"Wii Will Rock You!" The Use and Effect of Figurative Language in Consumer Reviews of Hedonic and Utilitarian Consumption

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Figurative language in advertising affects product attitudes positively across contexts. In contrast, the present research demonstrates that the use and effectiveness of figurative language in consumer-generated content is context specific, because of conversational norms unique to this form of communication. Study 1 shows that consumer reviews containing more figurative language lead to more favorable attitudes in hedonic, but not utilitarian, consumption contexts, and that conversational norms about figurative language govern this effect. Study 2 reveals that reading a review containing figurative language increases choice of hedonic over utilitarian options. Finally, via analysis of online consumer reviews and a lab experiment, studies 3 and 4 indicate that consumers use figurative language more when sharing experiences about hedonic than utilitarian consumption, and that review extremity influences figurative language use only in reviews of hedonic consumption. The studies highlight the critical role of conversational norms in interpreting and creating user-generated content.

This article investigates the effectiveness and use of figurative language in consumer-generated content about consumption experiences. Words and phrases can have a literal meaning, which is their plain dictionary meaning. For example, the literal meaning of the expression *climbing the wall* is the action of traveling up or down along a vertical surface. But words and phrases can be used figuratively as well. Figurative language is the use of words and expressions employing their indirect meaning, to convey an additional connotation beyond that of their lexical sense (Fogelin 1988). For example, in some languages, such as English, the figurative idiomatic meaning of the expression *climbing*

the wall is to be extremely nervous or upset. In other languages, such as Russian or Hebrew, the expression has a different figurative meaning, which is to be very bored or have nothing to do. Additional instances of figurative language include metaphor (*The Ferrari of vacuum cleaners*), word play (*Don't leave without a good buy*), idiomatic expressions (*My car's a lemon*), hyperbole (*The service person was a cell phone professor*), or imitating sounds (*This teacher is wrrrufff*, meaning a tough teacher, or *ouch!*, meaning *I was offended*).

Research in advertising has studied the persuasive effect of figurative language. Researchers have commonly found and generally believe that figurative language evokes positive affect and attitudes across contexts (Chang and Yen 2013; McQuarrie and Mick 1999, 2003; McQuarrie and Phillips 2005; Phillips and McQuarrie 2009). In contrast, we suggest that figurative language in user-generated content is effective only in certain contexts. We propose that this context sensitivity results from a difference in the conversational norms regarding advertising and consumer-generated content. Introducing the role of conversational norms in determining linguistic expectations and choice of language, we develop a theory and predictions concerning the effectiveness of figurative language in user-generated content.

We base our reasoning on literature that demonstrates a positive link between emotional intensity and use of figurative

language. We then suggest hedonic and utilitarian consumption as contexts commonly associated with emotional and rational attitudes, respectively (e.g., Alba and Williams 2013; Chaudhuri and Ligas 2006; Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). Building on several literatures, we propose figurative language is more conversationally normative—and therefore more effective—in hedonic consumption than in utilitarian consumption. Following reasoning whereby communication norms govern not only perception but also language choice, we then test and find support for the prediction that consumers also use figurative language more in descriptions of hedonic consumption rather than utilitarian consumption.

An extensive literature provides evidence for the important role of user-generated content in consumption decision making (Cenfetelli, Benbasat, and Al-Natour 2008; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Daugherty, Li, and Biocca 2008; Forman, Ghose, and Wiesenfeld 2008; Ghose and Ipeirotis 2009; Li and Hitt 2008; Moe and Schweidel 2012). This article contributes to consumer research by exploring an underrepresented aspect of online consumer communication—use and effects of language in user-generated content. This work also contributes to research on communication and psycholinguistics by being the first to investigate the effect of figurative language in natural communication. Finally, we propose a new theoretical explanation for the link between figurativeness and emotion, introducing conversational norms.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN ADVERTISING IS EFFECTIVE

Research in advertising suggests that messages using figurative language elicit more positive attitudes toward the ad and the product, compared with advertising that does not employ figurative language (McQuarrie and Mick 1999, 2003; McQuarrie and Phillips 2005; Phillips and McQuarrie 2009), and that this positive effect occurs across product categories and consumption contexts (Chang and Yen 2013; McQuarrie and Phillips 2005; Phillips and McQuarrie 2009). An explanation for this common finding comes from a great deal of evidence, indicating that consumers expect advertising to be amusing, creative, and artful (Nilsen 1976; Stern 1988; Wyckham 1984) and that they realize that advertisers' aim is to persuade (Coleman 1990; Hansen and Scott 1976). Some have suggested that figurative language in advertising is effective because of the pleasure consumers experience from appreciating the artfulness of the ad (Harris et al. 1999; Phillips and McQuarrie 2009; Sopory and Dillard 2002), whereas others (Mothersbaugh, Huhmann, and Franke 2012) find that certain figures of speech in advertising evoke deeper processing than others. Thus, consumers are willing to accept, and even expect, superlatives and exaggerations in advertising copy.

Do the same communicational rules apply to evaluations of text generated by consumers and not copywriters? In the next section we identify several important differences between advertising and user-generated content, which suggest a negative answer to this question.

COMMUNICATIONAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ADVERTISING AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Grice's (1975) cooperative principle states that participants in a conversation cooperate so that the conversation "succeeds" (i.e., the interlocutors comprehend each other's intended meaning). Listeners cooperate by investing effort to understand the speaker who invests effort by trying to be clear and understood. To accomplish successful discourse, conversation participants adhere to conversational norms, a set of nondeclared rules that lay out the optimal way to communicate. Conversational norms vary across contexts. For example, exaggeration is a conversational norm in rhetorical speeches, whereas in formal documents it is not normative to exaggerate.

