Attitudes to regional and standard accents in commercial and non-commercial contexts

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Abstract

Commercials regularly use non-standard accented speakers to promote products and services despite sociolinguistic findings that non-standard accents in non-commercial contexts are evaluated less positively than standard accents. Accent evaluations in commercial contexts may be different because of perceived relevance to the product or service or of perceived manipulative intent. To date, no studies have investigated whether identical accented speech fragments are evaluated differently in commercial and non-commercial contexts.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effect of non-standard versus standard accented speech in commercial versus non-commercial contexts in terms of attitudes towards the speaker (competence, status, likeability, dynamism), comprehensibility, attitude towards the product, attitude towards the vlog, and perceived realism of the vlog. In a 2 x 2 between-subject design, 631 Dutch respondents evaluated Dutch standard-accented and regionally accented vlogs in either a commercial or non-commercial context. Findings show that commercial versus non-commercial context had no effect on the evaluations of standard and regional accents. In both contexts, a regional accent was evaluated more negatively than a standard accent for the majority of measures: attitudes towards the speaker (competence, status, dynamism), comprehensibility, attitude towards the product, and perceived realism of the vlog. These findings indicate that a regional accent is a potent negative cue across these contexts, overriding possible effects that are specific to commercial contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Radio and television commercials regularly use non-standard accented speakers (foreign or regional) to promote products and services. For instance, the UK telecommunications firm O2 has used British northern regional accents in its radio and TV commercials, and commercials for the US Geico car insurance company have shown a gecko speaking several US regional accents, including Texan. In the Netherlands, radio and TV commercials for the SNS bank have...
employed a spokesperson with an accent from the southern province of Limburg, and the windscreen repair service Carglass has for a long time broadcast TV commercials featuring mechanics with several Dutch regional, ethnic and urban accents. When non-standard accented spokespersons are used to promote products and services, consumers are supposed to associate certain characteristics and competences with certain accents, which are then transferred to the product advertised and thus increase brand authenticity and positive brand image (Kelly-Holmes, 2005; Piller, 2001). Previous studies on attitudes towards the use of non-standard accents (regional, ethnic or foreign) in commercial contexts have found that standard accents are evaluated more positively than non-standard accents (e.g., DeShields et al., 1996; Hendriks et al., 2015; Reinares-Lara et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2013; see also Lalwani et al., 2005; Morales et al., 2012) and that accents that are congruent with the product advertised attract more positive evaluations than accents that are not congruent with the product (e.g., Dubey et al., 2018; Hendriks et al., 2015; Puzakova et al., 2015).

For non-commercial contexts, sociolinguistic research has shown that speakers with non-standard (regional or ethnic) accents are not only regarded more positively than speakers with standard accents (in terms of solidarity and likeability), but also more negatively (in terms of status and competence (e.g., Grondelaers et al., 2010).

The question is whether the evaluation of accents in commercial contexts differs from the evaluation of accents in non-commercial contexts. A positive evaluation of non-standard accents in commercial contexts may be due to the foregrounding of relevant positive aspects, such as speaker likeability (cf. the notion of solidarity in sociolinguistic research; e.g., Fuertes et al., 2012) and ordinariness, to stress that the spokespersons are ordinary citizens, like the consumers the commercial is aimed at (cf. the use of typical consumers as endorsers promoting a product, Friedman and Friedman, 1979). On the other hand, the use of accents may be evaluated more negatively in commercial contexts than in non-commercial contexts, because consumers are aware that the spokesperson’s accent is used to manipulate them (cf. manipulative intent, Campbell, 1995). In line with the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright, 1994), consumers may react negatively to a message and a spokesperson if they feel that the message is trying to manipulate them into buying or using a product or service (Wojdynski and Evans, 2020).

To date, no studies have investigated whether identical accented speech fragments are evaluated differently in commercial and non-commercial contexts on the same attitudinal dimensions. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effect of non-standard versus standard accented speech in commercial versus non-commercial contexts (operationalised as vlogs) in terms of attitudes towards the speaker (competence, status, likeability, dynamism), comprehensibility, attitude towards the product, attitude towards the vlog, and perceived realism of the vlog.

