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Generalizing or personalizing: Effects of three types of second person pronouns in service ads

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Abstract Second person pronouns have both generalizing and personalizing functions. Netherlandic Dutch distinguishes three types of address pronouns in the singular: a weak informal pronoun *je*, a strong informal pronoun *jij*, and a formal pronoun *u*. The latter two seem more suitable for personalization thanks to their predominantly deictic reading, while the former easily obtains a generic reading and is therefore best suited for generalization. An experiment tested four hypotheses about the effects of these pronouns on the evaluation of service ads. The results show that hedonic service ads generally receive better evaluations than utilitarian ones. Moreover, while *je* is associated with higher scores than *u* in hedonic service ads, no reliable effect of pronouns was observed in utilitarian ads. Exploratory post-hoc data analyses reveal that, when participants are generally more positive in their evaluation of the ad, they give higher scores to ads with *je* than with *jij* and especially *u*. Interestingly, this effect seems to be reversed among participants who generally give more negative evaluations. For them, use of *u* actually improved the evaluation, although the differences between the pronouns were less credible. These contrasting results suggest that the effects of pronouns strongly depend on the overall positive or negative evaluation of a service or ad.

Keywords experiment, pronouns of address, Netherlandic Dutch, generic, deictic, services marketing, hedonic, utilitarian, involvement

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1 Introduction

In 2023, we found the following excerpt from an investment company on their website. We have bolded the second person pronouns (and will do so in the remainder of this article):

(1) *Allianz heeft per 19 september 2019 een aantal fondswijzigingen doorgevoerd. Hieronder vindt **jij** een overzicht van de actuele koersen van de fondsen van Allianz. Als **jij** klikt op het fonds van **jouw** keuze, dan zie **jij** de fondsinformatie.* (...) *De actuele waarde van **jouw** Allianz beleggingsverzekering(en) kan **jij** dagelijks bekijken in **jouw** persoonlijke digitale kluis. Voor meer informatie kan **jij** uiteraard contact met ons opnemen.*
'Allianz has made a number of fund changes effective September 19, 2019. Below you will find an overview of the current rates of the Allianz funds. If you click on

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the fund of your choice, you will see the fund information. (…) You can view the current value of your Allianz investment insurance daily in your personal digital safe. For more information, please contact us.'

There is an undeniable trend in the Netherlands for companies and organizations to address their customers with the informal pronoun *jij* instead of the formal pronoun *u*. The underlying idea is that the informal pronoun is more personal and expresses solidarity and trust, whereas the formal pronoun that is traditionally used can be considered a negative politeness marker, an expression of distance (Vismans, 2013). A student once told us that, for his work at a company, he was instructed to replace all formal pronouns of address on all pages of the company's website with their informal counterparts. We assume that the fragment in (1) is the result of that same strategy.[1] The formal version of (1) is given in (2) (translation is the same as in (1)):

(2) *Allianz heeft per 19 september 2019 een aantal fondswijzigingen doorgevoerd. Hieronder vindt* ***u*** *een overzicht van de actuele koersen van de fondsen van Allianz. Als* ***u*** *klikt op het fonds van* ***uw*** *keuze, dan ziet* ***u*** *de fondsinformatie.* (…) *De actuele waarde van* ***uw*** *Allianz beleggingsverzekering*(*en*) *kan* ***u*** *dagelijks bekijken in* ***uw*** *persoonlijke digitale kluis. Voor meer informatie kan* ***u*** *uiteraard contact met ons opnemen.*

The authors who have Netherlandic Dutch as their first language agree that the use of the personal pronoun *jij* 'you' and the possessive pronoun *jouw* 'your' in (1) makes the text seem overly direct and, consequently, rude and blunt. For this reason, some first speakers of Dutch would prefer to be addressed with the formal personal pronoun *u* 'you' and the formal possessive pronoun *uw* 'your', as in (2). However, the reason for this preference is not (just) that the pronouns in (1) are informal, but rather (also) that they are the unreduced, 'strong' versions of the informal pronouns (Gruber, 2013; 2017). A third version of the excerpt with the reduced, 'weak' informal personal and possessive pronouns *je* 'you/your' is given in (3) (again, the translation is the same as in (1)):

(3) *Allianz heeft per 19 september 2019 een aantal fondswijzigingen doorgevoerd. Hieronder vind* ***je*** *een overzicht van de actuele koersen van de fondsen van Allianz. Als* ***je*** *klikt op het fonds van* ***je*** *keuze, dan zie* ***je*** *de fondsinformatie.* (…) *De actuele waarde van* ***je*** *Allianz beleggingsverzekering*(*en*) *kan* ***je*** *dagelijks bekijken in* ***je*** *persoonlijke digitale kluis. Voor meer informatie kan* ***je*** *uiteraard contact met ons opnemen.*

Vermaas (2002) already noted the ongoing change from the formal pronoun *u* to the informal pronouns *jij* and *je*, and hypothesized that it was mainly due to an increasing use of the weak informal pronoun *je* as a general form of address: this pronoun sounds

more neutral than *jij*, which emphasizes informality, and the formal pronoun *u*, which expresses distance. "*Je* could therefore be seen as an intermediate form – between *u* and *jij*" (Vermaas, 2002, p. 59, our translation).

We, i.e. the authors who have Netherlandic Dutch as their first language, agree that (3) sounds more natural and neutral, much friendlier, and more polite than (1), even though the weak pronoun *je* is not considered a polite form, unlike the formal pronouns *u* and *uw* in (2) (cf. Vismans, 2023 for an analysis of the complex relationship between theories of address and politeness). This raises the question whether differences in perception of these pronouns go beyond the distinction between formal and informal alone. The aim of the present study is to address this question. Section 2 reviews the literature to find out whether the three types of pronouns have different effects on addressees, in particular, in the context of service advertising. The literature review yields four hypotheses about the impact of these pronouns in service ads. Section 3 reports on an experiment that tested these hypotheses. Section 4 presents the results of the experiment. Section 5 reports some intriguing additional findings that we made when performing exploratory post-hoc analyses of the data. We believe that our findings may have important implications for future studies of the effects of linguistic variables on consumers' attitudes. Section 6 discusses the results and concludes.