Similarly, advertising differs from user-generated content in several aspects related to conversational norms. First, consumers often perceive ads to be biased, persuasive attempts (Sweldens, Van Osselaer, and Janiszewski 2010). By contrast, user-generated content is generally perceived as an objective sharing of opinions (Moore 2012; Schellekens, Verlegh, and Smidts 2010; Sen and Lerman 2007). Consequently, the communicational goals of advertising are clearer to consumers, whereas the communicational norms of other consumers need to be inferred from their generated content. Thus, conversational norms regarding persuasive text may include expectations of linguistic tactics and artful word play. Conversely, the norms of using figures of speech in user-generated content may not be governed by a general expectation that the text will be persuasive but rather that it will reflect a sincere opinion.

Second, ads constitute professionally preplanned mass communication. They undergo editing, restyling, and censorship. In contrast, user-generated content is natural and spontaneous, is often generated by naive authors, and is usually not censored. This difference creates communicational expectations for user-generated content that resemble the expectations of interpersonal communication, whereas communicational expectations for advertising texts are more similar to expectations for works of art (Hahn 2009; Murken-Altrogge 1978; Spitzer 1949).

Third, while ads almost always convey positive information about an advertised product, user-generated content is more evenly distributed between negative and positive opinions. Consumers may therefore predominantly expect superlatives and praise of products in advertising, whereas they may expect reviews to contain unbiased evaluations and even criticism (Sen and Lerman 2007).

Because of these differences, we suggest consumers have a different set of conversational norms and expectations regarding advertising and user-generated content. Namely, it is typical for, and expected of, advertising communication to be exaggerated and emotionally intensified. Therefore, figurative language is generally normative for advertising (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Rotfeld and Torzoll 1980; Simonson and Holbrook 1993; Toncar and Fetscherin 2012;

Xu and Wyer 2010). But user-generated content is a form of natural language in interpersonal communication. Therefore, language perception and language choice may be governed by considerations that differ from those in advertising, particularly in their crucial dependence on the context of conversation (Grice 1975; Schwarz 1996; Sperber and Wilson 1995). We next review literature in communication and psycholinguistics, which suggests normative contexts for using figurative language in natural communication.

EMOTION, CONVERSATIONAL NORMS, AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Psycholinguistic research has revealed a positive correlation between emotional intensity and use of figurative language in interpersonal communication (Bryant and Gibbs 2002; Caillies and Butcher 2007; Drewnowska-Vargane 2001; Fussell 1992, 2002; Fussell and Moss 1998; Gibbs, Leggitt, and Turner 2002; Giora et al. 2005; McCabe 1988; Pennebaker 1997; Simashko 1994; Sornig 2003; Zemanova 2007). For example, Fainsilber and Ortony (1987) examined metaphor use in oral descriptions of autobiographical experiences and in behaviors resulting from these experiences. In support of Ortony's (1975) view that metaphor is used for communicating ideas that are difficult or impossible to express in literal terms, Fainsilber and Ortony (1987) found that metaphor was used more often to describe subjective feeling states than to describe overt actions. They also found that figurative language was used more often to express intense emotional states than milder ones. Similarly, studies of therapeutic discourse conducted by sociologists and sociolinguists (Angus 1996; Ferrara 1994; Pollio and Barlow 1975) have shown that figures of speech are quite common when clients convey emotional states. For example, clients articulate phrases such as "like I lost a part of myself" or "I had a hole in my heart" or "it just welled inside me slowly like a beach tide" and "as if I had a lead block in my chest." Finally, Fussell and Moss (1998) asked participants to describe an emotionally arousing video clip to another participant. Results revealed higher usage of figurative language in descriptions of emotions, compared with activities or dress of the protagonists in the video clips.

Although not discussed in the literature, a plausible conclusion that emerges from these findings is that people employ more figurative language when talking about issues of emotional character. In other words, figurative language is motivated not necessarily by emotional arousal but rather by the conversation context: talking about emotional content elevates the figurativeness of the language. We suggest an explanation for this phenomenon grounded in conversation theory for the prevalence of figurative language in contexts involving emotional, rather than rational, experience. As mentioned earlier, literature in the philosophy of language maintains that language choice, as well as meaning derivation in language comprehension, is moderated by norms of conversation (Austin 1962; Burgoon and Aho 1982). Moreover, research on interpersonal communication suggests adherence to conversational norms leads to more persuasive communications (Brown and Levinson 1987; Burgoon and Aho 1982; Gibbs 1985; Grice 1975). Reece (1989), for example, found that a public letter written to the government failed to convince because it did not meet conversational norms. Similarly, Xu and Wyer (2010) find that message effectiveness suffers when the language of a product description does not fit the media in which it appears (popular vs. professional magazine).

The conversational norm regarding figurative language is that it is more appropriate for communicating artistic and emotional experiences (e.g., poetry) than rational and functional experiences (e.g., technical writing; Gibbs 2008; Ireland and Pennebaker 2010; Shen 2002). Therefore, a possibly central reason for the findings indicating higher prevalence of figurative language in contexts involving emotional experiences than in contexts involving rational experiences is that speakers and listeners are governed by conversational norms regarding figurative language in emotional and rational contexts.

