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# We Are Not the Same as *You and I*: Causal Effects of Minor Language Variations on Consumers' Attitudes toward Brands

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Can subtle wording changes in marketing communications, such as saying “you and [the brand]” as opposed to “we,” affect people’s evaluations of real-world brands? Despite their importance in interpersonal communication, the effects of such variations in relationship-implying language on consumers’ perceptions of brands have received little research attention. Four experiments demonstrate that closeness-implying pronouns (e.g., saying “we” rather than “you and the brand”) can have either positive or negative effects on consumers’ attitudes toward real-world brands with which they have real working relationships. The experiments show that these effects depend on whether the closeness implied by the pronoun is consistent with people’s expected interactions with the brand. These effects are moderated by people’s affiliation with the brand (i.e., customers vs. noncustomers), brand type, and the extent of cognitive elaboration and are mediated by perceived brand trustworthiness. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

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Together we’ll go far. (Wells Fargo Bank, <http://www.wellsfargo.com>)

Imagine a global financial firm with the heart and soul of a two-person organization. A world-leading wealth management company that sits down with you to understand your needs and goals. . . . You & Us. (UBS, <http://www.ubs.com>)

**M**arketers often desire to promote consumers’ feelings of being in a close relationship with the brands they

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market, and they frequently craft their communications using language that portrays brands as close partners with consumers. The excerpts above illustrate the commonsense belief that portraying the relationship between the brand and the consumer using terms derived from interpersonal communication (e.g., “we” or “you and us”) should lead to more favorable attitudes. This belief has intuitive appeal, but do these terms actually foster favorable brand perceptions? And are they equally effective, considering their logical equivalence?

The present research examines this issue by studying whether subtle wording differences in marketing communications, such as using the terms “we” versus “you and us,” can affect consumers’ perceptions of and, consequently, attitudes toward brands. Although these equivalent terms should logically lead to equivalent effects on attitudes, we suggest that they can subtly convey information about a consumer’s relationship with the brand, with both positive and negative effects. Specifically, we suggest that the effects on attitudes and perceptions will depend on whether consumers expect their interactions with the brand to be relatively close versus distant (Fournier 1998) and whether the language in the communication is consistent with these expectations.

More broadly, this research begins to shed light on how subtle differences in the language of marketing communications

can shape consumers' attitudes toward brands. Although prior research has examined various effects of language use on consumers' responses to marketing communications, there has been little empirical work on how subtle language shifts can convey information about the consumer-brand relationship and, consequently, shape brand trait perceptions and evaluations.

In the next sections, we develop hypotheses about how pronoun variations influence brand attitudes. Specifically, we examine the following questions. Can subtle changes in the use of relationship-implying terms (e.g., "you and Wells Fargo" vs. "we") affect perceptions of brand attributes and, consequently, attitudes toward the brand? Do these effects depend on expectations regarding customer-brand closeness? What are the sources of these expectations? Do these effects depend on the nature of the affiliation between customers and the brand (i.e., customers vs. noncustomers)? Do these effects further depend on consumers' motivation to process the communication effortfully?

Four experiments examine these questions. The experiments explore the moderating roles of closeness expectations and cognitive elaboration in these effects and demonstrate the mediating role of brand trustworthiness as a direct outgrowth of expectation-language consistency. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

## LANGUAGE AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Prior research has investigated various effects of language use on consumer behavior (Krishna and Ahluwalia 2008; Luna and Peracchio 2002; Zhang and Schmitt 2004). One stream has examined phonetic processing of brand names and words (Klink 2003; Schmitt, Pan, and Tavassoli 1994). For example, variations in the brand name of a product can directly affect consumers' perceptions of the product's attributes because the sounds of the phonemes in brand names can subtly convey what the product is like, such as how rich or creamy an ice cream is (Yorkston and Menon 2004).

Another stream has focused on the effects of style and rhetorical devices such as rhyme and metaphor on consumer responses to advertising. Findings suggest, for example, that rhetorical devices can enhance ad recall and produce more positive attitudes among consumers (Deighton 1985; McQuarrie and Mick 1996, 2003; Ottati, Rhoads, and Graesser 1999).

A third stream of research has examined the effects of code switching (i.e., mixing languages within a sentence) and choice of language itself in marketing communications (Koslow, Shamdasani, and Touchstone 1994; Krishna and Ahluwalia 2008; Luna and Peracchio 2005a, 2005b; Tavassoli and Han 2001). For example, choice of language can influence the perceived emotionality of marketing communications such that information expressed in consumers' native language is perceived as more emotional than information expressed in consumers' second language (Puntoni, de Langhe, and van Osselaer 2009).

The aim of this article is different. In the present research,

we examine whether subtle wording variations in marketing communications can convey information about consumers' relationship with a brand and whether the effect of such wording variations depends on the (mis)match with consumers' expectations about their interactions with the brand. Given that language is inherently interpersonal, studying the effects of subtle language variations on brand trait perceptions and ensuing attitudes is critical to a more complete understanding of the idea that consumers interact with brands in ways that resemble their interpersonal interactions (Fournier 1998). The next section sets the stage for our hypotheses by discussing prior findings that highlight the specific role of pronouns in interpersonal communication.

## PRONOUN USE AND SOCIAL PERCEPTION

The manner in which individuals talk to one another reflects the nature and quality of their relationships (Simmons, Gordon, and Chambless 2005). Pronouns provide an important means not only for defining the entities that are at the center of a discourse but also for communicating and reinforcing perceptions about a relationship (Gordon, Grosz, and Gilliom 1993). First-person plural pronouns (e.g., "we") indicate closeness and shared identity (Brown and Gilman 1960; Simmons et al. 2005). For example, highly committed partners use the pronoun "we," rather than "the other person and I," more frequently than less committed partners (Agnew et al. 1998). The use of pronouns such as "we" is an outgrowth of partnership and confidence in being able to solve problems together (Seider et al. 2009). However, first-person singular pronouns (e.g., "I") indicate individuated identity and self-focus (Pennebaker, Mehl, and Niederhoffer 2003). Couples who use pronouns such as "we," "our," and "us" behave more positively toward one another and evince less physiological stress, whereas couples who emphasize their separateness by using pronouns such as "I," "me," and "you" are less satisfied in their relationships (Seider et al. 2009).

Pronoun selection can not only reflect perceptions about a relationship but also bolster them. For example, Fitzsimons and Kay (2004) showed that people rate both their own and others' interpersonal relationships as closer and of higher quality when they are described using the pronoun "we" rather than "the other person and I." Saying "Why don't we go see a movie tonight?" instead of "Why don't you and I go see a movie tonight?" can be an instrument that partners use to communicate perceptions of closeness in their relationship (Fitzsimons and Kay 2004). Thus, language can not only reflect relationship perceptions but also perpetuate those same perceptions (Williamson 1978). One explanation for these findings is that using pronouns such as "we" requires a shared understanding of their referent between the listener and the speaker (Chung and Pennebaker 2007). Asking "Why don't we go see a movie tonight?" makes no sense unless one knows who "we" are. Hence, the mere use of this pronoun implies the existence of a relationship.

On the basis of this research, marketing managers might conclude that use of the word “we” should lead to more positive attitudes than use of the words “you and [the brand].” However, we suggest that this may not be an effective strategy for communicating with all consumers. We argue that the effects of pronoun use should be contingent on consumers’ expectations regarding their interactions with different brands (Fournier 1998) and on the congruity between the level of closeness implied by the pronoun and that expected by the consumer.

## LANGUAGE AND CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIP NORMS

As people repeatedly interact with relationship partners, they develop cognitive structures containing expectations about how these interactions should occur. These structures, in turn, can affect the encoding of an interaction as well as the attributions people make for events in it (Baldwin 1992; Berscheid 1994). Similarly, research on consumer-brand relationships has suggested that the ways in which consumers relate to different brands often correspond to different interpersonal relationship profiles, each entailing a distinct set of relation scripts and behavioral norms (Fournier 1998).

Importantly, different consumer-brand relationship perceptions entail different norms of behavior, and these often guide people’s evaluations of brands’ actions (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). For example, prior work has shown that people respond favorably to marketing decisions (e.g., a price increase) when these are perceived as consistent with behavioral norms implied by the framing of the relationship between the consumer and the brand as based on exchange versus communal norms (Clark and Mills 1993), but they respond unfavorably when these decisions are inconsistent with perceived relationship norms (Aggarwal 2004; Aggarwal and Law 2005). An untested possibility is that consumer-brand relationship perceptions could affect not only how consumers respond to substantial marketing decisions with obvious economic implications (e.g., pricing) but also how they respond to very subtle and seemingly inconsequential variations in the language used in marketing communications.

