



Good, better, best.

A study on the effects of comparative language on customer engagement in
social media advertising

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Abstract

Customer engagement is a key brand performance indicator in the context of social media platforms like Instagram. A technique that has been studied in relation to customer engagement is comparative advertising. However, an unspecified form of comparative advertising has not been elaborately studied, despite its more common use by marketers. Theory suggests there are two different effects this comparative language could have on customer engagement. Firstly, consumers could consider the unclear basis of comparison as less credible, leading to decreased customer engagement. Secondly, the hierarchical semantics of comparative language could create a perception of power, leading to increased customer engagement. Based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model a distinction was made between these ambiguous propositions. Highly involved customers were expected to be more critical and thus more likely to deem the message as less credible, while lowly involved customers were expected to process the message based on peripheral cues, meaning they would deem the message powerful. Results indicated a different causal route than expected. Using unspecified comparative language in an Instagram advertisement only seemed to negatively affect customer engagement. Consumers who saw unspecified comparative language were more likely to consider the message less credible. This led to a decreased perceived message power, which decreased consumer engagement. If these consumers were particularly highly involved with the product category in the advertisement, credibility also directly impacted their engagement, which worsened the effect of unspecified comparative language on customer engagement. For managers these results stress the importance of credibility in advertising messages and indicate that marketers should be careful with using unspecified comparative language in their brand communication.

Key words: comparative language, customer engagement, perceived message credibility, perceived message power, product category involvement

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Introduction

In the age of online communication, social media networks are still ever expanding. Despite the declining growth of the biggest social network Facebook, their worldwide user base is still increasing every year (Noyes, 2020; Oosterveer, 2020). Moreover, the amount of users on younger platforms like Instagram or TikTok for example, is growing more rapidly (Chen, 2020; Gupta, 2020). For marketers, this large number of users creates many potentially fruitful advertising opportunities. Logically, firms try to use these opportunities to up their brand's performance (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). After all, the potential reach is enormous. To tap into this, marketers have developed a broad variety of techniques and appeals throughout the years to increase the effectiveness of their advertising attempts by for example increasing their customer engagement (Chahal et al., 2019). Increasing customer engagement is not a simple task, however, as it is an elaborate construct which is influenced by various factors (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020; Harrigan et al., 2017). Fortunately for marketers, some of the key factors influencing customer engagement are message characteristics (Harris et al., 1986; Leek et al., 2017; Pezzuti et al., 2021). This indicates that marketers can manipulate the language and linguistic styles in their communication in order to influence consumer behaviour.

An important communication technique for influencing consumer behaviour that has been used for a long time is comparative advertising. In this type of advertising, a product or service is compared to that of a competitor (Grewal et al., 1997). This can be done either explicitly or implicitly. When done explicitly, a specific competitor is named. A good example is car brand BMW. They posted a picture on Twitter of a Mercedes car wrapped in a BMW-cover, with the caption: "Now every car can dress up as its favorite superhero @MercedesBenzUSA" (see Appendix A). In this advertisement the comparison with the competitor is clearly visible in text and image. When done implicitly, however, there is no (clear) mention of a competitor. Take Bounty, for example, an American paper towel brand, which uses the slogan 'the quicker picker upper' (Appendix B). Academic literature on printed advertising has found that comparative advertising benefits all sorts of brand performance indicators. Comparative ads were found to be more effective than noncomparative ads in generating attention, message- and brand awareness, and favourable brand attitudes (Grewal et al., 1997; Wu et al., 1989). Additionally, they would help to increase purchase intentions and purchase behaviors (Grewal et al., 1997). This indicates that comparative advertising could also be a useful method for improving brand performance.

Interestingly, while comparative advertising can include both implicit and explicit comparisons, earlier research mainly focused on strict explicit comparisons (Beard, 2015; Grewal et al., 1997; Thompson & Hamilton, 2006). However, the more implicit type of comparative advertising has become more prevalent in more recent years (Beard, 2015, Ferrell et al., 2021; Gottschalk, 2009; Teodorescu, 2015). In fact, Teodorescu (2015) ascertained that when comparative language is used, there is often no mention at all of a competitor's product to which the advertised product is compared. Instead, advertisements only mention that their product is 'more powerful' or 'better', as is the case in the Bounty example (Appendix B). In this case, comparative advertising only relies on comparative language with an unclear basis of comparison. Due to earlier research's focus on explicit comparisons, very little research has been conducted on the effects of this more implicit, unspecified type of comparison (Beard, 2015). Therefore, Beard (2015) suggests that future research should look into the effects of implicit comparison.

Furthermore, there seems to be another gap in earlier academic knowledge. While much research has been done to examine the effects of comparative advertising, many of these papers study the effects on printed ads (Grewal et al., 1997; Jewell & Saenger, 2014; Soscia et al., 2009). However, in the context of social media advertising, brand performance is conceptualised differently (Katsikeas et al., 2016). After all, social media technology provides a whole array of new methods for measuring brand performance (e.g. clicks, likes, shares, etc.). As a result, customer engagement has become a key indicator for online brand performance (Chahal et al., 2019; Ratcliff, 2014). This means marketers often use customer engagement as a way to measure their advertising success. However, comparative advertising has not been researched in relation to these newer brand performance measures (Ananda et al., 2019; de Vries, 2012). This makes it an interesting research topic, especially given the still increasing amount of social media users.

Lastly, based on the academic literature on comparative language there might be a reason to assume that the effects of comparative advertising are not equal for different product categories. Soscia et al. (2009) suggest that consumers who are highly involved with a product represent the perfect target group for comparative advertising as they are better able to understand and value the information communicated through an advertisement. Low-involvement consumers, on the other hand, might be less affected by comparative language. This means that consumers seeing an ad for an expensive, high-involvement product (e.g. a new car), might perceive comparative advertising differently than consumers who are viewing a low-involvement product ad (e.g. toothpaste). After all, a consumer looking to buy a new car

has got more at stake than someone buying a tube of toothpaste. In that case, there is more cognitive capacity involved with their purchase decision, indicating high-involvement processing (Thompson & Hamilton, 2006). As this makes consumers better able to understand and value information, one could argue that comparative advertising might have different effects among consumers viewing ads for high- or low-involvement product categories. Although earlier literature on the influence of involvement on comparative advertising exists, these papers once again focus on explicit comparative advertising in printed ads (Gotlieb & Sarel, 1991; Muehling et al., 1990). Additionally, academic literature is still ambiguous about the role of involvement. Given this lack of research and the seemingly apparent moderating effect of message processing, it will also be taken into account in this study.

Conclusively, it would be useful to fill the gaps in academic knowledge on the effectiveness of comparative language in online advertising. As this language is used a lot, it is important to understand how it affects customer engagement. Additionally, gaining insight on this subject would not only benefit academic knowledge, but it could also hold valuable managerial implications. After all, the language used in advertising serves a purpose; persuading (potential) customers. Knowing the functioning of this language could help to increase the effectiveness of persuasive communication and improve online customer engagement. If, for example, it becomes apparent that certain customers are especially prone to the effects of comparative language, marketers could adjust their communication to this tendency. Therefore, this paper sets out to study the following research question: “What are the effects of unspecified comparative language in social media advertising on online customer engagement?” Additionally, in answering this question, it will take into account the influence of the concept of product category involvement. By doing so, it will dive deeper into the different effects of comparative language and its underlying mechanisms, based on message processing involvement. Results of this study will contribute to filling the existing gap in academic knowledge and will hopefully provide useful insights for managers trying to improve online customer engagement.

Theory

This chapter will elaborate on the most important concepts in this study and the relationship that exists between these concepts. First of all, the concept of online customer engagement will be explained. Next, the different aspects of comparative advertising and comparative language will be elaborated upon. Where possible, these factors will be linked to relevant theories.

Lastly, the moderating effect of the product category will be included and hypotheses will be stated.

Online customer engagement

As described in the previous chapter, marketers use comparative advertising as a means to improve online brand performance. After all, social media networks form a vast potential reach for advertisers. However, potential reach in itself is not a reliable predictor of brand performance (Katsikeas et al., 2016). So how to determine whether communication is effectively impacting online brand performance? Academic research suggests customer engagement as a commonly used key indicator for online brand performance (Chahal et al., 2019; Ratcliff, 2014). Elaborate academic literature defines customer engagement as “a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, cocreative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships” (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 260). This psychological state exists as a dynamic, iterative process within service relationships (Brodie et al., 2011). This means that customer engagement reflects the process of customers’ interaction with a brand and the mental state that accompanies these experiences.

Furthermore, it is important to understand that customer engagement is a multi-dimensional concept that plays a central role in a network with other relational concepts (Brodie et al., 2011). The mechanisms of customer engagement arise from the combination of both cognitive and emotional constructs (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011), but the concept also contains a behavioural dimension. Hollebeek et al. (2014) label this as ‘activation’, which describes “a consumer's level of energy, effort and time spent on a brand in a particular consumer/brand interaction” (p. 154). Van Doorn et al. (2010) follow a similar conceptualisation and define customer engagement as “the customers’ behavioral manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (p. 253). This indicates that customer engagement does not only consist of a mental process, but also entails the behaviour that comes along with it. For this research, this behavioural dimension is particularly of interest, as it directly translates to customer-brand behaviour. In other words, these behavioural reactions (e.g. comments, shares, and likes) are what marketers are trying to pique with their advertising messages (Coelho et al., 2016; Solem & Pedersen, 2016). Therefore, examining this dimension has a relevant practical importance.

