Phatic Brand Communication on Social Media

by

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ABSTRACT

This research introduces the concept of phatic brand communication to marketing, and examines its use in the context of social media. The main function of phatic brand communication is for brands to create an atmosphere of sociability with consumers (e.g., "Hey YOU. Have a great day.") rather than to convey substantive information. First, a typology of phatic language is developed, which integrates and expands the current conceptualization of what "phatic" means in diverse disciplines. This typology organizes phatic language into phatic content (i.e., "what" is being communicated) and phatic style (i.e., "how" it is communicated). Next, a comprehensive framework of phatic brand communication is presented. In this framework, brands produce messages using phatic language, and consumers interpret them and perceive phaticity, which leads to behavioural and psychological marketing outcomes. Various moderating factors are considered, and propositions are forwarded. Next, in an empirical study, a Twitter dataset is used to test the proposed typology and the framework. The dataset of brand Tweets confirms the presence of the typology of phatic language. This study provides support for the framework by showing positive relationships between phatic language and perceived phaticity, and between perceived phaticity and consumer engagement in terms of likes, replies, and retweets. The study also highlights a moderating factor, where the presence of transactional content in the message negatively influences the positive relationship between perceived phaticity and engagement. Next, a series of laboratory experiments demonstrate that (a) excessive phatic language can backfire; (b) the order of phatic and transactional components affects behavioural intentions and attitudes; and (c) a message with only transactional content can have more positive marketing outcomes by including phatic content, regardless of the types of transactional content.

PREFACE

This thesis is an original work by Thomas K.B. Koo. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Textual paralanguage”, No. Pro00073802, July 7, 2017. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

DEDICATION

To William, Max, and Charlotte—my greatest motivators and distractors.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"It's beginning to look a lot like... 🎄☃️✨" (Starbucks)

"Hey YOU. Have a great day." (Target)

In the above Tweets (i.e., messages posted on Twitter), what are Starbucks and Target trying to communicate to their audience? These Tweets aim to convey something more than merely persuading, informing, or reminding their audience of the four Ps of marketing (i.e., product, price, place, promotion; Armstrong and Kotler 2017; McCarthy 1964); specifically, the two brands are using those messages to foster positive relationships with their audience. Indeed, language serves both transactional functions—the transmission of ideas, knowledge, and information—as well as relational ones (Brown and Yule 1983). *Phatic* communication refers to the use of the latter type of language that creates an atmosphere of sociability (e.g., greetings, small talk; Malinowski 1923). Marketing research has mostly focused on the transactional component of brand communication (Berger and Schwartz 2011; Jalali and Papatla 2019), and there is a surprising lack of theoretically based frameworks or empirical research addressing the phatic component, despite the significance of the social and relationship-building aspect of brand communication (Duncan and Moriarty 1998; Fournier 1998). Further, marketing practitioners frequently design and engage in brand communication with the objective of managing relationships with consumers, but the impact of this type of language use on the audience is not well understood.

Thus, the purpose of the current research is to introduce the concept of phatic communication to marketing by integrating theories from diverse disciplines, such as

anthropology and linguistics, and to explore how phatic *brand* communication impacts consumers. I propose a typology of the language used in phatic communication (i.e., phatic language) and an overall conceptual framework of phatic brand communication. In the context of social media, I discuss how brands produce messages using phatic language, how consumers interpret these messages, and what downstream consequences and outcomes they have. I then test this typology and framework using a Twitter dataset and laboratory experiments.

Social media is where I examine phatic brand communication because it offers an ideal context. First, social media has emerged as one of the most dominant brand communication channels; almost all brands are now present on social media. Across all industries, social media spending accounts for approximately 13% of total marketing budgets, and this is expected to grow by over 60% in the next five years (Moorman 2020). Second, one of the primary reasons that brands invest in social media marketing is to manage relationships with consumers. As the word "social" in the name of the channel suggests, brands hope to form and reinforce social bonds with consumers via social media platforms (Voorveld 2019). This specific objective of social media marketing parallels that of phatic brand communication. Finally, social media offers a new opportunity for brands to engage in phatic communication with consumers in more diverse, creative ways. While brands have engaged in phatic communication through traditional media channels (e.g., television, print advertising), its use in these channels is limited because their high cost leaves little room for such relationship-building "chitchat" such as those in the opening examples. In contrast, on social media, brands can exercise more creative freedom and engage in phatic communication more frequently because posting messages costs very little.

The current work provides several theoretical and practical contributions. First, I contribute to the marketing literature by offering a comprehensive conceptual framework of

phatic brand communication, outlining its components and consequences. In response to recent calls for research on phatics over semantics (Berger et al. 2020), this work provides impetus and rich opportunities for future research by offering multiple testable propositions. The need for research on phatics is particularly true in the area of social media marketing because social media is currently the most suitable and accessible media channel for phatic brand communication. Second, I contribute to the linguistics literature by expanding and refining the concept of phatic language. The lack of typology or taxonomy of phatic language has been noted in the discipline (Ward and Horn 1999), and I address this gap by developing a typology of phatic language through a synthesis of prior works. Third, I contribute by providing empirical evidence for the proposed typology and the framework using both field data and controlled experiments. Fourth, my research offers marketing practitioners a new perspective on the use of language in brand communication. I outline how, when, and why marketers can use specific types of phatic language to design social media marketing messages that aim to improve consumer-brand relationships and increase engagement, positive word-of-mouth, and loyalty.

In chapter 2, I present my theoretical model. I briefly review literature on the history and the key characteristics of phatic communication. Then, I present a typology of phatic language that integrates and expands its current conceptualization of what "phatic" is. Next, I offer a conceptual framework of phatic brand communication, and describe the production, interpretation, and outcomes of a message containing phatic language. Chapters 3 and 4 present my empirical work. In chapter 3, using a Twitter dataset, I provide evidence for this typology and framework by assessing the presence and prevalence of the components of phatic brand communication, as well as its behavioural outcomes in terms of consumer engagement. In chapter 4, I report three experiments that manipulate phatic brand communication and provide

causal tests of its impact. Finally, in chapter 5, I discuss key research and managerial implications.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

This chapter synthesizes prior literature to offer a definition of phatic communication, develops a typology of the language used in phatic communication, and presents a conceptual framework of phatic brand communication. I begin by reviewing how the term "phatic" has been used in the literature, where its meaning has not been consistent.

Defining Phatic Communication

Malinowski (1923), an anthropologist, first coined the term "phatic communion" after observing tribal members of the Trobriand Islands in the Pacific Islands exchange frivolous, aimless utterances during daytime chores and around the village fires at night. In addition to perfunctory greetings and inquiries about health, these exchanges included accounts of irrelevant happenings and comments on what is perfectly obvious, such as weather. He noted that these interactions did not primarily serve the purpose of communicating ideas or expressing thoughts. Instead, the symbolic meaning of the speech act itself, rather than the content, was used to establish links of fellowship and to solidify members' social bonds. To describe this social use of language, Malinowski (1923) developed the concept of phatic communion, which he defined as the use of "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by mere exchanges of words" (p. 315).

In some literature, the scope of the term "phatic" has been narrowed down to specific functions of language. Most notably, Jakobson (1960) limited the phatic function of language to establishing, prolonging, and discontinuing the communication. Specifically, the phatic function

allows the interlocutors to open or close the communication episode (e.g., “hi,” “bye”), to sustain it (e.g., “uh-huh,” “yeah”), or to verify that the channel is functional, or the receiver is present (e.g., “hello?” “can you hear me?”).

Similarly, Laver (1975), building on the seminal work of Malinowski, proposed that phatic communion serves two specific subfunctions, namely, to defuse the potential hostility of silence, and to co-operate in getting the interaction comfortably under way, via commonly used and understood expressions, such as greetings, parting tokens, compliments, and thanks. He argued that phatic communion is more important especially in the initial phase of conversations when the interlocutors are feeling their way toward the working consensus of their interaction, revealing their perceptions of relative social status.

Others have proposed a broader view of the concept of what is phatic. Coupland, Coupland, and Robinson (1992) generalized the term “phatic communion” to mean all verbal interactions that emphasize relational goals, above and beyond any practical aims, not limiting its meaning to specific language use or expressions. They argued that expressions like “how are you” and “nice weather” mostly carry the symbolic meaning of the sender’s phatic intentions, while their semantic or literal meaning is of less importance. Other researchers have since examined a wide range of communication acts, such as small talk, puns, riddles, and jokes, as part of phatic communion or phatic communication, further broadening the concept (Cook 2000; Žegarac and Clark 1999).

Going beyond verbal communication, Laver (1975) noted the presence of paralinguistic factors, such as gestures and facial expressions, which contribute to phatic communion. More recently, computer-mediated communication has resulted in creative methods of phatic communication, including the widespread use of textual paralanguage (e.g., emoji, repetitious

punctuation), which is used to express the social gestures that these channels lack (Luangrath, Peck, and Barger 2017). For example, most instant messaging platforms offer various emoji, stickers, and image options; Facebook allows users to "poke" each other, and Zoom users can send clapping hands and thumbs up emoji.

In terms of communication channels, phatic communication occurs in both face-to-face (Coupland et al. 1992; Laver, 1975) and mediated communication, including telephone conversations (Cheepen 2014) and various computer-mediated technologies (Kulkarni 2014; Miller 2008; Wang, Tucker, and Rihll 2011), with channel-specific norms (e.g., salutations and sign-offs in letters; Malinowski 1923). Users of computer-mediated communication have been shown to engage in phatic communication to create social connections in blogs (Luzón 2011), instant messaging (Kulkarni 2014; Yus 2017), and social media (Radovanovic and Ragnedda 2012). Social media, in particular, offers dedicated spaces for social interaction and bonding, which naturally leads to high volumes of phatic messages (Miller 2008; Radovanovic and Ragnedda 2012; Yus 2017).

Today, the terms "phatic communion" and "phatic communication" are often used interchangeably, as phatic communion inevitably occurs through communication, which is the process of sending and receiving messages (Carey 2008). This is consistent with Malinowski's original conceptualization of phatic communion, which involves the process of communication (i.e., "exchanges of words") and its outcome in terms of "ties of union." Thus, I define phatic communication as a type of communication that creates an atmosphere of sociability. In its simplest form, the phatic communication process involves senders who produce and send messages with intentions to be sociable, and receivers who receive and interpret these messages for their degree of sociability. It can also be inferred from prior research that the concept of

phatic communication should translate well from offline to online communication, with channel specific differences.

The literature suggests that phatic communication involves messages that contain a specific type of language, which I term phatic language. Based on the synthesis of prior research, I organize phatic language into phatic content and phatic style, similar to the distinction made between content words and style words (Tausczik and Pennebaker, 2010). Phatic content refers to the common expressions and topics of phatic communication (e.g., greetings, commenting on the weather); it is about *what* is being communicated. Research on phatic communication has been centred around this concept of phatic content since the days of Malinowski (1923), Jakobson (1960), and Laver (1975). Phatic style refers to the way content is delivered with an intention to enhance its sociability, using various narrative techniques (e.g., diction, figures of speech); it is about *how* it is communicated. Although the concept of phatic style has not received as much attention, Coupland and colleagues (1992) and Žegarac and Clark (1999) have alluded to this concept. The presence and absence, and the degree of phatic content and style, determine the potential phaticity (i.e., the quality of being phatic) of a message. Next, I elaborate on the typology of phatic language.

Typology of Phatic Language

Phatic language consists of phatic content and phatic style. Based on its functions, I further categorize phatic content into channel managing, solidarity signaling, and space filling. Table 1 summarizes the proposed typology of phatic language.

Table 1. Typology of Phatic Language.

Phatic content		
Channel managing	*Solidarity signaling*	*Space filling*
· Greetings · Parting tokens · Backchannels	· Agreeing · Commiserating · Sympathizing · Complimenting · Congratulating · Thanking · Encouraging · Well-wishing	· Small talk · Off-topic, off-task social sharing · Inquiries about health · Remarks about obvious contexts · Comments on the trivial, mundane matters of everyday life · Irrelevant jokes

Phatic style	
· Diction · Syntax	· Figures of speech · Textual paralanguage

Phatic Content

Phatic content refers to the common expressions and topics that are intended to create an atmosphere of sociability. While all phatic content shares this primary function of expressing sociability, a synthesis of the literature reveals its three secondary functions: channel managing, solidarity signaling, and space filling.