### Close versus Distant Consumer-Brand Relationship Expectations

One central dimension on which representations of relationships vary is their perceived closeness (Fournier 1998; Kelley et al. 1983). Close relationships are characterized as friendly, comfortable, informal, and caring (Fournier 1998); expressive of emotions (Barnes 1997); and involving intimate knowledge of the other (Fournier 1998; Seepersad, Choi, and Shin 2008). They are also perceived as equal and fair (Cate et al. 1982), based on shared goals and beliefs (Huston and Burgess 1979), and involving a sense of overlap between relationship partners (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992).

Closeness can vary not only for interpersonal relationships but also for consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998). One determinant of consumers’ expected closeness with brands could be brand type or the product category to which it belongs. Consumers may expect their relationships with brands in some categories (e.g., financial counseling) to be based on closeness, teamwork, or shared goals, whereas relationships with other brands in even very similar categories (e.g., insurance) may be expected to be more distant, based less on mutual goals and more on “zero-sum” behavior. Although both relationship types are, in all likelihood, based on exchange norms (i.e., the parties act to achieve gains rather than merely to benefit the other), they may still differ on various dimensions of closeness, as defined above. These differences, in turn, could lead message recipients to react differently to the same copy, on the basis of the extent to which the closeness implied in the message matches people’s expectations regarding the relationship and its associated norms.

In addition to brand type or category, a key factor that is likely to influence people’s closeness expectations, and hence their reactions to relationship-implying language, is the nature of their affiliation with the brand, namely, whether they are current customers of the brand. Specifically, whereas existing brand customers may expect their relationship with a brand to be either close or distant (e.g., depending on the brand), noncustomers should generally expect potential interactions with brands with which they are not affiliated to be relatively distant, in much the same way that people expect distance in their relationships with strangers.

### The Moderating Role of Cognitive Elaboration

Prior research indicates that people are more sensitive to subtle influences, including linguistic components in a communication, when they are motivated to process the information carefully (McQuarrie and Mick 2003; Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1996; Petty et al. 2008). We expect that the effects of subtle language variations would be moderated by the extent of cognitive elaboration.

Our hypothesis regarding the moderating role of cognitive elaboration is based on the premise that consumers must first assess the consistency between the specific language used in the communication and representations of the relationship stored in their memory. Then, they must use this assessment to guide judgment and attitudes toward the communicating brand. At each of these two steps, there is reason to believe that effortful cognitive elaboration would increase the effects of language on brand attitudes.

Effortful elaboration on brand information is likely to render associated knowledge structures (such as one’s relationship expectations toward the brand) more accessible (Petty et al. 2008), and accessible knowledge is more likely to be used as a basis for consistency judgments (Higgins 1996; Mussweiler 2003; Schwarz 1998). Further, thoughts taking place under increased cognitive elaboration tend to be better predictors of attitudes than thoughts under low elaboration (e.g., Petty et al. 1993).

For the most part, people tend to process self-relevant information more effortfully than they do self-irrelevant information (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995; Wheeler, Petty, and Bizer 2005). This suggests that brand affiliation should influence not only closeness expectations, as discussed above, but also the likelihood of cognitive elaboration. Specifically, communications should be more self-relevant to brand customers than to noncustomers. Consequently, we expect the effects of subtle pronoun variations in marketing communications to be particularly pronounced among brand customers, who are motivated by default to elaborate on brand communications. That is, we expect brand customers to respond more favorably to closeness-implying language that matches their expectations from the relationship and less favorably to language that does not match relationship expectations.

Noncustomers, in contrast, should only be affected by pronoun variations when they are induced to elaborate effortfully on the communications. This can happen, for example, when the importance of thinking carefully is emphasized (Cacioppo et al. 1996; Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991). In such instances, noncustomers should become more sensitive to subtle pronoun variations than they normally would be.

Consistent with our suggestion that people's attitudes are influenced by the (in)congruity between the closeness implied in the communication and the their expectation for relationship closeness, we predict that when noncustomers are induced to elaborate carefully, they should react less favorably to closeness-implying language (e.g., "we") than to language that emphasizes consumer-brand separateness (e.g., "you and the brand"). When they are not induced to elaborate, however, they should be less sensitive to these differences in language because they do not, by default, think carefully about communications from brands with which they are not affiliated. Figure 1 describes our hypotheses using a path diagram.

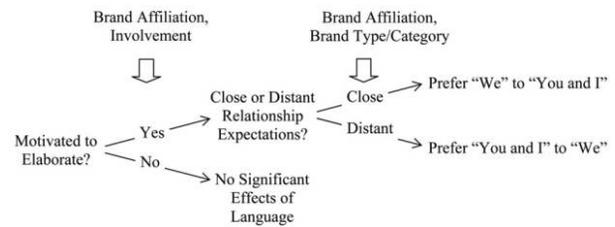
### The Mediating Role of Brand Trustworthiness

We propose that evaluations of brands can be influenced by the (in)congruity between the degree of closeness implied by the choice of pronouns in a marketing message and customers' expectation for closeness in their relationship with the brand. Specifically, we hypothesize that consumers' assessment of the congruity between the language used in the communication and their expected closeness affects consumers' perceptions of the brand's trustworthiness and, in turn, their attitudes toward the brand.

Trust in a relationship has been defined as a person's confidence that the other party will act as expected, on the basis of the person's past experience in the relationship (Scanlon 1979). Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) similarly defined trust in terms of the perceived predictability of a partner's behavior, which in turn reflects "the degree to which experience in the relationship suggests consistency, stability, and control over the pattern of behavior exhibited" (96). Prior work on schema congruity indicates that one

FIGURE 1

### ROLES OF CLOSENESS EXPECTATIONS AND ELABORATION



NOTE.—Horizontal paths describe the proposed relationships among our key conceptual constructs. Vertical arrows indicate how these constructs were operationalized in the experiments.

reason people prefer congruent stimuli is because they allow predictability (Mandler 1982; Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). Because trust is based on predictability and consistency with expectations, language that is consistent (vs. inconsistent) with one's expectations should increase (vs. decrease) perceived brand trustworthiness. Perceived brand trustworthiness, in turn, should influence brand attitudes, brand loyalty, and behavioral intentions (Morgan and Hunt 1994).

In sum, we expect closeness-implying language (e.g., "we") to be seen as consistent with consumer-brand relationships that are expected to be closer. In contrast, we expect language that emphasizes the separateness of relationship partners (e.g., "you and the brand") to be perceived as consistent with consumer-brand relationships that are expected to be more distant. Marketing communications containing language that is consistent (vs. inconsistent) with the expected consumer-brand relationship (i.e., closer vs. distant) should increase (vs. decrease) perceived brand trustworthiness, resulting in more (vs. less) favorable attitudes, but only when consumers are motivated to think effortfully about the communications.

### THE CURRENT RESEARCH

Four experiments examine the following questions. First, can subtle changes in the use of closeness-implying terms (e.g., "you and the brand" vs. "we" vs. "the brand") affect perceptions of brand attributes and, consequently, attitudes toward the brand? Second, do these subtle changes have different effects, depending on consumers' expected closeness with the brand?

Experiment 1 examines whether customers' attitudes toward a real-world banking brand, with which they have real working relationships, can be influenced by exposing them to a communication in which the consumer and brand are referenced either in terms of the pronoun "we" or by the phrase "you and the brand." Experiment 2 examines whether the effect of pronoun use can be reversed, depending on consumers' closeness expectations, by directly manipulating

these expectations. Experiment 3 examines the role of brand affiliation in these effects as a determinant of both closeness expectations and cognitive elaboration.

Experiment 4 extends the prior experiments and examines whether the effect of language on attitudes toward real-world brands can be reversed, depending on the specific product category and its associated relationship norms. Further, experiment 4 directly tests the mediating role of perceived brand trustworthiness.

## EXPERIMENT 1: LANGUAGE, BRAND AFFILIATION, AND ATTITUDES TOWARD A REAL-WORLD BRAND

Experiment 1 examines whether language use influences customers' attitudes and behavioral intentions toward a real brand with which they have an actual working relationship. This experiment focuses on effects of language use in a context in which people expect a relatively close relationship with the brand. To test our conceptualization, we first needed to identify a domain in which consumers expected their working relationships with brands to be relatively close. We conducted a pretest (app. A), which identified retail banks as a category in which customers generally expect their relationship with brands to be relatively close.

On the basis of these pretest results, experiment 1 examines whether exposing real bank customers and noncustomers to a persuasive message that refers to the bank and the consumer in terms of the pronoun "we," as opposed to the phrase "you and the brand," would lead to more favorable attitudes. We predicted that existing customers, but not noncustomers, would have more favorable attitudes toward the brand when the message referred to the brand and the consumer as "we" rather than as "you and the brand."

Experiment 1 also examines two alternative accounts. First, one could argue that closeness-implying language (i.e., "we") increases closeness perceptions toward the brand (Fitzsimons and Kay 2004), resulting in more favorable attitudes. A second alternative explanation is that the pronoun "we" increases cognitive elaboration relative to the phrase "you and Wells Fargo," which, in turn, amplifies customers' preexisting (presumably favorable) attitudes toward the brand.