Given the comprehensiveness of customer engagement, it is, in general, seen as a concept that can provide enhanced predictive power for consumer behaviour (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Further, it is also a strong predictor of a broad range of online brand performance

indicators. De Oliveira Santini et al. (2020) point out that customer engagement directly impacts firm performance, behavioural intention, and word-of-mouth. Moreover, it would also help predict customer loyalty (Pham & Avnet, 2009). Other recent research found that customer engagement also positively contributes to customer consumption (Ho et al., 2020). It is an indication of new customer acquisition and existing customer retention, as well as the firm's financial performance. Based on these findings from recent literature, it is apparent that customer engagement gives a strong indication of online brand performance. Therefore, the focus of this paper, with regards to desired advertising outcomes and online brand performance, will be on customer engagement.

Lastly, customer engagement is not only a driver of many firm performance indicators, it is also seen as a consequence of several indicators. Academic research has found that customer engagement can be the result of customer affections and cognitions, like customer satisfaction, positive emotions, and company trust (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020; Harrigan et al., 2017). Interestingly, however, customer engagement can also be influenced by messages, for example through perceived message power and perceived message credibility (Harris et al., 1986; Pezzuti et al., 2021). The fact that message characteristics can influence customer engagement is relevant as it is something that can be directly manipulated by marketers. This means that marketers could influence customer engagement through adjusting certain aspects of their message. The use of comparative language is one of those aspects marketers can tweak which could influence customer engagement, as will become apparent in the coming paragraph.

Comparative advertising and -language

In 1997, Grewal et al. did a meta-analysis on the effectiveness of comparative advertising, in which they incorporated 22 years (1975-1996) of empirical research. They defined comparative advertising as advertising which compared at least two brands in the same general service or product category. Additionally, comparative ads should compare the brands on specific service/product attributes. This definition is still supported in later literature (Jewell & Saenger, 2014; Kenton, 2020; Soscia et al., 2009). As described in the introduction, comparative advertising can be split in two different categories. Firstly, a more strict, explicit type of comparison, in which two or more brands in the same general service or product category are explicitly compared on specific service/ product attributes (Grewal et al., 1997). Secondly, as became apparent, there is a more implicit type of advertising which seems more prevalent in current day advertising (Beard, 2015; Teodorescu, 2015).

Within the category of implicit advertising a further distinction can be made. Implicit comparative advertising can indirectly - visually or textually - refer to a specific competitor, for example, by claiming a product lasts two times longer than its direct competitors (see Appendix C) (Grewal et al., 1997). However, as Teodorescu (2015) found, most often not even an indirect reference is present. In this case, the comparative advertisement is more about comparative language than about actual textual or visual references to competitors. Therefore, a deeper understanding of comparative language is pertinent.

Comparative language is created through a morphological process in which adjectives are made quantifiable (Cummins & Katsos, 2010; Shariq, 2020). The quantifiable nature of this language inherently drives the existence of a degree of comparison (Cummins & Katsos, 2010). In other words, making adjectives quantifiable inherently creates the possibility to define a hierarchy. This explains the existence of the comparative adjective and the surpassing superlative adjective, which enrich and extend the semantics of the adjective (Bedanokova et al., 2015). In the English language, creating comparative language means that “the suffix –er is attached to adjectives for the comparative degree and –est for the superlative degree” (Shariq, 2020, p. 569). The use of comparative language is a widely used technique by advertisers to compare their product to people’s old products and convey the message that the new product is better than the old one (Shariq, 2020; Teodorescu, 2015).

So how does comparative language impact customer engagement? And what roles do perceived message power and perceived message credibility play? Some papers suggest that message characteristics, like comparative language, could benefit customer engagement. Pezzuti et al. (2021) found that expressing certainty in an online message leads to more customer engagement. The reason for this effect is that expressing certainty makes a message seem more powerful (Pezzuti et al., 2021). Subsequently, increased perceptions of power have a positive effect on customer engagement (Pezzuti et al., 2021). This implies that the perceived power of communication is a driver of customer engagement. This creates opportunities for the use of comparative language, as comparative language, by definition, indicates a higher degree or quality (Oxford University, 2021). This can be explained by the hierarchical semantics which follow the quantifiable nature of comparative language. Consequently, this would mean that a higher degree of comparison indicates a higher degree of power. This is supported by Simon-Vandenberg (1997) who states that expressing 'overtone', indicating comparative or superlative language, contributes to communicating strong commitment to the validity of the statement. This means that comparative language contributes to the expression of modal certainty and thus conveys greater power. The reason why superlative forms are so prevalent

in some languages is because they increase the perceived level of certainty (Rozumko, 2016). As expressing certainty can increase customer engagement, it is likely that unspecified comparative language should also increase customer engagement. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H_{1A} The use of comparative language has a positive impact on perceived message power.

H_{1B} Perceived message power has a positive impact on customer engagement.

On the other hand, however, there is also literature that suggests that unspecified comparative language in fact could negatively influence customer engagement. Harris et al. (1986) note that, in contrast to explicit comparison, there is no standard that something is being compared to. Simply implying that a product gives ‘more’, creates a vacuous statement with an unclear basis of comparison. This leaves the recipient wondering: “more than what?”. Harris et al. (1986) consider the use of unspecified comparatives a form of evaluative advertising. Evaluative advertising is the counterpart of factual advertising, and involves “subjective judgments of an unverifiable and unfalsifiable nature” (Harris et al., 1986, p. 17). Additionally, more recent research by Ferrell et al. (2021) indicates that comparative claims are often used without providing evidence or referral. However, this does not necessarily mean that it is false advertising. After all, anything true could be used to complete the comparative. However, since the message could be considered vague and is not falsifiable, the perceived credibility of the statement could decrease (Cheung et al., 2009). This in turn, could have an impact on consumer engagement, since message credibility strongly influences whether consumers take action, and ‘activation’ is an important dimension of customer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014; McKnight & Kacmar, 2006). This means that implicit comparative advertising could be considered less incredible, leading to reduced customer engagement. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H_{2A} The use of comparative language has a negative impact on perceived message credibility.

H_{2B} Perceived message credibility has a positive impact on customer engagement.

Conclusively, the two lines of reasoning in previous paragraphs create a distinction in the mechanisms of comparative language. Apparently, there seem to be two possible processes that could explain the relationship between comparative language and customer engagement. First of all, there seems to be a positive relationship between comparative language and customer engagement through the perceived power of a message. Second, there seems to be a negative relationship between comparative language and customer engagement through the perceived credibility of a message. Academic results thus seem ambiguous on the subject of comparative language. To distinguish which process a consumer is more likely to follow, a moderator will be put forward in the next paragraph. Furthermore, as comparative language has never been directly linked to customer engagement, and because the two lines of reasoning seem to contradict each other, the relationship between comparative language and customer engagement is expected to be fully mediated via either perceived message power or perceived message credibility.

Product categories and the ELM

An explanation for the academic ambiguity on the effects of comparative language might arise from the mechanisms of message processing and product category involvement. Firstly, when examining the relationships between product category involvement and customer engagement, it is important to make a clear distinction between the two. Despite the fact that customer engagement is closely related to concepts such as ‘involvement’, ‘commitment’, and ‘loyalty’ (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011), these are not dimensions of customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011). Academic research has pointed out that customer engagement exhibits conceptual distinctiveness from these related concepts (Hollebeek et al., 2014). In this paper, involvement is used to describe “the ongoing concern that a customer may have for a product category based on the perceived importance of that product category in relation to his or her self concept, ego, and value system and/or the general interest that a customer may have in the purchase process” (Bowden, 2009, p. 70). It is therefore conceptually distinct from customer engagement, which reflects the process of customers’ interaction with a brand and the mental state that accompanies these experiences.

Next, to better understand the mechanisms of involvement, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is of relevance. The ELM describes the way in which attitudes and beliefs are formed or changed (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). According to the ELM, the processing of a message can be done via two different routes; a central and a peripheral route (Baran & Davis, 2014; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Message processing via the central route requires a certain

amount of cognitive capacity. For this cognitive capacity to be allocated to the processing of a message, (high) involvement with the message is necessary. On the contrary, message processing via the peripheral route does not require much cognitive capacity and often works through the assessment of so-called peripheral cues. Peripheral cues are cues that are used unconsciously to process messages with less cognitive attention (Baran & Davis, 2014).