Channel Managing

The first type of phatic content serves the secondary function of establishing (i.e., greetings), ending (i.e., parting tokens), or maintaining the communication channel (i.e., backchannels). Greetings (e.g., “hi,” “good morning,” “how are you”) are common expressions

that signal and ease the transition into communication, without which the verbal exchange may seem abrupt or blunt (Jakobson 1960; Laver 1975). Similarly, parting tokens or closings (e.g., "bye," "see you later," "take care") are expressions that signal and ease the transition out of communication in a gentle, friendly manner (Jakobson 1960; Laver 1975). Finally, backchannels refer to short listening noises (e.g., "uh-huh," "hmm," "yeah"), evaluative remarks (e.g., "cool," "nice"), and expressives (e.g., "wow," "oh," "no") that signal the receiver's attention and engagement to the sender during a communication episode, thus keeping the channel alive and open (Ädel 2011; Jakobson 1960; Kulkarni 2014; Radovanovic and Ragnedda 2012).

Solidarity Signaling

Another type of phatic content appeals to the sender and receiver's sense of similarity and common group membership by expressing shared opinions, feelings, or values (Goffman 1967). This type of phatic content conveys the sender's positive evaluation and approval of the receiver by being supportive and empathetic (Wolfson and Manes 1980). This is consistent with some of the antecedents of rapport between customers and employees, which have been identified as common grounding and showing empathy (Gremler and Gwinner 2008; Macintosh 2009). Some of the methods of solidarity signaling include agreeing, commiserating, complimenting, congratulating, encouraging, sympathizing, thanking, and well-wishing (Boyle 2000; Coupland et al. 1992; Kampf 2016; Laver 1975; Wolfson and Manes 1980), which typically involve appropriate and commonly used expressions (e.g., "I hear you," "no way," "congrats," "good luck").

Space Filling

The last type of phatic content serves the function of avoiding uncomfortable silence, which is resolved through small talk and social sharing that is off-topic or off-task (Ädel 2011; Coupland et al. 1992; Derks, Fischer, and Bos 2008; Laver 1975; Radovanovic and Ragnedda 2012). Although space filling phatic content sometimes lacks common expressions, especially compared to channel managing and solidarity signaling phatic content, it is centred around a few common topics, such as inquiries about health and remarks about obvious contexts such as weather, time, and circumstances (Ädel 2011; Coupland et al. 1992; Maíz-Arévalo 2017; Malinowski 1923). The sender of the message may also comment on the trivial, mundane matters of everyday life such as leisure and food (Malinowski 1923; Radovanovic and Ragnedda 2012), or tell jokes that are irrelevant to the current task or context (Maíz-Arévalo 2017).

Phatic Style

The other component of phatic language is phatic style, that is, how the message is constructed or delivered. Prior research in diverse topics alludes to the presence and use of phatic style. For example, a positive politeness strategy involves using in-group language, exaggerating approval and sympathy, intensifying interest, and using humour (Brown and Levinson 1987). Also, patient-practitioner interactions with sociability goals rather than transactional goals have been shown to involve humorous, playful verbal exchanges (Ragan 1990). Similarly, some of the rapport-building behaviours that Gremler and Gwinner (2008) identified are connecting by using

humour and being friendly and pleasant, which is consistent with the intentions of phatic language.

Phatic style creates an additional layer of meaning, over and above phatic or transactional content, through the feelings that the receiver gets when interpreting the message. For example, two messages may contain the same transactional content, but, depending on the manner of its expression, one may be perceived as neutral, stoic, or formal, while the other may seem more friendly (e.g., “Hi. Please visit our store this weekend.” vs. “Hey! Why not come by our store this weekend?”). Clearly, certain interpretations are more conducive to phatic communication. For example, using casual expressions (e.g., using slang) and incorporating emoji into the message can create fun, informal, and friendly feelings (Biber 1991; Danesi 2016; Fraley and Aron 2004; Kim and Gupta 2012; Radovanovic and Ragnedda 2012). Also, being playful or humorous eases tension and makes the communication channel more inviting and approachable (Eggins and Slade 2005; Gorham and Christophel 1990; North 2007; Warren, Barsky, and Mcgraw 2018). The use of emotion-laden words also helps convey excitement and enthusiasm (Schindler and Bickart 2012). Phatic style attempts to take advantage of such interpretations by either transferring the sender’s positive emotions (e.g., enthusiasm, excitement, joy) to the receiver in a process similar to emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1993; Smith and Rose 2020), or invoking positive emotional reactions or responses from within the receiver by using fun or playful language (Li, Chan, and Kim 2019; Warren et al. 2018).

In terms of how phatic style is deployed, it involves producing messages using various narrative techniques. These techniques include, but are not limited to:

- diction (i.e., word choice; e.g., colloquial, slang, more arousing words [e.g., like vs. love]);

- syntax (i.e., sentence structure; e.g., long, short, fragmented);
- figures of speech (e.g., hyperbole, metaphor, pun); and
- textual paralanguage (e.g., emoji [], capitalization [LOOK], exclamation marks [!!!]).

As a special note on textual paralanguage, it is a unique feature of written communication and is the dominant form of paralanguage used in the focal context of this paper, social media. For example, brands have been shown to use emoji to depict an object, sport, or place, and to convey emotions (e.g., humour, anger, happiness; Davis et al. 2019). However, even when they convey a concrete meaning (e.g.,  , which depicts a hamburger), the mere act of using the emoji of a hamburger conveys an additional layer of meaning that is phatic, compared to simply using the word "hamburger."

Conceptual Framework of Phatic Brand Communication

Brand communication involves the process of sending and receiving brand messages; brands produce and send messages to consumers, and consumers receive and interpret those messages. Building on my earlier definition of phatic communication, phatic *brand* communication is a type of brand communication that creates an atmosphere of sociability with consumers through sending and receiving brand messages that contain phatic content and/or style.

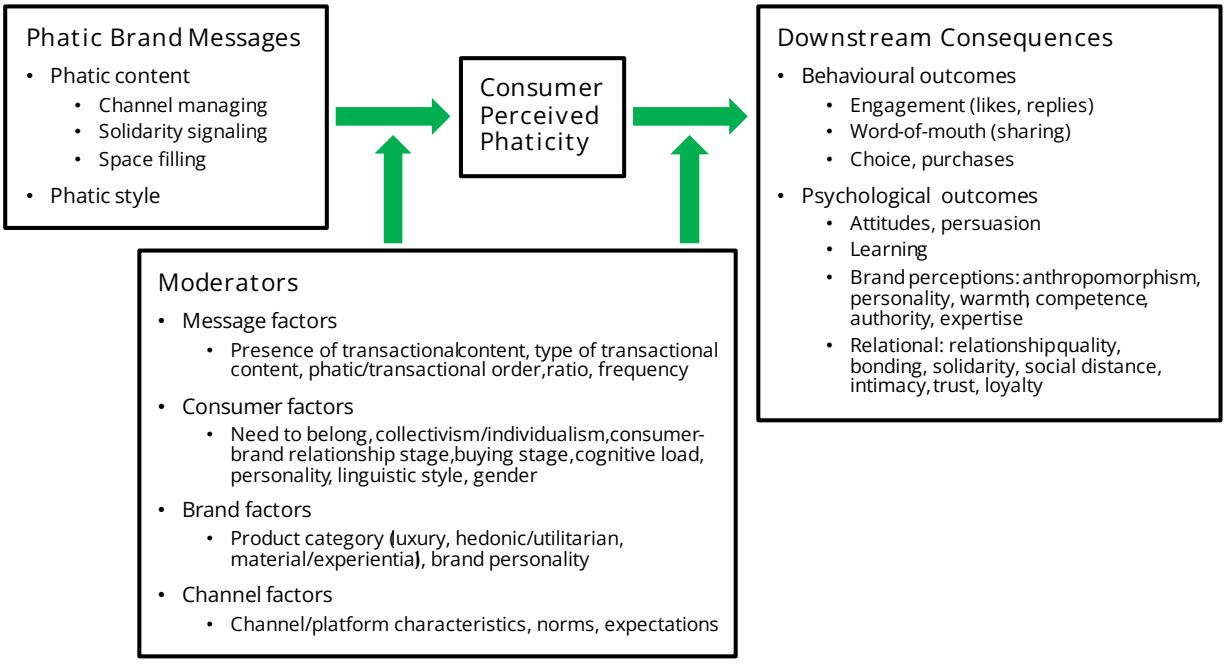
Brand messages may contain components that are phatic as well as transactional. This is analogous to various dual components of language or discourse that have been identified in the literature. Language can be used as an instrument of reflection versus a mode of action (Malinowski 1923), an informative versus a social type of discourse (Coupland et al. 1992), and

to give information versus to do something social (Tracy and Naughton 2014). Similarly, the phatic component of a message is composed of phatic language that is sociability oriented, and the transactional component contains substantive information about brands (e.g., informing, persuading, reminding) that is being conveyed to consumers. Transactional content is discussed in more detail as part of one of the moderating factors.

The rapid adoption of social media by consumers has attracted substantial interest from brands because of the opportunity this space provides for brand communication. For example, some early social media adopter brands like Starbucks have utilized social media as a tool to communicate practical and transactional content, such as special offers and discounts, to attract consumers to engage with them on social media (Deighton and Kornfeld 2011). Others, such as Coca-Cola, have achieved success on Facebook by inviting consumers to share frivolous and fun content, such as creating Coca-Cola and Mentos rockets (Deighton and Kornfeld 2011). This latter type of social media approach has provided brands with the opportunity to engage with their audience at a more personal, relational level (Voorveld 2019). Although the use of informative or transactional messages on consumer outcomes is relatively well researched (Jalali and Papatla 2019), the same is not true for what brand communication with relational goals on social media looks like, and how it is related to consumer outcomes, which the present research addresses.

Figure 1 presents the overall framework of phatic brand communication. First, brands produce messages using phatic language (i.e., phatic content and phatic style). These messages are then interpreted by consumers for their degree of perceived phaticity, which in turn has various behavioural and psychological downstream consequences. Also, the degree of consumer perceived phaticity is moderated by factors related to message, consumer, brand, and channel. In

Figure 1. Framework of Phatic Brand Communication.



the following sections, I elaborate on each component of the framework, and make propositions for relationships between components with clear directional predictions.

Note that phatic brand communication may occur through any brand communication channels, and the use of phatic language should translate well from offline to online communication. However, I focus on social media because this channel is most conducive to and most used for phatic brand communication.

Phatic Brand Messages: Production Using Phatic Language

The starting point of phatic brand communication is when brands produce messages using phatic language with an intention to create an atmosphere of sociability with consumers

through communication. Below I discuss the prevalence, frequency, and usage of the different types of phatic content and phatic style in brand messages on social media, and their potential implications.

Using Phatic Content

Channel managing. Social media assumes that the communication channel is always available and open, unlike in traditional channels (e.g., face-to-face, telephone, and television). As such, the boundaries for the beginning and ending of communication episodes are often not clearly defined. Consequently, greetings and parting tokens on social media may be unnecessary or even inappropriate. Thus, while brands may sometimes address their audience (i.e., consumers) in conjunction with conventional greetings to signal the beginning of a new communication episode (Rourke et al. 2007; Kulkarni 2014), greetings and parting tokens in general are likely to be used infrequently because, essentially, brands are always "on." In contrast, backchannels (e.g., "really?" "wow!") may be especially useful in the social media context because they maintain the presence of the communicators, although their use only makes sense, by definition, when responding to someone else's message. Therefore, brands are likely to make a frequent use of backchannels when responding to consumers' messages and in customer service exchanges to show that they are present and paying attention to their consumers (Ädel 2011; Kulkarni 2014; Radovanovic and Ragnedda 2012).

Solidarity signaling. Solidarity signaling phatic content is commonly observed in traditional communication channels (e.g., seasonal greetings/well-wishes and thanking/showing

appreciation). The channel characteristics of social media—its low costs, conversational norms, and community-like nature—are likely to increase the volume, frequency, and variety of this type of phatic content. It may be worth investigating the various types of solidarity signaling phatic content. For example, given that some solidarity signals are positively valenced (e.g., complimenting, encouraging, and thanking), while others are negatively valenced (e.g., commiserating and sympathizing), there may be a difference in their usage and effectiveness.

