

Directive Speech Acts Drive Higher Engagement: A Pragmatic Linguistic Study of Patisserie Brand Captions

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Abstract

This study examines how three types of pragmatic speech acts directive, expressive, and informative are employed in social media captions by international patisserie brands and how these linguistic strategies relate to consumer engagement. Addressing the limited scholarly attention to speech act functions in commercial digital discourse, this research applies Speech Act Theory and a descriptive quantitative approach to analyze 12 purposively selected captions from Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. The findings indicate that informative speech acts are the most frequently used, while directive speech acts appear to be associated with relatively higher levels of engagement, particularly within TikTok comment interactions. However, this pattern should be interpreted with caution due to the limited sample size. These results highlight the potential persuasive role of directive forms in digital marketing communication. Despite limitations related to sample size and language scope, the study offers theoretical insights into pragmatic patterning in brand discourse and provides practical implications for optimizing engagement-driven content. Future research should expand the dataset and incorporate multimodal as well as cross-linguistic perspectives to deepen the understanding of speech act functions in digital marketing contexts.

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Introduction

The rapid evolution of digital media has fundamentally reshaped how brands communicate and engage with consumers (Fährnich et al., 2023). In contemporary marketing environments, social media platforms function not only as channels of promotion but also as spaces where meaning is constructed through language, visuals, and interaction (Yang et al., 2022). Within this context, caption discourse has emerged as a critical yet often underexamined component of digital communication (Singh et al., 2022). While visual content captures attention, captions play a decisive role in guiding interpretation, framing brand identity, and prompting audience response. From a pragmatic linguistic perspective, captions can be understood as speech acts utterances that perform communicative functions such as informing, directing, or expressing attitudes.

Despite the growing importance of digital marketing discourse, the application of Speech Act Theory in this domain remains limited and fragmented. Previous studies have examined online advertising language broadly, often focusing on persuasive strategies or consumer psychology, but relatively few have systematically analyzed how specific speech act categories function within social media captions (Dwivedi et al., 2023). In classical pragmatic theory, speech acts are commonly categorized into assertive (representative), directive, and expressive forms (Lim & Lee, 2023). Assertive acts convey information or describe states of affairs, directive acts aim to influence audience behavior, and expressive acts communicate the speaker's emotions or evaluation. In digital

marketing contexts, these categories are not merely linguistic distinctions; they represent strategic tools through which brands inform audiences, encourage action, and build emotional connection (Fährnich et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2022). However, empirical research linking these pragmatic forms to measurable engagement outcomes such as likes, comments, and shares remains underdeveloped.

The research gap becomes more pronounced when considering sector-specific communication practices (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Much of the existing literature has focused on large-scale industries such as fashion or electronics, where communication strategies are often dominated by directive language aimed at immediate conversion and sales. In contrast, patisserie and artisanal food brands represent a distinct category of marketing communication. This sector is characterized by a strong reliance on aesthetic presentation, sensory appeal, emotional storytelling, and experiential value. Products are not only consumed but also symbolically associated with lifestyle, celebration, and indulgence. As a result, the linguistic strategies employed in this sector are likely to differ from those in mass-market industries, requiring a more balanced integration of informative (assertive), directive, and expressive elements. However, systematic studies examining how these speech act types are distributed and how they function in such boutique contexts remain scarce.

In addition to sectoral differences, platform-specific characteristics further complicate the relationship between language and engagement. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok differ in terms of content format, algorithmic structure, and user interaction patterns. For instance, TikTok emphasizes short-form, highly interactive content, while Instagram combines visual aesthetics with curated branding, and Facebook often supports broader informational dissemination. These differences suggest that the effectiveness of particular speech act types may vary across platforms, yet comparative analyses that integrate linguistic and engagement perspectives are still limited. Based on these considerations, the present study identifies a research gap at the intersection of three dimensions 1) the limited application of Speech Act Theory in digital marketing discourse, 2) the lack of sector-specific analysis within experiential industries such as patisserie, and 3) the insufficient understanding of how different speech act types relate to consumer engagement across social media platforms.