Earlier academic research has linked these two routes of processing to high- and low-involvement product categories (Soscia et al., 2009). There are products that are considered high-involvement purchases and products that are considered low-involvement purchases (Park et al., 2007). Of course, it is important to keep in mind that the level of product involvement differs between individual consumers (Hoyer et al., 2017). However, certain product attributes make a general classification possible. Prior literature has grouped high-involvement and low-involvement products based on consumers' perceived risk (Hoyer et al., 2017). "Durable products such as consumer electronics, appliances, and automobiles are typical examples of high-involvement products, since wrong purchase decisions have financial implications and force consumers to deal with poor products for long periods of time" (Gu et al., 2012, p. 183). Additionally, these products often do not only have higher monetary value. In fact, they are also often bought for symbolic meaning, image reinforcement, or psychological satisfaction (Radder & Huang, 2008). All in all, high-involvement products generate higher levels of financial, social, psychological, or time risk and can therefore have more significant personal consequences (Hoyer et al., 2017). This leads to consumers often taking more time to search for information about these products, so they can make sure they make the right purchase. In terms of the ELM, this means that consumers are more likely to process information about such products via the central route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Products that classify as low-involvement, on the other hand, are consumable products, like groceries, books, and care products (Gu et al., 2012; Hoyer et al., 2017). Here, the consequences of not making the right purchase are small. Therefore, consumers are less likely to critically examine information, and are thus more likely to process information about such products via the peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).

Based on these product categories and the ELM, some prepositions can be made with regards to the two lines of reasoning in the previous paragraph explaining the relationship between comparative language and customer engagement. Firstly, comparative language is often characterized as emotional language (Ryffel et al. 2014). Emotional language, and emotions in general, are more likely to be processed via the peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Therefore, consumers who are viewing a low-involvement product advertisement likely

do not allocate the cognitive capacity to discredit seemingly empty comparisons. Instead, they rely on peripheral cues, as they process the message via the peripheral route. This is where the perceived power of the message could play an important role. As brought up earlier, the hierarchical semantics of comparative language indicate a strong commitment to the validity of the statement. As there is no cognitive capacity allocated to process the message, the consumer is forced to process the message based on peripheral cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). In this case, that cue will be that comparative language indicates a powerful statement. Due to the seemingly powerful semantics of comparative language and the peripheral type of processing, the following hypothesis will be tested:

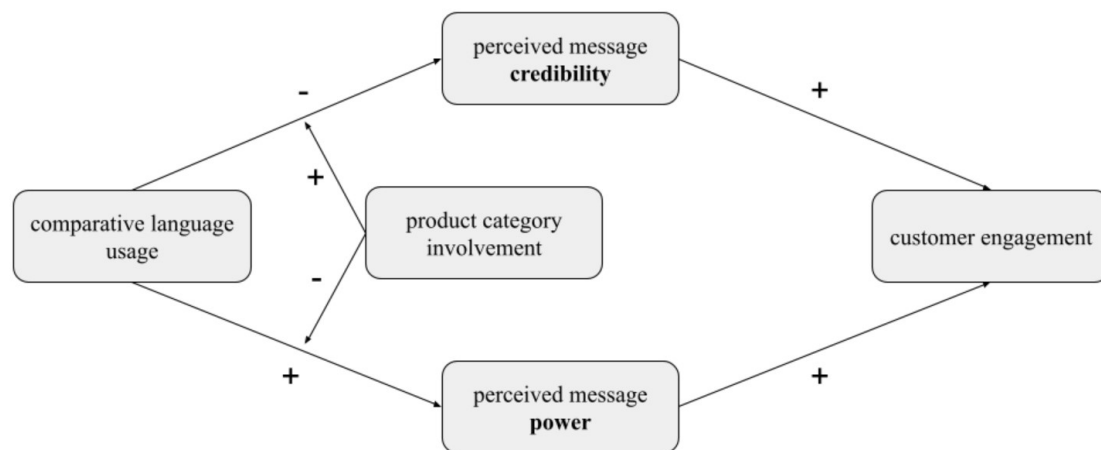
H₃ A low-involvement product context strengthens the positive effect of comparative language on perceived message power.

On the other hand, Thompson and Hamilton (2006) demonstrate that comparative ads are more effective when consumers use analytical processing, in comparison to non-comparative ads. However, here, one should keep in mind that these findings concern explicit comparative advertising. There is reason to believe that these results do not apply to implicit comparative language. Soscia et al. (2009) indicate that high-involvement consumers are better able to understand the value of information communicated through an advertisement. However, as the implicit comparative language leaves an unclear basis of comparison, they create a vacuous statement (Harris et al., 1986). The value of such a statement is rather low, as it is not unverifiable. In fact, comparatives and superlatives could even be seen as exaggerations or ‘puffing up’ (Harris et al. 1986). In terms of the ELM, this means that consumers who process an ad via the central route, will spot that the message could be considered vague and is not falsifiable, which, in turn, would decrease the credibility of the statement (Cheung et al., 2009). After all, consumers who are processing an ad for a high-involvement product, will allocate more cognitive resources to the processing of that message (Park et al., 2007; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Finally, as mentioned earlier, message credibility strongly influences whether consumers take action (McKnight & Kacmar, 2006) and ‘activation’ is an important dimension of customer engagement. Therefore, it seems logical to expect that consumers who view ads for high-involvement products, are less likely to be engaged, because they perceive the use of implicit comparative language as less credible. This shapes the following hypothesis:

H₄ A high-involvement product context strengthens the negative effect of comparative language on perceived message credibility.

Figure 1

Conceptual model



Methodology

In this chapter, the methodology used in this study will be explained. It will shed light on the research design, operationalisation, research ethics, data and sampling, and representativity. The procedure of the experiment and the analysis will also be elaborated upon.

Research design

This study's conceptual model consisted of one independent variable, two mediating variables, one dependent variable, and one moderating variable. An overview of the conceptual model can be found in Figure 1. To test the conceptual model an online experiment has been conducted. An experiment was chosen as the preferred method, as it can support claims about causality, which was important given the conceptual model and research question (Hair et al., 2018; Wester et al., 2006). Additionally, it provided a means to measure mediating variables, which would be substantially more complicated when analyzing real-life social media data. Lastly, it was necessary to keep certain factors, like other message characteristics, constant (Hair et al., 2018). The experiment can be characterized as a two by two between-subjects controlled experimental design, containing four conditions (Hair et al., 2018). These four conditions consisted of two conditions *with* comparative language for both a high- and low-

involvement product category, and two conditions *without* comparative language, for both a high- and low-involvement product category. An overview of the conditions can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

2 x 2 factorial design

	Product category involvement	
	Low	High
No comparative language	A	B
Comparative language	C	D

Stimulus material

To test the different conditions of comparative language and product category involvement, stimulus material was created. The material was later tested with a pilot test, to check the quality of the stimulus material and to support methodological decisions.

Development of the stimulus material

To test the effects of comparative language in online brand communications, stimulus material was created to simulate these communications in the experiment. As mentioned before, Instagram currently still is one of the fastest growing online platforms. Therefore, the Instagram platform was chosen as the format for online brand communication in this experiment. Next, pairs of high- and low-involvement products had to be chosen to manipulate product category involvement. Therefore, a decision was made for high- and low-involvement products. For the high-involvement product category, a durable product had to be chosen that could also convey symbolic meaning, image reinforcement, or psychological satisfaction (Gu et al., 2012; Radder & Huang, 2008). Multiple products fitted this description (Hoyer et al., 2017; Radder & Huang, 2008). Therefore, several products were chosen to make stimulus material, which were later tested in a pilot test. This was done to end up with at least one product category that would represent an adequate operationalisation of the manipulation. Subsequently, a car, a washing machine, and a coffee machine, were initially chosen as the high-involvement products.

For the low-involvement category, consumable products were chosen, of which the consequences of not making the right purchase are small (Gu et al., 2012; Hoyer et al., 2017).

These products had to be as closely related to their high-involvement counterparts as possible. This was done to ensure as little other factors as possible could influence the stimulus material. Therefore, a car mat, laundry detergent, and coffee pads were chosen as the low-involvement products. Additionally, not only were the products kept as closely related as possible, the images used in the stimulus material were also kept visually as similar as possible. After all, this paper tries to examine the effects of the written language underneath a post. To make sure that visual factors would not influence the manipulation, an image similarity test was conducted before the pilot test. Lastly, fictional brands were created to accompany the product categories. The reliability and believability of these brands was later tested in the pilot test.

Image similarity test

As images are an important part of Instagram messages, a check regarding imagery was conducted. To control whether the images in the created stimulus material were sufficiently visually similar, an online tool was used that expresses image similarity in percentages (Image similarity identifier, 2018). These analyses indicated a 92.33 % similarity between the car mats and car conditions. It found a 35.82 % similarity between the laundry detergent and washing machine conditions. It found a 78.95 % similarity between the coffee pads and the coffee machine conditions. According to the software, images that share less than 70% similarity can be considered unsimilar. This means that the 'laundry detergent - washing machine' conditions were not sufficiently visually similar. Therefore, it was decided to not incorporate these conditions in the pilot test.