Space filling. Space filling phatic content is particularly valued in synchronous communication channels (e.g., face-to-face and telephone) where it reduces any discomfort from silence while also signaling sociability. In contrast, it tends to be absent in asynchronous communication channels (e.g., television and radio) because there is a clear beginning and an ending of a communication episode with no silent space that requires to be filled. Although social media is typically an asynchronous channel (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), its unique characteristic of being always "on" necessitates space filling phatic content to fill in the gaps between communication episodes. In fact, the majority of the messages generated by typical social media users are space filling phatic content to maintain their social presence and to signal sociability to their social network (Radovanovic and Ragnedda 2012). Brands are likely to mimic this behaviour in their social media communication, especially between their substantive messages about products and promotions, to remain relevant and appear present and sociable to consumers.

Using Phatic Style

In addition to phatic content, brand messages may contain phatic style. Brands have already been using phatic style in their communication in channels such as TV and radio (e.g., advertising) to make the content more engaging, as well as more inviting and approachable. The use of phatic style is likely to be further pronounced on social media, where informal, friendly language is the norm, and humour is prevalent because social media itself is often consumed as a form of entertainment (Schroeder 2016). In addition, social media platforms allow brands to take advantage of textual paralanguage to augment their messages, thus encouraging the incorporation of phatic style.

Consumer Perceived Phaticity: Interpretation of Phatic Brand Messages

When consumers receive brand messages, they interpret them to extract various meanings, including the extent to which the messages are phatic. In successful phatic communication, brand messages containing phatic language create an atmosphere of sociability as they are interpreted by consumers. Thus, in general, brand messages containing more elements or greater intensity of phatic language is likely to increase consumer perceived phaticity.

P1: Phatic brand messages increase consumer perceived phaticity.

Outcomes of Perceived Phaticity

I now outline several potential downstream consequences of perceived phaticity. A few selected behavioural and psychological outcomes of interest are discussed below.

Behavioural Outcomes

I first focus on the behavioural outcomes in terms of consumer engagement, word-of-mouth, and choice.

On social media, one of the most observable and desirable outcomes of perceived phaticity is increased consumer engagement, as expressed in terms of more consumer actions such as likes and replies in response to brand messages. Perceived phaticity with its resulting atmosphere of sociability is an invitation for engagement as it keeps the communication channel open and friendly, reduces social distance, and conveys goodwill (Gorham and Christophel 1990; North 2007). It also eases the discomfort of an interaction by making the sender of the message seem more genuine to the receiver (Ylänne-McEwen 2004). Empirical evidence supports this; social media posts with more emoji, a type of phatic language, increased engagement in terms of more likes (Hu et al. 2017), and more positive content led to greater consumer engagement (Berger and Milkman 2012).

P2: Perceived phaticity increases engagement in terms of likes and replies.

Perceived phaticity also influences the sharing behaviour of consumers, which may be considered a type of engagement, but with a specific and important function of spreading word-of-mouth. Phatic communication has been shown to encourage people to tell and share more details about themselves (Coupland 2014). Relatedly, rapport in customer-employee relations, which also occurs as a result of phatic communication, has been shown to be positively related to

word-of-mouth in settings such as banks and dental offices (Gremler and Gwinner 2000; Macintosh 2009). Further, the use of rhetorical styles such as alliteration and repetitions has been shown to enhance consumer message sharing (Villarroel Ordenes et al. 2019), and Hu and colleagues' (2017) work shows that social media posts with more emoji also lead to more sharing.

P3: Perceived phaticity increases word-of-mouth in terms of message sharing.

One of the most tangible behavioural outcomes is choice or purchase behaviour of consumers. Although social media is a context that is typically a step removed from actual purchase, there is evidence that choice may eventually be affected by perceived phaticity. In the traditional in-person sales context, research has shown that salespeople using phatic communication perform best (Dion and Notarantonio 1973). For instance, salespeople with a communication style that was interaction oriented (i.e., phatic), even at the expense of ignoring the task at hand (i.e., selling), performed better than those with other communication styles, especially when both the salesperson and the customer had the same phatic communication style (Williams and Spiro 1985). Rapport has also been shown to increase purchases (DeWitt and Brady 2003; Gremler and Gwinner 2000). These offline effects can be potentially extended to online, such that perceived phaticity on social media could have a positive effect on consumer choice and purchase behaviours.

P4: Perceived phaticity increases choice and purchases.

Psychological Outcomes

The psychological outcomes of perceived phaticity can be summarized in terms of attitudes, learning, brand perceptions, and perceived relationship quality.

When asked about the kind of behaviours that consumers wanted to see from brands on social media, 83% said that they wanted to see friendly behaviours (Sprout Social 2017), which is consistent with phatic communication. In addition, rapport between customers and employees has been shown to lead to greater customer satisfaction (DeWitt and Brady 2003; Gremler and Gwinner 2000; Macintosh 2009), hence leading to more positive attitudes. Given this, consumers are likely to have an overall positive assessment of brands engaging in phatic brand communication.

P5: Perceived phaticity increases positive attitudes toward the brand.

When consumers are exposed to brand messages, persuasion knowledge, which refers to their beliefs about marketers' persuasion tactics, may become activated (Friestad and Wright 1994). However, phatic communication can disguise underlying business motives (Coupland, and Robinson 1992), and as a result, business transactions may become "pure persuasion" (Burke 1969) when persuasion occurs with no substantive argument or information. This suggests that perceived phaticity should be able to turn off or decrease activation of consumer persuasion knowledge.

P6: Perceived phaticity decreases activation of persuasion knowledge.

Another potential outcome of perceived phaticity is in learning. Play and humour, which are part of what makes messages phatic, have been shown to help with learning and memory (Christophel 1990). Thus, perceived phaticity may facilitate consumer learning of the message content, for instance, in informative messages. However, perceived phaticity may also hinder information transmission or its retention if the sociability function of the message is competing with the rest of the message content for consumers' attention or mental capacity. Overall, the effect of perceived phaticity on learning is unclear since it likely depends on additional factors.

In terms of brand perceptions, a potential outcome of perceived phaticity is increased anthropomorphism of brands, which influences how consumers perceive brands as human (Yang, Aggarwal, and McGill 2020). Luangrath and colleagues (2017) speculated that textual paralanguage may increase anthropomorphism, humanization, or realism of brands. A similar prediction can be advanced for perceived phaticity because not only can phatic language incorporate the use of textual paralanguage, but it is also likely to give more human voice and personalities to brands.

P7: Perceived phaticity increases anthropomorphism of the brand.

Warmth and competence are the two most fundamental dimensions of person and brand perceptions (Abele and Wojciszke 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007). Perceived phaticity is likely to influence consumer perceptions of brand warmth because a greater sense of sociability should promote perceived warmth (Burgess 1964; Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012; Li et al. 2019). The effect of perceived phaticity on competence is less clear. On the one hand, it is

possible that consumers make negative inferences about the competence of brands based on their increased warmth perception because of the trade-off effect between warmth and competence (Godfrey, Jones, and Lord 1986; Holoien and Fiske 2013). For example, while being playful and informal may be perceived as more friendly and approachable, it may reduce authority and credibility. On the other hand, a communicator who skillfully and appropriately uses phatic language may be perceived as a competent communicator.

P8: Perceived phaticity increases perceived warmth of the brand.

Since the main function of phatic communication is relational, various downstream consequences of perceived phaticity can be expected in terms of relationship quality and bonding. For example, Burnard (2003) observed that phatic communication was helpful in nurse-patient relationship quality. At the most basic level, phatic communication reduces uncertainty and discomfort during a social interaction. It is a fundamental interactive mechanism for creating and maintaining social cohesion and amicability by easing tension and reducing perceived differences (Eggins and Slade 2005). Thus, it contributes to feelings of agreement, collegiality, and solidarity between communicators (Coupland et al. 1992).

Phatic communication also decreases the social distance between communicators by being more informal and casual (Christophel 1990; Eggins and Slade 2005). This feeling of closeness leads to better relationship quality between consumers and brands that is less transaction-based, but more based on intimacy and trust (Fournier 1998; Rubin 2002). Gremler and Gwinner (2000) and Macintosh (2009) similarly found that rapport built through phatic communication leads to several positive outcomes, such as trust and loyalty.

P9: Perceived phaticity increases consumer-brand relationship quality.

Moderators

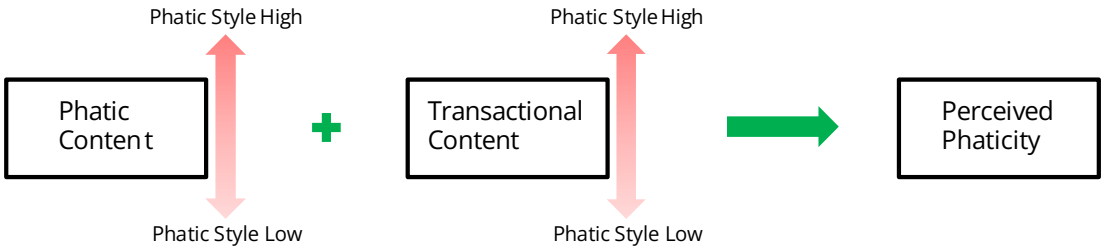
Various moderating factors that influence the effect of phatic brand messages on consumer perceived phaticity are organized into the following four categories: message, consumer, brand, and channel factors. They will have a flow-through impact on the outcomes discussed above, depending on whether they increase or decrease perceived phaticity.

Message Factors

Brand messages often contain transactional content that focuses on the transmission of ideas, knowledge, or information about brands and their products. Message factors refer to the ways in which phatic language is combined with such transactional content, as shown in figure 2, which affects how messages are perceived. Some of the message factors include the presence or absence of phatic and transactional components, their order of appearance, ratios, and frequency.

Note that phatic content by itself can be a complete message (e.g., “Happy long weekend.”), or it can be combined with phatic style (e.g., “Happy long weekend 😍”) or transactional content (e.g., “Happy long weekend. Buy one get one free this weekend.”). Phatic content by itself or in conjunction with transactional content can create a potentially phatic message, and phatic style can further enhance the potential phaticity of the message. However,

Figure 2. Combining Phatic and Transactional Components.



phatic style cannot be a message by itself because it does not have inherent content[1]. It requires content to be applied to, whether it is phatic or transactional, because phatic style is the way content is expressed. Once combined with content, phatic style enhances its phaticity.

Transactional content is not inherently phatic by itself. In an attempt to create an atmosphere of sociability, brands may combine transactional content with phatic language, that is, phatic content and phatic style, when producing brand messages. In addition to the example in the previous paragraph of combining phatic content with transactional content, a message with transactional content only can become potentially phatic by delivering it in phatic style. For example, a message, "Buy one get one free this weekend," which is not likely to be high on perceived phaticity, becomes more phatic when delivered using phatic style: "Buy one get one free this weekend!!!!!!" or "Buy one get one free this weekend 😍."

Previous research has shown that transactional content has a significantly negative effect on sharing of videos on social media (Tellis et al. 2019). Also, when messages contain both phatic and transactional components, it is likely that the phatic effect of the messages become

[1] Some types of textual paralanguage are exceptions (e.g., emoji, emoticon) because they have both transactional content (which replaces the actual word that the image represents) and phatic style.

diluted. Finally, the transactional content is likely to activate consumers' persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994), thus making consumers become more skeptical of the motives behind the use of phatic language.

P10: The presence of transactional content in phatic brand messages decreases the effect of phatic brand messages on perceived phaticity.

In a message that contains both phatic and transactional components, the types of transactional content may influence how consumers perceive the overall phaticity of the message. One common way of categorizing transactional content is by its objectives: informing, persuading, and reminding the audience (Armstrong and Kotler 2017). Previous research shows that the intentions of brand messages (e.g., assertive, expressive, directive) affect consumers' message sharing behaviour (Villarroel Ordenes et al. 2019). Thus, it is possible that the types of transactional content, with their differing objectives, may interact with the phatic component to influence how consumers perceive the brand message. For example, consumers may be more receptive to the brand's use of phatic language as part of an informative message, whereas they may show more reactance to it in a persuasive message. This topic requires further investigation, and will be explored in chapter 4.

Another message factor is the order of phatic and transactional content. On the one hand, messages with phatic content followed by transactional content could lead to greater perceived phaticity than with transactional content followed by phatic content because opening a communication episode with phatic content may lower the guard of consumers, that is, less likely to activate persuasion knowledge. A study in fact found that early (vs. late) placement of brand

name (i.e., transactional content) hurt sharing of videos on social media (Tellis et al. 2019). On the other hand, the reverse may be true if ending on a positive, social note with phatic content facilitates greater perceived phaticity from the overall communication episode. This topic will be also explored further in chapter 4.