2. THEORY

A number of studies have compared the evaluation of standard versus non-standard accents in commercials. A standard accent can be defined as a way of pronouncing a language ‘that is most often associated with high socioeconomic status, power, and media usage in a particular community’ (Giles and Billings, 2004, p. 192), whereas a non-standard accent is ‘a foreign accent or one used by a minority or lower socioeconomic group’ (Fuertes et al., 2012, p. 121). Three types of non-standard accents can be distinguished, foreign, ethnic and regional. A foreign (or non-native) accent may be described as the accent of speakers who did not learn to speak the language from birth and which as a result reflects characteristics of the speaker’s first language (e.g. French-accented English or Dutch). An ethnic accent is a variety spoken by a minority group in a particular society (e.g., Hispanic-American-accented English or Moroccan-accented Dutch). A regional accent is spoken by inhabitants of a particular region in a particular country (e.g., Yorkshire-accented British English or Bavarian-accented English). Overall, language attitudes research has found that speakers of all three types of non-standard accent may be evaluated differently (often more negatively) than speakers of standard accents (e.g., Cargile et al., 1994; Edwards, 1999; Gluszek and Dovidio, 2010).

Research investigating the impact of non-standard accents in commercials has generally shown that commercials with standard-accented spokespersons are evaluated more positively than commercials with non-standard-accented speakers. In Hendriks et al. (2015), radio commercials with foreign-accented (French and German) spokespersons led to lower purchase intention, product attitude and speaker competence than commercials with standard-Dutch-accented spokespersons for Dutch participants. As for the effects of ethnic accents, American participants evaluated commercials with Hispanic spokespersons less positively than commercials featuring spokespersons with standard American accents in terms of purchase intention (DeShields et al., 1996, 1997). For regional accents, Reinares-Lara et al. (2016) showed that a commercial with a standard Spanish accent was assessed more positively than a commercial with a regional Spanish (Canarian) accent in terms of source credibility, expertise and trustworthiness by listeners from the Spanish capital, Madrid.

The findings for more negative evaluations of non-standard versus standard accents in commercials are in line with findings for accent evaluations in sociolinguistic studies in non-commercial contexts. Generally, such studies have
shown that speakers with non-standard accents are regarded less positively than speakers with standard accents on characteristics such as status and dynamism (see Fuertes et al., 2012). For example, speakers with a Kurdish accent in Turkish were evaluated as older, less successful and less attractive than speakers with a standard Turkish accent by non-Kurdish students (Schluter, 2021). As far as social attractiveness is concerned, findings are mixed. Non-standard speakers can sometimes be seen as more socially attractive and likeable, trustworthy, generous and warm (Grondelaers et al., 2010; Hejimer and Vonk, 2002; Hogg et al., 1984; Schoel and Stahlberg, 2012). However, a meta-analysis of twenty studies revealed that speakers with a non-standard accent were attributed not only less status, less dynamism but also less solidarity (social attractiveness) than speakers with a standard accent (Fuertes et al., 2012). The general downgrading of speakers with a non-standard accent can be related to the notion of Standard Language Ideology, which has been defined as ‘a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogeneous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class’ (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 64). For instance, a recent study showed that posts on Weibo, China’s online microblogging site, regularly downgraded speakers with a regional Putonghua accent compared to speakers with a standard Putonghua accent (Zhao and Liu, 2021). Similarly, Implicit Association Tests revealed that Dutch primary school children preferred a standard Dutch accent over an (ethnic) Moroccan-Dutch accent (Dekker et al., 2021).

To date, there would appear to be a limited number of studies into the effects of non-standard accents in commercial contexts and a considerable body of sociolinguistic research in non-commercial contexts. The sociolinguistic findings show largely negative evaluations of non-standard accents, but they also point to possible positive evaluations of non-standard speakers (in terms of, for instance, likeability and trustworthiness) that could be exploited in commercial contexts. At the same time, evaluations of non-standard-accented speakers in commercial contexts could be even more negative than in non-commercial contexts, because listeners to a commercial may be more sceptical since they know the commercial is an attempt to persuade them (cf. Campbell, 1995; Wojdynski and Evans, 2020). It has not yet been investigated if non-standard versus standard accents are evaluated in the same way in commercial as in non-commercial contexts. Such a study would provide new and relevant insights into the impact of accents in commercials by showing to what extent the same evaluative mechanisms as have been evidenced by a substantial body of sociolinguistic research are also applicable to commercial contexts.