### Method

*Participants and Procedure.* One hundred and sixty-four individuals (mean age = 28, range 18–58; 58% females) were recruited from a national online pool in exchange for the chance to win a \$25 gift certificate. Participants read a short message about Wells Fargo Bank, a West Coast banking brand, allegedly taken from a bank advertisement promoting a new banking program designed to meet people's need for independence and flexibility. Some participants read a message that used the phrase "you and Wells Fargo," whereas others read a message in which "you and Wells Fargo" was replaced with "we." A third group read a mes-

sage that used "Wells Fargo," without referring to the consumer. This group served as the control. Participants were then asked to indicate their attitudes toward the brand. At the end of the experiment, participants were asked about their bank affiliation (i.e., whether they were customers of the brand). Thus, the experiment had a 2 (brand affiliation: customer vs. noncustomer)  $\times$  3 (language: "we" vs. "you and the brand" vs. control) between-subjects design. In the "we" condition, the paragraph read as follows: "Why choose Wells Fargo? Because from day one, we work together. Together, we take into account your financial needs and resources. Together, we make whatever decisions necessary to ensure your life goes uninterrupted. Whether you need a loan or want to make an investment, we make these decisions in cooperation. Because we share the same goals, we make sure together that your money is handled with care."

In the "you and Wells Fargo" condition, participants read a nearly identical paragraph: "Why choose Wells Fargo? Because from day one, you and Wells Fargo work together. Together, you and Wells Fargo take into account your financial needs and resources. Together, you and Wells Fargo make whatever decisions necessary to ensure your life goes uninterrupted. Whether you need a loan or want to make an investment, you and Wells Fargo make these decisions in cooperation. Because you and Wells Fargo share the same goals, you and Wells Fargo make sure together that your money is handled with care." In the control condition, participants read a paragraph similar in content but without coupling the consumer and brand together: "Why choose Wells Fargo? Because from day one, Wells Fargo takes into account your financial needs and resources. Wells Fargo makes whatever decisions necessary to ensure your life goes uninterrupted. Whether you need a loan or want to make an investment, Wells Fargo can help make these decisions. Wells Fargo makes sure that your money is handled with care."

*Dependent Variables.* After reading the paragraphs, participants were asked to rate, on 7-point scales (1 = not at all agree; 7 = totally agree), the extent to which they thought the brand was favorable, good, and positive (averaged to form an attitude index;  $\alpha = .94$ ), as well as one item measuring behavioral intent ("I would recommend Wells Fargo to a friend"). To test whether the language manipulation affected perceptions of closeness toward the brand, participants completed the inclusion-of-other-in-self pictorial scale (Aron et al. 1992). To test an alternative explanation according to which the pronoun "we" increased cognitive elaboration, participants indicated how carefully they thought about the information (1 = not at all carefully; 7 = very carefully) and how much effort they put into thinking about Wells Fargo (1 = very little effort; 7 = a lot of effort), averaged to form an elaboration index ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

To measure brand affiliation, participants were then asked whether they were banking with Wells Fargo. Finally, participants were asked to provide demographic information, such as ethnic background, native language, age, education

level, and gender. This was done to detect potentially relevant population differences between customers and non-customers. These demographic variables did not vary as a function of brand affiliation in this or subsequent experiments, and therefore they are not discussed further.

## Results

Recall that our pretest participants expected their relationship with their bank to be close. Because of this, we expected that customers would have more favorable attitudes following the “we” message than following the “you and Wells Fargo” message or the control message. A 2 (brand affiliation: customer vs. noncustomer)  $\times$  3 (language: “we” vs. “you and the brand” vs. control) ANOVA on attitudes revealed the predicted language  $\times$  brand affiliation interaction ( $F(2, 156) = 4.94, p < .01$ ), with no main effects of either language or brand affiliation (both  $F < 1.5, NS$ ). Specifically, as predicted, existing bank customers had more favorable attitudes toward the brand in the “we” condition ( $M = 5.8$ ) than in the “you and Wells Fargo” condition ( $M = 4.5$ ) or the control condition ( $M = 4.7; F(2, 156) = 3.58, p < .05$ ). The latter two conditions did not differ ( $p > .6$ ). Conversely, noncustomers’ attitudes did not vary significantly as a function of language use ( $M_{\text{you\&WF}} = 5.1$  vs.  $M_{\text{we}} = 4.3$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.5; F(2, 156) = 1.92, NS$ ). Looked at another way, in the “we” condition, existing customers had significantly more favorable attitudes toward the bank than did noncustomers ( $F(1, 156) = 8.75, p < .005$ ), but the differences were nonsignificant in both the “you and the brand” and the control conditions (see fig. 2).

A similar pattern emerged with respect to participants’ behavioral intent of recommending the brand to a friend. Analysis revealed a significant language  $\times$  brand affiliation interaction ( $F(2, 156) = 4.97, p < .01$ ). Specifically, customers were more likely to say that they would recommend the brand in the “we” condition ( $M_{\text{we}} = 5.7$ ) than either the “you and Wells Fargo” or control conditions ( $M_{\text{you\&WF}} = 4.4$  and  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.7; F(2, 156) = 3.20, p < .05$ ). In contrast, behavioral intentions did not vary as a function of language use among noncustomers ( $F(2, 156) = 1.89, NS$ ).

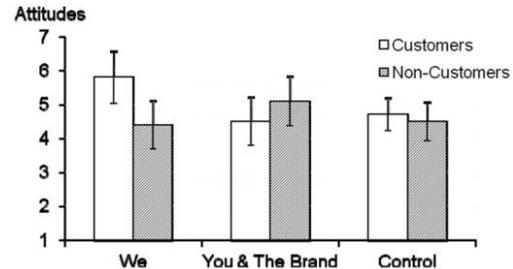
Finally, analysis revealed no effect of language on the inclusion-of-other-in-self scale ( $F(2, 156) < 1, NS$ ), suggesting that language use did not influence people’s perceptions of closeness with the brand. Analysis also revealed a main effect of brand affiliation on cognitive elaboration ( $F(1, 156) = 4.60, p < .05$ ), indicating that customers elaborated more effortfully than noncustomers, but there was no main effect or interaction involving the language manipulation (both  $F(2, 156) < 1.5, NS$ ), suggesting that cognitive elaboration was not influenced by language use.

## Discussion

As predicted, customers of a real-world banking brand had more favorable attitudes and behavioral intentions when the language used implied greater closeness between the brand and the consumer. Language did not influence atti-

FIGURE 2

EFFECT OF LANGUAGE AND BRAND AFFILIATION ON ATTITUDES TOWARD A BANKING BRAND (EXPERIMENT 1)



tudes significantly among people who did not have an ongoing working relationship with the brand. The results of experiment 1 also cast doubt on alternative accounts, according to which language variations influenced perceived closeness toward the brand or the level of cognitive elaboration.

To ensure that the results were not brand specific but rather reflected expectations toward brands in the category more generally, we replicated experiment 1 using two different banking brands, Wells Fargo and a local credit union. Despite the obvious differences between these two brands (e.g., one being a national giant, whereas the other was a local community establishment), the overall pattern of results was identical to the one revealed in experiment 1 and did not differ as a function of brand name.

The results of experiment 1 support our proposition that even minor and seemingly inconsequential language variations can have significant effects on consumers’ attitudes toward real-world brands. However, because of our use of a real-world brand, the results could potentially be affected by consumers’ prior attitudes toward the brand. Experiment 2 was designed to rule out this possibility.

## EXPERIMENT 2: MANIPULATING CLOSENESS EXPECTATIONS

Experiment 2 was designed to test our prediction that brand customers would respond more favorably to marketing communications that use the pronoun “we” (vs. “you and the brand”) when the relationship with the brand is expected to be close but respond less favorably when the relationship with the brand is expected to be distant. Participants were asked to imagine being customers of CellCom, a hypothetical cellular carrier. We directly manipulated relationship expectations (close vs. distant). After reading the relationship description, participants read a short promotional communication and provided their evaluations of the brand. As suggested in the introduction, relationship closeness expectations can vary by product category and its associated norms (see app. A). In experiment 2, however, we kept

product category constant while manipulating closeness expectations, to control for unwanted category effects.

We also examined an alternative account according to which the pronoun “we” activates an interdependent self-construal, whereas “you and the brand” activates an independent self-construal (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee 1999). Specifically, it might be that people evaluate closer brands more favorably under an interdependent self-construal but evaluate distant brands more favorably under an independent self-construal. To examine this account, participants were asked to complete a self-construal measure (Singelis 1994).

## Method

One hundred and twenty participants (mean age = 35, range 18–67; 54% females), recruited from a national online pool, were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (relationship framing: close vs. distant)  $\times$  2 (language: “you and the brand” vs. “we”) between-subjects design. Participants read one of two relationship descriptions regarding CellCom, a hypothetical cellular brand (see app. B, customer conditions). The descriptions served to create expectations for either a close or a distant relationship between CellCom and its customers. Importantly, brand affiliation was manipulated to be that of current customers in all conditions. As a result, we expected elaboration to be high for all participants.