The rapid advancement of digital media has fundamentally reshaped how brands communicate and interact with consumers. In contemporary marketing ecosystems, social media platforms are no longer merely channels for information dissemination but have evolved into interactive spaces where meaning is co-constructed through language, visuals, and user participation. Within this context, social media captions play a crucial role as concise yet strategic linguistic units that frame brand identity, guide audience interpretation, and encourage engagement. Recent studies have highlighted the growing importance of caption discourse in influencing consumer responses and shaping brand perception

Despite increasing scholarly attention to digital marketing communication, research on the pragmatic dimensions of language use particularly speech act functions remains relatively underdeveloped. Existing studies have tended to examine digital commerce discourse in general terms often overlooking how specific linguistic strategies operate within particular industry contexts. Moreover, while Speech Act Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how language performs actions such as informing, directing, or expressing attitudes, its application in social media marketing studies is still limited and fragmented. This gap becomes more pronounced when considering the patisserie sector. As a highly visual and experience-oriented industry, patisserie

brands rely not only on aesthetic imagery but also on carefully crafted captions to evoke sensory appeal, emotional connection, and persuasive intent. However, there is a lack of systematic research examining how different types of speech acts are employed in this sector and how they function across diverse social media platforms. In addition, platform-specific characteristics such as the interactive, short-form nature of TikTok versus the more informational orientation of Instagram and Facebook may influence both the choice of linguistic strategies and the level of consumer engagement they generate. Yet, comparative analyses that link speech act types to engagement metrics across platforms remain scarce.

Accordingly, the primary research gap addressed in this study lies at the intersection of three dimensions: (1) the underexplored application of speech act theory in digital marketing discourse, (2) the lack of sector-specific analysis within the patisserie industry, and (3) the limited understanding of how different speech act types relate to consumer engagement across social media platforms. By focusing on these interconnected aspects, this study moves beyond general descriptions of digital communication toward a more nuanced examination of how language functions strategically in context. To address these gaps, this study investigates the use of three major categories of speech acts directive, expressive, and informative in the social media captions of leading international patisserie brands. Employing a descriptive quantitative approach, the research analyzes how these pragmatic forms are distributed across platforms and examines their relationship with consumer engagement indicators. In doing so, the study contributes to the broader fields of linguistic pragmatics, digital discourse analysis, and consumer behavior by demonstrating how micro-level linguistic choices can shape macro-level engagement outcomes in digital marketing environments.

Method

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to analyze patterns of speech acts used in digital patisserie marketing and their corresponding consumer engagement across social media platforms. The primary objective was to quantify the occurrence and effectiveness of pragmatic linguistic strategies through observable digital discourse features. A descriptive quantitative research design was employed to quantify speech act occurrences and their effects on consumer engagement in digital patisserie marketing. The population of this study consisted of social media posts from international patisserie brands active in digital marketing campaigns during 2024. Using purposive sampling, a total of 12 posts were selected from eight brands, namely Pierre Hermé Paris, Ladurée Paris, Dominique Ansel Bakery, Milk Bar, Bouchon Bakery, Tartine Bakery, Sweetgreen Pastries, and Sprinkles Cupcakes. The inclusion criteria were:

1. Post must contain a promotional caption written in English,
2. Published on one of the following platforms: Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok,
3. Garnered significant engagement (minimum 2,500 likes or 300 comments),
4. Posted between January and June 2024.

The population consisted of social media posts from eight internationally recognized patisserie brands active between January and June 2024. Twelve posts with English-language promotional captions and significant engagement ($\geq 2,500$ likes or 300 comments) were purposively sampled across Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Data were collected using a structured linguistic coding scheme adapted from Speech Act Theory (Razzaq et al., 2023). Captions were manually extracted and classified into three speech act types:

1. Directive: Intended to prompt consumer action,
2. Expressive: Conveying emotion or sentiment,
3. Informative/Assertive: Delivering factual or descriptive information.

For each post, engagement metrics (likes, comments, and shares) were also recorded to examine consumer response patterns. Captions were manually extracted and coded into three speech act categories directive, expressive, and informative based on pragmatic linguistic criteria adapted from Razzaq et al. (2023). Engagement metrics were recorded for each post. All research variables were operationalized based on pragmatic linguistic criteria. The operational definition table is shown below.