Pilot test

To determine the quality of the stimulus material and to check which product category represented the best manipulation of product category involvement, a pilot test was conducted. For this pilot test the created Instagram advertisements were shown to a group of 41 people, after which several questions were asked. First, the perceived realism of the stimulus material was tested. To do this, a scale by Tiggemann et al. (2013) was used, in which respondents were asked how realistic they deemed the advertisement. This was done to make sure that respondents perceived the stimulus material as a good representation of a real-life Instagram post, which improves the generalizability of the results. As this measurement was also included in the main experiment, a more elaborate description of this scale can be found later in this paragraph. Next, product category involvement was measured to check whether the high- and low-involvement products were indeed classified as such. To do this, a scale by Zaichkowsky

(1985) was used to determine how involved respondents were with the specific product category. This was done to control whether the manipulation of involvement was successful across the different products. As this measurement was also included in the main experiment, a more elaborate description of this scale can be found later in this paragraph. Lastly, brand reliability was checked to control whether respondents deemed the created fictional brands reliable and believable. To measure perceived brand reliability, a scale by Erdem and Swait (2004) was used, consisting of six items. Respondents could indicate to what degree they agreed on statements like “This brand reminds me of someone who is competent and knows what he or she is doing”, “This brand seems to deliver what it promises” and “This brand does not pretend to be any different than it is”. Respondents could answer these items on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = ‘strongly disagree’, 7 = ‘strongly agree’)

The results from the pilot test indicated that both the coffee ($M=5,80$, $SD=1,02$) and the car ($M=5,43$, $SD=1,53$) product categories reported satisfactory realism. Both the coffee ($M=5,35$, $SD=1,24$) and the car ($M=5,28$, $SD=1,26$) product categories also reported satisfactory brand reliability. Although the coffee brand was deemed slightly more realistic and reliable, these differences were minimal and insignificant (resp. $t(39) = -0,91$, $p = .368$; $t(39) = -0,19$, $p = .854$). Next, considering product category involvement, results indicate no significant difference in involvement between the high-involvement ($M=4,19$, $SD=0,58$) and low-involvement ($M=3,58$, $SD=1,32$) product category for the coffee brand ($t(39) = 1,34$, $p = .196$). Problematically, this indicates that the involvement manipulation was not successful. However, for the car brand, a significant difference was found between the high-involvement ($M=4,40$, $SD=1,09$) and low-involvement ($M=2,68$, $SD=1,22$) product category, meaning that here, the manipulation was successful ($t(39) = 3,42$, $p = .003$).

Finally, given the visual similarity between product images, the satisfactory reliability and realism values, and the successful manipulation of involvement, the car product category and brand were chosen as the final stimulus material for the study. Next, the stimulus material was manipulated to create a condition with and without comparative language. In the non-comparative advertisement, three adjectives were used that could describe both the car and the car mat (sleek, luxurious, and sustainable). This was done to make sure that the adjectives itself would not influence differences between the high- and the low-involvement product. For the comparative language conditions these adjectives were made quantifiable to indicate a degree of comparison (sleeker, more luxurious, more sustainable). The final stimulus material can be found in Appendix D.

Measures

After finalizing the pilot test, several concepts needed to be operationalised before conducting the main experiment. Therefore, scales were defined for measuring the concepts of customer engagement, perceived message power, and perceived message credibility. Also, scales were defined to check the perceived realism and involvement. Lastly, several questions were constructed to measure media use and gather demographic information.

Online customer engagement

One of the most essential constructs of the final experiment is online customer engagement. An elaborate theoretical definition of customer engagement has been given in the previous chapter. From this definition, it has become apparent that customer engagement entails three main dimensions; cognitive-, emotional-, and behavioural engagement. For operationalising the first two dimensions the following items, developed by Solem and Pedersen (2016), were used: (1) 'This brand post evoked my interest' (cognitive), (2) 'This brand post evoked my feelings' (emotion). Respondents could answer these items on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = 'strongly disagree', 7 = 'strongly agree'). With regards to the behavioural dimension, in practice, customer engagement entails a broad range of behaviours, including word-of-mouth, recommendations, helping other customers, and writing reviews. In the context of online social media, these behaviors are often translated to actions like comments, shares, and likes. (Coelho et al., 2016; Solem & Pedersen, 2016). Therefore, the behavioural dimension of online customer engagement was measured using an adapted scale from Berger and Milkman (2012), using the following three items: (1) 'I would like this Instagram post', (2) 'I would comment on this Instagram post', and (3) 'I would share this Instagram post.' Respondents could answer these items on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = 'strongly disagree', 7 = 'strongly agree'). The reliability of the combined online customer engagement scale in the final model was good (*Cronbach's a* = .849), according to Hair et al. (2018).

Perceived message credibility.

Message credibility was measured using a scale developed and validated by Appelman and Sundar (2015). Here, message credibility is defined as "an individual's judgment of the veracity of the content of communication" (Appelmand & Sundar, 2015, p.5). The scale was created to provide a usable metric for the credibility of messages to use in academic literature. Using this method, respondents were asked the following question: 'How well do the following adjectives describe the content you just saw?' (1) 'accurate', (2) 'authentic', (3) 'believable'. Respondents

could answer these items on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = ‘describes very poorly’, 7 = ‘describes very well’). The reliability of this scale in the final model was acceptable (*Cronbach’s a* = .745), according to Hair et al. (2018).

Perceived message power

Earlier academic studies have developed scales for measuring perceived power in an advertising context. Warren et al. (2018) developed a scale to measure the perceived power of a fictitious character in advertisements. Pezzuti et al. (2021) have adapted that scale to measure perceptions of power on social media. In this study, these scales are combined and adapted to measure the perceived power of a social media message. This means that the scale was adapted to measure how powerful respondents consider a certain message to be. Therefore, respondents answered the following items using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree”, 7 = “strongly agree”): (1) ‘The message seems powerful’, (2) ‘The message seems strong’, (3) ‘The message seems assertive’. The reliability of this scale in the final model was excellent (*Cronbach’s a* = .929), according to Hair et al. (2018).

Product category involvement

A measure for product category involvement was included in the experiment as a manipulation check. It was measured to check whether the high- and low-involvement products were indeed classified as such. To do this, a scale by Zaichkowsky (1985) was used, which has later been validated by other academic literature (Goldsmith & Emmert, 1991). After seeing the manipulation, respondents were shown nine items to determine their involvement. Respondents could indicate how important, interesting, relevant, stimulating, meaningful, attractive, fascinating, valuable, and necessary they deemed the product. These items could be rated on a bipolar seven-point scale. The reliability of this scale in the final model was excellent (*Cronbach’s a* = .952), according to Hair et al. (2018).

Perceived realism

A measure for perceived realism was also included as a manipulation check. It was measured to make sure that respondents perceived the stimulus material as a good representation of a real-life Instagram post, which improves the generalizability of the results. It was measured using a shortened version of a scale developed by Tiggemann et al. (2013). This shortened scale consisted of two questions, namely “The products or services in the Instagram advertisement were realistic” and “The Instagram advertisement looks like it would in real life”. Respondents

could answer these items on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = ‘strongly disagree’, 7 = ‘strongly agree’). The reliability of this scale in the final model was good (*Cronbach’s a* = .827), according to Hair et al. (2018).

Media use and demographic questions

In order to gain a broader understanding of the background of the respondents in the dataset, two questions regarding media use were asked, as well as several demographic questions. To measure the media use of respondents, a measurement by Andersen et al. (2016) was used. First of all, respondents were asked which social media platforms they had used in the past week. Respondents could pick multiple answers from a list of WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, or none of these. Secondly, respondents were asked specifically about their Instagram use. They could indicate how many days they had used Instagram in the past week. Lastly, respondents were asked to indicate their age, gender, and highest level of education.

Participants and sampling

The target population for this study was Dutch 18 to 39 years old. This target population was chosen as it represents the largest user base for Instagram users in the Netherlands (Tankovska, 2021). For collecting the data in this paper a convenience sample was drawn from the target population. To collect this sample, respondents were approached via Whatsapp, Facebook, LinkedIn, SurveySwap, and the researcher’s personal network. Respondents were also asked to forward the experiment to others. According to Hair et al. (2018), the desired number of respondents for such an experiment is between 15 to 20 observations for each experimental condition. However, to increase statistical power, the aim was to obtain at least 30 observations per experimental condition. This means that a minimum of 120 respondents was required for this study. In total 156 respondents partook in the online experiment. Of those respondents, 14 did not fully finish the experiment and 1 respondent did not agree to the experiment’s terms. This means that 141 respondents have completely finished the experiment. The requirement for the minimal number of respondents is hereby met, which indicates the results should be generalizable if the sample is representative (Hair et al., 2018). Of the 141 respondents, 2 did not fill in the demographic questions, meaning these respondents could not be included in the representativity testing.

Representativity

To test the sample for representativity, the demographics of the study sample were compared to the most recent data of the target population from the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, 2020a, 2020b). A chi-square test was used to compare the data. Table 2 shows the study sample was representative of the target population with regards to gender ($X^2(1, N=139)=3,074$; $p=.080$). This means the distribution of gender within the study sample did not differ substantially from the distribution in the target population.