We conducted a pretest to ensure that the relationship-framing manipulation effectively influenced expected closeness without influencing brand attitudes or perceived brand efficacy (see app. A). Pretest results confirmed that that was the case.

After reading the relationship description, participants in the main study read a short communication allegedly made by CellCom. Depending on condition, they read the following message (a separate pretest confirmed that participants from the same pool perceived the pronoun “we” as equivalent, in this context, to “you and CellCom”): “Why choose CellCom? Because from day one, you and CellCom [we] work together. Together, you and CellCom [we] tailor a unified, optimized solution to all your communication and network needs. Together, you and CellCom [we] set up your account in a manner that ensures you are always connected, always efficient, and optimized to preserve your resources. Whether you need an upgrade or a new line, you and CellCom [we] make every decision along the way in cooperation. An informed consumer is a satisfied consumer, so you are always on top of things.”

After reading the brand communication, participants rated the extent to which they thought the brand was favorable, good, and positive (e.g., 1 = not at all favorable; 7 = extremely favorable), averaged to form an attitude index ( $\alpha = .91$ ). In addition, to examine an alternative account according to which our language manipulation activated an independent versus interdependent self-construal, participants were asked to complete Singelis’s (1994) 24-item self-

construal scale, which consists of independent and interdependent self-construal subscales.

## Results

An ANOVA on brand attitudes, with relationship framing and language as independent variables, revealed the predicted relationship framing  $\times$  language interaction ( $F(1, 116) = 7.48, p < .01$ ), with no significant main effects. Using “you and the brand” led to marginally more positive attitudes than “we” under a distant relationship framing ( $M_{\text{you\&brand}} = 6.26$  vs.  $M_{\text{we}} = 5.92; F(1, 116) = 2.84, p < .10$ ), whereas using “we” led to more positive attitudes than “you and the brand” under a close relationship framing ( $M_{\text{we}} = 6.07$  vs.  $M_{\text{you\&brand}} = 5.61; F(1, 116) = 5.27, p < .05$ ; see fig. 3).

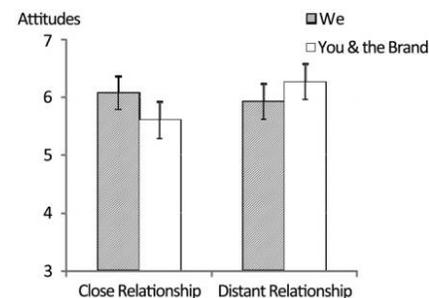
Casting doubt on an alternative account based on self-construal activation, an examination of self-construal scores suggested that our language manipulation did not influence participants’ self-construal. A self-construal account would predict a main effect of language on self-construal, but analyses of variance revealed no main effects or interactions involving language or relationship framing on either the independent (all  $F < 1.4$ , NS) or the interdependent subscale (all  $F < 1.5$ , NS). Thus, an alternative account based on self-construal activation was not supported.

## Discussion

Experiment 2 supports our conceptualization. Participants evaluated a hypothetical brand more favorably after reading a message that used the pronoun “we” rather than the phrase “you and the brand,” but only when expecting a close relationship with the brand. When participants expected a distant relationship, the message that used the pronoun “we” resulted in less favorable attitudes than the message that used phrase “you and the brand.” The results also suggest that these effects were not due to activation of interdependent versus dependent self-construals. Experiment 3 was designed to extend the findings of experiment 2 and illuminate the role of brand affiliation (customer vs. noncus-

FIGURE 3

EFFECT OF RELATIONSHIP FRAMING AND LANGUAGE ON BRAND ATTITUDES (EXPERIMENT 2)



tomers) as a determinant of both closeness expectations and cognitive elaboration.

### EXPERIMENT 3: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF BRAND AFFILIATION

Experiment 3 uses a similar setup to that used in experiment 2, to examine the role of brand affiliation. We hypothesized that brand affiliation should moderate both closeness expectations and elaboration likelihood, thereby influencing both the direction and magnitude of subtle pronoun variations.

People process self-irrelevant information less effortfully than they process self-relevant information (Wheeler et al. 2005), and subtle language variations tend to affect consumers only under effortful processing (McQuarrie and Mick 2003). Consistent with our hypotheses and the results of experiment 1, we expected that under baseline elaboration conditions, language should influence attitudes among customers but not among noncustomers. However, when noncustomers are induced to elaborate on the communication, they should react less favorably to the pronoun “we” than to “you and the brand” because closeness-implying language is inconsistent with their expectation, regardless of relationship framing.

#### Experiment 3A: Close Relationship Expectations

Two hundred and nine participants (mean age = 30, range 18–81; 39% females), recruited from the same online pool as in experiment 1, were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (brand affiliation: customer vs. noncustomer)  $\times$  2 (language: “you and the brand” vs. “we”)  $\times$  2 (involvement: baseline vs. high) between-subjects design. As in experiment 2, we used materials about the fictional brand CellCom, focusing this time only on the close relationship-framing conditions.

We first manipulated involvement. Half the participants were told that they were part of a very small group of respondents and therefore their evaluations would have a direct influence on the planned launch of this new national brand. On the basis of prior research (e.g., Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991), we expected this manipulation to increase involvement in the task, thereby increasing cognitive elaboration. The other participants were only told that their responses would be combined with those of many others.

After this manipulation of involvement, participants followed procedures similar to those reported in experiment 2. They read one of the two scenarios described in appendix B in which the relationship between CellCom and its customers was portrayed as close. The two scenarios differed only with respect to the individual affiliation with the brand (i.e., customer vs. noncustomer). After reading the relationship description, participants read the same communication by CellCom as in experiment 2, which used either the pronoun “we” or the phrase “you and the brand.”

After reading the brand communication, participants rated the extent to which they thought the brand was favorable,

good, and positive (e.g., 1 = not at all favorable; 7 = extremely favorable), averaged to form an attitude index ( $\alpha = .94$ ). As a manipulation check, they also rated how carefully they thought about the information about CellCom (1 = not at all carefully; 7 = very carefully) and how much effort they put into thinking about CellCom (1 = very little effort; 7 = a lot of effort). These measures were averaged to form a cognitive elaboration index ( $r = .73$ ;  $\alpha = .84$ ). Confirming our involvement manipulation, a 2 (language)  $\times$  2 (brand affiliation)  $\times$  2 (involvement) ANOVA revealed a brand affiliation  $\times$  involvement interaction ( $F(1, 201) = 4.46, p < .05$ ). Specifically, whereas people in the customer condition elaborated carefully regardless of the elaboration manipulation ( $M_{\text{base}} = 5.37$  vs.  $M_{\text{incr}} = 5.44$ ;  $F(1, 201) = .11, \text{NS}$ ), noncustomers elaborated more carefully in the increased elaboration condition than in the baseline condition ( $M_{\text{base}} = 4.78$  vs.  $M_{\text{incr}} = 5.59$ ;  $F(1, 201) = 11.51, p < .001$ ).

#### Results

We predicted that customers would always prefer language consistent with their relationship expectations (here, close) but that noncustomers would only show effects of language when induced to elaborate. As noncustomers, they should prefer more distant language, consistent with their lack of a current relationship with the brand. A 2 (language)  $\times$  2 (brand affiliation)  $\times$  2 (involvement) ANOVA on brand attitudes revealed a main effect of brand affiliation ( $F(1, 201) = 5.49, p < .05$ ) and a two-way brand affiliation  $\times$  language interaction ( $F(1, 201) = 16.53, p < .001$ ), both of which were qualified by the predicted three-way language  $\times$  brand affiliation  $\times$  involvement interaction ( $F(1, 201) = 3.98, p < .05$ ).

Focusing first on the baseline involvement condition, analysis revealed the predicted brand affiliation  $\times$  language interaction ( $F(1, 99) = 4.11, p < .05$ ), with no main effects. Using the pronoun “we” led to more positive attitudes than “you and the brand” among people in the customer condition (5.85 vs. 5.28;  $F(1, 99) = 4.13, p < .05$ ), but language use did not have an effect among people in the noncustomer condition (5.36 vs. 5.46;  $F < 1, \text{NS}$ ). Attitudes in the customer/“we” condition did not differ significantly from those in either noncustomer condition (both  $F < 2.1, \text{NS}$ ).

Next, we examined the high-involvement condition. The analysis revealed a main effect of brand affiliation ( $F(1, 102) = 6.50, p < .05$ ) and a brand affiliation  $\times$  language interaction ( $F(1, 102) = 17.46, p < .001$ ). Specifically, among people in the customer condition, using the pronoun “we” led to more positive attitudes than “you and the brand” (6.14 vs. 5.28;  $F(1, 102) = 5.45, p < .05$ ). This finding parallels the results for the baseline elaboration condition and is consistent with the idea that customers elaborate carefully by default. Among people in the noncustomer condition, using the pronoun “we” led to less positive attitudes than “you and the brand” (4.55 vs. 5.67;  $F(1, 102) = 14.08, p < .001$ ). Hence, when induced to elaborate, noncustomers do differentiate between the two messages and respond more favor-

ably to language that matches their expectation for a more distant interaction.

