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# Enjoy! Hedonic Consumption and Compliance with Assertive Messages

ANN KRONROD  
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This paper examines the persuasiveness of assertive language (as in Nike's slogan "Just do it") as compared to nonassertive language (as in Microsoft's slogan "Where do you want to go today?"). Previous research implies that assertive language should reduce consumer compliance. Two experiments show that assertiveness is more effective in communications involving hedonic products, as well as hedonically advertised utilitarian products. This prediction builds on sociolinguistic research addressing relationships between mood, communication expectations, and compliance to requests. A third experiment reaffirms the role of linguistic expectations by showing that an unknown product advertised using assertive language is more likely to be perceived as hedonic.

Consumers are often exposed to forceful messages and imperative slogans such as Nike's "Just do it," Sprite's "Obey your thirst," or U.S. Airways' "Fly with US." The frequent use of assertively phrased messages is puzzling, given the mounting research in consumer behavior (e.g., Dillard and Shen 2005; Fitzsimons and Lehman 2004; Lord 1994), communications (e.g., Kellerman and Shea 1996; Quick and Considine 2008; Quick and Stephenson 2007; Wilson and Kunkel 2000), and sociolinguistics (e.g., Levine and Boster 2001; Sanders and Fitch 2001), which suggests that these messages should lower consumer readiness to comply.

To understand the unexpected prevalence of assertive language, we turn to sociolinguistic literature on the language used in compliance-seeking requests. Research has found that people in positive mood tend to use more assertive language in their requests (e.g., Forgas 1995; Sinclair and Mark 1992). Correspondingly, people in positive mood ex-

pect to be addressed with more direct and assertive language (Bloch 1996; Forgas 1999a, 1999b). This matching pattern appears consistent with language behavior literature, which demonstrates that higher compliance occurs when the language of requests fits the receiver's expectations (e.g., Brown and Levinson 1987; Forgas 1998).

Building on this logic, we suggest in this article that assertive messages are more persuasive than nonassertive messages when they relate to consumption contexts that induce positive mood. In particular, we focus on hedonic consumption, which commonly elicits positive mood (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). We suggest a conceptual model where the effectiveness of assertive messages regarding hedonic products, or products that are framed hedonically, is higher than the effectiveness of nonassertive messages. By contrast, in baseline utilitarian consumption contexts, nonassertive phrasing should yield higher compliance. We explain these effects through the mediation of mood and communication expectations.

Three experimental studies support our hypothesis and its underlying explanation in terms of induced mood and communication expectations. The experiments are preceded by a field study of 428 real-life slogans in hedonic and utilitarian product categories that also supports our main claim. Study 1 tests the conceptual model. We show that compliance depends on the interaction between language (assertive/nonassertive) and communication expectations for assertive/nonassertive language. Such expectations evolve from mood, which originates from different product types (hedonic/utilitarian). We also rule out an alternative explanation whereby assertive language might reduce the guilt feelings

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associated with hedonism. Study 2 employs real print ads from business magazines to generalize the findings to contexts involving utilitarian products presented in metaphorically hedonic language and imagery ("hedonic framing"). Study 3 looks at the relationship between hedonic consumption and message assertiveness from an inverted point of view, showing that consumers perceive products advertised using assertive language as more hedonic than the same products promoted with a nonassertive message. This finding reinforces the notion that assertive language meets communications expectations in hedonic contexts.

### ASSERTIVE LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION EXPECTATIONS, AND COMPLIANCE WITH REQUESTS

Research on compliance-seeking communication emphasizes the importance of politeness (e.g., Brown and Levinson 1987; Levine and Boster 2001; Sanders and Fitch 2001). Communications research has also examined the role of politeness in making effective requests (Kellerman and Shea 1996), and it was found that forceful language tends to reduce compliance across many domains, including physical exercise (Quick and Considine 2008), the use of condoms (Quick and Stephenson 2007), and in personal requests (Wilson and Kunkel 2000). Consumer behavior research similarly suggests that assertive messages reduce consumer compliance (e.g., Dillard and Shen 2005; Fitzsimons and Lehman 2004; Lord 1994). Given this background, the recurrence of assertively phrased ads and slogans (e.g., Coca-Cola's "Make it real" or Wendy's "Do what tastes right") appears paradoxical. In the ensuing paragraphs we explain this paradox and draw testable hypotheses regarding the contexts where higher compliance might result from assertive phrasing.