The distinction between emotional and rational contexts is particularly relevant when considering consumption experiences characterized as an emotional-rational context. One such distinction prevalent in marketing research is between hedonic and utilitarian context. In the next section we briefly summarize literature defining hedonic consumption as mostly emotional and utilitarian consumption as mainly rational and then discuss our predictions regarding figurative language in user-generated content regarding these two types of consumption.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN USER-GENERATED CONTENT ABOUT HEDONIC AND UTILITARIAN CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCES

A large body of literature indicates hedonic experiences are more emotional in nature, whereas utilitarian experiences are more rational in nature (Adaval 2001; Alba and Williams 2013; Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994; Babin et al. 2005; Chaudhuri and Ligas 2006; Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000; Drolet, Williams, and Lau-Gesk 2007; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Homer 2008; Kivetz and Simonson 2002; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998). In early work, Babin et al. (1994) find distinct characteristics of hedonic perceptions of products, which are related to emotional and aroused consumption, whereas utilitarian perceptions of products are related to rational accounts such as amount spent or bargain made. Voss, Spangenberg, and Grohmann (2003) find that consumers have hedonic and utilitarian attitudes. Hedonic attitudes are based on emotional attachment, whereas utilitarian attitudes are a product of experiences characterized by logical personal relevance. Recently, Arnold and Reynolds (2012) discussed the role of hedonic consumption in promoting fun and excitement and avoiding problem resolution in everyday life (which may require a rational approach). Finally, Botti and McGill (2011) suggest hedonic

consumption is more "affectively rich" than utilitarian consumption; therefore, preferences for hedonic goods are emotionally driven, whereas those for utilitarian goods are cognitively driven.

The consistent distinction between hedonic and utilitarian consumption contexts as evoking emotional versus rational thinking and attitudes suggests figurative language should be more typical in user-generated content regarding hedonic consumption than utilitarian consumption. Since conversational norms influence the effectiveness of communication (Brown and Levinson 1987; Burgoon and Aho 1982; Gibbs 1985; Grice 1975), figurative language may have greater influence on attitudes toward hedonic products than toward utilitarian products. Building on this literature, we predict consumers will be more positively affected by figurative language in user-generated content regarding hedonic consumption compared with utilitarian consumption, because figurative language may be more conversationally normative for describing hedonic than utilitarian experiences. However, because the conversational norms that govern the use of figurative language in advertising differ from those governing its use in user-generated content we do not expect an effect of consumption goal (hedonic/utilitarian) in advertising content. Formally,

H1a: Positively valenced consumer-generated content that contains figurative language will lead to more positive attitudes toward hedonic consumption than utilitarian consumption.

H1b: The different effect of figurative language on attitudes in hedonic versus utilitarian contexts will not be evidenced in advertising messages.

H1c: Conversational norms, reflected in judgments of typicality of figurative language, mediate the effect of figurative language on attitudes.

We base our theoretical reasoning on the link between conversational norms regarding emotional states and prevalence of figurative language in conversation. Building on literature on linguistic signaling (Giora et al. 2005; Xie and Kronrod 2012) we propose that conversational norms may also affect the salience of people's goals when exposed to certain forms of language. Specifically, if figurative language is normatively associated with hedonic consumption experiences, then reading a figurative description of a product or a consumption experience may prime hedonic goals. For example, a figurative description of a grocery store, as in "you can find the entire ocean in the seafood department" may increase the salience of hedonic consumption goals more than a literal description, such as "the seafood department contains a very large variety." Consequently, consumers' choice of fish at the store may be aimed at achieving goals related to hedonic consumption.

In sum, because we hypothesize a strong tie between figurative language and hedonic consumption, and between literal language and utilitarian consumption, we suggest figurative language signals hedonism and literal language util-

itarianism. Thus, use of figurative language may sway consumer choice to favor hedonic options over utilitarian options. We therefore predict that

H2: Figurative language increases choice of hedonic options over utilitarian options, whereas literal language increases choice of utilitarian options over hedonic options.

Finally, we suggest conversational norms also govern the language consumers *use* when conveying information. Although emotional intensity may serve as a precursor to use of figurative language in communication about consumption experiences, conversational norms dictate its actual use (Gallois 1994; Ortony et al. 1978; Roberts and Kreuz 1994; Winton 1990). Figuratively speaking, we contend that consumers will be more likely to "go ballistic" when describing emotionally intense hedonic consumption than utilitarian consumption (e.g., Heath, Bell, and Sternberg 2001; Sen and Lerman 2007). Specifically, we expect consumers who share information about relatively emotional consumption experiences to be more likely to use figurative language than consumers who share information about experiences not typically associated with emotional processing. This difference will be governed by conversational norms. Our hypotheses are therefore as follows:

H3a: Figurative language is more often used to describe hedonic consumption than utilitarian consumption.

H3b: It is perceived as more conversationally normative to use figurative language in a hedonic context than a utilitarian context.

H4: In descriptions of hedonic consumption, extremely positive and negative reviews will contain more figurative language than moderate reviews. In descriptions of utilitarian consumption review extremity will not influence figurative language usage.

EXPERIMENT 1: FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE EFFECTIVENESS IS CONTEXT SPECIFIC IN CONSUMER-GENERATED CONTENT BUT NOT IN ADS

Experiment 1 had three aims: first, to test whether figurative language in consumer reviews elicits more positive attitudes toward hedonic consumption than toward utilitarian consumption (hypothesis 1a); second, to test whether figurative language exerts context specific effects in user-generated content but not in ads (hypothesis 1b); and finally, to test whether conversational norms mediate this effect (hypothesis 1c). We asked participants to evaluate a hotel that served either a utilitarian goal (a business trip) or a hedonic goal (a vacation trip). We used a single product (but varied the consumption goal with which it was associated) to eliminate effects resulting from idiosyncratic differences between hedonic and utilitarian products.