Looked at another way, whereas there was only a main effect of language use in the customer condition, regardless of involvement ( $F(1, 92) = 11.52, p < .001$ ; all other  $F < 1$ , NS), the noncustomer condition revealed a language  $\times$  involvement interaction effect ( $F(1, 109) = 4.33, p < .05$ ). Among noncustomers, the pronoun “we” led to less positive attitudes than “you and the brand” when involvement was increased ( $F(1, 109) = 12.25, p < .001$ ), but there was no effect of language among noncustomers in the baseline involvement condition ( $F < 1$ , NS; see fig. 4A).

### Experiment 3B: Distant Relationship Expectations

Two hundred and fifty-six participants (mean age = 30, range 18–68; 41% females), recruited from the same online pool as in experiment 3A, were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (brand affiliation: customer vs. noncustomer)  $\times$  2 (language: “you and the brand” vs. “we”)  $\times$  2 (involvement: baseline vs. high) between-subjects design. The procedure was identical to that used in experiment 3A, but this time the relationship between CellCom and its customers was framed as distant (app. B). After reading the

relationship description and communication by CellCom, they responded to the same attitude measures ( $\alpha = .91$ ) as in experiment 3A, which served as our dependent variable.

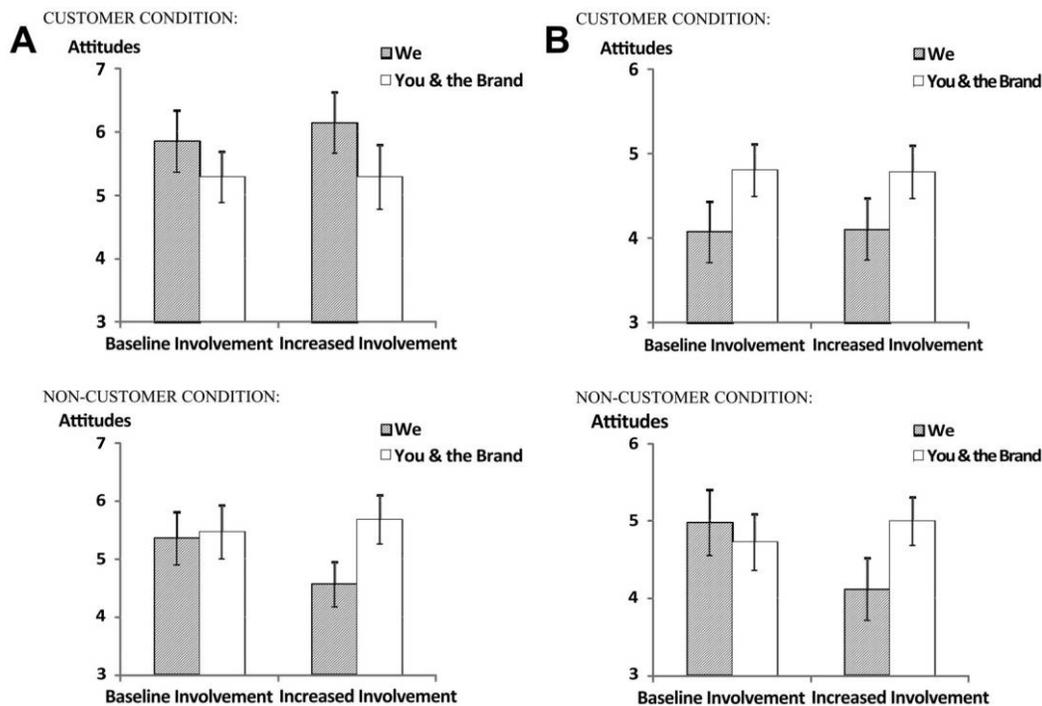
### Results

We predicted that customers would always prefer language consistent with their relationship expectations (here, distant) but that noncustomers would only show effects of language when induced to elaborate. As noncustomers, they should prefer more distant language, consistent with their lack of a current relationship with the brand. A 2 (language)  $\times$  2 (brand affiliation)  $\times$  2 (involvement) ANOVA on brand attitudes revealed a main effect of language ( $F(1, 248) = 8.81, p < .005$ ) and a two-way language  $\times$  involvement interaction ( $F(1, 248) = 3.91, p < .05$ ), both of which were qualified by the predicted three-way language  $\times$  brand affiliation  $\times$  involvement interaction ( $F(1, 248) = 3.94, p < .05$ ).

Focusing first on the baseline involvement condition, analysis revealed the predicted brand affiliation  $\times$  language interaction ( $F(1, 117) = 5.32, p < .05$ ). Using the pronoun “we” led to less positive attitudes than “you and the brand” among people in the customer condition (4.07 vs. 4.80;  $F(1,$

FIGURE 4

ROLE OF BRAND AFFILIATION AND INVOLVEMENT (EXPERIMENTS 3A AND 3B)



NOTE.—A, Experiment 3A, close relationship framing; B, experiment 3B, distant relationship framing.

117) = 6.48,  $p < .05$ ), but language use did not have an effect among people in the noncustomer condition (4.97 vs. 4.72;  $F < 1$ , NS). Hence, when the brand is expected to be a distant relationship partner, customers prefer more distant language usage. This result empirically reverses the result of the prior experiments but supports the prediction that customers prefer language consistent with their relationship expectations, whether distant or close.

Next, we examined the increased involvement condition. The analysis revealed a main effect of language ( $F(1, 131) = 12.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with no interactions. Specifically, under increased involvement, the pronoun “we” led to less positive attitudes than “you and the brand” among both customers (4.10 vs. 4.78;  $F(1, 131) = 4.96$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and noncustomers (4.11 vs. 4.99;  $F(1, 131) = 7.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As this experiment focused on a distant relationship, these findings are consistent with our conceptualization that people have more favorable attitudes toward brands that use language consistent with their expectations (see fig. 4B).

Looked at another way, whereas there was only a main effect of language use in the customer condition, regardless of our involvement manipulation ( $F(1, 131) = 11.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ; all other  $F < 1$ , NS), the noncustomer condition revealed a language  $\times$  involvement interaction effect ( $F(1, 117) = 6.24$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Among noncustomers, the pronoun “we” led to less positive attitudes than “you and the brand” under increased involvement ( $F(1, 117) = 4.69$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but there was no effect of language among noncustomers in the baseline involvement condition ( $F < 1.6$ , NS).

## Discussion

Experiment 3 provides further support for our suggestion that, when people are motivated to process the communication carefully, they react favorably to expectation-consistent language in brand communications but react unfavorably to expectation-inconsistent communications. Moreover, experiment 3 clarifies the dual role of brand affiliation in these effects, which is to act as a determinant of both closeness expectations and cognitive elaboration.

Customers, regardless of manipulated involvement, reacted more favorably to closeness-implying language when they expected the relationship to be close but less favorably when they expected it to be distant. Noncustomers showed a different pattern. Although noncustomers normally do not process brand information effortfully enough to show effects of subtle language variations, they can be induced to process effortfully. In such cases, they react less favorably to closeness-implying language than to language that emphasizes their separateness from the brand, regardless of how the brand’s relationship with its customers is framed, because closeness-implying language is inconsistent with their expectation, as noncustomers, for more distant communications.

Experiment 3 used a hypothetical brand and manipulated both consumer-brand relationship expectations (close vs. distant) and cognitive elaboration (via brand affiliation and involvement), which allowed us to effectively eliminate any potential confounds between these variables and premessage

brand attitudes. However, an open question is whether these findings also vary as a function of readily observable characteristics of different real-world brands, with which people have real working relationships, such as the particular category to which the brand belongs and its associated relationship norms. Experiment 4 was designed to test this hypothesis by examining whether language use might lead to opposite results among customers in brand categories that are associated with more distant consumer-brand relationship expectations.

## EXPERIMENT 4: OPPOSITE EFFECTS IN DIFFERENT CATEGORIES AND MEDIATION

Experiment 4 had two main goals. First, we sought to examine whether the reversed effect of language use for distant relationships shown in experiments 2 and 3 could be replicated with real-world brands. Our pretest (app. A) indicated that people tend to perceive their working relationships with their bank as relatively close but perceive their relationships with a health insurance provider as relatively distant. Paralleling the results of experiments 2 and 3, we predicted that reading a message referring to the brand and the consumer in terms of the pronoun “we”—rather than the phrase “you and the brand”—would lead to more favorable attitudes among bank customers because they expect the brand to be a close relationship partner. However, using the pronoun “we” should lead to less favorable attitudes among health insurance customers because they expect the brand to be a distant relationship partner. Consistent with our conceptualization and with the results of the previous experiments, we also predicted that noncustomers in both categories would exhibit attenuated effects, due to the lower tendency to elaborate on communications from nonaffiliated brands.