To address this goal we start by identifying relevant situations where assertive language seems prevalent. A series of works conducted by Joseph Forgas (1995, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b) links assertive language and mood. This research repeatedly demonstrates that mood is a key contextual variable that alters language usage and communication expectations (Beukeboom and Semin 2006). Specifically, positive mood makes language processing more flexible and less systematic (Martin and Davies 1998). People in a happy mood may underestimate the likelihood of offending others and use more direct and less polite request strategies (e.g., Bless, Mackie, and Schwarz 1992; Forgas 1995; Mackie and Worth 1989, 1991; Sinclair and Mark 1992). Also, receivers in a positive mood *expect* higher assertiveness and lower politeness, because of loosened perceptions of social rules and frames (Bloch 1996; Forgas 1999a, 1999b). Overall therefore, when in a positive mood, both sources and receivers of a communication are predisposed to use and accept assertive language.

Research in communications and linguistics consistently finds that requests elicit higher compliance when their level of assertiveness meets communication expectations (e.g.,

Brown and Levinson 1987; Burgoon and Aho 1982; Burgoon, Hunsacker, and Dawson 1994; Forgas 1998; Kim, Rao, and Lee 2009). This effect is possibly due to elevated perceived fluency (e.g., Kim, Rao, and Lee 2009; Lee and Labroo 2004; Schwarz 2004), which could arise from the feeling of fit between expectations and reality. In contrast, when the language of request is too assertive (Kemper and Thyssen 1981; King 2001; Levine and Boster 2001; Wilson and Kunkel 2000) or not assertive enough ("too polite" in Lakoff and Ide 2005; see also Firmin et al. 2004; Tsuzuki, Miamoto, and Zhang 1999), compliance with the request is reduced due to misfit between communication expectations and the phrasing of the request in a specific situation. We conclude that receivers in positive mood are likely to comply with assertive messages, because positive mood creates an expectation of assertive language, and the fit between expectations and reality elevates compliance.

### HEDONIC CONSUMPTION AND COMPLIANCE WITH ASSERTIVE LANGUAGE

To explain the prevalence of assertively phrased messages in marketing communication we rely on the common distinction between hedonic and utilitarian consumption, which relates to the mood state that these two contexts induce. Specifically, hedonic consumption involves emotional and affective experiences, sensual pleasure, fantasy, and fun (e.g., Adaval 2001; Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000; Kivetz and Simonson 2002) and activates positive mood (e.g., Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). Employing this distinction, we propose a process where the usually negative effect of assertive language on compliance may become positive under the moderation of hedonic consumption, because hedonic consumption induces positive mood and as a result communication expectations are changed to more assertive language and the fit between language and expectations elevates compliance.

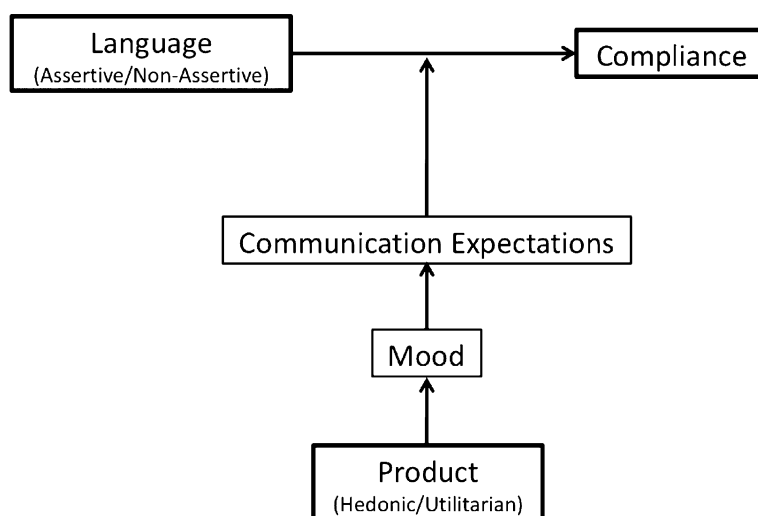
Thus, we propose the following process: a reference to hedonic consumption elevates positive mood; consequently, language usage and expectations are possibly altered toward more blunt, direct, or assertive language; messages promoting hedonic consumption in an assertive fashion (e.g., *Take a ride on the flying balloon!*) meet communication expectations more than nonassertive messages (e.g., *Why don't you take a ride on the flying balloon?*), and the fit between expectations and the actual message language may facilitate consumer compliance when the language is assertive (while nonassertive language may sound odd and thus reduce compliance). Figure 1 represents the proposed theoretical relationships.

More formally, we suggest the following testable hypotheses:

- H1:** Assertive language leads to higher compliance than nonassertive language with messages promoting hedonic products. The opposite is true for utilitarian products.

FIGURE 1

ASSERTIVE LANGUAGE IN HEDONIC CONSUMPTION: THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL



**H2:** The moderating effect of product (hedonic vs. utilitarian) on the impact of message assertiveness on compliance is mediated by the presence of positive mood in hedonic consumption, which in turn alters communication expectations for more assertive language.

