis without controlling for possible effects of gender, age, and Facebook use. Then we repeated each step in the main analysis controlling for possible influence of these variables combined.

Mediation analysis. Adding the control variables gender, age, and Facebook use to the model only influenced the total indirect effect of pronominal addressing on brand likeability through appropriateness ($b = -0.05, SE = 0.03, 95\% \text{ BCa CI } [-0.11, -0.01]$). All other effects remained (in)significant. Therefore, we decided to run the analysis again with each control variable separately. However, when examining each control variable separately, the indirect effect remained significant (gender: $b = -0.06, SE = 0.03, 95\% \text{ BCa CI } [-0.12, 0.00]$; age: $b = -0.06, SE = 0.03, 95\% \text{ BCa CI } [-0.13, -0.01]$; Facebook use: $b = -0.06, SE = 0.03, 95\% \text{ BCa CI } [-0.12, 0.00]$). We can, thus, assume that only a combination of factors influenced the change.

Moderated mediation with nationality and eWOM valence as moderator. The control variables gender, age, and Facebook use did not influence the significance of any of the previously mentioned effects.