The ratio and frequency of phatic content versus transactional content may also influence perceived phaticity. Previous research suggests that when consumers are annoyed by multiple phatic brand messages, they show reactance and respond negatively to additional phatic brand messages (Fournier, Dobscha, and Mick 1998). Clearly, there is likely to be diminishing returns of phatic content, as well as an optimal quantity, in relation to transactional content, and I will explore this possibility in chapter 4.

Consumer Factors

Consumers are the target audience of brand messages. Various consumer-related factors may contribute to differences in how consumers interpret phatic brand messages and respond to perceived phaticity (i.e., in terms of outcomes). Some of these consumer factors include the need to belong, cultural orientation, consumer-brand relationship stage, buying stage, cognitive load, personality, linguistic style, and gender.

At the fundamental level, Malinowski (1923) argued that phatic communion testifies to human's deep-rooted need for fellowship. Scheff (1990) similarly suggested that ritualized communication, such as shared common expressions and topics of phatic language, mitigates bond anxiety. If phatic communication is a manifestation of the fundamental human need to belong (Baumeister and Leary 1995), consumers with a high need to belong are more likely to

have a heightened sensitivity to phatic brand messages, and display stronger responses to them in terms of perceived phaticity. This may hint at one of the potential psychological processes of phatic brand communication.

P11: A higher (lower) need to belong of consumers increases (decreases) the effect of phatic brand messages on perceived phaticity.

At the broad, cultural level, Henkin (2019) argued that in collectivistic societies, the phatic function of a message may be more important than its informative value because establishing and strengthening interpersonal bonds take priority. If so, people in collectivistic societies may be more sensitive and attuned to phatic communication in general. Thus, they may perceive phaticity more easily from phatic brand messages than people in individualistic societies. Alternatively, it is also possible that people in individualistic societies are more responsive to phatic brand messages because such messages stand out more to them, whereas for those in collectivistic societies, the absence of phatic language may be more noticeable because phatic communication is so fundamental and prevalent.

P12: Cultural orientation in terms of individualism and collectivism influences the effect of phatic brand messages on perceived phaticity, such that individualism (collectivism) increases sensitivity to the presence (absence) of phatic language.

Consumer-brand relationship stage is another factor that may influence phatic brand communication. Kulkarni (2014) observed that communication involving phatic style was more

common at two extremes of social relations, that is, between people who were very close or between those who were very distant. Kulkarni argued that those who were distant were using it as a strategy for starting a conversation. A similar pattern of moderation can be predicted where, between brands and their very close (i.e., loyal) consumers, consumers are likely to respond more strongly to phatic brand messages because they are more open to interacting with their favourite brands (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006). This is in line with the finding that consumers prefer marketing messages containing language that is consistent with the relationship (Sela, Wheeler, and Sarial-Abi 2012). In addition, consumers who are very distant from a brand (i.e., new or potential customers) may also respond strongly to phatic brand messages as they construe it as a casual excuse to engage with the brand. In contrast, consumers who are in the middle of the consumer-brand relationship stage may be least likely to be responsive to it.

P13: Consumer-brand relationship stage influences the effect of phatic brand messages on perceived phaticity, such that very close and very distant relationships (those in the middle) increase (decrease) the effect.

Yet another factor that consumers may differ in is their current buying stage (Lee et al. 2018), which may influence how they perceive phatic brand messages. For example, some exploratory stages may favour a deliberative mindset (Gollwitzer 2012), which will render consumers to be more ready to engage in relational communication, thus more receptive to phatic brand messages. However, when consumers are in an implemental mindset, they may not be responsive to phatic brand messages because they are actively seeking transactional content.

In fact, phatic brand messages may backfire in this case if they are deemed annoying and distracting to consumers' goals.

P14: Consumers' buying stage influences the effect of phatic brand messages on perceived phaticity, such that the stages that are conducive to a deliberative (an implemental) mindset increase (decrease) the effect.

Cognitive load (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Kahneman 2003) of consumers when processing phatic brand messages may influence how they perceive phaticity. Written communication, such as social media, involves more effortful processing of the messages, and as a result, phatic brand messages are likely to activate consumers' persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994). If consumers become acutely suspicious of the brands' motivations for phatic brand messages, they may not perceive much phaticity from those messages, and the phatic messages will fail to create the atmosphere of sociability. However, if consumers are cognitively busy, they may not use as much effort in processing phatic brand messages, and as such, they will actually perceive those messages as being more phatic.

P15: Consumers' cognitive load influences the effect of phatic brand messages on perceived phaticity, such that higher (lower) cognitive load increases (decreases) the effect.

Consumer personalities and linguistic style, which is a display of personality, may influence how phatic brand messages are perceived. For example, Matz and colleagues (2017)

and Moon (2002) found that people responded more positively to messages that matched their personalities, which implies that consumers who are more sociable may be more likely to perceive phaticity in response to phatic brand messages. Similarly, linguistic style match has been shown to increase conversation rates among consumers (Ludwig et al. 2013).

P16: Consumer-brand personality and linguistic style match influences the effect of phatic brand messages on perceived phaticity, such that a higher (lower) match increases (decreases) the effect.

Gender differences in language norms may play a moderating role. A study of email content among friends revealed that emails from women contained a higher incidence of features associated with the maintenance of rapport and intimacy than those from men (Colley and Todd 2002). If this finding implies that women tend to be more attuned to phatic communication than men, gender may influence the interpretation of brand messages.

P17: Gender influences the effect of phatic brand messages on perceived phaticity, such that an audience of women (men) increases (decreases) the effect.

Brand Factors

Brands are the initiators of phatic brand communication, and the factors related to them may affect how phatic brand messages are perceived by consumers. Broadly speaking, brand factors can be considered to be a matter of message-brand fit in terms of various brand

characteristics, such as product category (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian, luxury vs. non-luxury) and brand personality.

Ample prior research suggests that message fit plays a role in communication. In a study where the fit between language and product category was represented by conversational norms, product reviews containing more figurative language led to more favourable attitudes in hedonic, but not utilitarian, consumption contexts (Kronrod and Danziger 2013). Further, successfully realizing intended brand personality requires credible, fitting brand messages (Malär et al. 2012), thus it is also likely that the message fit with brand personality would have similar consequences for perceived phaticity.

In another study, Gurzki, Schlatter, and Woisetschläger (2019) concluded after reviewing print advertising of luxury and non-luxury brands that one of the distinguishing factors of luxury brand communication was increasing psychological and social distance from consumers. If their finding represents consumers' expectations of how luxury and non-luxury brands should communicate, this could affect perceived phaticity, such that when a luxury brand sends a phatic brand message, its effect should be weaker than when a non-luxury brand does the same because phatic language is an inconsistent fit with a luxury brand. It is also possible that phatic brand communication may have detrimental downstream consequences for luxury brands, whether it is successful or not. If successful, it will decrease the social distance between consumers and the luxury brands, which may decrease perceptions of exclusivity and status. On the other hand, unsuccessful phatic brand communication may threaten perceived competency and expertise of the luxury brands.

Mandler's (1982) theory on schema congruity (i.e., fit) suggests that when ideas and their extensions are consistent or mildly inconsistent, it leads to favourable assessments, whereas wild

inconsistencies lead to unfavourable assessments. This role of congruity or fit has been shown in product evaluations (Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989) and new product acceptance (Jhang, Grant, and Campbell 2012). With phatic brand communication, I expect similar patterns: a consistent or mildly inconsistent message-brand fit to be conducive to phatic brand communication, while a highly inconsistent fit to be detrimental to it.

P18: Message-brand fit influences the effect of phatic brand messages on perceived phaticity, such that a consistent or mildly inconsistent (highly inconsistent) message-channel fit increases (decreases) the effect.

Channel Factors

Communication must take place through communication channels. Channel factors refer to channel- and platform-specific characteristics, norms, and expectations, which would influence how consumers respond to phatic brand messages. As in brand factors, the most fundamental aspect of channel factors is the fit: in this case, message-channel/platform fit.

As an example of platform-specific expectations, a survey of social media users showed that 83% of them would like to see brand personality on Facebook, while only 33% of them would on LinkedIn (Sprout Social 2017). In another study, Reich and Pittman (2020) found that the same advertisement was received differently by consumers across different social media platforms due to perceived differences in terms of platform intimacy. Specifically, intimate (which they defined as interpersonal-focused) appeals were more effective on intimate platforms (e.g., Instagram) in increasing engagement, whereas non-intimate (which they defined as self-

focused) appeals were more effective on non-intimate platforms (e.g., LinkedIn). Similarly, in phatic brand communication, consumers may find phatic brand messages on Facebook more appropriate and thus perceive the messages as more phatic; however, on LinkedIn, they may find the same messages as less appropriate and do not perceive them as phatic.

P19: Message-channel fit influences the effect of phatic brand messages on perceived phaticity, such that a consistent or mildly inconsistent (highly inconsistent) message-channel fit increases (decreases) the effect.

CHAPTER 3: TWITTER STUDY

In this chapter, I test the proposed typology and the conceptual framework in a field study using social media data from Twitter. Perceived phaticity is coded from the scraped data. There are three main objectives to this study. The first objective is to code and categorize brand messages on Twitter to map them on the proposed typology of phatic language. This should reveal the presence and prevalence of various types of phatic content and style in brand messages on Twitter, and test whether the use of phatic language indeed leads to increased perceived phaticity. The second objective is to examine the effect of phatic brand communication on consumer engagement. The proposed framework suggests that perceived phaticity should have a positive effect on consumer engagement as measured by the Twitter engagement metrics (i.e., likes, replies, retweets). The third objective is to test one of the moderators from the framework which affects the effectiveness of phatic brand communication. Specifically, I examine whether the presence of transactional content within a phatic brand message has a negative effect.

Methods

Data Collection

I used Twitter to investigate phatic brand communication on social media because it is currently one of the most dominant social media platforms, with more than 330 million active monthly users, and is used by consumers and brands alike (Statista 2019). I used Twitter's

publicly available application programming interface (API) to collect a sample of brand Tweets, including the number of likes, replies, and retweets, as well as the date and time of each post.

28 brands representing 10 industry sectors were selected from Interbrand's most valuable brands (Interbrand 2020) and from the lists of most popular brands on Twitter (Ramakrishnan 2019; Social Blade 2021). Table 2 shows the complete list of brands, with the total number of followers and Tweets posted by brands at the time of analysis.

11,443 brand Tweets were scraped, covering a 12-month period from December 1, 2018

Table 2. List of Brands.

Sector	Brand	Number of followers	Number of tweets
Airlines	American Airlines (@AmericanAir)	1.6M	2.2M
	Southwest Airlines (@SouthwestAir)	2.2M	898.2K
	JetBlue Airways (@JetBlue)	2M	589K
Automotive	Ford Motor Company (@Ford)	1.2M	43.4K
	Chevrolet (@chevrolet)	1.1M	39.3K
Beverages	Coca-Cola (@CocaCola)	3.3M	272K
	Pepsi (@pepsi)	3M	38.3K
	Red Bull (@redbull)	2M	95.8K
Financial services	Visa (@Visa)	378.2K	13.8K
Luxury	Louis Vuitton (@LouisVuitton)	7.5M	5,379
	gucci (@gucci)	5.8M	9,237
	Burberry (@Burberry)	8.4M	13.7K
Media	Disney (@Disney)	6.5M	15.9K
	Netflix US (@netflix)	6.9M	30.6K
Retail	Amazon.com (@amazon)	3.1M	31.6K
	Target (@Target)	2M	80.1K
	Whole Foods Market (@WholeFoods)	4.4M	253K
Sporting goods and apparel	Nike (@Nike)	8M	36.4K
	ZARA (@ZARA)	1.3M	38.6K
	H&M (@hm)	8.4M	13.3K
	adidas (@adidas)	3.7M	13.7K
Technology and electronics	Google (@Google)	21.6M	103.4K
	Microsoft (@Microsoft)	8.7M	16.5K
	Intel (@intel)	4.8M	14.8K
	Uber (@Uber)	1M	16.4K
	Facebook	13.4M	14.5K
Wireless providers	Verizon (@verizon)	1.7M	125.1K
	T-Mobile (@TMobile)	1.2M	492.9K

*Numbers as of October 2020

to November 30, 2019. All Tweets in the dataset are original posts, which means that the dataset does not include replies or retweets made by brands. Brand replies are excluded because they are not visible to a brand's entire audience. Brand retweets are also excluded, although they are visible to everyone, because the retweeted messages are not generated by the focal brand. In addition, Tweets generated by "Twitter for Advertisers" are excluded because they are targeted Tweets visible to specific accounts only. Tweets in languages other than English are also excluded from the dataset unless they are commonly understood phrases in another language, intended to be understood by most of the audience (e.g., "hola").