Further, we suggest that the effect of communication expectations in marketing is bidirectional: not only does assertive language in hedonic product contexts elevate compliance, but also facing assertive phrasing elevates expectations for a hedonic product, due to communication expectations. In other words, consumers encountering assertive phrasing may infer that the product being promoted is hedonic in nature. Research has shown that language can affect perceptions and attitudes (e.g., Luna, Peracchio, and de Juan 2003). For example, people who encounter direct language infer a closer or more familiar relationship with their counterparts (Dillard et al. 1997). We also know language affects emotions and mood (e.g., Leggitt and Gibbs 2000). Therefore, we suggest that assertive language may be a cue for the hedonic character of the promoted product, due to communication expectations: if the speaker uses assertive language, she is likely referring to a product that induces positive mood (e.g., a hedonic good). As a further support for the mediating role of communication expectations, we hypothesize this effect as follows:

**H3:** Products promoted with more assertive language will be perceived as more hedonic, whereas products promoted with less assertive language will be perceived as more utilitarian.

## FIELD DATA

To provide preliminary support to our theoretical intuition, we conducted a small-scale field study. We used an advertising slogan database (<http://www.textart.ru/database/slogan/list-advertising-slogans.html>), one of the largest publicly available databases focusing on U.S. and international brands. The database contains 128 product categories, enabling a rich and diverse sampling framework for hedonic and utilitarian products.

Two judges rated all the categories as clearly hedonic, clearly utilitarian, or mixed/unclear/both. Then, 14 categories were selected to create a sample of 214 slogans in hedonic categories and 214 slogans in utilitarian categories. The hedonic categories included ice cream ( $N = 15$  slogans), beer ( $N = 116$ ), designer jeans ( $N = 29$ ), restaurants ( $N = 33$ ), and radio stations ( $N = 21$ ), and the utilitarian categories included craftsman tools ( $N = 16$ ), real estate ( $N = 26$ ), business software ( $N = 20$ ), uniforms and workwear apparel ( $N = 14$ ), toiletries ( $N = 10$ ), construction ( $N = 27$ ), copywriting service ( $N = 12$ ), banking ( $N = 75$ ), and diapers ( $N = 14$ ). From each category all the available slogans were integrated in the analysis.

The two judges then marked each slogan as assertive or nonassertive. The categorization was based on the following criterion: does the slogan use an imperative or not? An example of a nonassertive slogan in the ice-cream category is "Made like no other" (Haagen-Dazs) and for an assertive slogan: "Stop me & buy one" (Wall's).

We found 8.2% of assertively phrased slogans in utilitarian product categories, and, with a dramatic difference, 24.2% of assertively phrased slogans in hedonic categories ( $\chi^2 = 9.9$ ,  $p < .002$ ). These findings are in line with our

suggestion that assertive language is more prevalent (and potentially more effective) in messages encouraging hedonic consumption.

### STUDY 1: COMPLIANCE WITH ASSERTIVE REQUESTS REGARDING HEDONIC VERSUS UTILITARIAN PRODUCTS

Study 1 intends to test hypotheses 1 and 2, by showing how hedonic products elicit positive mood, which in turn alters communication expectations and ultimately elevates compliance with assertive language. In contrast, nonassertive phrasing does not meet communication expectations that arise in the presence of positive mood induced by hedonic products. Therefore, compliance with nonassertive language in the context of hedonic consumption is expected to be lower.

Study 1 also seeks to rule out a key alternative explanation. Assertive requests might lead to higher compliance in hedonic consumption contexts if individuals use these requests to reduce feelings of guilt, blaming self-indulgent behaviors on the external pressure (e.g., Khan and Dhar 2006; Kivetz 2005; Kivetz and Keinan 2006; Strahilevitz and Myers 1998; Xu and Schwartz 2009; Zheng and Kivetz 2009).

#### Method

We recruited 78 undergraduate participants for this experiment. Participants first read an introduction sentence informing them that they were about to read a message regarding a product (chocolate or bank account). Then all participants rated two items on a 7-point scale: the degree to which they felt *happy* and in *good mood* when thinking of the product. Participants also answered three guilt-related items (“feel guilty/it would be a mistake/will regret”), adapted from Xu and Schwartz (2009). After answering the questions, participants turned the page and read a simple message: “You must (try our chocolate) open a bank account with us” for an assertive phrasing and “It’s worth (trying our chocolate) opening a bank account with us” for a nonassertive phrasing. We assigned participants randomly to one of the four conditions (chocolate-assertive, chocolate-nonassertive, bank-assertive, bank-nonassertive). After reading the message, participants filled out a questionnaire measuring compliance intention, adapted from Chandran and Morwitz (2005). The questionnaire consisted of four items rated on a 7-point scale: “How certain/What is the chance/How definite/How sure are you that you would purchase this product?” Participants then replied to three communication expectations items, adapted from Stemmer (1994), assessing the extent to which participants expected the assertive/nonassertive phrasing in the product context at hand (hedonic/utilitarian): “How typical/expected/standard is the phrasing of this message?”