2 Pronouns of address and their potential effects

In Dutch, as in many other languages, second person pronouns can be used either deictically (i.e. referring to the addressee), which is considered their "normal" use, or generically, also called "impersonally" (e.g., Siewierska, 2004; Deringer et al., 2015; de Hoop & Tarenskeen, 2015; Kluge, 2016). An example of a generic use of the English second person pronoun *you* is given in (4) (Whitley, 1978, p. 18):

(4) *When my great-grandad was a boy,* ***you*** *could still buy candy for a penny a stick.*

The pronoun *you* in (4) is used generically, as it does not *exclusively* refer to the addressee. Indeed, it is unlikely that *you* refers to the addressee at all, as they were presumably not alive when the speaker's great-grandad was young. The mechanism of generalizing is omnipresent in conversations, and speakers "generalize intuitively, often on the basis of their own experiences" (de Hoop & Tarenskeen, 2015, p. 165). De Hoop and Tarenskeen (2015, p. 164) claim that even when a second person pronoun arguably refers to the speaker rather than the addressee (an example from Dutch can be found in (6) below), it is considered an instance of a generic pronoun, because "the situation is *presented* as a generalization over people" (de Hoop & Tarenskeen, 2015, p. 164). The generic use of second person pronouns is also found in marketing communication, as illustrated by Whitley's (1978, p. 27) example in (5):

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(5) *Well, **your** Frigicool X-59D is about the best little fridge **you**'ll find in **your** moderate-priced range.*

Bolinger (1979, p. 207), in response to Whitley (1978), points out that the second person pronoun in (5) has a personalizing effect and that the use of *you* enables speakers "to generalize and personalize at the same time". We assume that the generic reading of a second person pronoun corresponds to its generalizing function, and the deictic reading to its personalizing function. The line between the two readings is not always clear. Kluge (2016) shows that in the case of potential ambiguity, addressees usually do not ask for further specification, but instead rely on contextual cues to resolve the issue. Third person generic pronouns, such as *one* in English or *men* 'one' in Dutch, do not have the deictic reading. Generic *you*, however, retains a connection to the addressee simply because it is a pronoun of address (Malamud, 2012). By using a second person pronoun, the reader is invited to place themselves in someone else's shoes, which is characteristic for the generic reading of second person pronouns (cf. Malamud, 2012; de Hoop & Tarenskeen, 2015). Generically used second person pronouns have been shown to enhance resonance between people and ideas (Orvell et al., 2020).

The question is whether all three types of second person pronouns in Dutch, *je*, *jij*, and *u*, can refer equally well deictically and generically, and thus have both a personalizing and generalizing function. It has been proposed that only the weak informal pronoun *je* can get a generic reading in Dutch (Malamud, 2006). The reason would be that generic pronouns cannot bear stress, and *je* is a reduced, unstressed pronoun in Dutch. Whitley (1978) similarly claims that generic *you* in English cannot be stressed. However, this claim about English has already been refuted by Bolinger (1979, p. 195), who shares the following example with a stressed *you* receiving a generic interpretation: *I've felt the same way sometimes. It's all right for the professor to ignore the nobodies, but when the one he ignores is **yóu**, that means he's unfair*. Notably, Tarenskeen's (2010, p. 75) Dutch translation of this sentence has the strong informal pronoun *jij*: *Ik voel me soms ook zo. Het is niet erg als de professor de sukkels negeert, maar als **jíj** degene bent die wordt genegeerd, dan is het niet eerlijk*. Tarenskeen concludes that the strong pronoun *jij* in Dutch can have a generic reading, *pace* Malamud (2006).

Gruber (2013, p. 132) discusses some of Tarenskeen's (2010) corpus examples that illustrate the generic reading of the strong pronoun *jij*, such as (6), taken from an interview with a teacher of Dutch in the Netherlands.

(6) *Het leukste als leraar is natuurlijk ook dat **je** ziet dat ze wat leren van wat **jij** ze vertelt*.
'The nicest thing about being a teacher is, of course, that you see that they learn something from what you tell them.'

Gruber (2013, p. 133) confirms that both *je* and *jij* in (6) "can easily be understood as general remarks about teachers", which would be "irreconcilable with my [Gruber's]

generalization that Dutch will always only employ the weak pronoun in generic context." Yet, she maintains that the strong pronoun *jij* does not get a generic reading here, because, she claims, this reading is acceptable only if the addressee is "part of the group the pronoun is generalizing over" (Gruber, 2013, p. 133). However, the addressee in (6), the interviewer, need not be a teacher, and in fact was almost certainly not a teacher. So, there is no evidence to support Gruber's (2013; 2017) and Malamud's (2006) claim that the strong informal pronoun *jij* cannot obtain a generic reading.

A difference between *je* and *jij* is that *jij* is overall much less frequent than *je* (Tarenskeen, 2010). The same holds for the formal pronoun *u* in Netherlandic Dutch. De Hoop and Hogeweg (2014) annotated the readings of all types of second person pronouns in a literary novel and found that 35% of the informal weak pronoun *je* obtained a generic reading. *U* and *jij*, by contrast, hardly ever obtained a generic reading in the novel. It thus appears that *je* receives a generic reading more easily than *jij* and *u*. This is confirmed by a small post-hoc experiment reported in Sadowski et al. (2024). Given that the generic reading generalizes by definition, this difference between address pronouns may have consequences for the effectiveness of marketing communications. Orvell et al. (2019; 2020) show that generic *you* carries persuasive force. Thus, generic forms may improve consumers' perception of the prevalence of an advertised product or service on the market and increase the pressure they experience to appreciate and purchase it (see also Rimal & Real, 2003, on the impact of perceived norms and group identity on human behavior). If the message is aimed at a larger, generic group of consumers, rather than at the individual, the message may be perceived as more persuasive, and the communication may consequently become more effective. Moreover, consumers may react more negatively to a deictically used pronoun, as the message is more likely to be interpreted as a directive in that case (Zemack-Rugar et al., 2017; Sadowski et al., 2024). We thus expect *je* to be more effective than *jij* and *u* in marketing communications (**H1**).

H1: Participants will respond more positively to service ads with a weak informal pronoun of address than to ads with strong informal or formal pronouns:
je > *jij, u*

Research has found different or ambiguous effects of Netherlandic Dutch formal and informal pronouns of address in different communicative settings. On the one hand, Leung et al. (2023) and Schoenmakers et al. (2024) found a positive effect for the informal pronouns of address compared to the formal pronoun in a product advertising context. Moreover, Sadowski et al. (2024) found higher ratings for the informal pronouns of address in donation appeals. On the other hand, van Zalk and Jansen (2004), Jansen and Janssen (2005), and de Hoop et al. (2023) found an overall slightly positive effect of the formal pronoun in different types of text.

Importantly, van Zalk and Jansen (2004) and Jansen and Janssen (2005) compared the formal pronoun *u* to the weak informal pronoun *je* in their studies, while de Hoop

et al. (2023) chose to compare the formal pronoun *u* to the strong informal pronoun *jij*, "because the reduced form is more neutral, whereas the full form puts more emphasis on the informal character" (de Hoop et al., 2023, p. 100). While Schoenmakers et al. (2024) also compared the strong informal pronoun of address to the formal one in a product adverting context, Sadowski et al. (2024) used both the strong and weak informal pronoun in one and the same slogan and compared them to the formal one.

These studies demonstrate that the specific context of pronoun use is crucial. In our study, we focus on service ads. Service advertising differs from product advertising, but they are also quite similar in terms of what makes them persuasive (Butler & Abernethy, 1994). The question is whether a formal or informal pronoun will lead to a higher rating for the service in question, which could also depend on the type of service. Traditionally, a difference is made between utilitarian and hedonic services, where the former are functional (e.g., financial services or healthcare) and the latter more related to customer experience, having fun (e.g., leisure or entertainment industries). Barcelos et al. (2018) argue that for hedonic services, it is better to use a human instead of the more traditional corporate voice in interactions with customers on social media. In contrast, for utilitarian services such as financial consulting or medical services, it is better to use a corporate than a human voice and keep more distance when interacting with customers. This could mean that in hedonic services marketing, informal pronouns of address, marking closeness and solidarity, would lead to higher evaluation (attitude towards the ad and service, and purchase intention) than formal pronouns, marking respect and distance (**H2**), and vice versa for utilitarian services marketing (**H3**).