Table 1. Operational Definitions of Variables

Variable	Conceptual Definition	Operational Definition	Indicators	Scale
Directive Speech Acts	Speech acts used to influence listener behavior	Captions containing commands or instructions (e.g., “Order now”, “Book now”)	Presence of imperatives, temporal urgency	Nominal, Ratio
Expressive Speech Acts	Acts expressing emotional or evaluative states	Captions reflecting emotion or metaphors (e.g., “Celebrate”, “Happiness”)	Emotional language, metaphor, affective framing	Nominal, Ratio
Informative Speech Acts	Acts conveying facts or product-related details	Captions providing factual or ethical information (e.g., “50 calories”)	Factual statements, product claims, value-based description	Nominal, Ratio

Content validity was established through expert review by two senior linguists specializing in pragmatics and digital discourse. Feedback was used to refine the coding scheme. Reliability was assessed using Cohen’s Kappa, resulting in an inter-coder agreement of 0.86, indicating high reliability and consistency in speech act categorization. Content validity was confirmed via expert review. Inter-coder reliability showed Cohen’s Kappa of 0.86, indicating high consistency. Data were manually collected from official brand accounts on TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook between March and June 2024. Each selected post was documented along with its caption and engagement statistics. Data were organized in a coding sheet for speech act classification and verified for completeness. Ethical considerations were upheld by using publicly available data and anonymizing brand identities in analytical presentation. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including: (1) Frequency and percentage for each speech act type and (2) Mean engagement scores (likes, comments, shares) per speech act category. All analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel and SPSS v26 for tabulation and charting. A pie chart was also created to visually represent the proportional use of speech acts.

Result and Discussion

Result

A total of 12 social media posts from eight internationally recognized patisserie brands were analyzed across three digital platforms Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Each post was systematically coded according to three pragmatic speech act categories: directive, expressive, and informative (Sbisà, 2023). The dataset included engagement indicators (likes, comments, and shares)

alongside linguistic features extracted from caption texts. All selected posts met the inclusion criteria, and no data were excluded during preprocessing. Given the relatively small sample size and the non-normal distribution of engagement metrics, the analysis adopts a non-parametric perspective. Rather than making strong inferential claims, the results are interpreted as preliminary tendencies, with differences in engagement across speech act categories examined descriptively and cautiously, in line with exploratory research design.

Distribution of Speech Acts

Table 2 presents the frequency distribution of speech act types identified in the dataset. Informative speech acts constitute the largest proportion (41.7%), followed by directive (33.3%) and expressive (25.0%). This distribution suggests that patisserie brands tend to prioritize informational content, focusing on product descriptions, ingredients, or promotional details.

Table 2. Frequency of Speech Acts in Patisserie Social Media Captions

Speech Act Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Informative/Assertive	5	41.7
Directive	4	33.3
Expressive	3	25.0

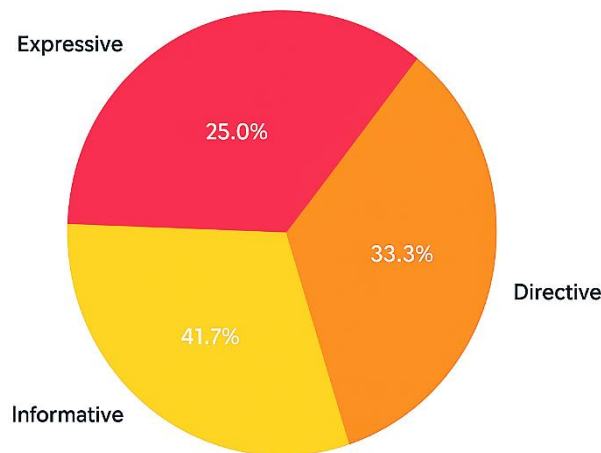


Figure 1. Proportion of Speech Act Types Used in Marketing Captions

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of speech act types found in patisserie marketing captions. The data show that informative speech acts constitute the largest proportion at 41.7%, indicating that most captions primarily function to convey factual, descriptive, or product-related information. Directive speech acts account for 33.3%, reflecting the use of captions to invite, encourage, or guide consumers toward specific actions. Expressive speech acts represent the smallest proportion at 25.0%, suggesting that emotional, attitudinal, or evaluative expressions are present but less dominant in the promotional discourse. Overall, the distribution indicates that patisserie marketing captions tend to prioritize informational and persuasive functions over purely expressive communication.