#### Results

Reliability for the mood items was  $\alpha = .94$ , communication expectations reliability was  $\alpha = .82$ , and compliance intention reliability was  $\alpha = .93$ .

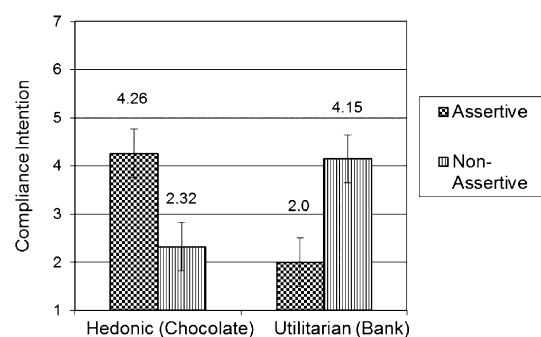
Findings in this experiment support hypothesis 1. We found a significant interaction effect between product type and language on compliance intention ( $F(1, 74) = 17.9, p < .001$ ), whereas the main effects were insignificant (product  $F(1, 74) = .497, p = .483$ ; assertiveness  $F(1, 74) = .174, p = .687$ ). Figure 2 depicts these findings. Planned contrasts for assertiveness showed that whereas assertive phrasing elicited higher compliance in a hedonic product context ( $M_{\text{choc-a}} = 4.26$ ) than in a utilitarian product context ( $M_{\text{bank-a}} = 2.0$ ;  $F(1, 74) = 22.3, p < .001$ ), nonassertive phrasing prompted higher compliance in a utilitarian product context ( $M_{\text{bank-n}} = 4.15$ ) than in a hedonic one ( $M_{\text{choc-n}} = 2.32$ ;  $F(1, 74) = 13.7, p < .001$ ). In addition, planned contrasts for product type revealed that compliance intention in the hedonic product context is higher for an assertive message than for a nonassertive message, whereas the opposite holds in a utilitarian product context ( $M_{\text{choc-a}} = 4.26$  and  $M_{\text{choc-n}} = 2.32$ ;  $F(1, 74) = 17.8, p = .001$  and  $M_{\text{bank-a}} = 2.0$  and  $M_{\text{bank-n}} = 4.15$ ;  $F(1, 74) = 17.6, p < .001$ ).

#### The Underlying Process

To test the underlying process, including the mediation effects suggested in hypothesis 2, a structural equation modeling (SEM) software was used (AMOS 17.0). The estimated model, represented in figure 3, exhibits excellent fit and supports all the hypothesized effects (see table 1).

We find that product type (hedonic/utilitarian) affects mood, which in turn affects communication expectations. The obtained parameters corroborate the notion that compliance emerges from the interaction between language choices (assertive or not) and communication expectations, while assertive language has a principled negative effect on

FIGURE 2  
COMPLIANCE WITH ASSERTIVE AND NONASSERTIVE LANGUAGE IN HEDONIC AND UTILITARIAN CONSUMPTION (STUDY 1)





compliance. Note that if we augment the model with a direct path between product and communication expectations (while keeping the indirect effect through mood), this path appears not significant ( $\beta = -.211, p = .252$ ), which further supports the role of mood as a mediator.

**Guilt.** To examine the alternative explanation based on guilt regarding self-indulgence, we obtained a guilt indicator, based on three items pertaining to guilt feelings (reliability:  $\alpha = .81$  before the message and  $\alpha = .75$  after the message). A two-way repeated measures ANOVA testing the significance of a decrease in guilt following an assertive phrasing in hedonic versus utilitarian product contexts revealed no significant effect ( $F(1, 74) = .025, p = .874$ ). If assertive language in the hedonic product context could not significantly reduce guilt, guilt is probably not a mediator in the process.

## Discussion

The results support hypotheses 1 and 2, and an alternative process whereby assertive language would decrease guilt associated with hedonic consumption could not be supported.

Whether a product is hedonic or not is often a matter of emphasis. A pool can be hedonic when used for fun and utilitarian when used for exercise. A fancy hotel room can be utilitarian in the context of a business trip. Botti and McGill (2011) have shown the significance of such hedonic versus utilitarian frames of identical consumption goods. In study 2 we address two utilitarian business services—one framed as utilitarian and the other framed as hedonic. We also replace our structured messages with real-world print

**TABLE 1**  
RESULTS: STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELING OF THE UNDERLYING PROCESS (STUDY 1)

Paths	Estimate (standardized)	SE	CR	p-value
Product → mood	.619	.278	7.363	<.001
Mood → comm. expect.	.245	.042	4.798	<.001
Language → compliance	-.242	.508	-1.787	.074
Product → compliance	.167	.505	1.293	.196
Mood → compliance	.455	.155	3.483	<.001
Language × comm. expect. → compliance	.342	.098	2.568	.010

Model fit indices:  $\chi^2(6) = 9.565, p\text{-value} = .144$ ; comparative fit index (CFI) = .988; normed fit index (NFI) = .968; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .088. Comm. expect. = communication expectations; CR = critical ratio for regression weight.