The second goal of this experiment was to examine the process underlying the effect. As reviewed in the introduction, behavior that is consistent with expectations increases trust. Hence, we expected that advertising language consistent with the relationship expectations of customers (i.e., close or distant) would increase perceptions of trustworthiness, and these perceptions of trustworthiness would mediate the effect of language on attitudes.

We also tested an alternative mediation hypothesis based on fluency. One could argue that, if relationship-congruent language is more expected, people could respond to it more favorably than to relationship-incongruent language because it is easier to process (Schwarz 2004; Whittlesea 1993). This ease of processing could then increase the favorability of attitudes (Lee and Labroo 2004; Whittlesea, Jacoby, and Girard 1990). We test both of these alternative mediators in experiment 4.

## Method

*Participants and Procedure.* Three hundred and eleven participants from the same online pool as in experiment 1 (mean age = 32, range 18–71; 70% female) read an excerpt allegedly taken from an ad featuring either Wells Fargo, a

banking brand, or Aetna, a health insurance brand. The excerpts promoted services in one of these respective domains and used the pronoun “we” or the phrase “you and the brand” (see experiment 1 and apps. A and C for stimuli descriptions).

After reading the excerpts, participants indicated their attitudes on the same attitude measures as in our previous studies, which served as the focal dependent measure ( $\alpha = .96$ ). To test our two mediation hypotheses, participants also rated their agreement with two brand trustworthiness items (“the brand is credible” and “the brand is honest and respectful”) and two fluency items (“the main idea in the ad was easy to understand” and “the language used in the ad was easy to understand”), on 7-point scales (1 = not at all agree; 7 = totally agree;  $\alpha = .87$  and  $\alpha = .84$ , respectively).

Finally, participants indicated whether they were customers of the brand. The study thus had a 2 (language: “we” vs. “you and the brand”)  $\times$  2 (brand affiliation: customers vs. noncustomers)  $\times$  2 (category: banking vs. health insurance) between-subjects design.

## Results

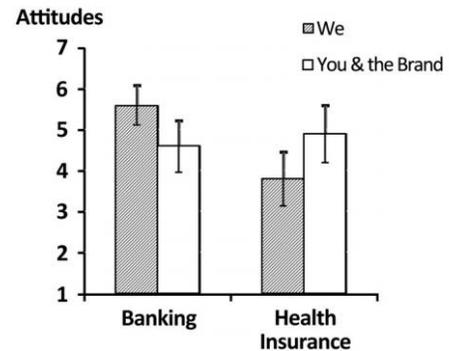
*Effect of Language, Category, and Brand Affiliation on Attitudes.* We predicted that using the pronoun “we” rather than the phrase “you and the brand” would have a significant positive effect on customers’ attitudes in the banking category but a negative effect in the health insurance category. We expected the effect among noncustomers to be attenuated in both domains. Consistent with this prediction, a 2 (language: “we” vs. “you and the brand”)  $\times$  2 (brand affiliation: customers vs. noncustomers)  $\times$  2 (category: banking vs. health insurance) ANOVA on attitudes revealed a two-way language  $\times$  category interaction ( $F(1, 303) = 6.54, p < .01$ ), which was qualified by the predicted three-way interaction ( $F(1, 303) = 9.57, p < .005$ ).

We first decomposed the three-way interaction by brand affiliation. An ANOVA focusing only on existing customers revealed a significant main effect of category ( $F(1, 45) = 4.88, p < .05$ ) and a significant language  $\times$  category interaction ( $F(1, 45) = 10.97, p < .005$ ). Specifically, whereas bank customers had more favorable attitudes toward their bank in the “we” condition ( $M = 5.56$ ) than in the “you and the brand” condition ( $M = 4.56; F(1, 45) = 5.93, p < .05$ ), health insurance customers had less favorable attitudes toward their brand in the “we” condition ( $M = 3.83$ ) than in the “you and the brand” condition ( $M = 4.91; F(1, 45) = 5.16, p < .05$ ). There was no effect of language on attitudes among noncustomers, in either the banking (both  $M = 4.92$ ) or the health insurance category ( $M = 5.00$  vs.  $M = 4.87$ ; all  $F < 1$ , NS; see fig. 5).

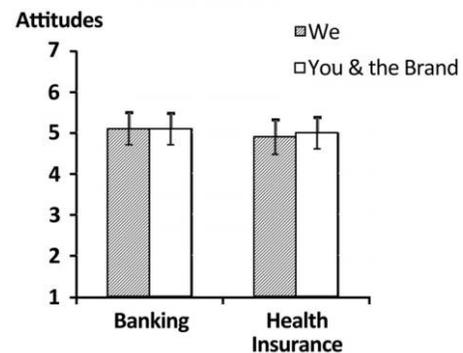
We also decomposed these results by brand category. Focusing on participants in the banking category, an ANOVA revealed a significant language  $\times$  brand affiliation interaction ( $F(1, 152) = 4.18, p < .05$ ). Existing customers had more favorable attitudes toward their bank in the “we” condition than in the “you and the brand” condition ( $F(1, 152)$

**FIGURE 5**  
EFFECT OF LANGUAGE AND BRAND CATEGORY ON CUSTOMER ATTITUDES TOWARD REAL-WORLD BRANDS (EXPERIMENT 4)

CUSTOMER CONDITION:



NON-CUSTOMER CONDITION:



$= 4.91, p < .05$ ), but there was no effect of language on attitudes among noncustomers.

In the health insurance category, analysis revealed a language  $\times$  brand affiliation interaction in the opposite pattern ( $F(1, 151) = 5.43, p < .05$ ). Specifically, existing customers had less favorable attitudes toward their health insurance provider in the “we” condition than in the “you and the brand” condition ( $F(1, 151) = 4.54, p < .05$ ), but there was no effect of language among noncustomers.

*Mediation Analyses.* We used the bootstrapping approach and accompanying SPSS (statistical analysis software) macros recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008) to test our mediated moderation hypothesis that the effect of language on brand attitudes was mediated by perceived brand trustworthiness. Analyses were conducted separately for each brand category, using models with multiple simultaneous mediators to assess the role of trustworthiness as well as fluency as potential mediators.

The first analysis focused on the banking condition, using language, brand affiliation, and the language  $\times$  brand af-

filiation interaction term as independent variables and trustworthiness and fluency as simultaneous mediators. Results revealed that the indirect effect via perceived brand trustworthiness was significant ( $-0.77$  with a  $[-1.50, -0.09]$  95% CI [confidence interval]), whereas the partial effect of language  $\times$  brand affiliation, controlling for trustworthiness, was nonsignificant ( $B = -0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.26$ , NS), suggesting full mediation. Fluency did not emerge as a mediator as it did not significantly contribute to the total indirect effect ( $0.01$  with a  $[-0.07, 0.12]$  95% CI). These results converged with a product-of-coefficients analysis, in which trustworthiness was a significant predictor of attitudes when controlling for language  $\times$  brand affiliation ( $B = 0.84$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ;  $t(151) = 20.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but the residual language  $\times$  brand affiliation interaction effect was nonsignificant ( $B = -0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.26$ ;  $t(151) < 1$ , NS; Sobel's  $z = 2.04$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Importantly, reverse mediation analysis suggested that attitudes did not significantly mediate the language  $\times$  customer interaction effect on trustworthiness ( $z = 1.74$ ,  $p > .08$ ).

The second analysis replicated the first analysis in the health insurance condition. Results revealed that the indirect effect via perceived trustworthiness was significant ( $1.12$  with a  $[0.25, 2.21]$  95% CI), whereas the partial effect of language  $\times$  brand affiliation was nonsignificant ( $B = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.24$ , NS), suggesting that the language  $\times$  brand affiliation effect on attitudes was fully mediated by trustworthiness in the health insurance condition. Fluency was a nonsignificant mediator ( $-0.02$  with a  $[-0.18, 0.03]$  95% CI).

These results again converged with a product-of-coefficients analysis. Trustworthiness was a significant predictor of attitudes when controlling for language  $\times$  brand affiliation ( $B = 0.88$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ;  $t(150) = 25.97$ ,  $p < .001$ ), whereas the residual language  $\times$  brand affiliation effect was nonsignificant ( $B = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.24$ ;  $t(150) < 1$ , NS; Sobel's  $z = 2.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Reverse mediation, with attitudes mediating the language  $\times$  customer effect on trustworthiness, was nonsignificant ( $z = 1.62$ ,  $p > .1$ ).