H2: Participants will respond more positively to hedonic service ads with an informal pronoun of address than to ads with a formal pronoun of address:
jij, je > *u*

H3: Participants will respond more positively to utilitarian service ads with a formal pronoun of address than to ads with an informal pronoun of address:
u > *jij, je*

Additionally, we assume that involvement plays a role in people's appreciation of services advertising. Jansen and Janssen (2005) found that higher ratings of persuasive texts were given by readers who were more involved in the sense that they were interested in the topic of the text and agreed with the advice given in it. Marketing research has shown that the interaction between attitude towards an ad and product involvement can have a positive impact on brand image (e.g., Nagar, 2015). Schoenmakers et al. (2024) also measured participants' product involvement in their study on product advertising. The results showed that participants who were more involved with a product were more

appreciative of it as well as of its ad, and they had a higher purchase intention compared to less involved participants. Therefore, we expect higher ratings when participants feel more involved with the services advertised (**H4**).

H4: Participants who are highly involved with a certain service will respond more positively to ads for this particular service than participants who are less involved.

3 Methodology

We conducted a questionnaire in Qualtrics to test the four hypotheses put forward in Section 2. The study was approved by the Ethics Assessment Committee Humanities of Radboud University Nijmegen (ETC-GW number 2021-9598).

3.1 Participants and design

366 respondents were recruited online through snowball sampling (45.36% male, M_{Age} = 34.83, SD = 15.15) to participate in a 3 (form of address: *je* vs. *jij* vs. *u*) × 2 (service type: utilitarian vs. hedonic) factorial mixed design experiment, where the form of address was a between-subjects factor and the type of service a within-subjects factor. Thus, each respondent saw only one address pronoun throughout the experiment (including the informed consent, which used the same address pronoun), while they were exposed to ads for both hedonic and utilitarian services. We excluded those participants who did not provide any sociolinguistic information as well as four participants who did not identify as either male or female, because the low number made it impossible to test the gender differences statistically. Finally, the participants who had not provided all numeric scores were excluded from the analyses, as well as one participant who responded with 0 on every scale. Our final dataset contained data from 355 participants. We also carried out additional tests based on the dataset with all participants (see Section 4), which confirm our original results.

3.2 Stimulus material

The stimulus material consisted of fictitious ads for various services. We conducted a pre-test to find out whether the respondents perceived certain services as either hedonic or utilitarian (Palazon & Delgado-Ballester, 2013). The pre-test included descriptions of six utilitarian services (bank, health insurance, energy provider, car insurance, water supply company, repair service) and six hedonic services (museum card, meal box, hairdresser/barber, cinema subscription, streaming service, wellness center). For each of these services, we asked participants to indicate to what extent they would use the service for pleasure (hedonic) or for practical purpose (utilitarian) on a scale from 0 to 100

Figure 1 Service ad for a cinema subscription. From left to right: formal, strong informal, and weak informal pronoun

(where 0 is hedonic and 100 utilitarian). 36 respondents (M_{age} = 27.44; *SD* = 11.73; 40.6% male) participated in this pre-test. Based on the results, we selected two services that scored the best on the hedonic benefits they provide, namely cinema subscription (*M* = 13.16; *SD* = 17.68) and wellness center (*M* = 15.09; *SD* = 23.49), and two services that scored the best on the utilitarian benefits, namely health insurance (*M* = 95.84; *SD* = 12.05) and energy provider (*M* = 91.09; *SD* = 17.43). We developed ads for these four services for use in the main experiment. We additionally exposed participants to four filler ads: two for a music festival and two for a sports service.

All ads consisted of texts of about 100 words each containing about ten pronouns of address, as well as a logo and a fictitious brand name of the service. Each description of a service started by addressing the consumer for instance through a question, to generate their interest in the service and to emphasize the personal relevance of the offer. The ads then presented the benefits of the service, mentioned its price, and finally indicated where consumers could find more information about the service and how to get in touch with the service provider. See Figure 1 for one example of a service ad in the three versions.

3.3 Procedure

Respondents were first asked for informed consent, written with the same address pronoun (*je*, *jij*, *u*) that was assigned to them in the main experiment. We then collected their demographics (age, gender, education). Before the main part of the experiment, participants were asked about their level of involvement with each service. Thus, we measured participants' involvement with the services prior to and independent of the service ads shown to them later (Schoenmakers et al., 2024). We measured involvement on a 100-point scale with one question for six different services, namely a cinema subscription, health insurance, wellness center, fitness center, energy provider, and personal trainer. The verbal labels at the extremes of the scales measuring involvement were: [*Service*] *is not really something for me* – [*Service*] *is really something for me* (Schoenmakers et al., 2024).

In the main part of the experiment, each participant saw eight ads presented in random order: two ads for a hedonic service, two ads for a utilitarian service, and four filler ads. After each ad, we collected evaluations of the presented services (in terms of attitude towards the service, attitude towards the ad, and purchase intention). We measured all variables on 100-point slider scales (Schoenmakers et al., 2024). The slider bar was initially set at 50 and had to be moved in order to proceed with the experiment. Participants did not see the numerical values corresponding to their responses, so as to force them to rely on their intuitions. We used two items per variable from the semantic differential scales of Hornikx and Hof (2008):

- Attitude towards the service: I find this service nice – not nice; not attractive – attractive;
- Attitude towards the ad: I find this ad interesting – boring; not original – original;
- Purchase intention: This service, I would certainly purchase – not purchase; I would not recommend – I would recommend this service to my friends.

Finally, we asked participants to what extent they felt personally addressed by the ad (completely disagree – completely agree).

3.4 Data treatment for regression analyses

We used R (R Core team, 2024) for data transformation and regression analyses. The data underwent several transformations before we could test our hypotheses. First, we made sure that the numeric scales were re-oriented in such a way that a higher value represented a more positive attitude. After the transformation, the correlations between the scores on the two scales meant to reflect participants' attitude towards the advertised service (Pearson's $r = 0.68$), the participants' attitude towards the ad (Pearson's $r = 0.60$), and the participants' purchase intention (Pearson's $r = 0.68$) were positive, but not very strong.

We used all scores representing the participants' attitude towards the service, the ad, as well as their purchase intention, as a single response variable in the regression models reported below. In what follows, we refer to this multifaceted variable as the participants' Evaluation of the service, or simply *Evaluation*. We chose for this type of aggregation because we are interested in the effectiveness of the service advertising in general rather than in terms of the individual scales. Our approach allows us to use many data points for statistical inference, which is an advantage when the relatively small effects of linguistic variables on users' preferences are modeled (cf. de Hoop et al., 2023). Furthermore, the information about which specific scale every Evaluation score belonged to was reflected in a variable called *Scale*. There were seven scales in total (see Section 3.3). The variable Scale was treated as a random effect in mixed-effects regression models, which enables us to generalize the results beyond the specific constructs represented by the scales, while accounting for their variability. Recall that our research hypotheses

are formulated without referring to the specific scales. Since we are not interested in the effects of the pronouns and other predictors on the individual scales, we can treat the latter as randomly sampled from a larger theoretical population of possible scales representing different aspects of consumers' attitudes. Our approach also has practical advantages. Pooling all observations together leads to more stable estimates and more precise credible intervals.