Method

Three hundred forty-two US residents, recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (mean age = 36; 49% female), participated in an online experiment for payment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in a 2 (consumption goal: hedonic vs. utilitarian) × 2 (language: figurative vs. literal) × 2 (format: ad vs. review) between-subjects design. Participants were asked to imagine searching for a hotel for a trip (pleasure/business). Then they were told they would be reading an advertisement (a consumer review) for a hotel that provides vacation trip (business trip) services. Finally, participants completed the dependent measures. One hotel description contained figurative language while the other contained only literal language. The descriptions were presented using a list format, as follows:

Figurative
1. The rooms are bigger than those in a palace!
2. The view blows your mind away!
3. The service is like on a king's reception!
4. The food: Yummy . . .
5. Bottom line, Paradise disguised as a hotel room!

Literal
1. The rooms are very spacious!
2. The view is excellent!
3. The service is very professional!
4. The food is very good . . .
5. In sum, a great place to stay at!

Our key dependent variable was participants' evaluation of the hotel on three items: "would you like to stay at this hotel?" (1 = definitely not, 7 = definitely yes); "how would you evaluate this hotel?" (1 = very bad, 7 = very good); "how much do you like this hotel?" (1 = don't like it at all, 7 = like it very much). Next, participants rated the typicality of the language used in the ad/review (the mediator). Specifically, they indicated how often they had encountered such language in an ad/review for that type of service (1 = not at all often, 7 = very often) and whether they would consider the language used in the ad/review typical for this type of service (1 = not at all typical, 7 = very typical). Finally, participants rated the figurativeness of the language used in the ad/review (1 = not at all figurative, 7 = very figurative), and the type of benefits offered by the hotel (7-point semantic differential scale with "hedonic" and "utilitarian" as anchors). These served as manipulation checks.
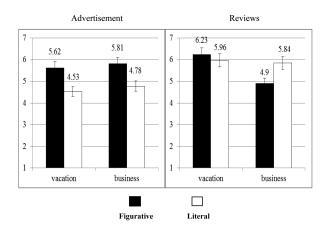
Results

The three product-attitude items showed a reliability of $\alpha = .94$. We used their mean as a single product attitude score. The two typicality items were highly correlated ($r = .74$). We used their mean as a single typicality score.

Product Attitudes. A 2 (goal) × 2 (language) × 2 (format) ANOVA examined participants' product attitudes. Results revealed the predicted three-way interaction ($F(1, 334) = 4.2, p < .05$; see fig. 1). As depicted in figure 1, ad and review conditions differed markedly, so we analyzed them separately. In the ad condition there was only a main effect of language type ($F(1, 334) = 6.98, p < .01$), such that attitudes toward the hotel were more positive when the ad contained figurative language ($M = 5.4$) than literal language ($M = 4.9$). These results replicate the generally positive effect of using figurative language in advertising content. Consistent with our prediction the effect of using figurative language in consumer-generated content was context specific. This was indicated by a significant consumption goal × language interaction ($F(1, 334) = 8.73, p < .005$). Participants who read figurative reviews for a hotel that served a hedonic goal rated the hotel more positively ($M = 6.2$) than participants who read figurative reviews for a hotel that served a utilitarian goal ($M = 4.9; F(1, 334) = 21.51, p < .001$), while use of literal language did not interact with goals to produce different attitudes ($F < 1, M_{utilitarian} = 5.8, M_{hedonic} = 5.9$).

Typicality. A 2 (goal) × 2 (language) × 2 (format) ANOVA examined participants' typicality ratings. The three-way interaction was significant ($F(1, 334) = 18.9, p < .001$). Typicality ratings differed in ad and review conditions in a manner similar to product attitudes, so we analyzed ad and review conditions separately. In the ad condition there was only a main effect of language type ($F(1, 334) = 36.4, p < .001$), such that figurative language ($M = 3.9$) was rated as more typical than literal language ($M = 2.5$). In contrast the goal × language interaction was significant in the review condition ($F(1, 334) = 35.17, p < .001$). Participants who read figurative reviews indicated this form of language was more typical when the hotel served

FIGURE 1

EFFECT OF LANGUAGE, GOAL, AND FORMAT ON PRODUCT ATTITUDES (EXPERIMENT 1)

a hedonic goal ($M = 4.9$) than when it served a utilitarian goal ($M = 3.3$; $F(1, 334) = 24.3$, $p < .001$), while participants who read literal reviews indicated this form of language was more typical when the hotel served a utilitarian goal ($M = 4.5$) than a hedonic goal ($M = 3.4$; $F(1, 334) = 11.9$, $p < .001$).

Typicality Mediation. To test the hypothesis that different language norms mediate the effect of the three-way interaction of consumption goal, language, and format on product attitudes we employed the mediation analysis suggested by Hayes (2013), using PROCESS model 12, which estimates a mediated moderation for three-way interactions. A bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect of the interaction of goal, language and format on product attitudes suggests full mediation by typicality for the interaction (effect = .87, SE = .12, confidence interval: LLCI = .15, ULCI = .34 at 95% significance level).

Manipulation Checks. The figurative description was judged significantly more figurative ($M = 5.83$) than the literal description ($M = 2.37$; $F(1, 333) = 493.8$, $p < .001$), indicating participants perceived the intended difference in figurativeness of the descriptions. The vacation hotel service was judged as significantly more hedonic (less utilitarian; $M = 3.93$) than the business hotel ($M = 3.13$; $F(1, 333) = 11.29$, $p < .001$), indicating participants perceived the intended difference in the function served by the hotel.