## Discussion

Experiment 4 provides important support for the hypothesis that the effect of subtle language variations on brand attitudes depends on consumers' subjective a priori relationship expectations in specific brand categories. Our pretest indicated that, whereas customers tend to expect their banking brand to be a close relationship partner, they expect their health insurance brand to be a more distant relationship partner. Accordingly, we predicted and found that customers (but not noncustomers) had more favorable attitudes toward their banking brand when the language used conveyed closeness (i.e., "we") but more favorable attitudes toward their health care brands when the language conveyed separateness (i.e., "you and the brand"). This shows that certain brand categories can be reliably associated with different relationship expectations, and as a result, relationship-implicating language can be differentially effective across brand categories.

Furthermore, mediated moderation analyses support our

hypothesis that the moderated effect of language on attitudes was mediated by perceptions of the brand as more trustworthy and respectful when language was consistent with preexisting perceptions of the relationship. Importantly, this mediation hypothesis was supported across both brand categories.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Companies carefully craft their communications with customers in order to shape beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. Prior research has examined effects of various linguistic features on attitudes and persuasion. However, much less attention has been devoted to understanding whether, and how, minor and logically inconsequential wording changes can imply information about consumers' relationships with brands, which in turn influences people's perceptions of and attitudes toward them.

The results of four experiments support the hypothesis that subtle variations in closeness-implicating language, such as using the pronoun "we" rather than the phrase "you and the brand," can have significant effects on consumers' perceptions of and attitudes toward brands, including prominent, real-world brands with which they have actual working relationships. Customers expecting a close relationship with both real and hypothetical brands evaluated the brand more favorably after reading a message that referred to the brand and the consumer in terms of the pronoun "we" rather than the phrase "you and the brand" (experiments 1–4). However, this effect reversed when customers expected the relationship to be distant (experiments 2–4). Thus, the effect of language on attitudes was moderated by the congruence between the level of closeness implied by language and that expected by the customer.

Consistent with our theory, these effects were found when consumers were motivated to elaborate effortfully on the communication (i.e., among current customers or under increased involvement) but not when the motivation to elaborate was absent (i.e., among uninvolved noncustomers). These effects were mediated by perceived brand trustworthiness: expectation-congruent language increased trust, resulting in more favorable attitudes (experiment 4).

## Theoretical Implications

The present research contributes to the literature on language in interpersonal cognition by suggesting that language, like other types of behavior, conveys meaning and influences attitudes not just directly, in an assimilative manner (Agnew et al. 1998; Fitzsimons and Kay 2004), but also through implicit assessments of (in)congruity between language and prior expectations about the relationship. Thus, whereas prior research has focused primarily on the positive effects of closeness-implicating language on perceptions of partners in relationships that were either close or neutral in nature, the present research indicates that using closeness-implicating language can actually hurt the communicating party when that language is inconsistent with expectations.

We also contribute to the literature on language effects in persuasion by providing insight into the psychological processes underlying the effects. Specifically, we demonstrate that people's evaluations of congruity between the message and their relationship expectation influence their trustworthiness perceptions. Perceived trustworthiness, in turn, influences brand attitudes, and prior research has suggested that it also affects brand loyalty and behavioral intentions (Morgan and Hunt 1994).

Additionally, this research contributes to the existing literature on language effects in marketing communications by examining the impact of brand affiliation (i.e., customer vs. noncustomer), as a determinant of closeness expectations as well as involvement and cognitive elaboration. Assessing the congruence between subtle linguistic components and relationship representations stored in memory, and using these assessments to guide judgment and attitudes, requires cognitive elaboration (McQuarrie and Mick 2003; Meyers-Levy and Peracchio 1996; Petty et al. 2008). Indeed, our effects were particularly pronounced among brand customers, who are more psychologically involved with affiliated brands than are noncustomers and therefore tend to process brand information more effortfully. Although one could argue that inconsequential pronoun choice is not relevant to the central merits of the attitude object, showing that they affect judgment especially under high-elaboration contexts demonstrates the centrality of brand relationship expectations in driving consumers' evaluations of brands.

Finally, we contribute to the literature on consumers' relationships with brands and their reactions to expectation-(in)congruent brand behaviors (e.g., Aggarwal 2004) in a number of important ways. First, our work demonstrates that consumers implicitly assess not only substantial marketing decisions with obvious economic implications (e.g., pricing) but also very subtle variations in relationship-implicating language. Language is a medium that specifically characterizes interpersonal interactions, as opposed to pricing, which characterizes business entities such as brands. Therefore, our findings uniquely illustrate and validate the notion that people sometimes truly think of brands as if they were other people, responding to differences even in language use.

Second, our work is unique in that it shows that people with different personal histories with a brand (i.e., customers vs. noncustomers) can have different and even opposite reactions to the same communications. Moreover, whereas prior work focused on hypothetical brands, our work examines attitudes of real customers toward real-world brands with which they have real working relationships.

Third, whereas prior work focused on communal versus exchange relationship norms (Clark and Mills 1993), we show that consumers' perceptions and expectations regarding their relationships with brands can vary significantly even within exchange norms. It seems highly implausible that people believe either banks or health insurance companies operate because they are concerned about people's well-being, rather than to make a profit. Nevertheless, our

findings demonstrate that consumers' relationships with these different types of brands vary on several dimensions of closeness, leading consumers to react differently to the same ad copy.

## Directions for Future Research

We showed that closeness expectations can vary by product category or brand framing, but one question is whether perceived closeness should operate as a continuous or a discrete variable. Prior research on comparison processes in social judgment provides a basis for hypotheses regarding this question, which could be examined in future research. The outcome of comparing a target (e.g., closeness-implicating language) with a standard (e.g., relationship expectations) depends on the standard's extremity (Herr 1986; Herr, Sherman, and Fazio 1983). On the basis of this perspective, it is likely that people with relatively extreme closeness or distance expectations should be more likely to respond strongly to (in)congruent language in marketing communications than do people whose expectations are moderate.

However, the initial direction of comparison (i.e., whether people seek similarity between language and a distance vs. closeness standard) might bias information processing because evidence supporting the initial comparison object may become more accessible in memory (Mussweiler 2001, 2003). These findings might suggest that even relatively moderate perceptions of closeness (or distance) in a relationship may bias the comparison process in the direction of the initial hypothesis, regardless of its extremity. Judgment differences between people with strong versus moderate closeness expectations might therefore be quite small.

While our research has focused on relationship closeness as a key differentiator of relationships, future research could explore language effects along other relationship dimensions. For example, consumers might prefer brands with different personalities (Aaker 1997) to use language implying different levels of closeness. People might associate competence and efficiency with distance, and consequently, distant language might favor brands with a competent or efficient personality, whereas closeness-implicating language might favor brands with a more cheerful or exciting personality. Likewise, a local brand could be expected to lead a close relationship with its customers, whereas a global brand might be expected to lead a less personalized, more distant relationship, resulting in similar effects of pronoun use.

Further, although we focused on pronouns as a lingual instantiation of relationship closeness, future research could examine other lingual markers of closeness, such as first versus last name salutation or colloquial versus formal style. Future research could also explore other language features that are either congruent or incongruent with relationship dimensions apart from closeness. Depending on the specific set of expectations from the brand, language emphasizing thinking versus feeling, active versus passive verbs, or singular versus plural terms could potentially be seen as more

(or less) congruent with expectations, leading to subtle but powerful effects on attitudes.

Moreover, the congruence of language might be assessed not only vis-à-vis people's expectations from the brand itself but also in comparison to internal standards of appropriateness. Consumers with different personalities, for example (e.g., extroverts vs. introverts), may naturally find some types of language more congruent with their internal lingual, attitudinal, or emotional standards and therefore be more persuaded by it. Such themes have become prominent in the political domain. For example, some have argued that framing of political issues (e.g., taxation as a burden or as a social obligation) can have different effects depending on the recipients' view of reality (Lakoff 2004). By further understanding and isolating the key bases for perception and evaluation in each product category, marketers can gain a competitive edge through their communications.

### Practical Implications

From a practical viewpoint, the finding that language can have important effects on consumers' attitudes promotes the notion that marketers should not only think of their consumers as relationship partners in general but also mind differences in how specific types of consumers relate to their brands in the context of its product category. Our findings indicate that consumers expect products and service providers in different categories to behave as different relationship partners (experiment 4), and consequently they evaluate the same communications differently, depending on these relationship perceptions. Moreover, even within a product category, people can have varying expectations for the brand as a relationship partner (experiments 2 and 3), and these perceptions, in turn, determine the effect of subtle language variations on attitudes. Likewise, the findings regarding the differences between customers and noncustomers may prove useful to marketers as they devise specific strategies for customer acquisition and retention (Blattberg and Deighton 1996; Reinartz, Thomas, and Kumar 2005), especially considering the pervasiveness and relative ease of crafting individually tailored communications. Customers appear to be much more sensitive than noncustomers to subtle wording differences in marketing communications, although the magnitude of this difference can vary, depending on how much the context prompts noncustomers to think.