The scores for the participants' involvement, which were used as a predictor in our analyses, were divided by 100, such that the transformed scores ranged from 0 to 1. The motivation behind this step was to solve numeric problems that emerged during the regression analyses. The responses about the participants' level of education were simplified, such that all participants fitted one of the following categories: secondary education (vo), senior secondary vocational education (mbo), higher professional education (hbo), or academic higher education (wo).[2] The *Age* variable was scaled and centered around 0.

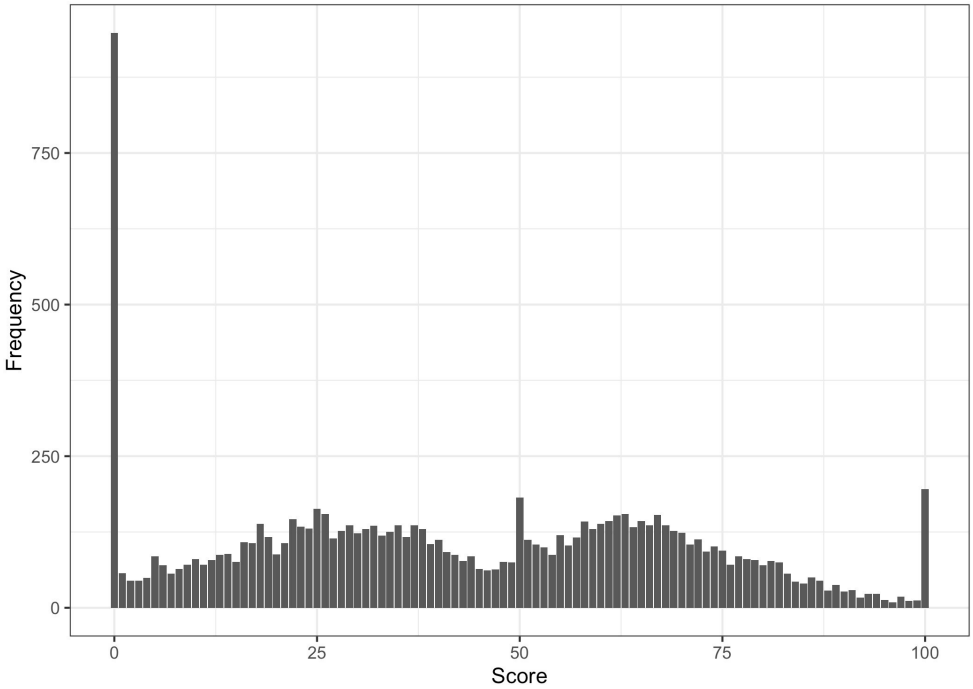
The final dataset was in a "long" format, in which every row contained a specific numeric response (Evaluation) of one participant to one ad on one scale. The row also contained information about the participant, the ad, its category (hedonic or utilitarian), the address pronoun, the involvement score, and the scale on which the numeric response was obtained.

While analyzing the data, we discovered that the scores of Evaluation were distributed in a peculiar way. Figure 2 displays the frequencies of each individual score from 0 to 100. One can see that the value 0 was selected very frequently (note that the starting point of the scale was set at 50). Thus, some participants completely rejected some of the ads. The other most popular scores were 100 and 50 (note also that participants were forced to move the slider bar), although these were much less frequent. The overall negative scores (from 1 to 49), as well as the overall positive scores (from 51 to 99), are closer to the middle of the distribution, representing two very rough 'humps'. This suggests that some participants tended to have either a somewhat negative or a somewhat positive evaluation.

With this peculiar distribution, linear regression failed to provide a good fit for all ranges of the Evaluation scores, judging from the posterior predictive checks – a popular diagnostics method. This is why we decided to bin the original numeric scores into several categories. The categories were "Minimum" (0), "Low" (from 1 to 49), "Middle" (50), "High" (51-99), and "Maximum" (100). Using these categories as the response variable, we fitted a cumulative logistic model, which we discuss in Section 4.

After exploratory post-hoc tests, we also observed that the effects of the predictors vary substantially depending on whether the participants gave a positive or negative evaluation of the experimental items. Strikingly, the effect of Pronoun, which is the main predictor of interest in our study, is the opposite in the two sets of data. This is why we also report the results of two distinct models in Section 5, one with Evaluation scores from 51 to 99, the other with Evaluation scores from 1 to 49, after presenting the model with all data points in Section 4.

Figure 2 Distribution of Evaluation scores in the dataset with four service ads



We fitted Bayesian generalized mixed-effects regression models using the brms package by Bürkner (2018). For every model, we created four chains with 4,000 iterations, from which the initial warm-up 2,000 iterations were discarded. The adapt delta factor was 0.9. All R-hats were 1.00, which means that the chains converged.

4 Results

This section reports the results of statistical analyses based on the four experimental service ads: utilitarian (energy supplier and health insurance) and hedonic (wellness and cinema subscription). The dataset contained 10,248 response scores.

The model included all datapoints and had a response variable with five categories representing the participants' *Evaluation*: "Minimum", "Low", "Middle", "High", and "Maximum" (see above). We used weakly informative, "liberal" Cauchy priors with center 0 and scale 2.5 for the fixed effects (Gelman et al., 2008), and the default priors for the other parameters provided in the brms package.

We began the process of model selection by including random intercepts for the individual participants and an interaction between *Scale* and *Ad* as random effects (cf. de Hoop et al., 2023), and all predictors (*Pronoun*, *Age*, *Gender*, *Education*, *Category*, and

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Table 1 Coefficients, their 95% credible intervals, and posterior probability of a positive effect (b > 0) on Evaluation split into five categories in the total dataset, based on a cumulative logistic model

Regression term	Coefficient estimate	Lower boundary of 95% CI	Upper boundary of 95% CI	Posterior probability b > 0
Intercept [1]	−2.63	−3.11	−2.15	≈0%
Intercept [2]	1.14	0.66	1.63	≈100%
Intercept [3]	1.25	0.77	1.73	≈100%
Intercept [4]	5.98	5.46	6.49	≈100%
Pronoun = *jij* (vs. *je*)	−0.31	−0.74	0.10	7.1%
Pronoun = *u* (vs. *je*)	−0.45	−0.86	−0.04	1.5%
Involvement (transformed)	2.27	1.78	2.76	≈100%
Age (scaled)	−0.09	−0.26	0.07	13.7%
Gender = M (vs. F)	−0.03	−0.32	0.26	42.7%
Education = hbo (vs. wo)	0.02	−0.32	0.35	54%
Education = mbo (vs. wo)	0.33	−0.09	0.75	93.8%
Education = vo (vs. wo)	0.41	−0.23	1.06	89.5%
Category = Utilitarian	0.04	−0.54	0.62	55.2%
Pronoun = *jij*:Category = Utilitarian	0.40	−0.08	0.87	94.5%
Pronoun = *u*:Category = Utilitarian	0.51	0.04	0.98	98.4%
Involvement:Category = Utilitarian	−1.55	−2.29	−0.79	≈0%

Involvement). Using the criterion WAIC, we estimated whether the initial model could be improved by incorporating a more complex random effects structure. We found that the model was substantially better when we added the random intercepts for Category nested in participants (Participant/Category). Moreover, we added two random slopes for the interaction between Scale and Ad: one for the Involvement scores and the other for the participants' Age.