Discussion

Experiment 1 demonstrates that figurative language exerts context-specific effects in user-generated content but not in ads. Results suggest that using figurative language in consumer-generated content is worthwhile in conveying a hedonic experience, while it may decrease effectiveness when conveying a utilitarian experience. Mediation analysis indicates conversational norms mediate the effect of goal on the persuasiveness of figurative language in user-generated content. Comparing ads to reviews suggests that conversational norms for advertising and for user-generated content differ: it is conversationally normative for figurative language to be used in advertisements for both hedonic and utilitarian product descriptions, and therefore the effectiveness of figurative language is similar for both types of product. However, figurative language is less normative (and therefore less effective) in utilitarian consumption descriptions provided by consumers. Next, we examine the effect of using figurative language in consumer reviews on consequential consumer choice.

EXPERIMENT 2: USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE INCREASES CHOICE OF HEDONIC OPTIONS OVER UTILITARIAN OPTIONS

Experiment 2 tests whether use of figurative language (relative to literal language) in consumer-generated content increases the likelihood of choosing hedonic options over utilitarian options in a consequential choice setting. Participants read consumer reviews of a store that offered a series of products. The reviews contained either figurative language or only literal language. Participants then made five choices between hedonic and utilitarian products sold at the store. We examined the effect of the language used in the store review on choice of hedonic (utilitarian) options in the store.

Method

Upon completing an unrelated experiment, 198 students from Ben Gurion University (mean age = 25; 49% female) were informed they would participate in a surprise raffle for having completed the experiment. They were told a local department store had donated the prizes. They were then told they would first read a description of the store and excerpts from four consumer reviews of the store (that contained either figurative language or contained literal language only; see table 1), and then they would choose five products from five product pairs to form a product assortment from which they would choose a single product if they won the raffle. Critically, each pair consisted of a hedonic product and a utilitarian product (see table 2). Finally, participants provided their email address so they could be reached if they won the raffle. They were then thanked, debriefed, and dismissed. Our key dependent variable was the number of hedonic products participants chose in their five product choices.

Results

Participants who read figurative consumer quotes about the store chose significantly more hedonic products ($M = 2.96$) than those who read literal quotes ($M = 2.51$; $t(1,$

TABLE 1

EXCERPTS FROM CONSUMER REVIEWS (EXPERIMENT 2)

Literal excerpts—the following are reviews from consumers who visited the store:

(1) The store has a large product selection.
(2) The personnel are very knowledgeable about the products sold in the store.
(3) The product arrangement is very organized.
(4) The personnel are extremely polite.

Figurative excerpts—the following are reviews from consumers who visited the store:

(1) The store's product selection is as abundant as a king's [handful].
(2) The personnel are real professors regarding products sold in the store.
(3) The products in the store are ordered like soldiers in a military inspection.
(4) The personnel can offer the Queen of England lessons in politeness.

THE EFFECT OF LANGUAGE ON THE CHOICE PROPORTION OF THE HEDONIC PRODUCT FOR
THE FIVE PRODUCT PAIRS (EXPERIMENT 2)

		Hedonic choice proportions	
Hedonic	Utilitarian	Figurative language	Literal language
Live concert CDs	Language learning CDs	.81	.67
Leisure and cooking books	Textbooks (e.g., accounting, finance)	.76	.61
Travel guides	Financial guides	.56	.58
DVD about water parks in the world	DVD about global warming	.56	.39
Digital-frame key holder	Cordless mouse for the computer	.75	.24

196) = 2.63, $p < .01$). Hedonic choice proportions for each of the five product pairs are shown in table 2.

Discussion

This study demonstrates the psycholinguistic effect of figurative language on consequential product choice. In support of hypothesis 2, we find that reading figurative language to describe a retailer fosters choice of hedonic products, whereas reading literal language fosters choice of utilitarian products. In the next two experiments we shift our focus to investigate conditions that foster consumer use of figurative language.

EXPERIMENT 3: WHEN DO CONSUMERS USE FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE TO DESCRIBE CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCES?

In experiment 3 participants analyzed the figurativeness of review headlines published on Amazon's website to test whether reviewers use figurative language more to describe hedonic consumption than utilitarian consumption (hypothesis 3a) and to test whether they use figurative language more in very negative and very positive reviews compared with neutral reviews for hedonic products, but not for utilitarian products (hypothesis 4). We used headlines because they represent a concise representative part of a text (Kronrod and Engel 2001; Leigh 1994).

Materials

Forty-four undergraduate students at Michigan State University suggested primarily hedonic and primarily utilitarian product categories in an online pretest study. A group of 30 undergraduate students rated the suggested products on their degree of being hedonic (1 = not hedonic at all; 7 = very hedonic) and utilitarian (1 = not utilitarian at all; 7 = very utilitarian). From this list we selected the four most hedonic products (mean on hedonism above 6 and utilitarianism below 2) and four most utilitarian products (mean on utilitarianism above 6 and hedonism below 2) and used them for our data collection on Amazon's website.

We selected specific products and the review headlines for these products as follows.

Product Selection. We typed the general product category in the search box on Amazon's website and selected the first product on the page that had at least six reviews for each of 1-star (very negative), 3-star (neutral), and 5-star (very positive) ratings. The four hedonic products we used were the Wii game console, Chocmod Truffettes de France natural truffles, the comedy movie *Night at the Museum*, and the HedBanz game. The four utilitarian products we used were the Hoover bagless upright stick vacuum cleaner, Omron HEM-780 automatic blood pressure monitor with comfit cuff, Penetrex pain relief therapy, 2 oz., and Tide original scent liquid laundry detergent.

Review Headlines Selection. For each product, we chose the chronologically first six headlines for 1-star, 3-star, and 5-star reviews. Thus, we obtained a database of 144 review headlines, representing eight products (four hedonic and four utilitarian), with 18 headlines for each product (six headlines each for 1-, 3-, and 5-star ratings).