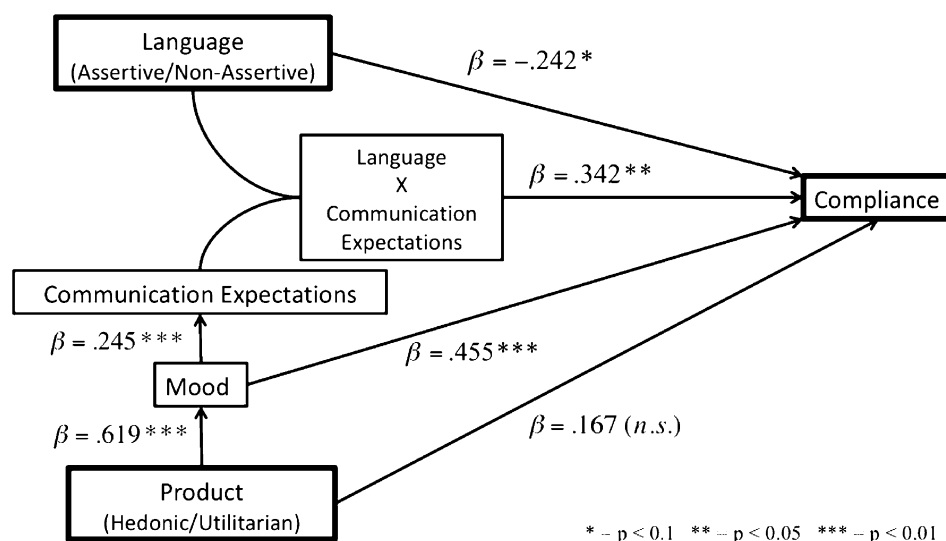
ads from a business magazine, where our linguistic intervention is limited to a minimum. Our purpose in study 2 is to test the main hypothesis 1 in a realistic setting and in a case where utilitarian products are framed as hedonic.

## STUDY 2: THE EFFECT OF HEDONIC FRAMING ON COMPLIANCE WITH ASSERTIVE MESSAGES

In this study we expand the scope of hypothesis 1 by examining “hedonic framing” situations, in which advertising gives a hedonic image to a product or service that is usually viewed as utilitarian. For example, an ad may frame a credit card as access to happy consumption or tires as opening the road to exciting adventures. We test whether mere hedonic

**FIGURE 3**

STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELING OF THE UNDERLYING PROCESS (STUDY 1)



framing can also make a positive effect of assertive language on compliance more likely.

## Method

We chose two real-world magazine advertisements for the experiment. Both advertisements promoted business services identified in a pretest as utilitarian ( $N = 14$ , similar scores of 2 and 2.2 on a 9-point scale). One advertisement, promoting a consulting company, gave a hedonic framing to this utilitarian service by means of a figurative description and an emotional appeal, featuring a picture of a flight to the moon and the slogan "Been There." The other advertisement, promoting a telecommunications company, used a photograph of formally dressed people engaged in a discussion, and featured the sentence "Need people to protect your multi-technology investment?"

To manipulate assertiveness, we edited the directive sentence in each ad into several either assertive or nonassertive phrasings, for example, "You should count on us/count on us" (assertive) and "You can count on us/why not count on us?" (nonassertive). We changed nothing else in the advertisements. Overall, the idea was to employ real persuasive phrases used in real advertisements with only slight adjustments for the purpose of experimental manipulation. We exposed 80 undergraduate students in a between-subjects design to the advertisements and asked them to complete the questions of compliance intention that were used in study 1. To ensure participants indeed perceived the hedonic framing as more hedonic than the utilitarian framing, we added a question that read, "How hedonic does the ad sound?"

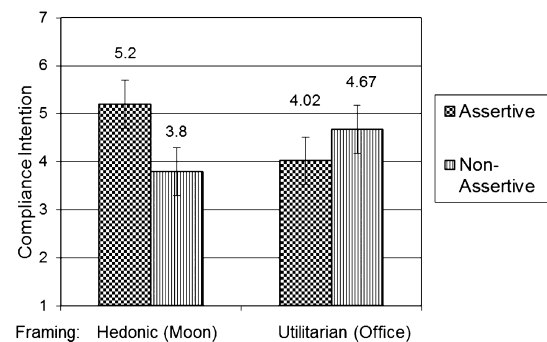
## Results

**Manipulation Check.** A  $t$ -test examining the difference in perceived hedonism between the two print ads confirmed a significant effect of hedonic framing ( $t = 2.23$ ,  $p < .028$ ), because the advertisement describing consulting services as a flight to the moon received higher hedonism scores ( $M = 5.3$ ) than the advertisement that used an office setting to describe a telecommunications service ( $M = 2.4$ ).

