The Power of Proximity: Exploring Narrative Language in Consumer Reviews

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Abstract

A growing body of literature reveals that narratives can be powerful persuasive devices for shaping audiences' beliefs, including when reading online reviews. However, little is known about what aspects shape the communicator's use of narrative language in the first place. Across seven studies, we show that writing reviews for an audience that is interpersonally close vs. distant enhances consumers' use of narrative language. This effect is mediated by consumers' tendency to write in a natural, less effortful style. We show that the effect is attenuated when people write about material (vs. experiential) purchases, and when people write on a smartphone (vs. PC). From a practical perspective, instructing consumers to imagine writing to a close audience elicits reviews higher in narrativity (which are more persuasive to readers). Consumers find writing for close others to be at least as enjoyable as several other prompts, but with improved outcomes. As most review sites provide limited guidance on how to write, we offer an inexpensive and scalable intervention to improve reviews and the review writing experience.

Keywords: *narratives, consumer reviews, persuasion*

Track: *Consumer Behaviour*