Procedure

One hundred students from graduate and undergraduate classes at Michigan State University participated in this experiment for course credit. Participant analyzed the 144 review headlines on figurativeness (1 = not figurative at all, 7 = very figurative). An example of a review headline for chocolate truffles which was rated as highly figurative was: "Holy Moly!" A headline for a blood pressure monitor, which was rated as low on figurativeness, was "very accurate." The headlines were presented in a random order, and participants were blind to the star rating of each review or to any product information other than product name. The headlines were presented product by product, so participants could easily relate the review subject to its product. The products were presented in random order.

Results

We ran a nested ANOVA with review extremity (star rating of 1, 3, and 5), product type (hedonic/utilitarian), product (eight products) nested in product type, and headlines (144 headlines) nested in review extremity by product type, as factors. The dependent variable was the figurativeness ratings for each of the headlines.

Consistent with hypothesis 3a, headlines of reviews for hedonic products contained significantly more figurative language ($M = 4.1$; SD $= 1.94$) than headlines for utilitarian products ($M = 2.8$; SD $= 1.73$; $F(1, 6) = 991.30$, $p < .001$). Further, results revealed a significant effect of review extremity ($F(2, 12) = 62.46$, $p < .001$) such that headlines of 5-star reviews ($M = 3.87$; SD $= 1.97$) contained more figurative language than headlines of 1-star reviews ($M = 3.57$; SD $= 1.99$), which contained more figurative language than headlines of 3-star reviews ($M = 3.01$; SD $= 1.73$). Supporting hypothesis 4, the predicted product type × review extremity interaction was significant ($F(2, 12) = 66.94$, $p < .001$; see fig. 2). For hedonic products, headlines of 1-star reviews ($M_{1star} = 4.45$; SD $= 1.89$) and 5-star reviews ($M_{5star} = 4.74$; SD $= 1.77$) contained more figurative language than headlines of 3-star reviews ($M_{3star} = 3.10$; SD $= 1.73$). However, for utilitarian products, review extremity did not influence figurative language use ($M_{1star} = 2.70$; SD $= 1.68$; $M_{3star} = 2.92$; SD $= 1.72$; $M_{5star} = 3.01$; SD $= 1.76$).

Discussion

Results of this experiment indicate headlines for hedonic product reviews contain more figurative language than headlines for utilitarian product reviews (hypothesis 3a). Furthermore, results indicate an interaction between product type and review extremity (hypothesis 4). For hedonic products, review headlines of extremely liked and extremely disliked products contain more figurative language than headlines of moderate product reviews, but for utilitarian products, review extremity does not moderate use of figurative language in headlines. The higher figurativeness ratings for the 5-star reviews compared with the 1-star reviews could be a result of lesser intensity of the reviews or different judgment of negative reviews in terms of figurative language.
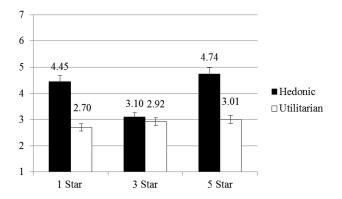
The data for this experiment were taken from real reviews of real products posted on Amazon's website. We analyzed review headlines to support our prediction regarding the consumption experience × emotional intensity interaction on figurative language use. However, we could not measure conversational norms in this experiment, and had little control over other possible aspects of the products selected for the analysis. We conducted experiment 4 to address these two issues.

EXPERIMENT 4: CONVERSATIONAL NORMS DRIVE THE USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN CONSUMER REVIEWS

Experiment 4 had two main aims. First, to examine whether consumers use figurative language more after engaging in hedonic consumption than utilitarian consumption (hypothesis 3a), and second, to test whether conversational norms underlie this tendency (hypothesis 3b). In addition, in this experiment participants evaluated the same product, serving

FIGURE 2

EFFECT OF REVIEW EXTREMITY AND PRODUCT TYPE ON FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE USE IN REVIEW HEADLINES (EXPERIMENT 3)

either a hedonic purpose or a utilitarian purpose. By manipulating only the purpose of consumption while keeping the product constant we eliminated effects associated with using different hedonic and utilitarian products.

Materials and Procedure

Ninety Michigan State University students received class credit for their participation (mean age $= 26$, 48% female). Participants used liquid soap that served either a hedonic purpose (blowing bubbles) or a utilitarian purpose (washing a spoon). Next, they wrote a review of the soap. Then they rated on 7-point scales how pleasant, exciting, fun, indulgent, useful, high quality, convenient, and efficient the soap was. The first four ratings gauged affective evaluations and the last four assessed rational evaluations. Finally, participants were thanked, debriefed, and dismissed.

Results

Two coders blind to the purpose of the experiment coded the reviews on a 6-point scale ranging from "not figurative at all" to "highly figurative" (the intercoder agreement was 98%).

Figurativeness. A *t*-test comparing the mean figurativeness of reviews for liquid soap of those who blew bubbles with those who washed a spoon revealed a significant difference ($t(1, 88) = 2.12$, $p < .05$). Supporting hypothesis 3a, participants who used soap for blowing bubbles used significantly more figurative language in their reviews ($M = 2.3$) than those who used soap for washing a spoon ($M = 1.8$).

Affective and Rational Evaluations. A two-way mixed ANOVA with evaluation (affective/rational) as a within-subject factor and use (hedonic/utilitarian) as a between-subjects factor revealed a main effect of evaluation ($F(1, 88) = 61.7$, $p < .001$) where rational attitudes ($M = 5.03$) were more

positive than affective attitudes (M = 4.13), and more importantly for our predictions, a significant interaction ($F(1, 88)$ = 77.2, $p < .001$). Participants who blew bubbles reported higher affective evaluations (M = 4.5) than participants who washed a spoon (M = 3.8; $F(1, 88)$ = 6.6, $p < .05$), whereas participants who washed a spoon reported higher rational evaluations (M = 5.7) than participants who blew bubbles (M = 4.4; $F(1, 88)$ = 25.3, $p < .001$). The main effect of use was not significant (p = .23), indicating the soap served the hedonic and utilitarian purposes equally well. These results support the notion of a strong link between hedonic consumption and affective evaluation, and between utilitarian consumption and rational evaluation.