As far as interactions are concerned, we tested the theoretically important interaction between Pronoun and Category. We also used WAIC to identify other useful interactions, which led to the addition of an interaction between Involvement and Category. The regression terms are displayed in Table 1.

The coefficient estimates are on the logit scale. A positive estimate means that this regression term improves Evaluation, whereas a negative one shows that this term makes

it worse. The boundaries of the 95% credible intervals represent 2.5% and 97.5% quantiles of the posterior distributions. Finally, the posterior probabilities of $b > 0$ in the rightmost column show how consistent the posterior distributions are with a positive effect on Evaluation. If a distribution has near 100% posterior probability of the effect being greater than 0, this means that we can be confident that this variable has a positive effect. If it is close to 0, we can believe that the effect is negative.

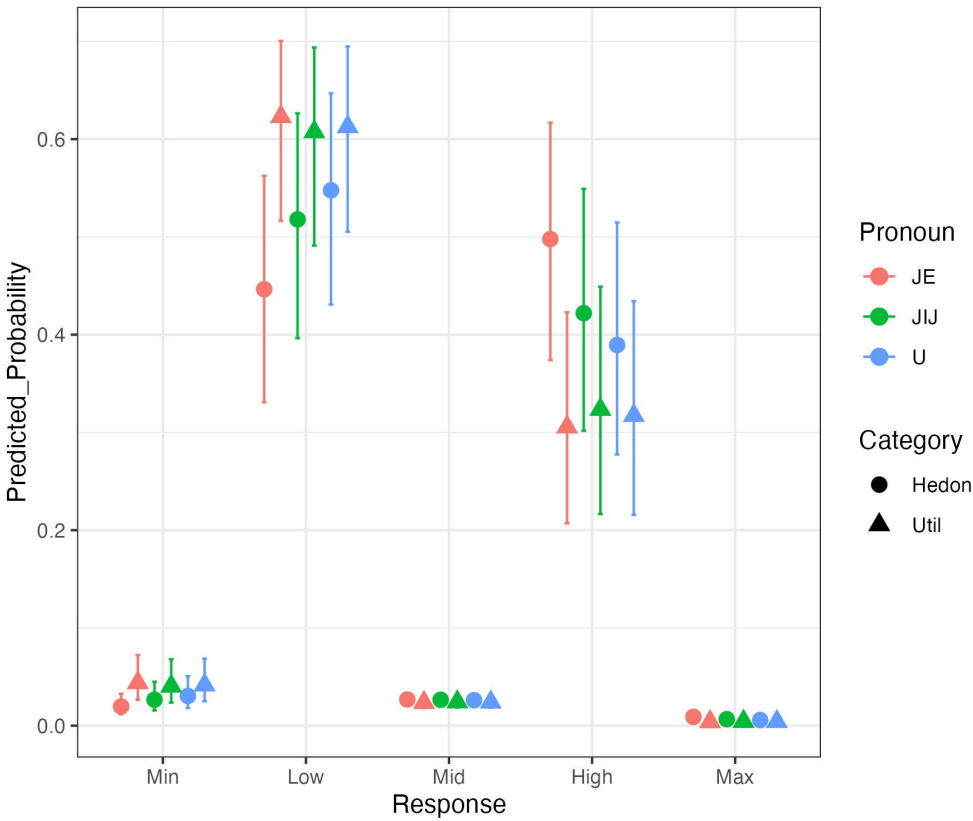
The intercepts are in fact "thresholds", showing the log-odds of having a specific score category if all the predictors are at their base levels or equal to zero. The first intercept [1] shows the log-odds of being in category Minimum versus all other score categories. The second intercept [2] represents the log-odds of being in categories Minimum or Low versus the higher categories, and so on.

As far as the demographic variables are concerned, participants who only attended secondary school or senior secondary vocational college gave overall slightly higher scores compared to the reference level (university education). The posterior probabilities of these positive effects are 93.8% and 89.5%, respectively, which can be interpreted as relatively weak evidence. The effects of Age and Gender are close to zero and not convincing, judging from the posterior probabilities and credible intervals.

The other variables, Pronoun, Category, and Involvement, which are relevant for our theoretical hypotheses, are involved in interactions. Note that we also tested a three-way interaction between these variables, but this interaction was not supported by the data. Let us begin with the interaction between Pronoun and Category. Figure 3 displays the predicted probabilities of each of the five binned responses for all combinations of Pronoun and Category. The plot shows that the predicted probabilities of the Minimum, Maximum, and Middle Evaluation scores are similarly low for all pronouns and categories. The main differences are observed for the Low and High scores. The utilitarian service ads have higher probability to get low evaluations and lower probability to get high evaluations than the hedonic ones. Notably, all pronouns have very similar probabilities if a utilitarian service is advertised. However, the pronouns display substantial differences for the hedonic service ads, where the probability of a low score is the lowest if *je* is used and highest if *u* is used, with *jij* in the middle. As for the probabilities of a high score, the picture is reversed: the probability is the lowest if *u* is used and the highest if *je* is used, with *jij* in between.

Because of the interaction between Pronoun and Category, we need to compare the effects of the forms for each Category separately. For the hedonic services, *je* is more likely to have higher Evaluation scores than *jij*. The log-odds difference is positive: the median $d = 0.317$, with the 95% Highest Posterior Density (HPD) interval between −0.113 and 0.729. This means that the evidence for this difference is not strong. By contrast, the difference between *je* and *u* in the hedonic service ads is positive and strongly supported by the data: $d = 0.452$ with the 95% HPD from 0.024 to 0.846. The difference between *jij* and *u* is small and not credible, though: $d = 0.14$, the 95% HPD from −0.303 to 0.58. As for the utilitarian service ads, the differences between the pronouns are very close

Figure 3 Predicted probabilities of binned responses for different combinations of Pronoun and Category



to zero: for *je* vs. *jij*, $d = -0.08$ (95% HPD −0.506 to 0.357), for *jij* vs. *u*, $d = -0.053$ (95% HPD −0.485 to 0.361), and for *je* vs. *u*, $d = 0.027$ (95% HPD −0.421 to 0.47).

The interaction between Involvement and Category is displayed in Figure 4. Higher involvement (transformed to fall in the range from 0 to 1) leads to lower chances of the ad receiving minimum and low scores and higher chances of it getting high and maximum Evaluation scores. The effect of Category differs depending on the level of Involvement. In comparison with the hedonic service ads, the utilitarian service ads are overall more likely to receive lower Evaluation scores and less likely to receive higher Evaluation scores. But if Involvement is very low, there is no difference between the two categories of ads. As Involvement increases, the difference becomes more pronounced.