The predominance of informative speech acts indicates a general tendency toward product-centered communication. However, the presence of directive and expressive forms reflects an attempt to balance informational clarity with persuasive and emotional appeal.

Engagement Metrics by Speech Act Category

Table 3 presents the average engagement per post based on speech act type. Posts with directive speech acts showed the highest average in all three engagement indicators likes, comments, and shares suggesting that imperatives such as "Order now" and "Book before..." are particularly effective in driving consumer response.

Table 3. Average Engagement per Post by Speech Act Type

Speech Act Type	Avg. Likes	Avg. Comments	Avg. Shares
Directive	7,833	750	300
Expressive	5,667	467	197
Informative/Assertive	5,750	425	198

These results support the pragmatic claim by (Razzaq et al., 2023) that directive speech acts are inherently designed to elicit behavioral outcomes, which in this case translates to higher user engagement. While these descriptive statistics suggest that directive speech acts may be associated with higher engagement, particularly in comment activity, it is important to interpret these differences cautiously. Due to the limited number of observations in each category, the variability within groups cannot be robustly assessed. To explore whether these observed differences reflect meaningful variation, a non-parametric comparison such as the Kruskal–Wallis test would be appropriate for future analysis. However, given the current dataset size, any statistical testing would have low power and limited reliability. Therefore, the present findings are better understood as indicative patterns rather than statistically confirmed effects.

Platform-Based Differences

Further examination of engagement patterns across platforms reveals variation in how speech act types perform in different digital environments. TikTok posts featuring directive speech acts tend to generate higher levels of comment interaction, suggesting that action-oriented language may align well with the platform’s participatory culture. Facebook posts, on the other hand, show relatively higher numbers of likes for directive captions, indicating a different mode of user response. Instagram demonstrates a more balanced distribution of engagement across all three speech act types, with no single category dominating consistently. These cross-platform differences highlight the role of platform affordances in shaping user interaction. However, similar to the overall engagement analysis, these observations remain exploratory and should not be interpreted as definitive without larger-scale comparative testing Chen et al. (2023) and Shakki et al. (2021).

Linguistic Features Across Speech Acts

The analysis also identifies recurring linguistic patterns associated with each speech act category. Directive speech acts are typically realized through imperative constructions combined with urgency markers, such as “Order now” or “Don’t miss out today,” which function to prompt immediate consumer action. Expressive speech acts rely on affective language and metaphorical expressions, such as “Celebrate life’s sweet moments,” aiming to build emotional resonance. Informative speech acts are predominantly constructed through declarative statements that emphasize product attributes, including health claims or sustainability features. These linguistic patterns demonstrate that patisserie brands employ a combination of pragmatic strategies to inform, persuade, and emotionally engage their audience. Importantly, while directive forms appear to correspond with higher engagement levels in this dataset, this relationship should be interpreted as a preliminary tendency that requires further validation through larger datasets and more rigorous

statistical testing. Informative speech acts dominate in frequency, whereas directive speech acts show a tendency toward higher engagement metrics. However, due to methodological constraints particularly the small sample size and lack of robust statistical testing these findings should be viewed as exploratory. They nonetheless provide a useful foundation for future research examining the relationship between pragmatic language use and consumer engagement in digital marketing contexts.

Discussion

The descriptive analysis indicates that among the three speech act categories, informative speech acts appeared most frequently in patisserie brand captions (41.7%), followed by directive (33.3%) and expressive (25%). When considered alongside consumer engagement metrics (likes, comments, and shares), directive speech acts show a tendency to be associated with higher levels of interaction. In particular, captions employing imperative structures and temporal urgency such as “Order now” or “Book before December 20th” appear to correspond with higher comment rates, especially on TikTok. In contrast, expressive and informative captions display relatively balanced engagement patterns, suggesting that emotional and informational content may contribute more to brand positioning and audience relationship-building than to immediate interaction. This distribution points to a potential distinction between frequency and performance: while informative acts dominate in usage, directive acts appear more closely linked to short-term engagement outcomes, particularly within fast-paced, short-form content environments.