Variables and Measures

The variables created from the scraped data are organized by those that represent message (i.e., Tweet) characteristics, consumer engagement, and controls. Table 3 summarizes the list of variables and their characteristics.

Message Characteristics

Three paid research assistants coded the Tweets independently on several message characteristics. Each Tweet was assessed using a coding scheme designed to measure the degree of perceived phaticity, the presence of phatic content, playfulness, casualness, emotionality, and the presence of brand name or products in the message. In an iterative process, I explained the coding scheme and engaged in extensive coder training using test datasets. The coders discussed the results of the test cases. I reviewed discrepancies and clarified the definitions to minimize

Table 3. List of Variables.

Message characteristics	
Perceived phaticity	Manually rated on a 1-7 scale by coders
Phatic content	
Channel managing	
Greetings	Manually dummy coded by coders
Parting tokens	Manually dummy coded by coders
Backchannels	Manually dummy coded by coders
Solidarity signaling	
Agreeing	Manually dummy coded by coders
Complimenting	Manually dummy coded by coders
Congratulating	Manually dummy coded by coders
Encouraging	Manually dummy coded by coders
Sympathizing	Manually dummy coded by coders
Thanking	Manually dummy coded by coders
Well-wishing	Manually dummy coded by coders
Space filling	
Small talk	Manually dummy coded by coders
Trivial remarks	Manually dummy coded by coders
Phatic style	
Playful	Manually rated on a 1-7 scale by coders
Casual	Manually rated on a 1-7 scale by coders
Emotional	Manually rated on a 1-7 scale by coders
Emoji	Count extracted from data
Transactional content	Manually dummy coded by coders

Consumer engagement	
Likes	Count from Twitter API; log(x+1) transformed
Replies	Count from Twitter API; log(x+1) transformed
Retweets	Count from Twitter API; log(x+1) transformed

Controls	
Brand	Brand names from Twitter API; dummy coded
Hashtag	Extracted from data; dummy coded
Mention	Extracted from data; dummy coded
Link	Extracted from data; dummy coded
Image	Count from Twitter API; dummy coded
Video	Count from Twitter API; dummy coded
Number of characters	Count extracted from data
Weekend	Time of posting from Twitter API; dummy coded
Time	Time of posting from Twitter API; dummy coded

future discrepancies. At the conclusion of this process, I arrived at a final coding scheme that was then used to code the actual dataset of the study (see appendix A for the final coding scheme).

Perceived phaticity. Perceived phaticity was defined as the extent to which a Tweet creates an atmosphere of sociability. The coders rated perceived phaticity on a seven-point scale (from 1 = "not at all" to 7 = "very much"). The ratings of the three coders were averaged to create a single variable. Interrater reliability was calculated following Shrout and Fleiss's (1979) intraclass correlation coefficient (see appendix B for reliability coefficients of all manually coded variables).

Phatic content. The coders looked for the following types of phatic content: channel managing (greetings, parting tokens, backchannels), solidarity signaling (agreeing, complimenting, congratulating, encouraging, sympathizing, thanking, well-wishing), and space filling (small talk, remarks on obvious contexts). The presence of each type of phatic content was coded as a dummy variable. When there was disagreement, I used the majority opinion among the coders, that is, at least two coders agreed.

Phatic style. The extent to which a Tweet was playful, casual, and emotional was used as a proxy for the presence of phatic style. The coders rated each Tweet for its degree of playfulness, casualness, and emotionality on a seven-point scale (from 1 = "not at all" to 7 = "very much"). The ratings were averaged to create one type of phatic style variable.

Emoji was measured as another type of phatic style. The number of emoji, as classified by the Unicode emoji dataset, for each Tweet was extracted directly from the scraped Tweets.

Transactional content. The explicit mentioning of the brand name or products within a Tweet was used as a proxy for the presence of transactional content. The coders indicated their presence using a dummy variable. When there was disagreement, I used the majority opinion of at least two coders.

Consumer Engagement

Consumer engagement with brands on social media was measured using the like, reply, and retweet counts of each brand Tweet, which are frequently used as indicators of consumer engagement (Murdough 2009; Vargo 2016). Each engagement measure for each Tweet assumes its final value, or the maximum cumulative level achieved by that Tweet (Stephen, Sciandra, and Inman 2015). This is because Twitter displays the newest Tweets first as they occur in real time, and thus users are unlikely to be shown Tweets that are more than a week old (Twitter 2021). All Tweets in the dataset were downloaded more than a week after the observation window. The number of replies, retweets, and likes were log(x+1) transformed because the data are right-skewed and include zero values (Goldenberg and Gross 2020).

Control Variables

A series of control variables following extant social media research was included in the analysis because these factors could influence perceived phaticity and consumer engagement.

Brand factors. Following previous research (Davis et al. 2019; Kumar et al. 2016), I created dummy variables for each brand, with Google as a referent, to capture the account characteristics of each brand, such as the audience size (i.e., the number of followers), audience profiles, communication frequency, brand personality, and industry sector, to ensure that the results are not driven by these factors.

Message features. I added several controls for the presence of certain features of a Tweet. Hashtags (an alphanumeric string beginning with the # symbol), user mentions (an alphanumeric string beginning with the @ symbol), and website links have been shown to influence consumer engagement (Pancer and Poole 2016). In addition, prior research suggests that messages with rich media (i.e., images and videos) increase consumer engagement (De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang 2012; Villarroel Ordenes et al. 2019; Li and Xie 2020). I created dummy variables for the presence of hashtags, mentions, links, images, and videos.

Message length. I controlled for the Tweet's length (i.e., the number of characters) because prior research suggests that longer content is more likely to be shared online (Berger and Milkman 2012). At the same time, there is an argument for longer messages having lower engagement because they are inherently more complex, which decreases the ease with which the messages are read (Temnikova, Vieweg, and Castillo 2015).

Timing. Prior research identified the optimal timing for posting a Tweet to be on the weekend (Kanuri, Chen, and Sridhar 2018). To control for the possibility that the timing of Tweets (i.e., the days and times of posting) also influenced the attention they received, I included

two timing controls based on when the post went online: dummy variables for weekend versus weekday, and the time of posting in four-hour intervals.

Results

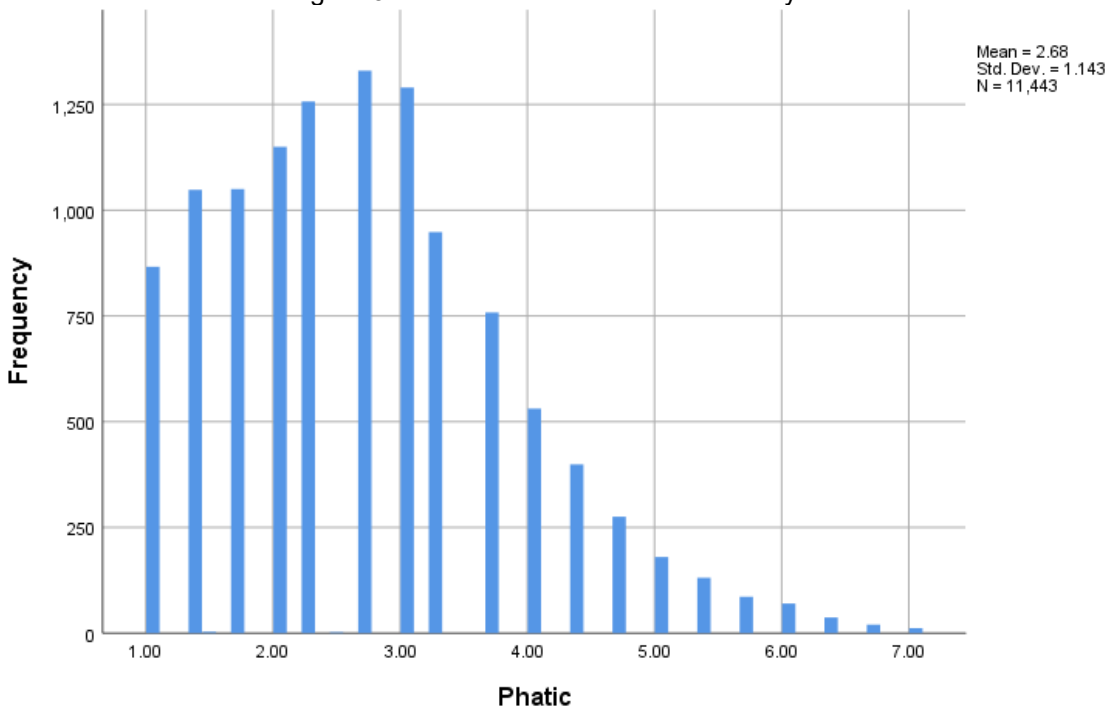
I first present the results of the analysis of a model for phatic language leading to perceived phaticity. Then I present a model predicting consumer engagement from perceived phaticity.

Perceived Phaticity

Figure 3 shows the distribution of perceived phaticity as rated by the coders. The mean perceived phaticity was 2.68 (SD = 1.14; n = 11,443), which was below the mid-point of the scale, and its distribution was right-skewed. This pattern of low perceived phaticity of brand Tweets was consistent with the theorizing in chapter 2 because brands are expected to engage in transactional communication, and thus inherently use less phatic language. It is also possible that brands may not be fully embracing and following the phatic linguistic culture of Twitter, and instead, they may be replicating how they communicate in traditional media. There is some evidence for this because some brands merely repeat the same messages on every channel and platform.

Overall, brands used one or more types of phatic content in 46.5% of their Tweets. The number of the encouraging type of phatic content was inflated because brands often used encouragements to promote themselves or their products (e.g., “just do it,” “never give up,”

Figure 3. Distribution of Perceived Phaticity.



"believe in yourself"), and it was difficult for the coders to distinguish between who or what was being encouraged. Excluding this anomaly (the percentage of Tweets containing phatic content except encouragement = 20.0%), space filling was the most common functional type of phatic content (10.7%). This is consistent with previous research which suggests that social media is most typically filled with trivial nonsense. More specifically, remarks on obvious contexts, such as pointing out special occasions like holidays, were most common (9.1%). This is probably because celebrating an occasion can be easily marketed along with new purchases, and also because this has been a common typic of brand communication in traditional as well as social media (Stephen et al. 2015). Table 4 is a summary of the basic descriptives of the types of phatic language, including the mean ratings of playfulness, casualness, and emotionality, and the mean number of emoji.

Table 4. Descriptives of Phatic Language.

Phatic content		
Secondary function	*Type*	*Number of Tweets (% of total Tweets)*
Channel managing		240 (2.1%)
	Greetings	188 (1.6%)
	Parting tokens	41 (.4%)
	Backchannels	20 (.2%)
Solidarity signaling		4,388 (38.3%)
	Agreeing	19 (.2%)
	Complimenting	583 (5.1%)
	Congratulating	135 (1.2%)
	Encouraging	3,508 (30.7%)
	Sympathizing	25 (.2%)
	Thanking	179 (1.6%)
	Well-wishing	206 (1.8%)
Space filling		1,220 (10.7%)
	Small talk	206 (1.8%)
	Trivial remarks	1,038 (9.1%)

Phatic style	
Type	*Mean*
Playful	M = 2.03 (SD = .83)
Casual	M = 2.75 (SD = .81)
Emotional	M = 2.55 (SD = .84)
Emoji	M = .33 (SD = 1.85)

A multiple linear regression was used to test if phatic content and phatic style predicted perceived phaticity. Image and video variables were not included as part of the control variables because they were not visible to the coders. Weekend and time variables were also not included because the coders were not being exposed to the Tweets in real time. The basic model structure is as follows:

$$
\begin{aligned}
&y(perceived\ phaticity) \\
&\quad = b_1(phatic\ content: channel\ managing) \\
&\quad + b_2(phatic\ content: solidarity\ signaling) \\
&\quad + b_3(phatic\ content: space\ filling) \\
&\quad + b_4(phatic\ style: playful, casual, emotional) \\
&\quad + b_5(phatic\ style: emoji\ count) \\
&\quad + controls(brand, hashtag, mention, link, character\ count)
\end{aligned}
$$

Both phatic content (and each of its functional subtypes) and phatic style significantly increased perceived phaticity. Table 5 summarizes the results.