**Interaction.** Reliability of compliance intention was  $\alpha = .87$ . We found a significant interaction between product type and assertiveness level in their effect on compliance intention ( $F(1, 76) = 4.03$ ,  $p < .048$ ; see fig. 4). Consistent with our prediction, planned contrasts showed that assertive phrasing elicits higher compliance intentions in a hedonic framing ( $M_{\text{moon-a}} = 5.2$ ) than in a utilitarian framing ( $M_{\text{tele-a}} = 4.02$ ;  $F(1, 76) = 4.5$ ,  $p < .03$ ). Nonassertive phrasing elicited higher compliance intentions in the utilitarian framing ( $M_{\text{tele-n}} = 4.67$ ) than in the hedonic framing ( $M_{\text{moon-n}} = 3.8$ ;  $F(1, 76) = 11.5$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Additional planned contrasts revealed that in hedonic framing, an assertive message yields significantly higher compliance intention, whereas in utilitarian framing, a nonassertive message yields higher compliance intention, though our results did not reach the expected significance level ( $M_{\text{moon-a}} = 5.2$  and  $M_{\text{moon-n}} = 3.8$ ;

FIGURE 4

COMPLIANCE WITH ASSERTIVE AND NONASSERTIVE LANGUAGE IN HEDONICALLY FRAMED CONSUMPTION (STUDY 2)



$F(1, 76) = 6.19$ ,  $p < .018$  and  $M_{\text{tele-a}} = 4.02$  and  $M_{\text{tele-n}} = 4.67$ ;  $F(1, 76) = 1.51$ ,  $p < .23$ ). We found no main effect for assertiveness level or framing on compliance intention. Overall, this result supports and extends our prediction that hedonic framing of utilitarian goods could boost the ability of assertive messages to generate compliance.

## Discussion

Study 2 suggests that the moderation of hedonic consumption on the effect of language on compliance may take place not only when a hedonic product is concerned, but also when a utilitarian product is framed as hedonic. This finding provides additional support to the notion that hedonic consumption contexts can change language perceptions and behavioral responses to language assertiveness. This experiment also corroborates that our findings are not necessarily tied to the inherent hedonic nature of the product being advertised but more likely (consistent with hypothesis 2) tied to the stimulation of good mood triggered by hedonic thoughts. To further support our predictions regarding the link between language and hedonic framing, study 3 tests an inverse process, whereby consumers recognize assertive language as a signal of hedonic consumption.

## STUDY 3: ASSERTIVE LANGUAGE AND PERCEIVED HEDONISM

We predicted in hypothesis 3 that the presence of assertive language may cause consumers to infer that the product is hedonic, whereas a nonassertive message would imply a utilitarian product, due to communication expectations. In this third experiment, we expected participants to associate nonsense imaginary product names (e.g., *Quile* or *Dezlik*) with hedonic consumption after we had introduced those names in an assertive message rather than a nonassertive message. This hypothesis is tied to the sociolinguistic interpretation of this research, according to which the presence

of assertive language is part of the communication expectations associated with hedonic consumption contexts. As hedonic products raise expectations for assertive language, assertive language yields an inference that the product being communicated is likely to be hedonic.

## Method

Participants had to guess the hedonic or utilitarian character of noncued imaginary brands after seeing an assertive or nonassertive message. We adapted our experimental paradigm from Leclerc, Schmitt, and Dubé (1994). Specifically, after reading, for example, “You must try QUILE!” or “You should have a QUILE!” (assertive phrasing) versus “You could try the QUILE” or “Why don’t you have a QUILE?” (nonassertive phrasing), participants were asked to guess what type of product these brands represented, and to judge whether it was a hedonic or a utilitarian product.

In a pretest, 12 judges rated 10 imaginary product names on two 7-point scales measuring the degree to which the names possessed a hedonic and a utilitarian connotation (1 = “not at all,” 7 = “very much so”). For each name, a score was computed as the difference between the hedonic and the utilitarian score. Thus, products judged equally high or low on both scales received a zero, which represented a neutral score. Out of the 10 products, four names were chosen. Their ratings ranged around zero with a variance of no more than 2 and an inter-rate correlation of no less than .5. This pretest ensured that the names of the products would not by themselves affect product perception. The chosen names were Quile, Iklan, Makikel, and Dezlik. These names may sound nonrealistic in English, but they have quite a typical sound and structure in Hebrew (though they do not represent meaningful words).