This interpretation requires careful qualification. The apparent effectiveness of directive speech acts should not be understood as a direct or causal determinant of engagement (Ricca, 2022; Tajeddin & Malmir, 2024). Given the limited sample size and the absence of robust statistical testing, the observed differences may reflect contextual or incidental variation rather than systematic effects. Moreover, engagement on social media is shaped by multiple interacting variables, including visual appeal, brand familiarity, platform algorithms, posting time, and audience expectations. As such, the higher engagement associated with directive captions may be partially influenced by these external factors rather than linguistic form alone. This calls for a more cautious reading of the findings, positioning them as preliminary tendencies rather than definitive conclusions. From a pragmatic perspective, directive speech acts can be understood as inherently action-oriented, which may explain their relative prominence in generating observable interaction (Dang & Han, 2026; House & Kádár, 2025). Their use aligns with the interactive affordances of platforms such as TikTok, where user participation and immediacy are central. At the same time, expressive and informative speech acts play complementary roles. Expressive forms contribute to emotional resonance and brand personality, while informative forms provide clarity and credibility regarding product attributes. Together, these functions suggest that effective digital marketing discourse relies not on a single dominant strategy but on a combination of linguistic approaches that address both immediate engagement and longer-term brand development.

This study was guided by three primary research questions concerning the prevalence, linguistic construction, and engagement function of speech acts. The findings indicate that informative acts are the most common, supporting the view that patisserie brands prioritize descriptive and value-oriented communication. In terms of linguistic realization, directive acts are characterized by imperatives and urgency framing, expressive acts by affective and metaphorical language, and informative acts by declarative factual statements (Linhares, 2025). These patterns are

consistent with established pragmatic frameworks and demonstrate how speech acts are operationalized in marketing discourse. With regard to engagement, directive speech acts appear to be associated with higher interaction levels, particularly in comments and shares (Guillén-Nieto, 2023). Nevertheless, this relationship should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive, given the methodological constraints.

A more critical consideration also reveals that reducing digital communication to three speech act categories may oversimplify the complexity of online discourse. Social media captions often function in conjunction with multimodal elements such as images, videos, emojis, and hashtags, which collectively shape meaning and user response. Furthermore, hybrid or overlapping speech act functions may occur within a single caption, challenging rigid categorization. Therefore, while the present study offers a structured analytical lens, it does not fully capture the dynamic and layered nature of digital brand communication. In light of these considerations, the findings suggest that linguistic form is strategically aligned with marketing intent, but its impact on engagement is mediated by broader contextual and platform-specific factors. Consequently, rather than concluding that one speech act type is inherently more effective, it is more appropriate to understand engagement as the outcome of an interplay between language, content design, and digital environment.

The findings of this study both align with and extend previous research, while also revealing important nuances that warrant critical consideration. The observed tendency for directive speech acts to be associated with higher engagement is broadly consistent with prior studies showing that imperative language in digital advertising can encourage user response and purchase intention (Murray & Starr, 2021). Likewise, the use of temporal markers such as “today only” or “before Dec 20” reflects established urgency-based marketing strategies that are designed to prompt immediate action. However, in the present study, this relationship should be interpreted cautiously (Hermajiwandini et al., 2025). Given the limited dataset and exploratory design, the apparent effectiveness of directive forms cannot be treated as a stable or generalizable pattern, but rather as a context-dependent tendency that may vary across platforms, audiences, and campaign types.

The role of expressive speech acts, although less prominent in frequency, supports previous findings that emotional and affective language contributes to brand warmth and perceived authenticity (Liu et al., 2023). In the context of patisserie branding, this is particularly significant, as the industry relies heavily on sensory appeal, artisanal identity, and lifestyle associations. Expressive language may therefore function less as a trigger for immediate engagement and more as a mechanism for cultivating emotional attachment and long-term brand value. At the same time, the dominance of informative speech acts in the dataset diverges from patterns observed in mass-market advertising, where directive strategies are often more prevalent. This difference suggests that patisserie brands may adopt a hybrid communicative approach, balancing persuasion with transparency and informational value possibly in response to consumer expectations regarding product quality, health considerations, and ethical production.