Engagement

Next, I tested the proposed framework of phatic brand communication, specifically, the links between perceived phaticity and consumer engagement outcomes. Doing so extends prior research showing that brand Tweets with emoji led to more likes and retweets (Hu et al. 2017; McShane et al. 2021). Once again, a multiple regression was used to test if perceived phaticity predicted likes, replies, and retweets. The basic model structure is as follows:

$$
\begin{aligned}
&y(engagement) \\
&\quad = b_1(perceived\ phaticity) \\
&\quad + controls(brand, hashtag, mention, link, image, video, \\
&\qquad\qquad character\ count, weekend, time\ of\ day)
\end{aligned}
$$

Table 5. Effect of Phatic Language on Perceived Phaticity.

Variable	*Perceived phaticity*
Phatic content: channel managing	.600*** (.000)
Phatic content: solidarity signaling	.229*** (.000)
Phatic content: space filling	.240*** (.000)
Phatic style: playful, casual, emotional	1.344*** (.000)
Phatic style: emoji count	.013*** (.000)
(Control variables)	
Microsoft	.090***
Intel	.141***
Uber	.487***
Facebook	.308***
Nike	-.491***
Zara	-.257***
H&M	-.444***
Adidas	-.995***
Louis Vuitton	.042
Gucci	.035
Burberry	-.119***
Amazon	.497***
Target	.563***
Whole Foods	.404***
Coke	-.239***
Pepsi	-.437***
Red Bull	-.053
Disney	-.033
Netflix	.136***
Ford	.261***
Chevrolet	.281***
American Air	.456***
JetBlue	.675***
Southwest	.423***
Visa	.286
T-Mobile	.420**
Verizon	.436***
Hashtag	-.207***
Mention	-.055***
Link	-.096***
Character count	-.002***
R square	*.816*
N	*11,443*

P values in parenthesis
* p < .10
** p < .05
*** p < .01

As predicted, perceived phaticity significantly increased all consumer engagement measures, namely, likes, replies, and retweets. Table 6 summarizes the results.

Table 6. Effect of Perceived Phaticity on Engagement.

	Likes	*Replies*	*Retweets*
Perceived phaticity	.045*** (.000)	.014*** (.001)	.020*** (.000)
(Control variables)			
Microsoft	-.445***	-.664***	-.256***
Intel	-.654***	-.714***	-.547***
Uber	-1.010***	-.381***	-.982***
Facebook	-.300***	.587***	-.157***
Nike	.742***	.608***	.829***
Zara	-1.002***	-1.130***	-1.153***
H&M	-.829***	-1.122***	-1.041***
Adidas	.115	.326***	.116
Louis Vuitton	.011	-.646***	-.068***
Gucci	-.173***	-.894***	-.355***
Burberry	-.625***	-1.076***	-.639***
Amazon	-.562***	.269***	-.514***
Target	-.118***	-.117***	-.035
Whole Foods	-1.395***	-.928***	-1.075***
Coke	-.377***	.038	-.362***
Pepsi	-.519***	-.174***	-.464***
Red Bull	-.879***	-.817***	-.862***
Disney	.449***	-.127***	.431***
Netflix	.798***	.542***	.733***
Ford	-.278***	.051	-.206***
Chevrolet	-.489***	-.206***	-.461***
American Air	-.473***	-.059*	-.461***
JetBlue	-1.087***	-.657***	-1.079***
Southwest	-.734***	-.414***	-.764***
Visa	-1.257***	-.931***	-1.054***
T-Mobile	-.542***	-.082***	-.555***
Verizon	-1.144***	-.742***	-1.042***
Hashtag	-.018	-.055***	-.025**
Mention	-.003	-.059***	-.018*
Link	-.172***	-.133***	-.185***
Photo	.102***	.040***	.117***
Video	.149***	.082***	.204***
Character count	.000**	.000**	.000
Weekend	-.002	-.015	-.013
4 to 8	-.047	-.040	-.043
8 to 12	-.070***	-.063***	-.068***
12 to 16	-.105***	-.069***	-.084***
16 to 20	-.131***	-.067***	-.124***
20 to 24	-.128***	-.077***	-.143***
R square	*.644*	*.587*	*.610*
N	*11,443*	*11,443*	*11,443*

P values in parenthesis
* p < .10
** p < .05
*** p < .01

Transactional Content

Finally, I tested one of the most important moderating variables in the proposed framework: transactional content. Specifically, I examined the effect of transactional content on the relationship between perceived phaticity and engagement. Transactional content is essential for brands so that they can communicate their marketing mix to consumers. In fact, 86.1% of the Tweets in the dataset of the current study explicitly mentioned the name of brand or product in the message. I used the presence of brand or product in the Tweet as a proxy for the presence of transactional content, which is a conservative, yet clean and easy-to-code approach. A multiple regression was used to test if the interaction between perceived phaticity and transactional content impacted likes, replies, and retweets. The basic model structure is as follows:

$$
\begin{aligned}
y(engagement) & \\
&= b_1(perceived\ phaticity) \\
&+ b_2(transactional\ content) \\
&+ b_3(perceived\ phaticity \times transactional\ content) \\
&+ controls(brand, hashtag, mention, link, image, video, \\
&\qquad character\ count, weekend, time\ of\ day)
\end{aligned}
$$

The results showed a significant interaction effect of perceived phaticity and transactional content on consumer engagement, such that when a message contained both phatic and transactional components, it negatively affected engagement. Table 7 summarizes the results.

Table 7. Interaction Effect of Transactional Content.

	Likes	*Replies*	*Retweets*
Perceived phaticity	.061*** (.000)	.045*** (.000)	.044*** (.000)
Transactional content	.105*** (.008)	.223*** (.000)	.162*** (.000)
Phatic x transactional	-.018* (.085)	-.032*** (.002)	-.025** (.019)
(Control variables)			
Microsoft	-.449***	-.674***	-.262***
Intel	-.655***	-.714***	-.548***
Uber	-1.007***	-.371***	-.976***
Facebook	-.302***	.586***	-.159***
Nike	.744***	.611***	.832***
Zara	-1.009***	-1.147***	-1.164***
H&M	-.831***	-1.127***	-1.044***
Adidas	.154**	.420***	.181**
Louis Vuitton	.010	-.646***	-.069***
Gucci	-.173***	-.890***	-.354***
Burberry	-.626***	-1.075***	-.639***
Amazon	-.564***	.263***	-.518***
Target	-.112***	-.104***	-.026
Whole Foods	-1.398***	-.936***	-1.080***
Coke	-.355***	.091*	-.327***
Pepsi	-.511***	-.154***	-.450***
Red Bull	-.861***	-.771***	-.832***
Disney	.445***	-.135***	.425***
Netflix	.822***	.601***	.773***
Ford	-.279***	.048	-.208***
Chevrolet	-.491***	-.212***	-.465***
American Air	-.471***	-.057*	-.459***
JetBlue	-1.087***	-.659***	-1.080***
Southwest	-.727***	-.399***	-.753***
Visa	-1.257***	-.933***	-1.055***
T-Mobile	-.534***	-.062**	-.542***
Verizon	-1.143***	-.739***	-1.041***
Hashtag	-.021*	-.065***	-.031***
Mention	-.003	-.060***	-.019*
Link	-.175***	-.141***	-.191***
Photo	.100***	.035***	.113***
Video	.147***	.079***	.201***
Character count	.000***	.000	.000
Weekend	-.002	-.014	-.013
4 to 8	-.049*	-.043	-.045
8 to 12	-.070***	-.063***	-.068***
12 to 16	-.106***	-.071***	-.085***
16 to 20	-.131***	-.067***	-.124***
20 to 24	-.128***	-.076***	-.142***
R square	*.644*	*.589*	*.611*
N	*11,443*	*11,443*	*11,443*

P values in parenthesis
* p < .10
** p < .05
*** p < .01

Overall, the results in this chapter provide empirical support for the typology of phatic language and the framework of phatic brand communication. Specifically, the results indicate that phatic content and phatic style in brand messages lead to perceived phaticity. Further, perceived phaticity increases consumer engagement in terms of likes, replies, and retweets, while its interaction with transactional content decreases its effectiveness.

This study, in using real Tweets, offers the advantage of examining the actual relationship between brand messages and consumer engagement and offers clear, immediate, and applicable implications for managers. However, the results are only correlational, and the dataset is constrained in its ability to reveal some of the nuanced effects of phatic brand communication. To address these issues, I now turn to experiments to provide a causal test of phatic brand communication and to examine some of the boundary conditions in the conceptual framework.

CHAPTER 4: EXPERIMENTS

The experiments in this chapter test the causality implied in the proposed framework of phatic brand communication. These experiments allow for clean manipulations of brand messages, while removing the brand-level variance that exists in the field data (where it was controlled for instead). In addition, these experiments test and address other possibilities or questions that are not or cannot be coded in the dataset. Three experiments test the effect of phatic brand messages on behavioural intentions and attitudes in terms of the limits of phatic language, the order of phatic and transactional content, and the types of transactional content. Since all three experiments use brand messages containing transactional content, they build on and extend the basic findings in the Twitter study of transactional content.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 examines the effect of phatic brand messages on several behavioural intentions. Phatic brand messages are manipulated in terms of phatic style. While it was proposed in chapter 2 that phatic brand messages may lead to several positive outcomes, this experiment tests whether there is a limit to their positive effect.

Design and Measures

In a single factor (phatic style: high vs. low) between-groups design, participants (n = 161) from the student credit pool saw a social media post by an undisclosed brand. The

participants were 58.4% male, 41.0% female, and .6% other, with a mean age of 21. Phatic style was manipulated by the number of exclamations. In the high phatic style condition, the brand message began with “Hey you. Have a fantastic day!!!!!!!!!!!” whereas in the low phatic style condition, it began with “Hey you. Have a fantastic day!” Note that even the low phatic condition contains phatic language; there is an element of phatic content, “have a fantastic day,” as well as multiple elements of phatic style, that is, the display of friendliness and casualness by way of “hey you,” the word choice of “fantastic” instead of “good” or “great,” and the exclamation mark at the end of the sentence that increases emotional expressiveness. It is only considered “low” in relation to the high condition. In both conditions, it was followed by transactional content, “Learn more about our monthly specials here: shorturl.at/iCHP2.”

After viewing the social media post, participants answered the following questions for their behavioural intentions on a 7-point scale from “not at all likely” to “very likely”:

- “How likely are you to click on the link in the post?”
- “How likely are you to add a reply/comment to the post?”
- “How likely are you to share the post with your network?”
- “How likely are you to “like” the post?”
- “How likely are you to follow the brand?”

Then, participants answered a question about persuasion knowledge, “While I was reading the social media post, I thought it was pretty obvious that the brand was trying to persuade the audience,” on a 7-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

Results and Discussion

ANOVAs were conducted that examined the effect of phatic style on various behavioural intentions and persuasion knowledge. Main effects analysis showed that participants in the high phatic style condition were significantly less likely to click on the link in the post (2.04 [high] vs. 2.76 [low]; $F(1, 160) = 7.84$, $p = .006$), to share the post with their network (1.26 [high] vs. 1.59 [low]; $F(1, 160) = 4.76$, $p = .031$), and to follow the brand (1.56 [high] vs. 1.95 [low]; $F(1, 160) = 4.30$, $p = .040$) than those in the low phatic style condition. There were no significant differences between conditions on the likelihood to add a reply or comment to the post, or on the activation of persuasion knowledge.

This experiment reveals a potential boundary condition for phatic brand communication. The results suggest that there is a limit to the amount of phatic language that can be used in a message before it backfires or at least is limited in its effectiveness. In this experiment, the brand message in the baseline (i.e., low phatic style) condition already contained sufficient phatic language. Enhancing its phaticity further by using additional exclamation marks in the high phatic style condition was probably pushing it beyond the ideal level. Its negative effect on behavioural intentions could be due to low perceived competency of the brand or discomfort from the inappropriate use of phatic language.

