

Snowclones: Using Cultural Capital to Engage and Persuade

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Abstract

Scholars and marketers have long sought to understand how rhetorical devices shape consumer attitudes and behavior. The present research examines an emergent rhetorical figure: the snowclone. Snowclones are culture-derived, phrasal templates (e.g., “X is the new Y,” “The mother of all X,” “To X or not to X”) sometimes employed in marketing communications. But are brands that just borrow and slightly tweak a familiar phrase rewarded for this behavior? Our analysis of over 60,000 brand social media posts reveals their effectiveness. Follow-up experiments illustrate that brand snowclone use can enhance audience engagement and attitudes. We propose and find that snowclones achieve these outcomes by allowing brands to signal their cultural capital more strongly than when using regular language to convey a similar message, or when using the original phrase from which the snowclone originated. Critically, snowclones only work among audiences who are familiar with the phrasal templates.

Track: Advertising & Marketing Communications