Despite these contributions, a more critical perspective highlights that the relationship between speech acts and engagement is not linear or exclusive. Engagement metrics are shaped by a complex interplay of factors beyond linguistic structure, including visual aesthetics, brand reputation, platform algorithms, posting time, seasonal relevance, and the use of influencers or hashtags. For instance, visually appealing product imagery or high-quality video content may significantly enhance

user interaction regardless of the accompanying caption. Similarly, well-established brands may generate high engagement due to audience loyalty rather than specific linguistic strategies. As such, attributing engagement outcomes primarily to speech act categories risks oversimplifying the dynamics of digital communication. From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the application of Speech Act Theory in digital marketing by demonstrating that linguistic categories such as directive, expressive, and informative acts can function as strategic resources in shaping online interaction. However, the findings also suggest that speech acts should not be viewed as isolated predictors of engagement, but rather as components within a broader multimodal and socio-technical system. This points to the need for more integrative analytical frameworks that account for the interaction between language, visual content, and platform-specific affordances.

In practical terms, the results offer tentative guidance for digital marketers, particularly within niche sectors such as patisserie. While directive language may enhance short-term engagement, especially when combined with urgency cues, an overreliance on such strategies may overlook the importance of emotional storytelling and informational credibility. A balanced approach that integrates directive, expressive, and informative elements while also considering timing, format, and audience characteristics may be more effective in sustaining both immediate interaction and long-term brand relationships. Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The small sample size (12 posts) restricts the generalizability of the findings and limits the possibility of conducting robust statistical analysis. The focus on English-language captions from international brands excludes local linguistic practices and cultural variation, which may influence both speech act usage and audience response. Furthermore, the analysis is confined to textual data, without incorporating multimodal elements such as images, videos, or hashtags that are central to social media communication.

Future research should address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse datasets, enabling more rigorous statistical testing of differences across speech act categories. Longitudinal designs could capture changes in engagement over time, while multilingual and cross-cultural analyses would provide a broader understanding of pragmatic strategies in global marketing contexts. In addition, incorporating multimodal analysis and audience-centered methods such as surveys or experiments would offer deeper insight into how users interpret and respond to different communicative strategies. Through such approaches, future studies can move beyond exploratory patterns toward a more comprehensive and empirically grounded understanding of language use in digital marketing environments.

Conclusion

This study examined the use of informative, directive, and expressive speech acts in the social media captions of international patisserie brands and explored their potential relationship with consumer engagement across digital platforms. The findings show that informative speech acts were the most dominant category, suggesting that patisserie brands tend to prioritize factual, descriptive, and product-oriented communication in their promotional captions. Directive speech acts, although less frequent than informative ones, appeared to be more closely associated with audience engagement, particularly on interactive platforms such as TikTok. However, this pattern should be interpreted cautiously, as the limited dataset and exploratory design do not allow for causal claims regarding the relationship between caption structure and consumer behavior.

The study contributes to the intersection of pragmatic linguistics and digital marketing by demonstrating that speech act theory can be used as an analytical framework for examining brand communication in social media contexts. The findings suggest that speech acts function not merely as linguistic forms but as strategic communicative resources through which brands inform audiences, construct affective appeal, and encourage interaction. Nevertheless, consumer engagement is not determined by linguistic features alone. It is also shaped by visual content, platform algorithms, brand visibility, posting time, audience characteristics, and broader marketing strategies. Therefore, speech acts should be understood as one element within a wider multimodal and algorithm-driven digital communication ecosystem.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings and restricts the use of more robust statistical analysis. In addition, the focus on English-language captions from international patisserie brands does not fully capture linguistic diversity, cultural variation, or local market dynamics. The study also concentrates primarily on textual captions, while social media communication is inherently multimodal. Future research should therefore examine larger datasets across different brands, languages, platforms, and cultural contexts. Further studies may also integrate multimodal analysis involving images, videos, hashtags, and audience responses, as well as employ inferential statistical methods, surveys, or experimental designs to clarify how speech act strategies influence consumer engagement. Such developments would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how language, media affordances, and marketing strategies interact in digital brand communication.

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