Table 2
Representativeness of the sample by gender

Age	Sample	Population
Men	43,2%	50,6%
Woman	56,8%	49,4%
N	139	4.819.493

Note: $X^2(1, N=139)=3,074$; $p=.080$

However, with regards to age, the study sample did not realistically represent the target population ($X^2(3, N=137)=151,513$; $p<.001$). This means the distribution of the age groups in the study sample differed significantly from the distribution in the target population. The group 18 to 25 year olds was overrepresented (78,4% > 31,8%), while the older groups were underrepresented. The skewed distribution might have been partly due to the sampling method, as the convenience sample could have led to overrepresentation of respondents in the age group of the researcher. Results can be found in Table 3.

Table 3
Representativeness of the sample by age

Age	Sample	Population
18 to 25	78,4 %	31,8 %
25 to 30	15,8 %	23,6 %
30 to 35	3,6 %	22,9 %
35 to 40	0,7 %	21,7 %
N	139	4.819.493

Note: $X^2(3, N=137)=151,513$; $p<.001$

Regarding the level of education, the study sample was also not representative of the target population ($X^2(3, N=139)=234,556; p<.001$) This means the distribution of the education level groups in the study sample differed significantly from the distribution in the target population. The university level of education is overrepresented ($73,4\% < 21,3\%$), while the other groups are underrepresented. The skewed distribution is again likely due to the convenience sampling from the researcher's network (Hair et al., 2018). Results and descriptives of the chi-square test can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

Representativeness of the sample by level of educational

Educational attainment	Sample	Population
Secondary education	2,2 %	16,1 %
MBO	2,2 %	30,5 %
HBO	22,3 %	32,1 %
University	73,4 %	21,3 %
N	139	4.819.493

Note: $X^2(3, N=139)=234,556; p<.001$

Procedure

The experiment was conducted via an online questionnaire provided through Qualtrics. In this experiment, two Instagram advertisements and several questions from another research were also included. The different advertisements were shown in random order with their appurtenant questions. For the current experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and shown the corresponding Instagram advertisement. Randomisation ensured that any differences between the four groups could only be due to the treatment since the groups could be expected to be equal on all other characteristics (Hair et al., 2018). Respondents were told to imagine they were looking to purchase a product from the same product category as the product in the advert. The amount of time the respondent spent on the advertisement was measured. This was done to make sure the respondents looked at the advertisement long enough for the stimulus to be effectuous. After seeing the advertisement, the respondents were asked about their engagement intentions, perceived message credibility, and perceived message

power. Subsequently, the product category involvement manipulation check was conducted, to check whether respondents indeed classified the high- or low-involvement products as such. Next, the realism check questions were presented. Lastly, the respondents were asked the media use and demographic questions. When the experiment was finished, respondents were thanked for their participation and given an email address they could contact to ask questions or repeal their participation.

Research ethics

The research was conducted with consideration for research ethics. The experiment was conducted via a secure online questionnaire provided through Qualtrics. Within the online experiment, the respondents were first given a short introduction on the study. They were informed about how their data would be used and debriefed on what their participation in the study would entail. Additionally, they were notified that they could stop the experiment at any given moment. Lastly, respondents were informed that only people aged 18 to 39 could participate in the experiment. This was done to ensure respondents fell within the target population and to ensure respondents were over 18 years old. Subsequently, they were asked if their age was between 18 and 39 years and whether they gave permission to use their data anonymously for research purposes. If respondents did not agree to these terms, they would be led directly to the end of the survey.

Analysis

The analyses in this paper were conducted using SPSS version 25.0. Within SPSS, PROCESS by Hayes (2012) was used to test the hypotheses. This method was chosen because it can incorporate both categorical and continuous variables, it can account for direct and indirect effects, and it can include both mediating and moderating variables (Hayes, 2012). Considering the conceptual model, these were all highly relevant features. In the analysis multiple relations were tested to rule out or confirm any spurious relationships between the constructs in the conceptual model. First, the assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, and linearity were tested before conducting the analysis. Next, PROCESS model 6 was used to test the double mediation portion of the model. Thereafter, PROCESS model 59 was used twice to test the moderating influence of product category involvement on both perceived message credibility and perceived message power. Here, involvement was included as a continuous variable - as measured in the experiment on a seven-point Likert scale - instead of the categorical variable created from the manipulation conditions. This was done because the continuous variable

provides more variance, which makes it more convenient to work with from a statistical perspective.

Results

In this chapter, the results from the data analysis will be presented. First, several checks and data preparations will be explained, after which the paper's findings will be reported from the proposed hypotheses.

Data checks and preparation

As mentioned before, a manipulation check was conducted to control whether the high- and low-involvement products were indeed classified as such. Results from the manipulation check indicated that the manipulation of product category involvement was successful. Respondents who saw the high-involvement product category (car) indeed reported higher involvement ($M=3,97$, $SD=1,34$) than the respondents who saw the low-involvement product category (car mat) ($M=2,79$, $SD=1,20$). This difference was significant ($t(139)=-5,47$, $p < .001$).

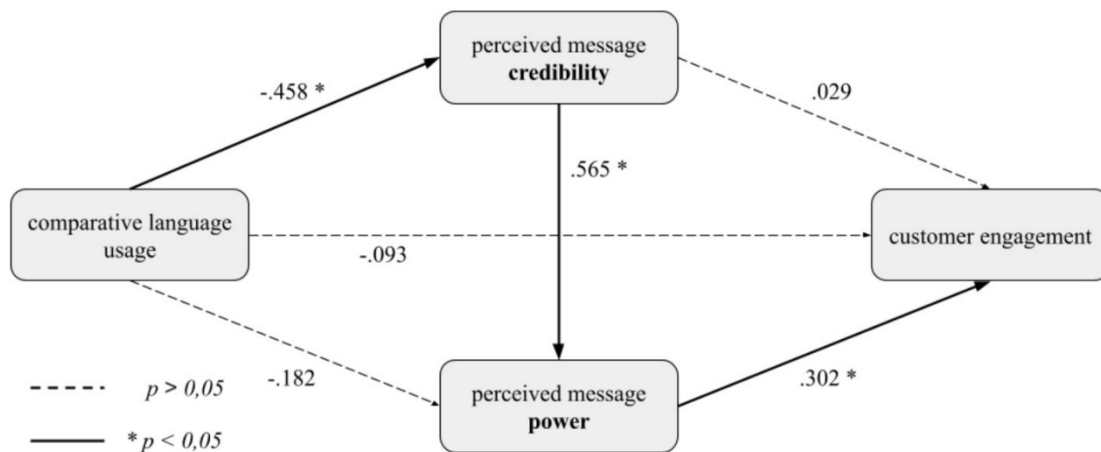
Before the PROCESS model could be tested, several assumptions needed to be checked. First, the dataset was controlled for extreme outliers by computing a random variable and running a regression with all variables predicting this random variable. No values in the dataset exceeded the critical Mahalanobis value, indicating there were no extreme outliers present. Next, the assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, and linearity were all also checked, before executing the PROCESS analyses (Hair et al., 2018). To test these assumptions, normal probability plots, scatterplots, and histograms were requested for customer engagement, perceived message credibility, and perceived message power. All were found to be satisfactory. This means all conditions were met in order to perform the analysis.

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1_A and 1_B and Hypothesis 2_A and 2_B were all tested via a model of double mediation, using PROCESS model 6. The results of this analysis can be found in Figure 2. The model explained 15,1% of variance in customer engagement ($R^2 = .151$, $F(3,137)= 8,11$, $p < .001$).

Figure 2

Dual mediation model for Hypothesis 1 and 2 (PROCESS model 6)



First of all, the model showed that the use of comparative language did not have a direct effect on customer engagement ($B = -.093$, $t(137) = -0,48$, $p = .631$). This was in line with the expectation that the relationship between comparative language and customer engagement would be fully mediated by either perceived message credibility or perceived message power. Next, Hypothesis 1_A stated that the use of comparative language has a positive impact on perceived message power. The results showed no support for this hypothesis. In fact, the use of comparative language had a negative effect on perceived message power. However, this effect was not significant ($B = -.182$, $t(138) = -0,79$, $p = .431$). Hypothesis 1_B stated that perceived message power has a positive impact on customer engagement. The results supported this hypothesis. Perceived message power indeed had a significant positive effect on customer engagement ($B = .302$, $t(137) = 4,21$, $p < .001$). This indicates that if a message is considered more powerful, customer engagement will likely increase.

Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2_A stated that the use of comparative language has a negative impact on perceived message credibility. The results supported this hypothesis. The use of comparative language indeed did have a significant negative effect on perceived message credibility ($B = -.458$, $t(139) = -2,54$, $p = .012$). This means that using unspecified comparative language in an Instagram advertisement negatively influences the credibility of the message. Hypothesis 2_B stated that perceived message credibility has a positive impact on customer engagement. Contrary to expectations, results showed no support for this hypothesis. Perceived message credibility did

not directly impact customer engagement ($B = .029$, $t(137) = 0.29$, $p = .769$). Interestingly however, perceived message credibility positively impacted perceived message power. This effect was significant ($B = .565$, $t(138) = 5.34$, $p < .001$). In turn, as was assessed before, perceived message power significantly positively impacted customer engagement ($B = .302$, $t(137) = 4.21$, $p < .001$). Ultimately, this meant that the use of comparative language did in fact negatively impact customer engagement, however, the effect followed a different mediation path than expected. Consumers were likely to deem a message with unspecified comparative language as less credible. As a result, they were likely to also deem the message as less powerful, which in turn led to consumers being less engaged with the message.