Experiment 2

The next experiment examines the interactions between the amount of phatic language and the order of phatic and transactional components on various behavioural intentions and attitude toward the brand message. The amount of phatic language is manipulated in terms of phatic style. The order of components within a phatic brand message is a theoretically important

message factor that acts as a moderator. It is also an important decision for practitioners who are working within certain constraints. Further, in this experiment, there is a control condition with only a transactional component and no phatic component, which will shed more light on the effectiveness of using phatic language.

Design and Measures

In a 2 (phatic style: high vs. low) x 2 (order: phatic component first vs. last) + 1 (control: no phatic component) between-groups design, participants (n = 358) from the student credit pool saw a social media post by an undisclosed brand. The participants were 56.4% male, 43.09% female, and .6% other, with a mean age of 19.9. In the high phatic style condition, the brand message contained "Happy Tuesday!!!!!!!!!!" whereas in the low phatic style condition, it contained "Happy Tuesday!" In the phatic first condition, the brand message began with the phatic component, which was followed by the transactional component, "Take a peak at our deals for the upcoming weekend: <click here>," whereas in the phatic last condition, the order of the two components was reversed. In the control condition, the brand message only contained the transactional component with no phatic component.

After viewing the social media post, participants answered the following questions for their behavioural intentions on a 7-point scale from "not at all likely" to "very likely":

- "How likely are you to click on the link in the post?"
- "How likely are you to add a reply/comment to the post?"
- "How likely are you to share the post with your network?"
- "How likely are you to "like" the post?"

- "How likely are you to follow the brand?"

Next, participants indicated their attitude toward the brand post using five bipolar items on a 7-point scale. The items were as follows: pleasant/unpleasant, like/dislike, positive/negative, favourable/unfavourable, and good/bad (Cronbach's Alpha $\alpha = .95$).

Lastly, participants answered a question about persuasion knowledge, "While I was reading the social media post, I thought it was pretty obvious that the brand was trying to persuade the audience," on a 7-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

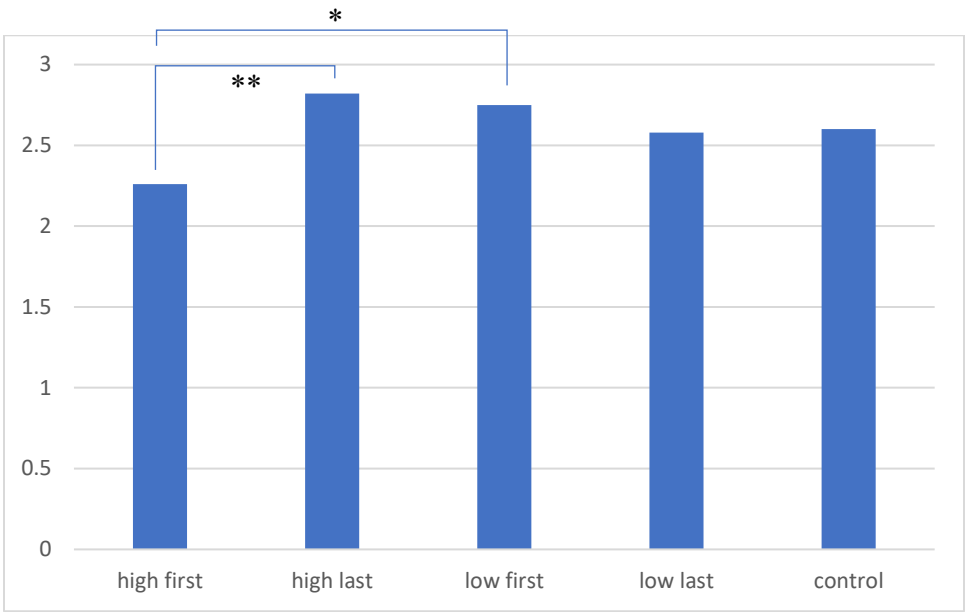
Results and Discussion

ANOVAs were conducted that examined the effects of the degree of phatic style and the order of phatic and transactional components on behavioural intentions, attitude toward the brand message, and persuasion knowledge.

There was a statistically significant interaction between phatic style (high, low) and order (first, last) on liking the post ($F(1, 292) = 4.10$, $p = .044$), with significant contrasts between high phatic style-phatic first and high phatic style-phatic last (2.26 [high phatic style first] vs. 2.82 [high phatic style last]; $t(353) = 2.19$, $p = .029$), and high phatic style-phatic first and low phatic style-phatic first (2.26 [high phatic style first] vs. 2.75 [low phatic style first]; $t(353) = 1.95$, $p = .052$). There were no main effects, and none of the conditions were significantly different from the control (Figure 4).

There was a statistically significant interaction on adding a reply/comment to the post ($F(1, 292) = 5.17$, $p = .024$), with significant contrasts between high phatic style-phatic first and low phatic style-phatic first (1.59 [high phatic style first] vs. 2.03 [low phatic style first]; $t(353) =$

Figure 4. Contrasts for Like.



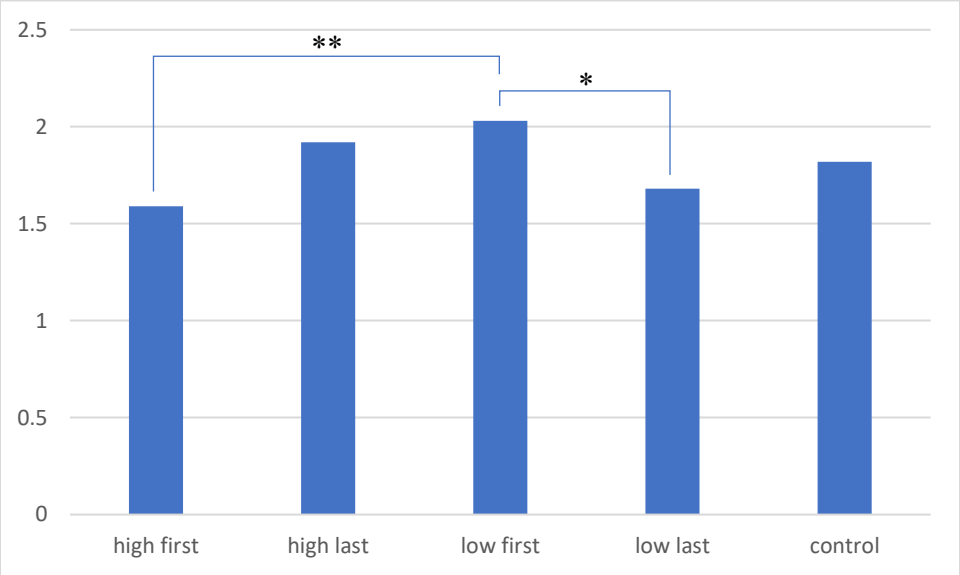
* p < .10
** p < .05
*** p < .01

2.14, $p = .033$), and low phatic style-phatic first and low phatic style-phatic last (2.03 [low phatic style first] vs. 1.68 [low phatic style last]; $t(353) = 1.67$, $p = .096$). Once again, there were no main effects, and no conditions were significantly different from the control (Figure 5).

There was a statistically significant interaction on attitude toward the brand post ($F(1, 292) = 4.11$, $p = .044$), with significant contrasts between high phatic style-phatic first and low phatic style-phatic first (3.94 [high phatic style first] vs. 4.33 [low phatic style first]; $t(353) = 2.11$, $p = .036$), high phatic style-phatic last and control (4.25 [high phatic style last] vs. 3.93 [control]; $t(353) = 1.66$, $p = .098$), and low phatic style-phatic first and control (4.33 [low phatic style first] vs. 3.93 [control]; $t(353) = 2.13$, $p = .034$). There were no main effects (Figure 6).

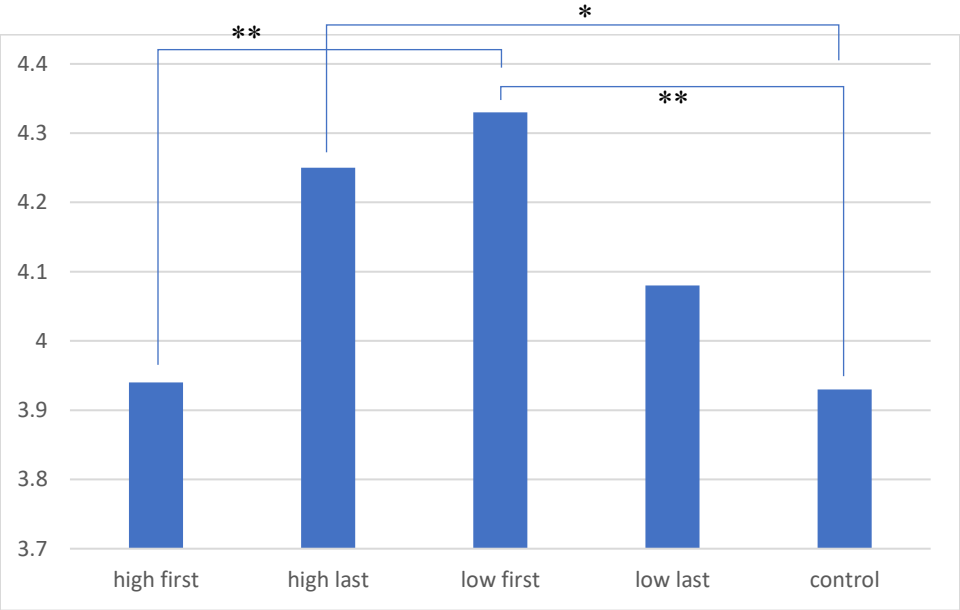
There were no statistically significant interaction or main effects on click, share, and follow.

Figure 5. Contrasts for Reply.



* p < .10
** p < .05
*** p < .01

Figure 6. Contrasts for Attitude.



* p < .10
** p < .05
*** p < .01

Finally, although there was no interaction effect on persuasion knowledge, there was a significant main effect of the order of the phatic component (5.05 [first] vs. 4.63 [last]; $F(1, 292) = 4.26$, $p = .040$), which indicates that when the message contains both phatic and transactional components, the phatic component at the beginning of a message is more likely to activate consumers' persuasion knowledge than one at the end.

The results offer evidence of an order effect, and add nuance to the findings of experiment 1, where the phatic component came before the transactional component. It appears that in general a higher amount of phatic language is more effective at the end of a message, after the transactional component, whereas a lower amount of phatic language is the opposite in that it is more effective at the beginning of a message, before the transactional component.

In terms of practice, in the beginning phase of a message, brands are likely to be better off to be more conservative with the use of phatic language because excessive phatic language may trigger persuasion knowledge in consumers. However, in the last phase, the brand message seems to benefit from ending on a high note with a liberal use of phatic language. This may be because consumers let their guard down now that they believe that the brand's persuasion attempt (i.e., the transactional component) is over.

Experiment 3

In experiment 3, phatic brand communication is manipulated in terms of the presence or absence of phatic content. Potential interactions between phatic content and the types of transactional content on attitude toward the brand message are examined. Previous research indicates that the intentions of brand messages influence consumer sharing of those brand

messages (Villarroel Ordenes et al. 2019). Thus, it is possible that the three common types of transactional content with different purposes (i.e., informing, persuading, reminding) interact with phatic content to affect attitude, which is tested in this experiment.

Design and Measures

In a 2 (phatic content: present vs. absent) x 3 (types of transactional content: informing vs. persuading vs. reminding) between-groups design, Amazon Mechanical Turk participants (n = 595) saw a social media post by an undisclosed brand. The participants were 54.6% male, 44.9% female, and .5% other, with a mean age of 38. In the phatic content present condition, the brand message began with "Happy Tuesday!" which was followed by transactional content, whereas in the phatic content absent condition, the brand message did not begin with the phatic content. The types of transactional content were operationalized as follows using real brand Tweets:

- Informing: "Our NEW Toasted Coconut Flash Cold Brew is lightly creamy and sweet with toasted coconut notes!"
- Persuading: "Enjoy a medium Toasted Coconut Flash Cold Brew for only $1.50 on Flash Tuesday!"
- Reminding: "Toasted Coconut Flash Cold Brew all day, everyday!"

After viewing the social media post, participants indicated their attitude toward the post using five bipolar items on a 7-point scale. The items were as follows: pleasant/unpleasant, like/dislike, positive/negative, favourable/unfavourable, and good/bad (Cronbach's Alpha α = .97).

Next, participants indicated how much they trusted the brand using three bipolar items on a 7-point scale. The items were as follows: trustworthy/untrustworthy, genuine/phony, and honest/dishonest (Cronbach's Alpha $\alpha = .94$).

