

POSITIONING HIGH- AND LOW-STATUS BRANDS IN SOCIAL MEDIA: THE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNICATION STYLE

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Description: This paper investigates whether and how the way in which luxury and non-luxury brands communicate in social media conveys different levels of social distance from customers.

Research Question

Social media have disrupted marketing communication by enabling brands to publicly communicate with their customers in a very personal way. However, for some brands, this social closeness to customers may be less beneficial than for others in terms of brand popularity and positioning. High status, luxury brands typically keep a certain distance from their customers in order to maintain an exclusive image and create a strong desire for their brand. Do high-status brands also create this type of distance in social media and address their customers differently

than do lower-status brands? And if yes, how exactly can brands preserve a certain degree of social distance in social media? We address these questions by exploring how the communication style, i.e., the way in which brands from different status levels communicate in social media, may convey different levels of social distance from customers.

Method and Data

We use four studies to investigate the communication style of luxury and non-luxury brands in social media. First, we analyze 49,402 tweets from 102 brands with the help of a stylometric Zeta analysis to reveal that luxury brands use a more distant communication style, even in a socially close channel such as social media. Second, the results of two laboratory experiments with manipulated social media communication styles confirm that consumers attribute different brand status levels to different communication styles and that these status inferences depend on consumers' luxury brand aspirations. Finally, we examine the downstream consequences of using a socially close and a socially distant social media communication style for high- and low-status brands on customers' like intentions on social media.

Summary of Findings

The results of our studies suggest that brands differ not only in what they communicate to their customers via social media, i.e., the communication content, but also in how they communicate, i.e., the communication style. We find that the communication styles employed by luxury and non-luxury brands in social media differ in the degrees of social distance they convey to the customer and that variations in social distance can be manipulated very subtly with the help of personal pronouns. Furthermore, we find that consumers associate a socially close communication style more strongly with lower-status brands and a socially distant

communication style more strongly with high-status, luxury brands. We also find evidence that consumers' level of luxury brand aspiration may serve as a psychological mechanism that helps to explain why customers infer a more luxurious brand status from a more distant communication style. In other words, a socially distant communication style may encourage consumers to aspire to a brand. Finally, we demonstrate how socially close and socially distant communication styles may yield different downstream consequences, in terms of customers' like intentions, for luxury and non-luxury brands in social media.

Key Contributions

Our work contributes to academic research in four ways. First, we contribute to the literature on brand linguistics by analyzing how brands from different status levels may use communication style to position their brands in social media. Examining this relationship is important because brand communication is a powerful means of conveying a specific brand image and shaping the consumer-brand relationship. Second, our research is the first to apply stylometry, a statistical method used to gain insights into a communicator solely based on his/her communication style, to marketing research. Third, we apply the concept of psychological distance to brand communication in social media and thus contribute to research examining social distance as an important dimension with which to classify communication styles. Finally, we shed light on the psychological mechanism to explain how customers associate brand status levels with different communication styles by examining customers' luxury brand aspirations.

Our research helps marketers to assess the factors that shape consumer-brand relationships in social media. We show that a brand's linguistic identity may influence how consumers identify, experience, integrate, and connect with brands. Brand managers are well advised to rethink whether their brand's social media communication style suits the image they intend to convey.