Hypothesis 3

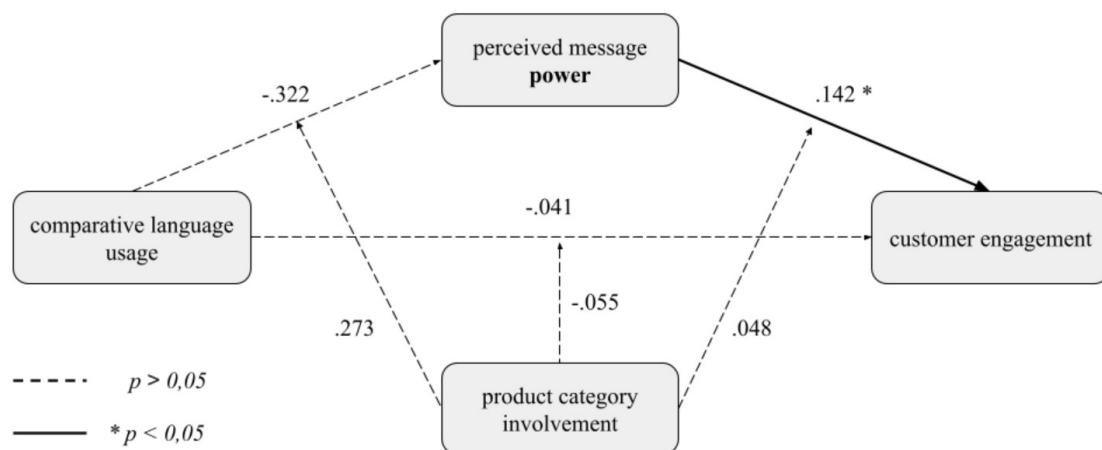
Hypothesis 3 was tested using PROCESS model 59. This model tested three interaction effects of product category involvement, as can be seen in Figure 3. First, it tested the proposed moderation effect of product category involvement on the relationship between comparative language and perceived message power. Second, it tested the moderation effect of product category involvement on the relationship between comparative language and customer engagement. Third, it tested the moderation effect of product category involvement on the relationship between perceived message power and customer engagement. Although no specific hypotheses were proposed for the second and third moderation effect, PROCESS model 59 was chosen as it gives a more elaborate and more complete notion of the mechanisms at play. This was deemed pertinent as results from the first hypotheses indicated a different path of mediation than expected. The results of this analysis can be found in Figure 3.

Hypothesis 3 stated that a low-involvement product context strengthens the positive effect of comparative language on perceived message power. Results indicated that Hypothesis 3 can be rejected. Again, results showed no significant relationship between the use of comparative language and perceived message power ($B = -.322$, $t(137) = -1.40$, $p = .165$). Also, the analysis did again provide support for the positive effect of perceived message power on customer engagement ($B = .142$, $t(135) = 2.52$, $p = .013$). However, product category involvement did not seem to influence the relationship between comparative language and perceived message power, as the interaction effect was not significant ($B = .273$, $t(137) = 1.65$, $p = .102$). As for the other interaction effects also no significant effects were found. Product category involvement did not influence the relationship between comparative language and customer engagement ($B = -.055$, $t(135) = -0.50$, $p = .615$). Product category involvement also did not influence the relationship between perceived message power and customer engagement

($B = .048$, $t(135) = 1,26$, $p = .208$). These results indicated that comparative language use and product category involvement did not influence how powerful consumers perceived a message to be or how engaged they were. However, if consumers felt the message was powerful, they were likely to be more engaged.

Figure 3

Conceptual model for Hypothesis 3 (PROCESS model 59)

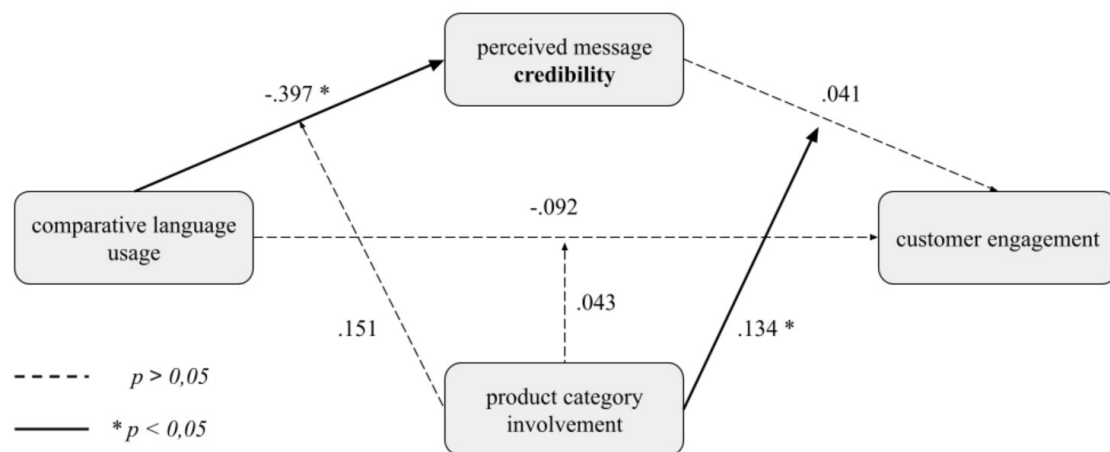


Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 was also tested using PROCESS model 59. Again, this model tested three interaction effects of product category involvement, as can be seen in Figure 4. First, it tested the proposed moderation effect of product category involvement on the relationship between comparative language and perceived message credibility. Second, it tested the moderation effect of product category involvement on the relationship between comparative language and customer engagement. Third, it tested the moderation effect of product category involvement on the relationship between perceived message credibility and customer engagement. The results of this analysis can be found in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Conceptual model for Hypothesis 4 (PROCESS model 59)



Hypothesis 4 stated that a high-involvement product context strengthens the negative effect of comparative language on perceived message credibility. Results indicated that Hypothesis 4 can be rejected. Again, results showed a significant negative relationship between the use of comparative language and perceived message credibility ($B = -.397$, $t(137) = -2,26$, $p = .025$). Also, the analysis did again show no support for the positive effect of perceived message credibility on customer engagement ($B = .041$, $t(135) = 0,55$, $p = .586$). Product category involvement did not seem to influence the relationship between comparative language and perceived message credibility ($B = .151$, $t(137) = 1,19$, $p = .237$). These results indicate that product category involvement did not influence how credible consumers perceived a message to be. Additionally, product category involvement also again did not seem to influence the relationship between comparative language and customer engagement ($B = .043$, $t(135) = 0,38$, $p = .704$).

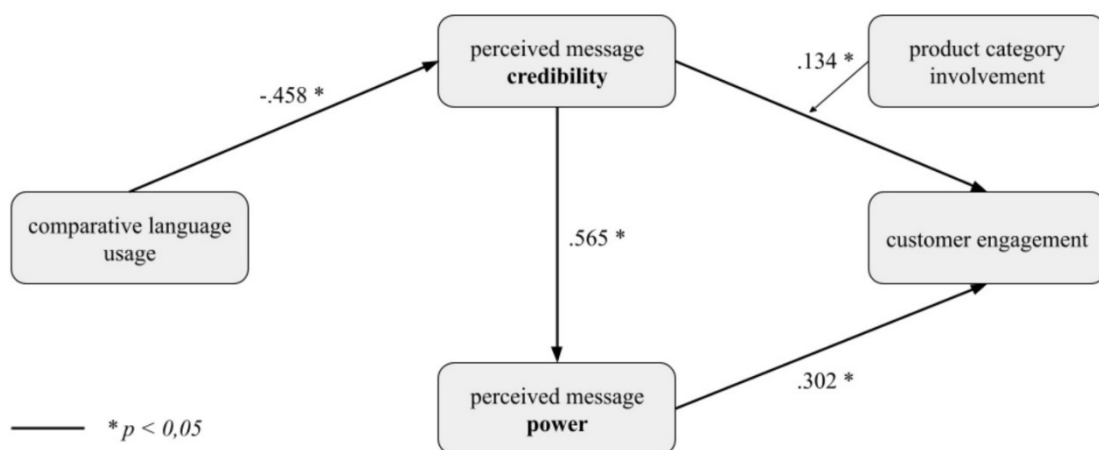
Interestingly, however, results did indicate a significant moderating role for product category involvement on the relationship between perceived message credibility and customer engagement ($B = .134$, $t(135) = 2,66$, $p = .009$). Further analysis indicated that for higher levels of involvement, perceived message credibility does have a significant positive effect on customer engagement. The Johnson-Neyman point for the moderator was 4,61. This means that from a score of 4,61 on the seven-point Likert scale, measuring involvement, the interaction effect was significant. 23,4 % of the respondents in the experiment were within this significance region. This means that if consumers were highly involved with the product

category, and they perceived the advertisement to be credible, this directly positively affected their degree of engagement with a brand post. This effect did not occur for consumers who were less involved with a product category.

