

# Replacing 'you' with 'we' can make a message less threatening, and less likely to be censored

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Ever been in a situation where you just can't get your message across? New research by Zakary Tormala and Mohamed Hussein suggests that

you might want to rethink which pronouns you deploy.

Tormala, a professor of marketing at Stanford GSB, and Hussein, a Ph.D. candidate who studies the intersection between [consumer behavior](#) and politics, looked at how using "you" versus "we" pronouns affected how people responded to messages in settings such as [online forums](#) and a simulated workplace scenario.

Their findings, [published](#) in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, were arresting: In adversarial contexts that held the potential for disagreement or conflict, messages that used "you" and "your" were less persuasive, less likely to be shared, and more likely to be censored than ones that employed "we" and "our." People who participated in their study were also less inclined to interact or engage with the sources of messages that used "you" rather than "we."

The work was inspired by the pair's shared interest in receptiveness, which describes a person's openness to ideas—and people—with whom they might disagree. "Openness doesn't mean you agree, but it means you're willing to engage with a person who holds that view," Tormala says.

Given the increasingly polarized nature of American society, finding ways to boost receptiveness could help bridge the seemingly intractable divide between people with opposing viewpoints. "Political polarization is at an all-time high," Hussein says. "Anything we can do to make the few conversations that are still happening more productive is a win."

## **Persuasion and censorship**

Tormala and Hussein had previously found that signaling receptiveness—for example, by admitting uncertainty about one's opinions—could enhance persuasiveness. That led them to wonder

whether fundamental aspects of language use, such as pronoun choice, might have similar effects.

They were also interested in exploring the factors that drive censorship. As Hussein explains, the ability to censor ideas was once reserved for emperors and kings. Nowadays, however, an ordinary person who volunteers as a content moderator for a [social media](#) or online discussion platform can decide which comments and messages stay up and which ones come down. Could perceptions of receptiveness drive such decisions?

Tormala and Hussein began by examining censorship in a place where it was almost guaranteed to be happening: the heated Reddit political forums (or subreddits) r/Liberal and r/Conservative. "It doesn't get any more adversarial than people discussing politics on Reddit," Hussein says.

In his analysis of more than 272,000 comments, Hussein discovered that the use of "you" pronouns increased the likelihood that a message would be censored, while the use of "we" pronouns decreased it. Further analysis revealed that the connection between "you" and censorship grew stronger as the tone of the messages became more negative.

The deleterious impact of second-person pronouns came as a surprise since prior work by other researchers indicated that using "you" in neutral or positive contexts actually bolstered perceived receptiveness and persuasiveness. Intrigued, Tormala and Hussein ran a series of controlled experiments to test the effects of using "you" versus "we" pronouns in the kinds of adversarial situations where receptiveness is most sorely needed.

For each experiment, the pair asked hundreds of participants on an online survey platform to respond to provocative messages or comments,

including [negative feedback](#) from one team member to another on a failed work project and inflammatory comments on immigration and abortion. Participants were shown two versions of each message, one using "you" and the other "we." (The researchers also looked at the indefinite pronoun "one.")

Almost without fail, the use of "you" made participants much less willing to interact or engage with the person behind the message, much less likely to share messages with others, and much more likely to censor messages if given the opportunity. The only exception occurred when "you" was embedded in phrases of acknowledgment or agreement, such as "I hear you" or "you're right."

## **Tips for better reception**

"We're not saying that 'you' invariably leads to worse outcomes," Hussein cautions. "We're saying that when 'you' is used in an adversarial or conflict-ridden context, it has the potential to inadvertently lead to these negative consequences."

Hussein and Tormala suspect that the impact of second-person pronouns is related to perceived aggression: In an adversarial setting, using "you" may seem accusatory, making recipients feel as if they are being blamed or attacked. That sense of hostility or aggression is then generalized to the person behind the message, who comes across as unreceptive.

"We," meanwhile, has the opposite effect: Because it is more inclusive, it seems less aggressive, enhancing the perceived receptiveness of whoever is behind the message. "Most people would rather talk to the person who said 'we got this wrong' than 'you got this wrong' because they seem more open," Tormala says.

That has implications for anyone trying to foster dialogue about any

topic, whether it's political or professional. "When you're about to express disagreement with somebody, look for opportunities to use words like 'we' or 'us' or 'our,' rather than words like 'you' and 'your,' which can make it feel like you're putting the responsibility for the disagreement on them," Tormala says.

Broadly speaking, Tormala and Hussein advise that if you're trying to reach someone with an opposing view, be sure to signal that you are open to their perspective. "That makes people feel heard and appreciated, and in turn lowers their psychological defenses and makes them more open to hearing what you have to say," Hussein says. Receptiveness begets receptiveness, while unreceptiveness begets unreceptiveness. After all, it's not all about "you."

**More information:** Mohamed A. Hussein et al, You versus we: How pronoun use shapes perceptions of receptiveness, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104555](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104555)

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