The aim of the present study, therefore, was to determine the effect of non-standard-accented versus standard-accented speech in commercial versus non-commercial contexts for identical accented speech fragments – investigated in the form of vlogs – in terms of attitudes towards the speaker (competence, status, likeability, dynamism), comprehensibility, attitude towards the product, attitude towards the vlog, and perceived realism of the vlog.

3. METHOD

The present study investigated whether a regional effect had a different effect than a standard accent on listeners’ attitudes in commercial and non-commercial contexts.

3.1. Materials

Participants were asked to evaluate recordings of commercial or non-commercial vlogs about food or non-food products in which the speaker had either a standard Dutch accent or a regional Dutch accent, the accent spoken in the southern province of North Brabant. The Brabant accent was chosen as it has been shown to be a clearly identifiable regional accent in the Netherlands (Grondelaers et al., 2010).

The products that were chosen (cheese, gin, office chair, and sunglasses) had no specific regional origin, so as not to influence the participants’ evaluation of the accent. Product-accent congruence in commercials has been shown to be a factor that has a positive effect on listeners’ evaluations of the commercial, the product and their purchase intentions (e.g., (Dubey et al., 2018; Hendriks et al., 2015). Such congruence effects would appear to be particularly relevant to commercial contexts, where the purpose of the speaker is to convince the listener to buy the product. In a non-commercial context, selling the product is not the aim, and, therefore, these effects of accent-product congruence are less relevant. As a result, accent-product congruence might have a different impact in commercial contexts than in non-commercial context. We, therefore, deliberately chose products that were not typically associated with a particular region and, consequently, were not congruent with a particular accent, so as to make sure that accent-product congruence could not act as a confounding factor. Additional reasons for choosing the four products were that they included both food and non-food items, that two were intended for human consumption (cheese, gin) and two were not (office chair, sunglasses), that they were gender-neutral, in the sense that they could be used by people regardless of their gender, and that they were affordable.
Initially, two vlog scripts were created for gin and sunglasses, which were set in either a commercial or a non-commercial context, in that the script concluded with either the offer of a discount code or an invitation to share comments. These scripts were pre-tested to determine whether the commercial or non-commercial nature of the vlog scripts was recognised. In the pre-test, the scripts were evaluated by 52 participants (65% female; age: $M = 25.89, SD = 7.89$, range = 18–56). Each participant was shown two of the eight scripts and asked to evaluate these scripts on perceived realism of the text, attitude towards text, and perceived manipulative intent. Perceived realism of the text (scale constructed for this study) and perceived manipulative intent (adapted from Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Jenkins and Dragojevic, 2011; Vashisht and Royne, 2016) were both measured with five seven-point Likert scales. *Perceived realism of the text* was measured with the items ‘This text is far-fetched’ (reverse coded); ‘This text is realistic’; ‘This text is authentic’; ‘This text is credible’; ‘I could imagine that this text is used in a vlog’ ($\alpha = 0.63$). *Perceived manipulative intent* was measured with the items ‘This text is trying to sell a product’; ‘This text is trying to make a decision for me’; ‘This text is trying to manipulate me’; ‘This text is trying to impose something on me’; ‘This text is letting me free to do as I want’ (reverse coded) ($\alpha = 0.72$). The *attitude towards the text* of the script was measured with nine semantic differential scales (adapted from Hendriks et al., 2015; Hornikx and Hof, 2008). The statement ‘I find this text’ was followed by the items ‘Not nice - Nice’; ‘Captivating - Boring’ (reverse coded); ‘Not original - Original’; ‘Not attractive - Attractive’; ‘Interesting - Not interesting’ (reverse coded); ‘Entertaining - Not entertaining’ (reverse coded); ‘Irritating - Not irritating’; ‘Informative - Not informative’ (reverse coded); ‘Not understandable - Understandable’ ($\alpha = 0.80$).

The pre-test showed that the non-commercial scripts ($M = 3.39, SD = 1.27$) were perceived as significantly less manipulative than the commercial scripts ($M = 4.78, SD = 1.01$) ($F(1, 51) = 47.39, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.48$). Additionally, both non-commercial ($M = 4.91, SD = 0.80$) and commercial scripts ($M = 4.59, SD = 0.91$) were perceived as equally realistic ($F(1, 51) < 1$). The attitude towards the text in the non-commercial scripts ($M = 4.12, SD = 0.92$) was not significantly different than in the commercial scripts ($M = 3.95, SD = 1.05$; $F(1, 51) < 1$). Therefore, the manipulation could be deemed to be successful.