Because the effects of the demographic variables (Gender, Age, Education) were not supported by the data, or supported only weakly, we also fitted a model without these variables. This enabled us to include data from all participants. We detected no substantial differences in the effects of the remaining variables. The results can be found in the document "Additional tests" in the online repository.

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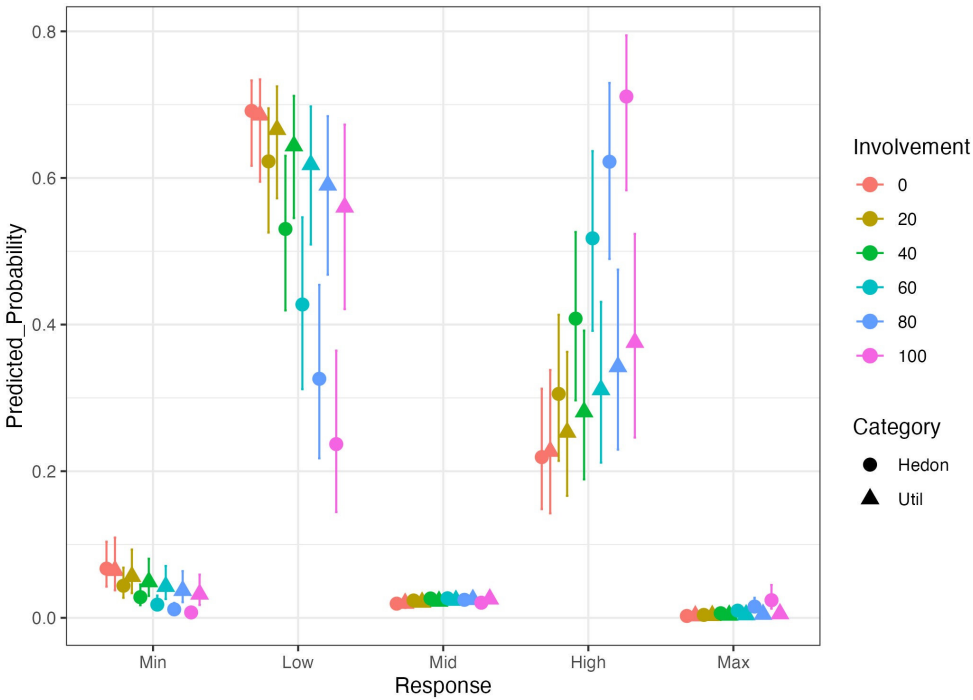
Figure 4 Predicted probabilities of binned responses for different values of Involvement (transformed) and Category



Below we summarize the results of our hypothesis testing. These will be further discussed in Section 6.

- H1 is partially confirmed. Only with regard to the difference between *je* and *u*, and only in the hedonic service ads, it is supported by the data. All other contrasts and contexts do not provide evidence for the preference of *je* over *jij* and *u*.
- H2 is partially confirmed. From the estimates, we see instead a cline of *je* > *jij* > *u*, whereby only the difference between *je* and *u* is sufficiently supported by the data.
- H3 is not confirmed. There are no substantial differences between the pronouns in utilitarian service ads.
- H4 is supported, but the effect of Involvement is moderated by the category of services, being stronger for hedonic services than for utilitarian ones.

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5 Results of exploratory post-hoc analyses

5.1 Analysis of high Evaluation scores

The model discussed in Section 4 only tested the effects of the predictors on the probabilities of a score belonging to one of five categories, due to the problems with fitting the numeric scores of Evaluation. But are there any differences in the effects on the actual numeric scores? We zoomed in on the effects of the variables when the participants gave high Evaluation scores. We used beta regression to model the data, in order to avoid predicted values higher than 100 and lower than 0. Beta regression can only model the scores between 0 and 1, excluding 0 and 1. For this purpose, the scores from 51 to 99 were first transformed into those from 0.2 to 0.98. The default priors were used.

As in the model above, we began the process of model selection by including random intercepts for the individual participants and an interaction between the random effects of Scale and Ad (cf. de Hoop et al., 2023), and all predictors. Using the criterion WAIC, we estimated whether the initial model could be improved by incorporating a more complex random effects structure. We found that the model was substantially better when we added the random intercepts for Category nested in participants (Participant/Category) and an interaction between the fixed effects of Involvement and Category.

The coefficients in this enhanced model, which are on the logit scale, are shown in Table 2. A positive coefficient means that the variable increases the Evaluation scores, and a negative coefficient means that the variable decreases them.

Looking at the results, we can conclude that the formal pronoun *u* has a negative effect on the scores compared to the weak informal variant *je*. The evidence for this effect is quite strong: the 95% credible interval does not include zero, and the posterior probability of a negative effect is 100% – 0.4% = 99.6%, which is high. The strong informal *jij* is in between, as shown in the left-hand plot of Figure 5. Note that the scores are transformed back to their original values from 51 to 99, to facilitate interpretation. An additional pairwise comparison shows that the difference between *jij* and *u* is quite small, too: the difference in log-odds $d = 0.105$, and the 95% interval is between −0.066 and 0.282.

As for the demographic variables, there is a suggestive effect of Age. Older participants tend to give scores closer to 100, if they choose to give a positive score. The posterior probability of this positive effect is almost 95%. The role of Gender is uncertain so far, with only 81.3% probability of male participants giving higher scores than female participants. We thus cannot be sure of any effect. As for education, the further the participants' education from the reference level (academic higher education (wo)), the higher the Evaluation scores, as shown in Figure 6.

We also observe an interaction between Involvement and Category, which is displayed in Figure 7. Personal involvement overall has a positive effect on the Evaluation scores. However, its effect is smaller if the service belongs to the utilitarian category in comparison with the hedonic services.

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Figure 5 Left: Effect of Pronoun in the data with high scores. Right: Effect of Pronoun in the data with low scores

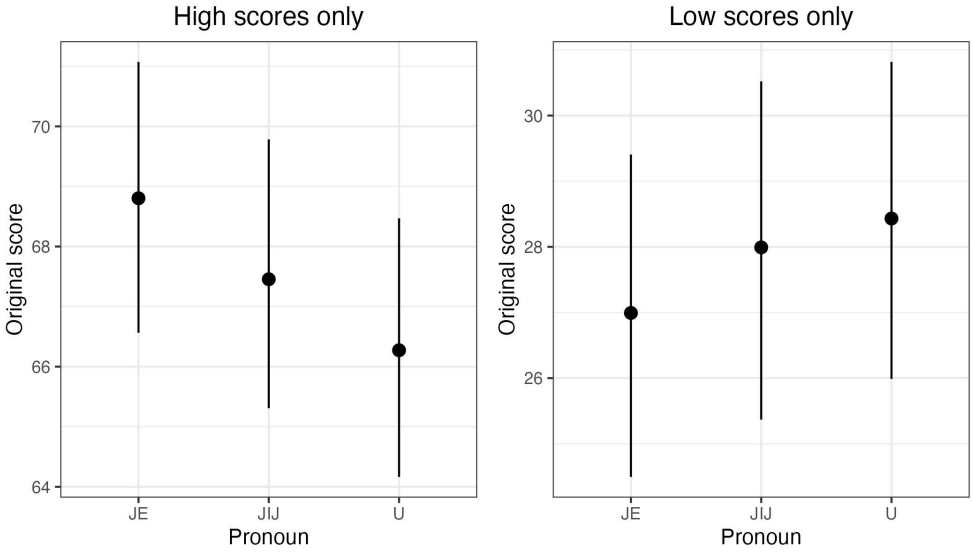

Table 2 Coefficients, their 95% credible intervals, and posterior probability of a positive effect (b > 0) on the Evaluation scores in the data with high scores only

