

The challenge of keeping an audience engaged: How language shapes attention

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Researchers from University of Pennsylvania, University of Maryland, and Emory University published a new *Journal of Marketing* article that examines how and why the language used in content engages readers.

The study is authored by Jonah Berger, Wendy W. Moe, and David A. Schweidel.

Everyone wants to hold an audience's attention. Brands want consumers to watch their ads, leaders want employees to read their emails, and teachers want students to listen to their lectures.

Similarly, [media companies](#) want readers to consume more content. The reason is simple: The further down a news story readers read, the more advertising revenue that article generates; the longer audiences spend watching videos, the higher the rate brands can command. And the more a piece of content holds attention, the more consumers learn about the product, service, or issue discussed.

Why do some articles captivate readers and encourage them to keep reading, while others make them lose interest after just a few sentences? And how does the content (i.e., the language used) shape whether audiences stay engaged? This study addresses these questions by utilizing [natural language processing](#) of over 600,000 reading sessions from 35,000 pieces of content, combined with controlled experiments.

Sustained attention vs. clickbait

It is important to distinguish [sustained attention](#) from other types of engagement. One way of measuring engagement is clicks, views, or other such metrics that measure how many people were exposed to a piece of content.

As Berger explains, "While prior research has examined how headlines or advertisements attract attention, we wish to explore how the content is able to hold a reader's attention. Focusing on short-term metrics like views and clicks can lead to clickbait or headlines that attract attention, but it does not necessarily lead to content being consumed."

Companies such as YouTube and Facebook use measures like "dwell time," or how long users spend consuming a piece of content, to better measure engagement, estimate relevance, and improve rankings and recommendations. A catchy headline might lead readers to click on a link, for example, but once they open the article, how much of it do they actually read? Do they stop after the first few sentences? Do they persist

for most of the article? Holding attention refers to whether content retains the attracted attention, keeping audiences engaged.

"Our study shows that language that is easier to process encourages continued reading, as does language that evokes emotion," says Moe. But not all emotional language has the same impact. Instead, these effects are driven by the degree to which different discrete emotions evoke arousal and uncertainty.

"Consistent with this, language that is anxious, exciting, and hopeful encourages reading while language that is sad discourages it," adds Schweidel. A simulation highlights the implications of these findings for content recommendation algorithms trained to sustain attention.

Managerial implications and lessons

The study offers four main lessons for chief marketing officers:

- It deepens understanding around what holds attention. While some research has examined what attracts attention or what drives word of mouth, there has been less focus on how language sustains attention or makes people consume more content once they have started. This study demonstrates the important role of emotional language and shows how different linguistic features shape content consumption.
- The findings help improve content design for advertisers, marketers, publishers, and presenters. Since content creators do not just want clicks, the researches show how simple shifts in language can encourage sustained attention. Further, while it is often assumed that certain topics are just better at keeping people engaged (e.g., [celebrity gossip](#) rather than financial literacy), they show how writing in certain ways can increase

sustained attention, even for "less engaging" topics.

- The results highlight that what holds attention is not always the same as what grabs attention or encourages word of mouth. While more certain language can increase likes and shares, emotions that make people feel certain are actually detrimental when it comes to sustaining attention. While some have argued that content that requires more [cognitive processing](#) should increase clicks, the study shows that content that requires more processing has the opposite effect when it comes to holding attention. Retaining attention is a different type of engagement, and findings from one type of engagement may not necessarily carry over to others. Consequently, when developing content, managers should think carefully about which outcomes they care most about and design the content with that in mind.
- Because online content consumption has become a critical social issue, the findings have important social implications. Disinformation and hate speech have been linked to negative outcomes for individuals as well as society and our results highlight [language](#)'s critical role in this process. If angry and anxious content holds attention, as the simulation shows, training algorithms to maximize sustained [attention](#) may lead this content to be recommended, with potentially negative implications for consumer welfare.

More information: Jonah Berger et al, EXPRESS: What Holds Attention? Linguistic Drivers of Engagement, *Journal of Marketing* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429231152880](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429231152880)

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