After the vlog scripts were pre-tested, two additional similar scripts were created with cheese and an open chair as products, resulting in a total of 16 versions (4 products × 2 accents × 2 contexts). All versions were recorded by the same professional male voice actor, who is a bilingual speaker of standard Dutch and Brabant Dutch. Earlier research has shown that listeners may react differently to regionally accented speech depending on the gender of the speaker (Grondelaers et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2016). We, therefore, deliberately chose not to include both male and speakers, so as not to complicate our research design with gender as an additional factor.

Recordings were made in a professional studio using an Apple MacBook Air laptop, a Behringer Xenyx X1204USB mixing console, a Rode NT1A microphone, Custom In-ear monitors (ears4u) headphones, Presonus Studio one 3 audio-editing software, at a frequency of 44100 Hz.

An example of a script with a commercial and non-commercial ending is:

**Hi,**

*Traditional old Dutch Jenever has a long history. Our grandparents and parents really enjoy it. Old fashioned, right? (said in a jokey way). Do you know that this is only half of the story? Jenever is something that I have started to like more and more. I enjoy drinking a glass with my grandpa or with my father. But also, together with my friends.*

**[commercial ending]**

*Are you also a lover of Jenever? I managed to get a 20% discount code! The only thing that you have to do is go to your liquor store and use my code.*

**[non-commercial ending]**

*What do you guys think? Do you think Jenever is something from the past or more something from now? Let me know in the comments.*

The other scripts can be found in the Appendix A.

### 3.2. Subjects

A total of 631 Dutch respondents took part in this study (age: $M = 33.56, SD = 13.56$, range 18–79; 53.4% male). The (highest) completed education level ranged from primary school to university. A majority of respondents was enrolled in or had completed higher education (40.6%). Age was distributed evenly across the four conditions ($F(3, 627) < 1$), as were gender ($\chi^2 (3) = 1.01, p = .799$), education ($\chi^2 (6) = 3.23, p = .779$), self-assessed regional accent strength ($F(3, 627) < 1$) and product use ($F(3, 627) < 1$).

### 3.3. Design

The study used a 2 (accent: standard/regional × 2 (context: commercial/non-commercial)) between-subject matched guise design.
3.4. Instrumentation

Listeners filled in an online questionnaire in which they evaluated one vlog in terms of attitude towards the speaker, comprehensibility, attitude towards the product, attitude towards the vlog, perceived manipulative intent and perceived realism of the vlog.

**Attitude towards the speaker** was measured with 19 seven-point Likert scales anchored by ‘completely disagree – completely agree’ and introduced by the statement ‘The speaker sounds...’ (based on Bayard et al., 2001; Grondelaers et al., 2019; Hendriks et al., 2014, 2016; Nejjari et al., 2012). **Competence** was measured with the items ‘reliable’, ‘intelligent’, ‘hardworking’, ‘educated’, ‘competent’ ($\alpha = 0.86$). **Status** was measured with the items ‘influential’, ‘trustworthy’, ‘self-confident’, ‘has a powerful voice’ ($\alpha = 0.78$). **Likeability** was measured with the items ‘unfriendly’ (reverse coded), ‘sympathetic’, ‘irritating’ (reverse coded), ‘credible’, ‘humoristic’, ‘tactful’ ($\alpha = 0.78$). **Dynamism** was measured with the items ‘modern’, ‘hip’, ‘trendy’, and ‘lively’ ($\alpha = 0.83$).

**Comprehensibility** of the speaker was measured with four seven-point Likert scales anchored by ‘completely disagree – completely agree’ (adapted from Hendriks et al., 2016), ‘I have to listen very carefully to be able to understand the speaker’ (reverse coded); ‘The speaker speaks clearly’; ‘The speaker is difficult to comprehend’ (reverse coded); ‘I have problems understanding what the speaker is talking about’ (reverse coded) ($\alpha = 0.79$).

**Attitude towards the product** was measured with three seven-point Likert scales anchored by ‘completely disagree – completely agree’ (adapted from Hendriks et al., 2015; Villegas, 2002): ‘I believe this product is attractive/interesting/good’ ($\alpha = 0.92$).