Regression term	Coefficient estimate	Lower boundary of 95% CI	Upper boundary of 95% CI	Posterior probability b > 0
Intercept	−1.00	−1.21	−0.80	≈0%
Pronoun = *jij* (vs. *je*)	−0.12	−0.28	0.05	8.5%
Pronoun = *u* (vs. *je*)	−0.22	−0.38	−0.06	0.4%
Involvement (transformed)	0.80	0.64	0.96	≈100%
Age (scaled)	0.06	−0.01	0.13	94.6%
Gender = M (vs. F)	0.06	−0.07	0.20	81.3%
Education = hbo (vs. wo)	0.06	−0.10	0.22	76.2%
Education = mbo (vs. wo)	0.23	0.03	0.43	98.8%
Education = vo (vs. wo)	0.44	0.14	0.74	99.8%
Category = Utilitarian	0.09	−0.16	0.34	74.7%
Involvement:Category = Utilitarian	−0.55	−0.84	−0.26	≈0%

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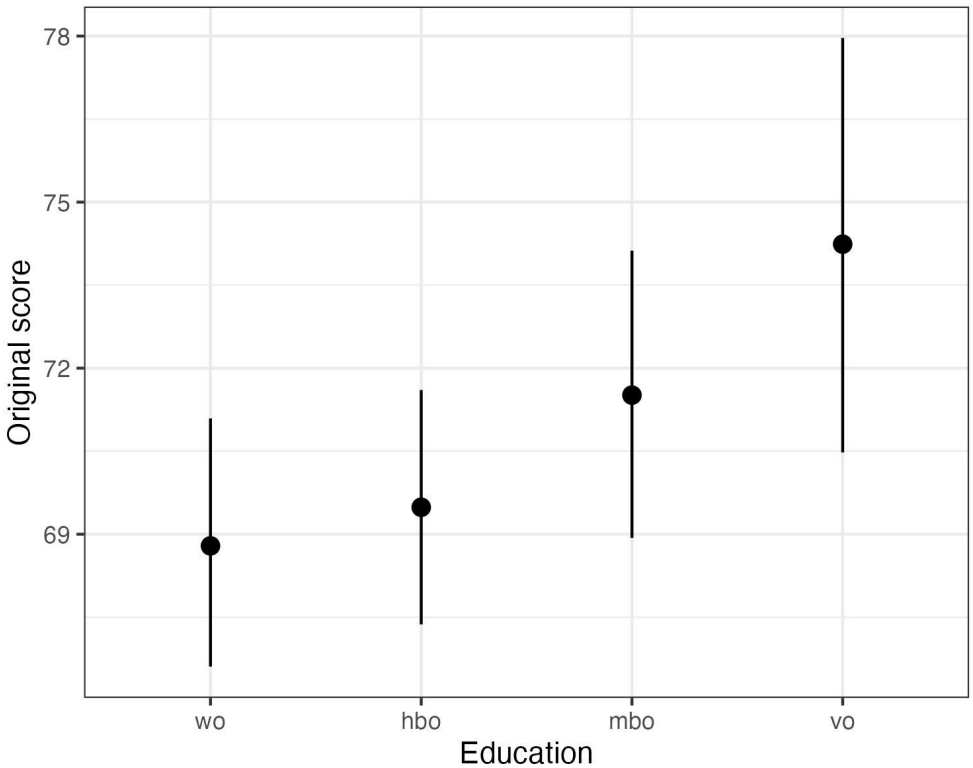
Figure 6 Conditional effects of Education in the data with high scores. The predicted scores are computed for the mean or most common value of the other predictors. wo = academic higher education; hbo = higher professional education; mbo = senior secondary vocational education; vo = secondary education



5.2 Analysis of low Evaluation scores

Here, we report the model based on the low Evaluation scores, from 1 to 49. We used the same data transformation and procedure as in the previous subsection. Unlike in the previous model, we found no useful interactions between the predictors. Table 3 displays the coefficients.

Crucially, the effect of Pronoun is reversed, as shown in the right-hand panel of Figure 5. Whereas *je* was associated with higher Evaluation scores compared to *jij* and especially to *u* in the model with high scores only, now *u* has the higher scores, followed by *jij*, and finally by *je*. The differences are less robust than in the model with high scores only, however. The evidence is weak. There is no interaction between Pronoun and Category, but there is a general preference for *u* in all ads.

Involvement has a robust positive effect, but there is no interaction with Category. Unlike in the previous model, we observe no effects of Education. Interestingly, Age

Figure 7 Conditional plot of the interaction between Involvement and Category in the data with high scores

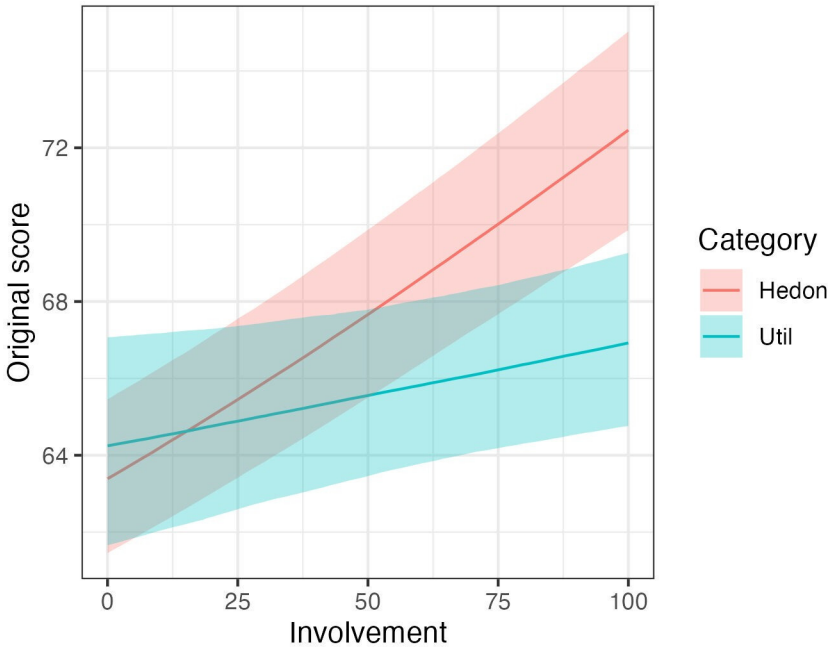


Table 3 Coefficients, their 95% credible intervals, and posterior probability of a positive effect (b > 0) on the Evaluation scores in the data with low scores only