The present findings have ready applications. For example, direct mail marketing efforts often allow marketers to precisely target either current or new customers and tailor their messages accordingly. The present research suggests that the efficacy of communications will be significantly enhanced if marketers adhere to the communications consistent with their product category and audience. Similarly, brands extending their product or service to a new geographical area would be advised to use different communications than those that have proved successful among their current customers. The present findings highlight that factors that may escape the attention of marketers, such as subtle

differences in word choice, can have significant effects on the responses of consumers.

### Conclusion

Brands typically strive to form close relationships with customers in an attempt to create positive attitudes, loyalty, and word of mouth. On the basis of prior research, one might expect that, if it had any effect at all, language subtly implying closeness between the brand and the consumer would facilitate persuasion. The present research suggests that this is not always the case. Multiple factors determine whether closer or more distant language will be the most persuasive, and so a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective. As active and skilled processors of social information, people rapidly extract and recruit relationship-relevant information in forming their evaluations, further reinforcing the notion that people view brands as social relationship partners.

## APPENDIX A

### RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS PRETESTS

The purpose of these pretests was to identify real brand categories in which people associate brands with either a relatively close relationship or a relatively distant relationship (experiments 1 and 4) and to pretest the relationship-framing manipulation for our hypothetical brand CellCom (experiments 2 and 3).

#### PRETESTING REAL-WORLD BRANDS: BANKING VERSUS HEALTH INSURANCE (EXPERIMENTS 1 AND 4)

We asked 170 participants to think about one of four self-generated real-world brands: their bank, another bank they were not affiliated with, their health insurance provider, or a health insurance provider they were not affiliated with. Thus, people were randomly assigned to a 2 (brand affiliation: customer vs. noncustomer)  $\times$  2 (category: banking vs. health insurance) between-subjects design.

We then asked participants to rate the extent to which they expect their relationship with the brand they considered to be characterized by closeness, shared beliefs, shared goals, equality, openness, warmth, fairness, care, comfort, friendliness, mutual respect, and a sense of being teammates. These characteristics directly correspond to the prominent dimensions of relationship closeness identified in prior literature (e.g., Aron et al. 1992; Cate et al. 1982; Fournier 1998; Huston and Burgess 1979; Kelley et al. 1983; Seepersad et al. 2008).

Participants rated their expectations from the relationship on 7-point scales (1 = I would not expect that at all; 7 = I would certainly expect that). Responses were aggregated to form a closeness expectation index ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

An ANOVA on expected closeness revealed a marginally significant main effect of brand affiliation ( $F(1, 166) = 3.55, p = .06$ ) and a category  $\times$  brand affiliation interaction ( $F(1, 166) = 5.92, p < .05$ ). Specifically, people thinking about their affiliated brands (i.e., customers) expected their relationship with their bank to be significantly closer than their relationship with their health insurance provider (4.47 vs. 3.89;  $F(1, 166) = 6.83, p < .01$ ). In contrast, closeness expectations of noncustomers did not vary as a function of brand category (3.63 vs. 3.88;  $F(1, 166) < 1.1, NS$ ). Looked at another way, bank customers' closeness expectations were significantly higher than those of noncustomers ( $F(1, 166) < 9.20, p < .005$ ), but health insurance customers' closeness expectations were not different from those of noncustomers in either product category ( $F(1, 166) < .2, NS$ ).

### PRETESTING A HYPOTHETICAL BRAND: CELLCOM (EXPERIMENTS 2 AND 3)

The next pretest focused on people's relationship expectations regarding the hypothetical brand CellCom. One hundred and sixty-two pretest participants, recruited from the same online pool as that used in the experiments, were randomly assigned to read one of the four relationship-framing scenarios about CellCom described in appendix B, which varied by the closeness between the brand and its customers (close vs. distant) and brand affiliation (customer vs. noncustomer). The design of this pretest was therefore conceptually equivalent to the real-brands pretest, except that all relationship perceptions were manipulated, using a hypothetical brand.

After reading their assigned scenario, we asked participants to rate their closeness expectations from CellCom using the same measures used in the real-brands pretest. In addition, we asked participants to rate their agreement with three attitude items ("CellCom is favorable," "CellCom is positive," and "CellCom is good") and three brand efficacy items ("CellCom is a high-quality brand," "CellCom is professional," and "CellCom is capable"), to ensure that the relationship-framing manipulation did not affect brand perceptions on those dimensions. These ancillary responses were aggregated to form attitude ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and perceived efficacy ( $\alpha = .90$ ) indexes.

An ANOVA on expected closeness revealed a main effect of relationship closeness framing ( $F(1, 158) = 5.41, p < .05$ ), a main effect of brand affiliation ( $F(1, 158) = 4.90, p < .05$ ), and a closeness  $\times$  brand affiliation interaction ( $F(1, 158) = 4.38, p < .05$ ). Specifically, people in the customer-framing condition expected their relationship with CellCom to be significantly closer in the close than in the distant framing condition (4.59 vs. 3.90;  $F(1, 158) = 10.00, p < .005$ ), but expectations of noncustomers did not vary as a function of closeness framing (3.92 vs. 3.89, NS). Looked at another way, people in the customer-framing condition had the same closeness expectations as noncustomers in the distant condition ( $F(1, 158) < .1, NS$ ), but their closeness expectations were significantly higher in the close framing condition ( $F(1, 158) = 10.46, p < .001$ ). There were no

effects on attitudes toward the brand (all  $F < 2, NS$ ) or on perceived brand efficacy (all  $F < 1.5, NS$ ).

## APPENDIX B

### RELATIONSHIP-FRAMING STIMULI, EXPERIMENTS 2 AND 3

#### Distant relationship, customer condition:

You have been a CellCom customer for the last five years. You have been using the network quite extensively and have been very happy with the quality of their service and their professional and respectful conduct. Overall, they seem to be a well managed, hierarchical, and performance-oriented company. When you first opened the account with them, they were quite formal but got the paperwork done quickly and efficiently. You also use their reliable, hassle-free web and data package. CellCom periodically offers new plans that appear attractive and cleverly designed. In the past, whenever you went to their store they treated you courteously—they respect your time. Overall your experience with CellCom has been excellent.

#### Distant relationship, noncustomer condition:

CellCom has been around for five years. You have not been using their services, but you know that people are very happy with the quality of their service and their professional and respectful conduct. Overall, they seem to be a well managed, hierarchical, and performance-oriented company. They are known for their formal service and for getting the paperwork done quickly and efficiently. They also offer a reliable, hassle-free web and data package. CellCom periodically offers new plans that appear attractive and cleverly designed. They are courteous and seem to respect their customers' time. Overall, CellCom is considered an excellent company.

#### Close relationship, customer condition:

You have been a CellCom customer for the last five years. You have been using the network quite extensively and have been very happy with the quality of their service and your relationship with them. Overall, they seem to be a very caring, attentive, and customer-oriented company. When you first joined them, they really gave you the feeling that they understood your needs and cared about them, and provided great service. Over the past few years, whenever you visited the store, you always enjoyed the warm interaction and personal service they provided. CellCom periodically offers new plans that appear to be designed with your needs in mind. They seem to be taking a personal interest in your satisfaction, and have often taken the initiative to suggest ways to better manage your account. Overall your experience with CellCom has been great.

#### Close relationship, noncustomer condition:

CellCom has been around for five years. You have not been using their services, but you know that people are very happy

with the quality of their service and the relationship they have with them. Overall, they seem to be a very caring, attentive, and customer-oriented company. They really seem to understand people's needs and care about them, and provide great service. They provide a very warm in-store interaction and personal service. CellCom periodically offers new plans that appear to be designed with their customers' needs in mind. They seem to be taking a personal interest in their customers' satisfaction, and often take the initiative to suggest ways to better manage their customers' accounts. Overall, CellCom is considered a great company.

## APPENDIX C

### HEALTH INSURANCE STIMULI, EXPERIMENT 4

“We” condition:

**Aetna Plan for Your Health**—A Whole New World of Health and Benefits

Why join Aetna Plan for Your Health? Because no matter what stage of life you're in, we work together to make sure you achieve your optimal health. Different people have different needs at different times of life, but many don't know that health plans can help manage health care costs and financial security. Because we share the goal of keeping you in good health, we can make these important decisions together. Together, we make health benefits and financial choices that meet your needs now and in the future. We navigate together through the wide range of available health and benefit options that deliver a valuable difference. Most importantly, we will continue to work together to ensure you achieve your optimal health through life.

“You and the brand” condition:

**Aetna Plan for Your Health**—A Whole New World of Health and Benefits

Why join Aetna Plan for Your Health? Because no matter what stage of life you're in, you and Aetna work together to make sure you achieve your optimal health. Different people have different needs at different times of life, but many don't know that health plans can help manage health care costs and financial security. Because you and Aetna share the goal of keeping you in good health, you and Aetna can make these important decisions together. Together, you and Aetna make health benefits and financial choices that meet your needs now and in the future. You and Aetna navigate together through the wide range of available health and benefit options that deliver a valuable difference. Most importantly, you and Aetna will continue to work together to ensure you achieve your optimal health through life.

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