**Attitude towards the vlog** was measured with three seven-point Likert scales anchored by ‘completely disagree – completely agree’ and introduced by the statement ‘I believe this vlog is...’ followed by the items ‘nice’, ‘uninteresting’ (reverse coded), ‘original’ ($\alpha = 0.75$) (adapted from Hendriks et al., 2015).

**Perceived manipulative intent** was measured with five seven-point Likert scales anchored by ‘completely disagree – completely agree’ (adapted from Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Jenkins and Dragojevic, 2011; Vashisht and Royne, 2016): ‘The speaker in this vlog is trying to sell a product/trying to make a decision for me/trying to manipulate me/trying to impose something on me/letting me free to do as I want’ (reverse coded) ($\alpha = 0.73$).

**Perceived realism of the vlog** (scale constructed for this study) was measured with four seven-point Likert scales with the items ‘This text is far-fetched (reverse coded)/realistic/authentic/credible’ ($\alpha = 0.70$).

**Recognition of accent** was measured by using two seven-point Likert scales anchored by ‘completely disagree – completely agree’ (adapted from Hendriks et al., 2018): ‘The speaker has a regional accent’ and ‘The speaker has a standard accent’. Participants were also asked ‘Which province do you think this speaker is from?’ followed by a drop-down menu with the twelve Dutch provinces and the option ‘don’t know’. The options from the drop-down menu were coded as correct or incorrect. For participants who listened to a non-standard Dutch accent (i.e., Brabant accent), the options Brabant or Limburg (i.e., the southern two provinces of the Netherlands) were coded as correct.

**Product use** by listeners was measured with a seven-point semantic differential scale introduced by the statement ‘Indicate how often you drink gin/eat cheese/sit in an office chair/wear sunglasses’ and anchored by ‘never – very often’.

**Self-assessed accent** was measured with two seven-point Likert scales anchored by ‘completely disagree – completely agree’ (adapted from Hendriks et al., 2018): ‘I speak with a regional accent.

Listeners were also asked about their age, gender, nationality, and educational level.

3.5. Procedure

Participants were recruited through a commercial platform (Qualtrics) and were asked to fill in an online questionnaire in Dutch on the Qualtrics platform. They were informed that they would be asked to listen to an audio fragment of a vlog and to answer questions about this but were not informed about the actual purpose of the study. They were told that participation was voluntary and that their data would be anonymised. They were asked to consent to their data being used for scientific purposes. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the audio fragments.

Once participants had given their consent, they answered demographic questions about their gender, age and nationality. They were also told to turn up the volume of their device. For the audio fragments, there was a timing option active on the page with the recording, to prevent participants from leaving the page before the end of the fragment.

After listening to the recording, participants were asked to answer questions regarding their attitude towards the speaker (i.e., competence, status, likeability, dynamism), comprehensibility, attitude towards the product, attitude towards the vlog, perceived manipulative intent, perceived realism of the vlog, accent recognition, product use. They were also asked to indicate their age, gender, educational level and whether they spoke with a regional accent themselves.
Participants were thanked for their participation after completing the questionnaire. They received financial compensation from Qualtrics. The average completion time of the experiment was 7 minutes ($SD = 12.56$).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Effect product

A MANOVA with Product as a factor for all measured variables showed that the four products were not evaluated differently ($F(27, 1808) = 1.43, p = .067$). Therefore, Product was not taken into account as a factor in subsequent analyses.

4.2. Manipulation checks

4.2.1. Recognition checks

The speaker in the regionally accented commercials ($M = 5.29, SD = 1.58$) was evaluated as having a significantly stronger regional accent than the speaker in the standard accented commercials ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.61$; $F(1, 627) = 229.50, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.288$). The effect of Context ($F(1, 627) = 1.07, p = .303$) and the interaction effect ($F(1, 627) = 1.65, p = .199$) were not significant. Vice versa, the speaker in the standard accented commercials was evaluated as speaking with a more standard accent ($M = 5.18, SD = 1.38$) than the speaker in the regionally accented commercials ($M = 3.22, SD = 1.72$; $F(1, 627) = 249.10, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.284$). The effect of Context ($F(1, 627) < 1$) and the interaction effect ($F(1, 627) = 3.18, p = .075$) were not significant.