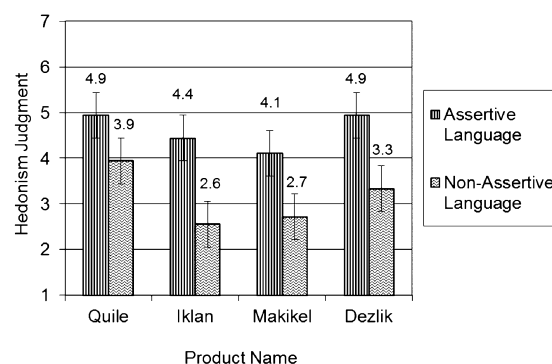
We composed eight messages, employing an assertive and a nonassertive phrasing for each of the four product names. Each participant ( $N = 48$ ) received a booklet containing four messages (one of the versions for each of the four product names). Product names and message phrasings (assertive vs. nonassertive) were counterbalanced. After reading each message, participants evaluated the products on a hedonic-utilitarian 7-point scale (1 = “very utilitarian,” 7 = “very hedonic”).

## Results

To obtain results for this experiment, we ran a repeated measures ANOVA with message type as a between-subjects factor and each of the four names as the within-subjects factor. As predicted in hypothesis 3, we obtained a significant main effect of assertiveness ( $F(1, 34) = 3.47, p < .019$ ). Supporting our prediction, assertive phrasing elevated the perception of hedonism for these imaginary product names. Participants evaluated the same product name as more hedonic following an assertive message and more utilitarian following a nonassertive message. The product name itself had no effect on hedonism judgments, and we found no interaction between product name and assertiveness. Fig-

FIGURE 5

THE EFFECT OF MESSAGE ASSERTIVENESS ON INFERENCES REGARDING THE DEGREE OF HEDONISM OF THE PRODUCT (STUDY 3)



ure 5 shows the differences between the judgments for all products.

## Discussion

Our results show that participants perceived the same imaginary brand name as belonging to a more hedonic product following an assertive message. This finding reinforces the linguistic foundations of our research in terms of communication expectations. It suggests that not only does hedonic state of mind elicit expectations for assertive language, but also assertive language elevates expectations for hedonic consumption. This result is important for marketing research and marketing decisions regarding the framing of products, as well as the effects of using assertive language on perceptions of products and anticipated consumption experiences.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The phrasing of persuasive messages is critical to achieve influence in a way that meets communication norms of requesting. Based on insights from sociolinguistics, this article aimed to support the new prediction that more assertive messages can cause greater compliance in the context of hedonic consumption (or where utilitarian products are described in hedonic terms) and lower compliance in utilitarian consumption contexts. We derived this hypothesis from research that shows that positive mood affects communication expectations in such a way that hearers are more open to assertive language than they are in a neutral or negative mood state. Additionally, previous research has found that when the language of a request matches communication expectations, compliance is elevated—probably due to a perception of mutual understanding, or to a feeling of fluency that makes the request appear natural. This article integrated these psychological observations and took them one



step further by drawing a link between the consumption context evoked in an advertising message and the persuasive effectiveness of the (non)assertive language used in these messages. In particular, hedonic consumption contexts are more likely to generate a positive mood, which in turn prompts consumers to expect assertive language and then to comply with requests using such language. By highlighting these effects, we explain the frequent use of assertively phrased slogans and marketing messages, which may otherwise appear paradoxical given the common finding in sociolinguistics, communications, and consumer research according to which assertive requests should be less persuasive.

Our findings revealed a generally supportive model for our theoretical predictions. As suggested by Bullock, Green, and Ha (2010), future research involving experimental manipulation of language expectations and other suggested mediators may be an important addition toward a comprehensive mediation analysis. In addition, this analysis echoed other research suggesting that positive mood generally elevates readiness for compliance with requests. Research on the effect of mood on general compliance has indeed suggested that happy people are generally more ready to help others (e.g., Fried and Berkowitz 1979; Isen and Levin 1972). This bears some similarity with our findings concerning the effect of mood on compliance, but we discover that the proper use of language (and in particular of language assertiveness) influences compliance, and in addition we further propose that nonassertive messages will hurt compliance in positive-mood contexts. As an optional future research, it is suggested to experimentally manipulate mood in different ways in order to further inquire into the effects of different mood states on language expectations and effects.

Our analysis revealed the mediation effects we were expecting. However, this does not mean that other variables may not affect the moderating role of communication expectations caused by different product types on compliance with assertive language. We are aware that other aspects of communication, such as intimacy of relationships (Rolloff and Janiszewski 1989), higher status (Becker, Kimmel, and Bevil 1989), or easiness of compliance with a request (Clark 1993) predict higher compliance with assertiveness in language. It is possible, for instance, that assertively phrased messages expressed by a source considered an expert in the field would increase consumer compliance, irrespective of the hedonic context. Further research on possible relationships between language and consumption situations may reveal interesting insights.

