

Avoiding the Goldilocks Trap: How CTA Intensity Shapes Social Media Engagement

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Abstract

Call-to-actions (CTAs) are widely used in brand communication on social media, yet their persuasive effects remain inconsistent. Drawing on Speech Act Theory and Psychological Reactance Theory, we conceptualize CTA intensity as a key boundary condition shaping consumer responses. Across two field studies including more than 18,000+ social media posts from brands operating in the restaurant and food delivery industries, we show that CTA intensity has a U-shaped effect on engagement: low and high-intensity CTAs enhance engagement, whereas moderate-intensity CTAs suppress it. We advance that CTAs activate psychological reactance only up till a saturation point, after which more CTA cues do not inhibit engagement. These findings clarify when directive communication helps or harms engagement and offer actionable guidance for brands seeking to optimize promotional messaging.

Track: Advertising & Marketing Communications