The speaker in the regionally accented commercials was correctly recognised by slightly over half of respondents (55.3%) as coming from the two southern provinces (either Brabant or Limburg).

4.2.2. Perceived manipulative intent

Perceived manipulative intent was greater in the commercial contexts ($M = 4.22, SD = 1.08$) than in the non-commercial contexts ($M = 3.61, SD = 1.11$; $F(1, 627) = 49.44, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.073$). The effect of Accent ($F(1, 627) = 2.52, p = .113$) and the interaction effect ($F(1, 627) = 2.96, p = .086$) were not significant.

4.3. MANOVA all measured variables

A MANOVA with Context and Accent as factors for all measured variables showed multivariate main effects of Context ($F(8, 620) = 2.03, p = .041, \eta^2_p = 0.025$) and Accent ($F(8, 620) = 18.22, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.190$), but no interaction ($F(8, 620) = 1.29, p = .246$). The univariate analyses revealed that Context only had an effect on likeability ($F(1, 627) = 5.51, p = .019, \eta^2_p = 0.009$) and perceived realism of the vlog ($F(1, 627) = 5.38, p = .021, \eta^2_p = 0.009$). The speaker in the non-commercial contexts ($M = 4.62, SD = 1.06$) was evaluated as more likeable than the speaker in the commercial contexts ($M = 4.41, SD = 1.13$). Perceived realism of the vlog was greater in the non-commercial contexts ($M = 4.22, SD = 1.07$) than in the commercial contexts ($M = 4.01, SD = 1.19$).

The univariate analyses also revealed that Accent had an effect on competence ($F(1, 627) = 29.79, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.045$), status ($F(1, 627) = 11.87, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.019$), dynamism ($F(1, 627) = 9.06, p = .003, \eta^2_p = 0.014$), attitude towards the product ($F(1, 627) = 7.95, p = .005, \eta^2_p = 0.013$), perceived realism of the vlog ($F(1, 627) = 4.05, p < .045, \eta^2_p = 0.006$), and comprehensibility ($F(1, 627) = 94.56, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.131$), but not on likeability ($F(1, 627) = 2.89, p = .090$), and attitude towards the vlog ($F(1, 627) < 1$). Vlogs with a standard-accented speaker were evaluated more positively than vlogs with a regionally accented speaker. The speaker with the standard accent was attributed more competence, status and dynamism than the speaker with the regional accent and was evaluated as more comprehensible. The products were evaluated more positively in vlogs with a standard-accented speaker than in vlogs with a regionally accented speaker. Vlogs with a standard-accented speaker were perceived as more realistic than vlogs with a regionally accented speaker. For means and standard deviations, see Table 1.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Marketers regularly make use of non-standard (regional, foreign, or ethnic) accents in commercials to persuade consumers to buy their products and services. This may be a surprising and counterproductive strategy, because extant sociolinguistic research in non-commercial contexts has convincingly demonstrated that non-standard accents are evaluated more negatively than standard accents for most measures, except likeability. Consequently, it is important to establish if non-standard accents are evaluated differently in commercial contexts than in non-commercial contexts.
The aim of the current study was to examine the effect of non-standard (regional) versus standard accented speech in commercial versus non-commercial contexts for identical accented speech fragments in terms of attitudes towards the speaker (competence, status, likeability, dynamism), comprehensibility, attitude towards the product, attitude towards the vlog, and perceived realism of the vlog. We examined this in an experiment with vlogs with commercial or non-commercial content recorded by the same speaker in either regionally accented (Brabant) Dutch or standard Dutch, as evaluated by Dutch listeners.

Our findings show that the impact of a speaker’s standard or regional accent was the same in a commercial and a non-commercial context. Regardless of the context, a vlog with a regional accent was evaluated more negatively than a vlog with a standard accent for the majority of measures: attitudes towards the speaker (competence, status, likeability, dynamism), comprehensibility, attitude towards the product, attitude towards the vlog, and perceived realism of the vlog. A vlog with a regional accent was not evaluated differently from a vlog with a standard accent on likeability of the speaker and attitude towards the vlog. In addition, the two contexts led to different evaluations for two measures. Irrespective of accent, the commercial vlogs were evaluated more negatively than non-commercial vlogs with regard to likeability of the speaker and perceived realism of the vlog.