### The Mediating Role of Mood

It is possible that the mere mention of hedonic consumption is sufficient to prompt communication expectations, without actually affecting the consumer's mood, so it is the product type and not the mood that alters communication expectations. Another possible explanation that does not involve mood is that assertive language may fit an image of the archetypical user of a hedonic product better

than nonassertive language. For instance, when a hedonic product is evoked, it might trigger the image of an impulsive, fun-loving character, associated with assertive language (Holtgraves 1986). The opposite would be true for utilitarian products, perhaps leading to an expectation of polite, orderly language. While the literature we rely on explicitly links mood and language, it might not be able to account for links between the image of an archetypical character and communication expectations. But possibly, although our results show a mediating effect of mood, it is plausible that additional effects of hedonic consumption contexts, such as the associated images of potential consumers, affect expectations for assertive language. Importantly, such alternative explanations would still involve communication expectations as an underlying process.

### Universality of the Findings

In study 2, we used English ads, whereas the rest of the studies were in Hebrew. Research suggests English and Hebrew differ in politeness judgment (e.g., Blum-Kulka 1994). Exploring the robustness of the findings across the two languages was important for this work, as it is also important for other works on language behavior.

### Additional Alternative Explanations

We specifically proposed that hedonic products are likely to prompt a positive mood, which results in the expectation for, and acceptance of, a more direct and assertive communication style. We empirically considered an alternative explanation for the context-dependent effect of message assertiveness, based on the notion that in hedonic product contexts assertiveness could reduce guilt associated with the anticipation of self-indulgence, but this explanation could not account for our findings.

Another alternative explanation may be related to the beneficiary prediction. Specifically, Buller et al. (1992) find that the degree to which the addressee is the beneficiary of a request positively affects compliance with more assertive requests. It is plausible, then, that assertive messages regarding hedonic consumption elicit higher compliance because the consumer is the obvious beneficiary in hedonic consumption contexts. However, this explanation only weakly supports the prediction of the interaction between product type and language, since it mainly predicts that in hedonic consumption contexts *any* request would be effective. More critically, this explanation does not predict why nonassertive phrasing will elicit lower compliance in hedonic product contexts.

Related to the notion of beneficiary, it could be that the assertively phrased messages in hedonic product contexts, such as "you must have this product," are not perceived as commands but rather as advice because the beneficiary in hedonic consumption is more saliently the consumer. This possibility echoes recent findings of Botti and McGill (2011), who relate higher satisfaction with self-made choices in hedonic consumption, compared with utilitarian con-

sumption, to perceptions of hedonic consumption as more self-motivated rather than externally motivated. This explanation is in line with our theorizing of altered communication expectations in hedonic product contexts. However, it suggests an alternative underlying process, where a different phrasing is expected not because the perception of social and communicational rules and borders loosens due to positive mood, but rather because of a different interpretation of the meaning of directive phrases as advice and not as a request. Further, this explanation too does not account for the interaction of language and product type, because it is not clear why there would be more compliance with assertively phrased advice than nonassertively phrased advice. To account for the possible different interpretations of the word “must,” it is possible to use different phrasings in the experimental design. We address this point in study 2, employing various assertive and nonassertive phrasing variations.

Study 2 may also suggest a role for regulatory focus: hedonic framing may elicit a promotion focus—using expressions such as “want to reach new heights”—whereas a utilitarian framing ad may evoke a prevention focus—using expressions such as “to protect your multi-technology investment.” Further examination of the relationships between language effects, product context, and regulatory focus may be interesting.

In the current research, we focused on hedonic consumption as a cause of positive mood and on the assertiveness of advertising slogans. We used various hedonic and utilitarian products in our manipulations. Previous works employ either the same product with different framing—hedonic versus utilitarian (e.g., Botti and McGill 2011) or different products (e.g., Fedorikhin and Patrick 2010). We are aware of the limitations of using different products instead of using the same product with different framing. This limitation is especially relevant in study 2, where we use not only different products but also different advertisements and brands. In our case, using the same product with different framing could be problematic, because the very wording of the framing might have an effect, due to the sensitivity of this research to language manipulations. It was important for us to use as little as possible intervention in the process of product description. To overcome the problem of possible confounds we used different products in each study. We received the same pattern of results each time, which may imply that the hedonic/utilitarian aspect of the products we use is a true moderator in our theory and studies.

We hope that this research brings additional credentials to linguistics foundations in consumer research (e.g., Luna and Peracchio 2001; Phillips and McQuarrie 2009; Puntoni, de Langhe, and Van Osselaer 2009; Zhang and Schmitt 2004). Specifically to this work, an important conclusion we draw is that assertive messages can be effective and nonassertive messages can be counterproductive, depending on how they meet consumers’ communication expectations, an ironic application of Burger King’s famous assertive slogan “Have it your way!”

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