Conversational Norms Test. An independent sample of 60 participants from the same population (undergraduate students participating for course credit) read their peers' reviews and rated them on conversational norms, employing the typicality items used in experiment 1 (r = .94). Participants were randomly assigned to rate either the hedonic or the utilitarian condition reviews.

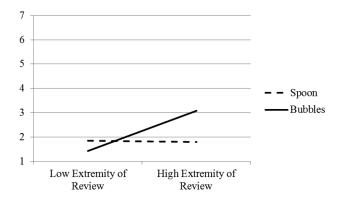We used PROCESS model 1 (Hayes 2013) to test whether product use moderated the effect of figurativeness on typicality judgments. The figurativeness × use interaction was significant ($F(1, 86)$ = 7.5, $p < .01$). For hedonic consumption, reviews were judged more typical the more figurative language they had, but this effect failed to reach statistical significance (β = .11, $t(1, 86)$ = 1.57, p = .12). In contrast, utilitarian consumption reviews were judged less typical the more figurative language they contained (β = −.26, $t(1, 86)$ = −2.6, $p < .01$).

Product Use Moderation of Review Extremity. Two coders, blind to the conditions and the purpose of the experiment, coded the 90 reviews on a 7-point scale of review extremity (1 = not extreme at all, 7 = very extreme). Notably, some of the reviews were positive and some were negative, as participants were not specifically asked to describe a positive or a negative experience with the soap.

A regression was performed on figurativeness ratings with the independent variables (i) review extremity, (ii) a dummy variable for whether product use was hedonic or utilitarian, and (iii) their interaction. The coefficient of review extremity was significant (β = .99; $t(1, 86)$ = 7.41, p = .001), the coefficient of product use was significant (β = 1.00; $t(1, 86)$ = 3.38, p = .01), and the interaction term was significant (β = −.50; $t(1, 86)$ = −5.60, p = .001, see fig. 3). To explore the interaction, we examined the slopes of review extremity at each level of product use (see Aiken and West 1991; Fitzsimons 2008; Spiller et al. 2013). The slope of review extremity was not significant for the utilitarian (spoon washing) consumption condition (β = −.006; t = −0.08, p = .93), yet it was significant and positive for the hedonic (bubbles) consumption condition (β = .493; t = 7.87, $p < .001$). In addition, a spotlight analysis at one standard deviation above the mean of review extremity showed a significant difference such that for high extremity reviews ratings of figurativeness were higher when product use was hedonic

EFFECT OF REVIEW EXTREMITY AND CONSUMPTION TYPE ON FIGURATIVENESS OF REVIEWS FOR LIQUID SOAP: SLOPES ANALYSIS (EXPERIMENT 4)

than when it was utilitarian (t = −6.12, $p < .001$). A similar spotlight analysis at one standard deviation below the mean of review extremity showed a marginally significant difference such that for low extremity reviews ratings of figurativeness were higher when product use was utilitarian than when it was hedonic (t = 1.95, p = .054).

Discussion

Results of experiment 4 indicate consumer use of figurative language depends on the goal of consumption: consumers use figurative language more to describe hedonic consumption than utilitarian consumption. Our conversational norms analysis supports hypothesis 3b, which ties figurative language usage to conversational norm adherence. Replicating results of experiment 3 and supporting hypothesis 4, we also find in this experiment that extremity of review significantly affects the figurativeness of language used to describe hedonic experiences, but not utilitarian experiences.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

A large body of recent research demonstrates that user-generated content significantly impacts product evaluation, decision making, and purchase behavior (Ansari, Essegaier, and Kohli 2000; Cenfetelli et al. 2008; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Daugherty et al. 2008; Forman et al. 2008; Ghose and Ipeirotis 2009; Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Li and Hitt 2008; Moe and Schweidel 2012; Zinkhan et al. 2007). Surprisingly, one factor that has received practically no attention is the language that consumers use to describe consumption (for exceptions, see Moore 2012; Schellekens et al. 2010). The current work attempts to further fill this gap, focusing on the use of figurative language in user-generated content and its effect on readers.

Our results indicate that different conversational norms govern advertising content and user-generated content. In advertising, figurative language is conversationally normative and therefore affective across contexts. However, in consumer reviews, figurative language is less normative for descriptions of utilitarian consumption that is associated with more rational and less affective attitudes. Therefore, the effectiveness of a review for a utilitarian consumption experience decreases when the author "spices up" the review with figurative language. We demonstrate that although emotional intensity encourages figurative language use, conversational norms serve as a "gatekeeper" to determine when it will be used.

To our knowledge, the *influence* of figurative language in natural communication has not been examined. Sopory and Dillard (2002) report a seminal meta-analysis of the persuasiveness of metaphor, but the vast majority of their data-points deal with preplanned mass communication texts, such as advertising and political communication. Moreover, no work has distinguished between the influences of figurative language in different consumption contexts. Our work contributes to the study of figurative language effects in different contexts of natural communication.