Regression term	Coefficient estimate	Lower boundary of 95% CI	Upper boundary of 95% CI	Posterior probability b > 0
Intercept	−0.03	−0.24	0.17	38.0%
Pronoun = *jij* (vs. *je*)	0.08	−0.10	0.26	80.5%
Pronoun = *u* (vs. *je*)	0.12	−0.06	0.30	89.9%
Involvement (transformed)	0.35	0.23	0.48	≈100%
Age (scaled)	−0.06	−0.14	0.02	6.4%
Gender = M (vs. F)	−0.11	−0.26	0.04	7.4%
Education = hbo (vs. wo)	−0.03	−0.20	0.15	36.4%
Education = mbo (vs. wo)	−0.04	−0.26	0.18	34.5%
Education = vo (vs. wo)	−0.03	−0.37	0.32	42.8%
Category = Utilitarian	0.02	−0.12	0.17	62.1%

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has a negative effect this time, with 100% – 6.4% = 93.6% posterior probability. Older participants tend to give scores closer to 0. Male participants give lower scores this time, also with more than 90% probability. This is also in contrast with the positive (but not very credible) effect observed above.

This subsection and the previous have demonstrated that the effects of Pronoun (as well as some of the other variables, such as Age and Gender) go in different directions depending on whether the participants like or dislike the ads and services. The effects of other variables are different as well: Education and Category seem to matter only if the Evaluation scores are high.

6 Discussion and conclusions

Our first hypothesis was that participants will respond more positively to service ads with *je* than with *jij* or *u*, due to the generic reading that *je* can obtain more easily than *jij* and *u*: *je* > *jij, u*. This hypothesis was supported by the categorical data (overall preferences), but only for the hedonic services, and only for *je* compared to *u*, not for *je* compared to *jij*. It might be that *jij* more than *u* has the potential to generalize, although this is not what Sadowski et al. (2024) found in their small post-hoc study concerning the differences between *jij*, *je*, and *u*. They showed that *u* acquires a generic reading more easily than *jij*, probably because grammatically singular *u* can also be used in the plural to address a group of addressees. However, the informal pronouns are by default used in Dutch ads and have been shown to contribute to a more positive evaluation of the ads (Leung et al., 2023; Schoenmakers et al., 2024). Therefore, it might be the combination of informality with the generalizing effect that distinguishes *je* (but not *jij*) from *u* in two respects, leading to a more positive response, albeit only for hedonic services.

That informality plays a role in hedonic service ads would be in line with our second hypothesis, which was that participants would respond more positively to hedonic service ads featuring an informal pronoun of address (*jij* or *je*) than to the formal pronoun *u* (*jij, je* > *u*), although only the contrast between *je* and *u* is sufficiently reliable. However, the absence of an interaction between the type of pronoun and the type of service (hedonic or utilitarian) suggests that both the second and third hypotheses, about hedonic and utilitarian service ads, respectively, are not confirmed by the data. The question is how to explain these findings. We assumed that the generalizing rather than the personalizing function of second person pronouns would be responsible for their success in a services marketing context. We find that it might rather be the combination of generalization and informality that makes the weak informal pronoun *je* preferred to the formal pronoun *u* in service advertising, because the difference between *je* and *jij* is not significant in any of our models. The difference between *je* and *u* is only found for hedonic service ads, for which we hypothesized that participants would prefer an informal pronoun of

address to a formal one. The fact that no differences are found for utilitarian service ads may be because utilitarian service ads are subject to two conflicting constraints: the first hypothesis was that *je* would lead to a more positive response than *jij* and *u* in service ads, but the third hypothesis was that *u* would be more appreciated than the informal pronouns *jij* and *je* in utilitarian service ads.

The fourth hypothesis about the positive effect of involvement with a certain service is supported by the categorical and numeric data. The effect is stronger for hedonic services than for utilitarian ones. Overall, involvement scores are lower for utilitarian services, resulting in a lower rating regardless of pronoun type.

To summarize, the different types of pronouns seem to have little effect on the overall evaluation of the service ads, as our model of five coarse-grained response categories demonstrates. However, the picture changes if we zoom in on specific regions of the Evaluation scores, as reported in Section 5. When participants are more positive in their evaluation of the service ad (the numeric high scores data), they give higher scores to the ads with the weak informal pronoun *je* than with *jij* and especially *u*. The order of preference is: *je* > *jij* > *u*. In contrast, when participants are less positive in their evaluation (the numeric low scores data), the order of preference is reversed. In that case, there seems to be a preference for the formal pronoun *u*, which slightly boosts the scores, whereas the weak informal pronoun *je* has the lowest scores, and the strong informal pronoun *jij* is again in between: *u* > *jij* > *je*. Note, however, that the evidence supporting this reverse effect is weaker than in the case of the dataset with high scores. Still, it is notable that the regression coefficients reveal opposing patterns in the datasets with high and low scores.

Furthermore, our post-hoc analyses allowed us to detect some effects of the demographic variables. When we zoomed in on the higher Evaluation scores, we found that older participants and those with lower education tended to give (even) higher scores than younger and more educated participants. When we focused on the lower Evaluation scores, older and male participants tended to give (even) lower scores than younger and female participants. These findings suggest that older customers give more extreme (positive and negative) reactions to service ads. More research is needed to corroborate these results.

Schoenmakers et al. (2024) concluded that the use of a strong informal pronoun *jij* in a product ad is more effective than the formal pronoun *u*, which is better avoided. This cannot be generalized to all types of ads, however. For hedonic services, the use of the weak informal pronoun *je* seems the best choice, probably because this pronoun combines a generalizing function with informality. However, when advertisers want a specific ad to appeal to potential customers who do not like these services or ads in the first place, they might be better off choosing the formal pronoun *u*, which can mitigate the negative attitude and help to achieve a more positive evaluation of the service. Thus, our study shows for the first time that the effect of the pronoun choice depends on whether language users generally like or dislike the service ad in question. If they like

it, the use of an informal pronoun enhances their appreciation, but if they do not like it, the use of the informal pronoun will only reduce their appreciation. This discovery, which emerged as a result of exploratory analyses, has important implications both for marketing practices and for future investigations of the effects of linguistic variables on consumers' attitudes towards products or services. The effect of language use can be moderated by the overall appreciation of service or product ads. We hope that future studies will find appropriate instruments for capturing these complex relationships between linguistic and non-linguistic factors.

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Author contributions

Helen de Hoop: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, funding acquisition; Natalia Levshina: formal analysis, visualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing; Sebastian Sadowski: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing; Gert-Jan Schoenmakers: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

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Statement of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Statement of technology use

No AI-based generative technology was used in the preparation of this manuscript and the execution of the research that the manuscript reports upon.

Supporting information

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in a Radboud Data Repository at https://doi.org/10.34973/k7jv-1w93.

Noten

1 We suspect that the spelling error *vindt jij* 'you find' in the second sentence of (1) may have been caused by a substitution of the formal pronoun of address *u* 'you' for the informal *jij* 'you', where no attention was paid to the corresponding change in verb spelling, as the correct form should be *vind jij* 'you find'.

2 https://idw.nl/en/dutch-educational-system/

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