Conclusively, results indicate that the use of comparative language has a significant negative effect on the perceived credibility of a message. The perceived message credibility has a positive effect on the perceived message power, which in turn influences customer engagement. In the context of a high-involvement product category, perceived message credibility can also directly affect customer engagement. The conceptual model including all significant relationships can be found in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Conceptual model including all significant relationships



Conclusion and discussion

This paper set out to examine what the effects are of unspecified comparative language in social media advertisements on online customer engagement. In answering this question, it took into account the influence of product category involvement. First of all, results indicate that seeing unspecified comparative language leads consumers to feel a message is less credible. This makes consumers label the advertisement as less powerful, which decreases their engagement with the brand post. This is an important finding as it shows that using unspecified comparative language in an Instagram advertisement can indirectly hurt customer engagement. Thereby, current research provides support for earlier research by Harris et al. (1986). They state that simply implying that a product gives ‘more’, or is ‘better’ creates a vacuous statement that

cannot be falsified. Apparently, this indeed leaves the recipient wondering: “more than what?” or “better than what?”. This worsened perception of credibility decreases how powerful consumers find the message. And, as mentioned before, if consumers consider the message to lack power, they are less likely to be engaged.

Further, this paper focused on the role of product category involvement on these relationships. As it turns out, product category involvement has no influence on the effects of unspecified comparative language on credibility or power. In other words, it does not matter whether consumers are particularly involved with the product category in the advertisement. If consumers see unspecified comparative language they are likely to consider the message less credible, whether they are looking to purchase simple consumable products, or expensive durable products. However, if consumers are highly involved with the product category, credibility does have a negative effect on customer engagement. This means that for a high-involvement product category, the negative effect of unspecified comparative language on customer engagement could be worsened. In this case, credibility does not only affect customer engagement via perceived message power, yet also directly. This means the total effect of perceived message credibility on customer engagement is larger when product category involvement is particularly high.

Lastly, results indicate that the use of unspecified comparative language does not directly nor positively influence perceived message power. As it turns out, consumers do not perceive a message as more powerful, just because it uses unspecified comparative language. However, results do indicate that if consumers consider a message to be powerful, their engagement will increase. It is interesting to link these results to findings by Pezzuti et al. (2021). They found that expressing certainty in an online message leads to more customer engagement, as it makes a message seem more powerful. The hierarchical semantics of comparative language created the expectation that that effect would also be true for comparative language. After all, comparative adjectives express a higher level of quality or power by definition. While results do confirm that a more powerful message leads to more customer engagement, unspecified comparative language apparently does not bring about a higher evaluation of message power.

An explanation for the current path of causal relations and the absence of a significant direct effect of unspecified comparative language on perceived message power, might be found in literature by Smolnikov (2018). He conceptualizes credibility as a dimension of power that actualizes and perpetuates perceived power in a social context. According to Smolnikov (2018), as the concept of power is a social construct, its perception is a function of its

believability. In other words, if people do not believe in the authenticity of the power of the other, the perception of his or her power becomes highly deficient (Smolnikov, 2018). There is reason to assume that this process might also be applicable to brand communications. Gretry et al. (2017) found that consumers apply their social expectations to brands and assume brands to take behavioral social norms into consideration. In other words, “consumers often act toward brands as they would toward people” (Gretry et al., 2017, p. 79). This indicates that for a brand communication message to be perceived as powerful, it must firstly be believed. This could explain why unspecified comparative language does not directly influence perceived message power. For the powerful message features to be effective, the message first needs to be credible, as credibility actualizes and perpetuates the perceived power of a message. The use of unspecified comparative language, however, created a vacuous statement which decreased credibility. This could have made it less likely for the powerful semantics to be effective.

Conclusively, using unspecified comparative language in an Instagram advertisement only seems to negatively affect customer engagement. Consumers who see this linguistic style are more likely to consider the message less credible. This leads to a decrease in the belief in the authenticity of power, which decreases consumer engagement. If these consumers are particularly highly involved with the product category in the advertisement, the decreased credibility could also directly impact their engagement, which thus worsens the effect of unspecified comparative language on customer engagement.

Managerial implications

The results from this paper hold an important relevant implication for managers. Apparently, it is best not to use unspecified comparative language in brand posts on Instagram. Doing so will likely not result in your message conveying greater power. In fact, it is likely to decrease the credibility of the message, which will hurt the customer engagement with your post. Especially for high-involvement product categories, using unspecified comparative language in your brand post is likely to hamper your advances to create customer engagement. Additionally, the results stress the importance of brand message credibility. Earlier academic studies have already pointed out that brand- and message credibility are major factors in influencing consumers’ brand purchase intention and consumers’ perceptions of brand value (Calvo-Porrall et al., 2014; Wang & Yang, 2010). Results from this paper again indicate how important it is to make credible claims in advertising messages. Therefore, managers should not only be careful with using unspecified comparative language, but also be concerned with creating credible, verifiable advertisement claims in order to increase perceived message power

and customer engagement. Perhaps, in some cases, better is not always best and sometimes good is better.

Limitations and future research

Despite the care with which this study was conducted, some nuance is needed in asserting the conclusions of this study. First of all, it is important to keep in mind that the results from this study probably do not apply to explicit comparative advertising, which was found to be more effective than noncomparative ads in generating attention, message- and brand awareness, and favourable brand attitudes (Grewal et al., 1997; Wu et al., 1989). It thus seems comparative advertising could still be a useful tool. However, not without a clear basis of comparison. Future research could further explore these differences to better understand the differences between explicit, implicit, and unspecified comparative advertising.

Additionally, the study sample was not representative for the target population with regards to age and educational level. This means that this paper's findings and conclusions might not necessarily apply to the full target population. Perhaps future papers could replicate current research with a more representative sample to confirm these assumptions.

Next, some nuances can be added to the findings regarding the low-involvement product category and perceived message power. The respondents in the low-involvement product category were expected to process the Instagram advertisement via the peripheral route of the ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). As a result, they would base their processing on peripheral cues, which would steer the respondents to perceive a more powerful message. While plenty of respondents indeed indicated they were not particularly involved, effects on power failed to materialize. Now, of course, this could mean that such an effect empirically does not exist, as was proposed and explained based on the paper by Smolnikov (2018). However, it is also important to rule out that the unnatural setting of filling out an online questionnaire could have influenced the results. Perhaps chances of peripherally processing the message decreased by the simple fact that the respondents willfully partook in an experiment. In other words, by paying attention and by actively trying to contribute to the experiment, respondents in general might have been processing all information more centrally, regardless of the manipulation. Perhaps future research could include measuring brain activity or eye movements during the experiment, to assess which type of processing is actually being applied. Earlier research has already suggested combining electrophysiology and eye tracking for examining information processing in the brain (Langer et al., 2017). Additionally, recent studies indicate that measuring brain activity while examining a message can predict message-

consistent behaviour changes (Pei et al., 2019). Therefore, measuring concepts like eye movements and brain activity could help future research to gain a more elaborate understanding and more definitely rule out the potential direct effect of comparative language on perceived message power. Unfortunately, this did not fit within the scope of this paper.

Lastly, it is important to consider the explained variance of the total model. As the R^2 values indicated, only 15,1 % of variance in customer engagement was explained. This indicates that presumably there are many other factors that influence customer engagement. Earlier academic research confirms these expectations, as it found that multiple factors like customer satisfaction, positive emotions, and company trust could all influence customer engagement (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020; Harrigan et al., 2017). Thus, while the findings in this paper make a contribution to understanding the mechanisms of comparative language and customer engagement, it is important to keep in mind it is only part of a bigger picture.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Example of explicit comparative advertising

BMW: “Now every car can dress up as its favorite superhero. @MercedesBenzUSA #HappyHalloween from #BMW”



BMW USA ✓
@BMWUSA



Now every car can dress up as its favorite superhero.
[@MercedesBenzUSA](#) [#HappyHalloween](#) from [#BMW](#)



Appendix B

Example of implicit comparative advertising, using comparative language

“Bounty, the quicker picker upper”