Conversational Norms in Marketing Communication

Why do conversational norms differ for hedonic and utilitarian consumption? More broadly, what originates conversational norms in certain contexts? Literature on the formation and creation of conventions and norms in conversation (Lascarides and Asher 2001; Lewis 2002) suggests they are formed in a gradual process of repeated use and encounter. Thus, it is plausible that through repeated use (and sometimes over-exploitation) of figurative language in advertising, it has become normative for such language to be used in ads. However, our findings suggest that norms of advertising do not apply to consumer talk about consumption experiences; users continue employing natural conversation norms in their descriptions of consumption situations, governed by norms of interpersonal communication. In this, the current work differs from most previous research on figurative language, which focused on processing fluency (Gibbs 1994, 2001, 2007; Gibbs and Colston 2012). The current work contributes beyond the traditional description of consumer behavior in terms of an individual's psychological processes, by suggesting a meta-psychological social explanation of behavior, such as norms which develop with time. Similarly, conversational norms about other forms of communication may explain findings previously attributed to psychological theories or previously unexplained. For example, communication about donations may be directed by conversational norms of request, whereas health communication may be governed by the conversational norms of advice (Searle 1969), because the consumer is the beneficiary of her actions.

Future Research

Figurative Language and Trust. Christmann and Mischo (2000) report that aesthetic means such as figurative expressions enhance persuasiveness only in rhetorical arguments perceived as honest. People generally trust consumer reviews more than advertising (Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002). This raises the question of whether in the context of user-generated content, use of figurative language may undermine the relative trustworthiness people ascribe to this form of content. In other words, is user-generated content that contains figurative language deemed less trustworthy than content using literal language, and might this hinder persuasiveness? The effectiveness of figurative language may hinge on the relative suspicion it evokes. In the current work we studied how conversational norms affect attitudes. It is plausible that text which adheres to conversational norms influences not only product attitudes but also attitudes toward the authors of reviews, their perceived trustworthiness, and how helpful consumers view the reviews.

Marketing Context Effects on Conversational Norms. The current work demonstrates a context-dependent phenomenon: in studies 3 and 4 we see that review extremity can affect the degree of figurative language use, but this happens only in the context of hedonic consumption. These results echo cross-cultural research on figurative language. Although literature generally reports a positive relation between emotional arousal and figurativeness (Fussel 2002), this is not always the case (Ameka 2002; Forgas 1999; Fussel and Moss 1998; Ye 2002). For example, while the majority of words expressing anger are figurative in Czech and in Russian (Zemanova 2007; e.g., "boiling" instead of "furious"), other cultures, such as Chinese, German, and some American dialects, are reticent in using figurative expressions in emotional talk (Drewnowska-Vargane 2001; Junker and Blacksmith 2006). Consistent with a conversational-norms account, the cultural effect of use of figurative language in emotionally intense states may be governed by conversational norms, which differ across cultures. Broadening this discussion and taking our results into account, one possible implication is that conversational norms encourage or discourage the use of figurative language in different contexts, beyond hedonic and utilitarian consumption. For example, figurative language may be more normative in social marketing, as well as communication employing affective appeal, such as fear appeal in health communication or guilt appeal in environmental messages. As figures of speech are used in abundance in communication that is neither advertising nor consumer-generated content, such as environmental or health communication, future research may inquire into the norms for and role of figurative language in those contexts.

Importantly, we do not find a simple fit effect between figurativeness and context. Although literal language is deemed equally normative for hedonic and utilitarian contexts, figurative language seems less normative, and therefore less prevalent and less affective, in utilitarian contexts.

Thus, conversational norms are not a matter of mere fit or congruency between expectations for certain language and the actual language that appears in a message or text. In fact, in some situations it is conversationally normative to surprise and to be linguistically unexpected (Searle 1969; Sperber and Wilson 1995).

Norms and Language. Interestingly, linguistic variation may stem from norms of different kinds: for example, grounded in the theory of exchange norms (Clark and Mills 1993), Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi (2012) describe how social norms of inclusion and proximity may affect the use of personal pronouns (saying "we" vs. "you and me") in brand relationships. In contrast, Patrick and Hagtvedt (2012), who are also interested in linguistic variation, describe the use of "I can't" versus "I don't" in self-talk as strategies to refuse temptation. The research does not discuss the issue of normative behavior in length, but a linguistic explanation for the difference in strength between "I can't" and "I don't" is that "I don't" implies a more permanent, and therefore a more definite, refusal. This kind of norm is a personal norm, and Patrick and Hagtvedt (2012) identify the way personal norms influence linguistic behavior, which in turn influences consumption behavior. Linguistic variation may indeed depend on different kinds of norms. In contrast with the works cited earlier, the current research describes *conversational* norms and their effect on attitudes toward products. Notably, conversational norms may reflect not only on figurative language. Kronrod, Grinstein, and Wathieu (2012), for example, also refer to conversation norms and language differences, demonstrating how mood creates expectations for more blunt and assertive language in communication about hedonic versus utilitarian products. Finally, Zhang and Schwartz (2012) show how conversational norms affect expectations for finer and rougher granulations of numerical expressions (such as "1 year" vs. "365 days"). In this section we brought to readers' attention the notion that linguistic use and effect may stem from different types of norms, such as social, personal, or conversational. But we also would like to stress that conversational norms have a variety of effects on language use and perception, of which figurative language is only one instance.

Summary

Although user-generated content has garnered much recent interest in the marketing and consumer behavior research community, the *language* comprising user-generated content has (so far) received little interest. Our research serves as one of the first attempts to explore factors that govern the language of user-generated content and to examine how linguistic aspects of user-generated content influence its impact on readers. We study user-generated content through the lens of language philosophy and psycholinguistic reasoning. Our article contributes to research in language behavior and communication by investigating conversational norms as a possible antecedent of the use and effectiveness of figurative language in natural consumer communication. We hope this article will be like a spore, spawning research focusing on consumer language in the marketplace.

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