Lastly, participants answered a question about persuasion knowledge, "While I was reading the social media post, I thought it was pretty obvious that the brand was trying to persuade the audience," on a 7-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Results and Discussion

ANOVAs were conducted that examined the effects of phatic content and the types of transactional content on attitude toward the brand message, brand trust, and persuasion knowledge. There was no significant interaction between the effects of phatic content and the types of transactional content (attitude: $F(2, 594) = .18$, $p = .836$; trust: $F(2, 594) = .67$, $p = .511$; persuasion knowledge: $F(2, 594) = .55$, $p = .576$).

Main effects analysis showed that participants in the phatic content present condition had a significantly more positive attitude toward the brand message (5.38 [phatic present] vs. 5.10 [phatic absent]; $F(1, 594) = 6.77$, $p = .010$) and perceived the brand to be more trustworthy (5.27 [phatic present] vs. 5.09 [phatic absent]; $F(1, 594) = 3.69$, $p = .055$) than those in the phatic content absent condition, despite significantly higher activation of persuasion knowledge (5.67 [phatic present] vs. 5.41 [phatic absent]; $F(1, 594) = 5.61$, $p = .018$).

There was a significant main effect of the types of transactional content on attitude ($F(1, 594) = 12.43$, $p < .001$). A post-hoc Tukey's test revealed that there were significant differences between informing and reminding types of transactional content (5.28 [informing] vs. 4.89

[reminding]; $p = .012$), and persuading and reminding types (5.56 [persuading] vs. 4.89 [reminding]; $p < .001$), and a marginal difference between informing and persuading types (5.28 [informing] vs. 5.56 [persuading]; $p = .096$). The types of transactional content also had a significant main effect on trustworthiness ($F(1, 594) = 5.09$, $p = .006$), which was mainly driven by the significant difference between persuading and reminding types (5.36 [persuading] vs. 4.98 [reminding]; $p = .005$). Once again, this was despite the fact that the persuading type was activating persuasion knowledge significantly more than the reminding type (5.80 [persuading] vs. 5.34 [reminding]; $p = .002$), and marginally more than the informative type (5.80 [persuading] vs. 5.48 [informative]; $p = .054$).

The results offer causal evidence for the framework of phatic brand communication. As proposed in the framework, phatic brand communication positively affects outcomes such as attitude and trust. The present experiment has demonstrated that this can be achieved using phatic language, specifically, with the inclusion of phatic content. The results also suggest that the types of transactional content in terms of informing, persuading, and reminding content do not seem to interact with the effects of phatic content on attitude toward the brand message, perceived trustworthiness of the brand, and activation of persuasion knowledge.

CHAPTER 5: GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the current paper, I introduce the concept of phatic brand communication. I offer a conceptual framework as well as a typology of phatic language, which is used to produce phatic messages. Based on this framework, I advance several propositions in terms of brand message production, consumer message interpretation, downstream consequences, and moderating factors in the context of social media.

Using a Twitter dataset, I provide first empirical support for the typology and the framework. The dataset confirms the presence of the various types of phatic language in brand messages on social media, and supports a model that explains the positive relationship between the brands' use of phatic language in their messages and coder-rated perceived phaticity. Further, I demonstrate the positive link between perceived phaticity and consumer engagement in terms of expressed likes, replies, and retweets, and the moderating role of transactional content.

A series of controlled laboratory experiments further examines the framework. Experiment 1 shows that the use of excessive phatic language in brand messages can backfire and have negative downstream consequences. Experiment 2 demonstrates that the order between phatic and transactional components within a message matters, where the use of excessive phatic language in the beginning of a message negatively affects behavioural intentions and attitude, while the use of mild phatic language at the end of a message has more favourable outcomes. Experiment 3 once again confirms that the addition of phatic language to transactional content leads to more positive outcomes for brands even when consumer persuasion knowledge is further activated as a result. The types of transactional content do not seem to matter when using it in conjunction with phatic language.

The present work makes theoretical contributions to multiple literatures. First, it offers a new theoretical framework to the brand communication literature, extending the current understanding of the role of language in marketing communication. In doing so, I provide a future research agenda by advancing several propositions. Second, I contribute to the rapidly growing social media marketing literature by examining brand communication on social media and augmenting prior work on textual paralanguage. Third, this work, as a new synthesis of diverse prior research on phatic communication, offers new insights to the linguistics literature by refining the concept of phatic language and its typology. The final contribution is in terms of theory testing; I test my proposed typology and framework using two different research methods for greater theory triangulation.

For marketing practitioners, this research provides a new perspective and a framework to understand the relational aspect of brand communication. Because consumers today are likely to expect brands to be more interactive and to understand the conversational norms of social media, it is important for marketers to consider the details of their phatic brand communication strategy. For example, the extent to which brand messages are perceived as phatic is likely to influence perceptions of brand warmth and competence, and thus marketers should consider whether a particular communication style is a desirable one, as well as a good fit. My data reveals the current state of how consumers react to and engage with phatic brand communication, and the experiments further demonstrate its effectiveness and limitations, or when marketers should be wary of using it. Marketing practitioners should also note that the application of phatic brand communication does not have to be limited to commercial exchanges. The concept can also be extended to enhance non-profit communication strategies with the public, such as when promoting prosocial behaviours and new public policies (e.g., donations, well-being).

Future Direction

Future research could investigate the fundamental sources of phaticity in phatic language, although it may be constantly changing because the perceptions of phaticity are culturally determined (which is an interesting research topic on its own, which could be studied by examining historical data or comparing demographic groups). For example, consumers are likely to perceive the expression "have a fantastic day" as more phatic than "have a nice day" because of the specific word choice (i.e., phatic style: diction), and it will be useful to be able to quantify such difference (e.g., evaluative lexicon; Rocklage, Rucker, and Nordgren 2018) so that these particular words can be compared to other word options. Further, certain expressions, topics, and style are clearly more readily interpreted and perceived as phatic than others. There may be a systematic reason for such effects, which could be investigated using automated text analysis (e.g., LIWC) and machine learning (e.g., BERT, NLTK), especially since the large unstructured text datasets are well-suited to those methods.

In terms of how phatic language is processed, most dual process theories (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Kahneman 2003) would predict that it is more likely to be processed subconsciously with minimal effort because phatic content involves routine social interactions, and phatic style is affective and often subtle. Thus, consumers may be prone to processing phatic language in brand messages subconsciously. However, because text-based communication tends to go through a more conscious process than spoken communication (Luangrath et al. 2017), phatic brand messages on social media, which is predominantly text-based, may come under more intense scrutiny by consumers.

Future studies could also examine the generalizability of the framework of phatic brand communication in other social media platforms outside of Twitter, as well as non-social media channels, such as websites, emails, TV, and even in-person. This is an important issue because brands tend to communicate across multiple platforms (Unnava and Aravindakshan 2021), and as discussed previously, there are channel and platform specific norms and rules that govern the production and interpretation of phatic messages. For example, Li, Packard, and Berger (2020) examined the employee-customer conversational dynamics, and found that the warm, affective speaking style, which is consistent with phatic style, had positive outcomes when used in the beginning and ending phases of a communication episode.

Further, although the present paper focused on text-based phatic communication, non-text-based phatic communication has become prevalent in social media and computer-mediated communication in general. These platforms often incorporate non-linguistic ways of phatic communication, such as using "poke" and "like." Katz and Shifman (2017) also noticed that people frequently shared "digital nonsense" with others in their network (e.g., memes, playful images and videos). The proposed framework can be certainly expanded to account for such phatic "gestures" and sharing behaviours since their primary function appears to be to enhance social bonds between communicators, and their effects could be investigated in future research.

Conclusion

Although phatic communication may seem insignificant and trivial compared to transactional, "substantive" communication, its usefulness and impact in social relationships have now been recognized (Coupland 2014; Laver 1975). Technology has empowered brands to

communicate with consumers in more ways than ever before, and I propose phatic brand communication as a new perspective for exploring the dynamics of this consumer-brand communication.

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APPENDIX A

Coding Scheme

Variable	**Scale/category**
Phaticity - To what extent does the Tweet create an atmosphere of sociability?	Not at all (1) – very much (7)
Playfulness - How playful is the Tweet?	Not at all (1) – very much (7)
Casual - How casual is the Tweet?	Not at all (1) – very much (7)
Emotional - How emotional is the Tweet?	Not at all (1) – very much (7)
Phatic content - Greetings - Parting tokens - Backchannels - Agreeing - Complimenting - Congratulating - Encouraging - Sympathizing - Thanking - Well-wishing - Small talk - Trivial remarks	0 = not present 1 = present
Product/brand	0 = not present 1 = present
(Coded but not included in the analysis)	
Valence	Negative (-3) – positive (+3)
Orientation	1 = self-oriented: commenting on factors personal to the speaker (i.e., the brand) 2 = other-oriented: commenting on factors personal to the listener (i.e., the audience) 3 = neutral: having relevance to factors affecting (or not affecting) both participants equally
Pronouns	0 = none 1 = 1st person (I, my, mine, me, myself, we, our, ours, us, ourselves) 2 = 2nd person (you, your, yours, yourself) 3 = 3rd person (he, his, him, himself, she, her, hers, herself, they, their, theirs, them, themselves, one, oneself)
Promotion	0 = not present 1 = present
Event	0 = not present 1 = present

APPENDIX B

Interrater Reliability Using Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC): ICC estimates and their 95% confident intervals were calculated using SPSS statistical package version 25 (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL) based on a mean-rating (k = 3), absolute-agreement, 2-way random-effects model.

Perceived Phaticity (ICC(2, 3) = .676)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.410[a]	.251	.532	3.955	11432	22864	.000
Average Measures	.676	.502	.774	3.955	11432	22864	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Content: Channel Managing: Greetings (ICC(2, 3) = .690)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.426[a]	.410	.441	3.277	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.690	.676	.703	3.277	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Content: Channel Managing: Parting Tokens (ICC(2, 3) = .646)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.378[a]	.366	.390	2.837	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.646	.634	.657	2.837	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Content: Channel Managing: Backchannels (ICC(2, 3) = .297)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.124[a]	.112	.135	1.427	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.297	.274	.319	1.427	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Content: Solidarity Signaling: Agreeing (ICC(2, 3) = .612)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.345[a]	.333	.356	2.578	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.612	.600	.624	2.578	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Content: Solidarity Signaling: Complimenting (ICC(2, 3) = .696)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.433[a]	.422	.444	3.300	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.696	.686	.706	3.300	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Content: Solidarity Signaling: Congratulating (ICC(2, 3) = .906)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.762[a]	.755	.769	10.699	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.906	.903	.909	10.699	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Content: Solidarity Signaling: Encouraging (ICC(2, 3) = .565)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.302[a]	.168	.416	2.856	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.565	.378	.681	2.856	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Content: Solidarity Signaling: Sympathizing (ICC(2, 3) = .611)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.343[a]	.332	.355	2.571	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.611	.598	.623	2.571	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Content: Solidarity Signaling: Thanking (ICC(2, 3) = .953)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.870[a]	.867	.874	21.155	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.953	.951	.954	21.155	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Content: Solidarity Signaling: Well-wishing (ICC(2, 3) = .920)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.792[a]	.787	.798	12.462	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.920	.917	.922	12.462	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Content: Space Filling: Small Talk (ICC(2, 3) = .363)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.160[a]	.147	.172	1.582	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.363	.342	.385	1.582	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Content: Space Filling: Trivial Remarks (ICC(2, 3) = .748)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.497[a]	.471	.522	4.114	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.748	.728	.766	4.114	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Style: Playful (ICC(2, 3) = .449)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.213[a]	.027	.382	2.857	11439	22878	.000
Average Measures	.449	.077	.650	2.857	11439	22878	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Style: Casual (ICC(2, 3) = .310)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.130[a]	-.006	.271	2.286	11436	22872	.000
Average Measures	.310	-.018	.527	2.286	11436	22872	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Phatic Style: Emotional (ICC(2, 3) = .442)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.209[a]	.046	.357	2.560	11440	22880	.000
Average Measures	.442	.125	.624	2.560	11440	22880	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.

Presence of Product/Brand (ICC(2, 3) = .865)

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[b]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.682[a]	.674	.690	7.438	11442	22884	.000
Average Measures	.865	.861	.870	7.438	11442	22884	.000

Two-way random effects model where both people effects and measures effects are random.
a. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
b. Type A intraclass correlation coefficients using an absolute agreement definition.