Appendix C

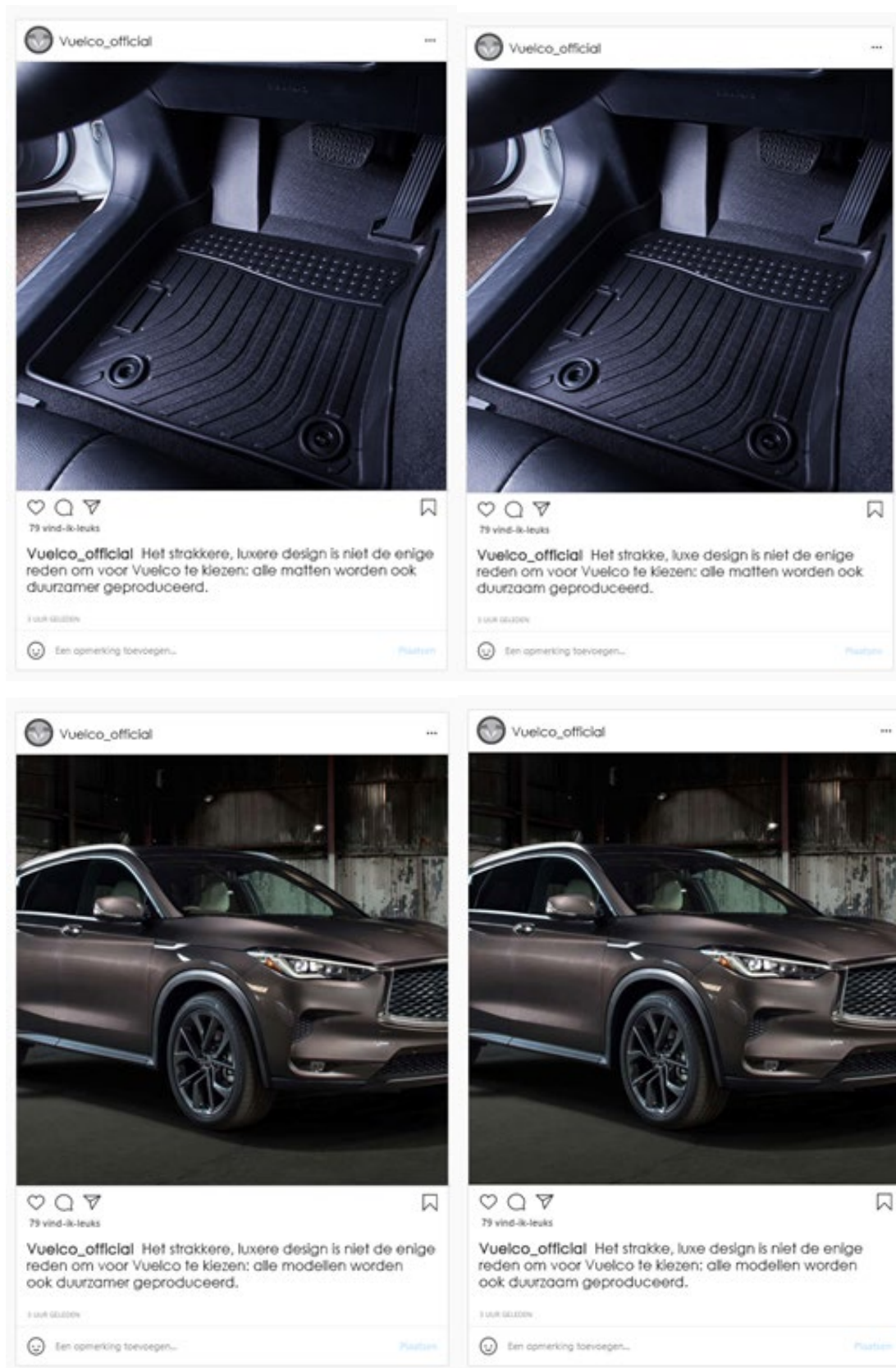
Example of implicit comparative advertising, visually and textually referring to a competitor

“Fairy lasts 2x longer than the next best-selling brand”



Appendix D

Stimulus material – car and car mats



Appendix E

Online experiment

Beste deelnemer/deelnemster,

Leuk dat je mee wilt doen aan dit onderzoek. Daarvoor allereerst hartelijk dank!

Wij zijn Judith de Jong en Joost Bressers en volgen momenteel beiden de Master Business Administration: Marketing aan de Radboud Universiteit in Nijmegen.

Voor onze masterthesis voeren wij beiden een onderzoek uit naar Instagramadvertenties. De minimale leeftijd voor deelname aan dit onderzoek is 18 jaar en je dient niet ouder te zijn dan 39 jaar. Deelname aan dit onderzoek duurt maximaal 5 minuutjes en is **geheel vrijwillig**.

De gegevens uit dit onderzoek zijn **geheel anoniem** en zullen **uitsluitend voor ons onderzoek** gebruikt worden. Probeer daarom ook zo eerlijk mogelijk de vragen te beantwoorden. Er zijn geen foute antwoorden mogelijk. Mocht je vragen hebben, schroom niet om contact met ons op te nemen via j1.dejong@student.ru.nl of j.bressers@student.ru.nl

Nogmaals heel hartelijk dank voor je deelname, je helpt ons enorm met de laatste loodjes van onze studie.

Judith de Jong
Joost Bressers

Door te klikken op de knop 'ik ga akkoord' geeft je aan dat je...

- bovenstaande informatie gelezen hebt en akkoord gaat;
- tussen de 18-39 jaar oud bent.

☐ Ik ga akkoord

☐ Ik ga niet akkoord

10/1000 pagina's

Q3_IG_aankondiging

Op de volgende pagina krijg je een Instagramadvertentie te zien. Bekijk deze Instagramadvertentie. Na het bekijken van deze Instagramadvertentie zullen een aantal vragen worden gesteld. Klik op het pijltje hieronder om naar de volgende pagina te gaan.

Je ziet hieronder een Instagramadvertentie voor een **auto**. We willen je vragen de afbeelding en de tekst goed te bekijken en je in te beelden dat je een auto wilt kopen



Geef aan in hoeverre je het eens bent met de volgende stellingen.

	Helemaal mee oneens	Mee oneens	Enigszins mee oneens	Neutraal	Enigszins mee eens	Mee eens	Helemaal mee eens
Deze Instagramadvertentie riep gevoelens bij mij op	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Deze Instagramadvertentie wekte mijn interesse	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ik zou op deze Instagramadvertentie reageren	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ik zou deze Instagramadvertentie liken	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ik zou deze Instagramadvertentie delen	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

100% Credibility Joost

CREDIBILITY JOOST

iQ ★

Geef aan in hoeverre je het eens bent met de volgende stellingen.

	Helemaal mee oneens	Mee oneens	Enigszins mee oneens	Neutraal	Enigszins mee eens	Mee eens	Helemaal mee eens
De advertentie is accuraat	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
De advertentie is authentiek	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
De advertentie is geloofwaardig	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

POWER JOOST

iQ ★

Geef aan in hoeverre je het eens bent met de volgende stellingen over de **boodschap** in de instagramadvertentie.

	Helemaal mee oneens	Oneens	Een beetje oneens	Neutraal	Een beetje eens	Eens	Helemaal eens
De boodschap is krachtig	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
De boodschap is assertief	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
De boodschap is sterk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

INVOLVEMENT JOOST

iQ ★ ...

Kruis het hokje aan dat volgens jou het meest van toepassing is op je **relatie met het product in het algemeen**.

Onbelangrijk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Belangrijk
Oninteressant	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Interessant
Niet relevant	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Relevant
Niet prikkelend	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Prikkelend
Niet betekenisvol	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Betekenisvol
Onaantrekkelijk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Aantrekkelijk
Saai	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Fascinerend
Waardeloos	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Waardevol
Onnodig	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Nodig

100% Involvement Joost

REALISME JOOST

iQ ★

Geef aan in hoeverre je het eens bent met de volgende stellingen.

	Helemaal mee oneens	Mee oneens	Enigszins mee oneens	Neutraal	Enigszins mee eens	Mee eens	Helemaal mee eens
De Instagramadvertentie was realistisch.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
De Instagramadvertentie zag eruit zoals het er in het echt ook uit zou zien	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Import from library

+ Add new question

Add Block

EDIA USE

Q11_USE

★ ...

Van welke van de volgende sociale mediaplatforms heb je de afgelopen week gebruik gemaakt?

- ☐ Whatsapp
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ Geen van deze

Q12_USEDAYS

Hoeveel dagen in de afgelopen week heb je Instagram in de afgelopen week gebruikt?

	0 dagen	1 dag	2 dagen	3 dagen	4 dagen	5 dagen	6 dagen	7 dagen
Instagram	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Import from library

+ Add new question

Add Block

DEMOGRAPHICS

Q13_AGE

Wat is je leeftijd in jaren?

Q14_GENDER

Met welk geslacht identificeer je je?

☐ Man
☐ Vrouw
☐ Anders

Q15_EDUCATION

Wat is je huidige of hoogst genoten opleiding?

☐ Basisschool onderwijs
☐ Middelbaar onderwijs
☐ MBO
☐ HBO
☐ Universiteit

Heel hartelijk dank voor je deelname!

Dit onderzoek beoogde de relatie tussen linguïstische stijlen in Instagramadvertenties en online klantbetrokkenheid via sociale media te onderzoeken.

Uw gegevens zijn anoniem opgeslagen. Mocht u nog vragen of opmerkingen hebben, neem dan gerust contact met ons op via j1.dejong@student.ru.nl of j.bressers@student.ru.nl