The finding that a regional accent was evaluated more negatively than a standard accent is in line with sociolinguistic research in non-commercial contexts and the few extant studies of non-standard accents in commercials. A meta-analysis of the effects of non-standard accents on speaker evaluations showed non-standard-accented speakers were
evaluated more negatively than standard-accented speakers in terms of status, solidarity and dynamism (Fuertes et al., 2012). Experimental studies of accents in commercials showed that regionally accented spokespeople were evaluated more negatively than standard-accented speakers in terms of source credibility, expertise and trustworthiness (Reinares-Lara et al., 2016), that commercials with ethnic-accented spokespeople led to lower purchase intentions than commercials with standard-accented spokespeople (DeShields et al., 1996, 1997), and that commercials with foreign-accented spokespeople led to lower purchase intentions, more negative attitude towards the product and more negative evaluation of speaker competence than commercials with standard-accented spokespeople (Hendriks et al., 2015). Thus, our findings for the negative effects of a regional accent in commercial and non-commercial contexts match those found in experimental studies that examined evaluations of non-standard accents in commercial or non-commercial contexts only.

The present study found no differences in likeability between the regionally accented and the standard-accented speaker. This is not in line with earlier studies showing that solidarity (also termed social attractiveness, integrity) was greater for speakers with non-standard (regional) accents than for standard-accented speakers (Grondelaers et al., 2010; Heijmer and Vonk, 2002; Hogg et al., 1984; Schoel and Stahlberg, 2012), nor with a meta-analysis revealing that solidarity was generally lower for non-standard-accented speakers than for non-standard-accented speakers (Fuertes et al., 2012). In view of these earlier findings, it is difficult to explain why accent had no effect on likeability in the present study, but a possible explanation is that the effect of context suppressed the effect of accent on the likeability of the speaker. The speaker in the non-commercial context was considered significantly more likeable than in the commercial context, and this effect may have neutralised the effect of accent on speaker likeability. In earlier studies, such an effect of context did not come into play, because they did not take into account commercial and non-commercial contexts.

In the current study, perceived manipulative intent was stronger for the commercial vlogs than for the non-commercial vlogs. The finding that the speaker was considered less likeable in the commercial than in the non-commercial vlogs is in line with studies showing a negative effect of perceived manipulative intent (cf. Campbell, 1995; Wojdynski and Evans, 2020). Campbell (1995) found that when consumers inferred manipulative intent, their attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the brand and purchase intention were lower than when they did not infer manipulative intent. On the basis of a review of the literature, Wojdynski and Evans (2020) conclude that recognition of sponsorship lowers consumer evaluations of the message and its source. Hence, our study confirms the tendency that people respond negatively to perceived attempts to influence their behaviour, although this tendency was weaker and less pervasive than in earlier studies.

The contribution of the current study to extant research is that it has examined the evaluation of a regional versus a standard accent in both commercial and non-commercial contexts in one experimental set-up, whereas previous studies examined one of these contexts only. Our findings demonstrate that a regional accent is evaluated less positively than a standard accent on a number of measures in both contexts. This indicates that a regional accent is a potent cue across these contexts, overriding possible effects that are specific to commercial contexts. Although perceived manipulative intent was found to be greater for the commercial vlogs than for the non-commercial vlogs, this did not affect the impact of the regional accent, either negatively or positively, as could have been expected. The commercial context did not lead to more positive evaluations of the regional accent than the non-commercial context, with listeners, for example, perceiving the regionally accented speaker as a down-to-earth, likeable and trustworthy spokesperson who has the right qualities to promote a product. Neither did the commercial context lead to more negative evaluations of the regional accent than the non-commercial context, with listeners, for instance, perceiving the regional accent as a ruse to add to persuasiveness of the commercial, in line with thinking on perceived manipulative intent (cf. Campbell, 1995; Wojdynski and Evans, 2020). The impact of Standard Language Ideology, a bias in favour of the standard variety of a language (Lippi-Green, 1997), appears to be so strong that listeners downgrade non-standard regional accents irrespective of the commercial nature of the message.

A limitation of the current study is that it did not take into account the effect of congruence between the regional accent and the products or services advertised. A number of studies have shown that products/services advertised by spokespeople with congruent non-standard accents are evaluated more positively than products/services advertised by spokespeople with standard non-congruent accents or with incongruent non-standard accents (e.g., Dubey et al., 2018; Hendriks et al., 2015; Puzakova et al., 2015). For instance, Dubey et al. (2018) showed that, for Australian listeners, a Chinese accent in a commercial for a Chinese restaurant led to more positive attitudes towards the brand and ad and higher purchase intention than a Chinese accent in commercials for an Australian and Indian restaurant. Because the focus of the present study was on the effects of commercial versus non-commercial contexts, we deliberately excluded accent-product congruence as a factor and selected products that were neutral with respect to their (in-)congruence with a particular accent. In other words, we chose products that were not associated with a particular region in the Netherlands. However, in view of the importance of congruence between accent and products/services for com-
mercial purposes, future studies should investigate the interaction between congruence and commercial versus non-commercial context. The question is whether the importance of congruence between a regional accent and a product/service outweighs the negative evaluations attached to non-standard accents in commercial contexts as opposed to non-commercial contexts, since congruence may be more relevant and salient in such commercial contexts.

A second limitation of our study is that it only investigated vlogs that were fully spoken in either a standard accent or a regional accent. Corpus analyses have shown that radio and television commercials frequently contain a specific combination of standard and regional accents in what have been termed the ‘action’ and ‘comment’ components of commercials (Lee, 1992; O’Sullivan, 2013, 2017, 2018; O’Sullivan and Kelly-Holmes, 2017; Sussex, 1989). The action component refers to the body of the commercial featuring action involving the product, for example, a holiday promoted by someone floating in a swimming pool, while in the comment component, which usually occurs towards the end of the commercial, the speaker comments on the product, often in the form of a ‘commercial-evaluative statement about the product’ (Sussex, 1989, p. 164). Corpus analyses reveal that a standard accent is often used in the comment component, whereas a non-standard accent is more common in the action component. For instance, in Australian TV commercials the comment section was “normally spoken by an educated Australian voice” (Sussex, 1989, p. 165), in Swiss TV commercials High German was more common in the comment component, while Swiss German varieties were more frequently used in the action component (Lee, 1992), and in Irish radio commercials features of Standard Southern British English have been found to be more characteristic of the comment component, with Irish English accent features being more characteristic of the action component (O’Sullivan, 2013, 2017, 2018; O’Sullivan and Kelly-Holmes, 2017).

The question is how listeners respond to such combinations of standard and non-standard accents in distinct parts of commercials, compared to commercials that are fully in a standard or non-standard accent. This question was not addressed in the current study, because a vlog is typically a monologue and therefore less suitable for incorporating more and differently accented speakers. Future studies should explore the effects of the typical use of standard and non-standard accents in action and comment components in commercial versus non-commercial contexts. To this end, rather than using monologic vlogs, such studies could, for instance, make use of dialogues between non-standard-accented speakers in an action component, followed by a final comment spoken by a third, standard-accented speaker.

A third limitation of our study is that we only used a male speaker to record all fragments. As previous studies have demonstrated that speaker gender can be a factor determining how listeners evaluate non-standard accented speakers (Grondelaers et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2016), future research should use experimental designs in which both male and female speakers are incorporated.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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ETHICS

The authors followed the standard procedures for experimental studies as approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Arts, Radboud University, the Netherlands, to guarantee the ethical soundness of the study.

APPENDIX A. SCRIPTS

Hi,

The traditional cheese with holes has a long history. Our grandparents and parents really enjoy this and we still enjoy it. I love to eat a cheese board with a glass of wine with my grandfather or my father. But also with a beer with my friends. Are you also a cheese lover?
[commercial ending] I managed to secure a 20% discount code! All you have to do is go to your cheese shop and use my code.

[non-commercial ending] And you? Do you think cheese with holes is something for your parents and grandparents or something more contemporary? More something for wine or beer? Let me know in the comments.

Hi,

Today I am having fun shopping! Guess for what? I bought new sunglasses! I have searched for a long time for glasses that I would like and that make me look “even” better. Finally I have found the perfect glasses! Don’t they look great? I especially like the luxurious look.

[commercial ending] I managed to secure a 20% discount code! All you have to do is go to your optician and use my code.

[non-commercial ending] I’d love to hear what you think, so let me know in the comments. Be honest! [smile]

References


