



The Language of Sales:

Behavioural Linguistics in Retail



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Research Partnership

This report has been compiled as part of an Everlytic and BreadCrumbs Linguistics partnership.

Everlytic is South Africa's largest digital messaging platform. It gives businesses the tools to communicate personally, reliably, and automatically via bulk email, SMS, voice broadcasting, and web push notifications.

BreadCrumbs Linguistics is an award-winning behavioural communications firm that has the proprietary use of Behavioural Linguistics™ in South Africa – a framework to craft communication using behavioural science principles. BreadCrumbs designs marketing and communication campaigns aligned to behavioural best practice and conducts and collates research papers across topics of communication and behavioural theory.

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Executive Summary

In our new era of work-from-home, the retail sector has had to adopt a flexible approach with more innovative strategies to shape customer habits and behaviours. This has meant a focus on consumer experience through digital platforms – where the majority of customer journeys occur.

A dominant channel for communicating retail messaging is through email marketing, which continues to evolve as businesses experiment with different tactics and approaches to make their emails more interactive.

This research summary highlights the top 50 sales-oriented emails sent from South African retailers through the Everlytic platform in 2021. The data was pulled from 2.4 billion bulk emails that retail clients sent during the year, excluding emails with less than 100 recipients. Email ranking was done according to key engagement metrics, including open rates and click-through rates.

As part of the data set, 15 organisations accounted for the top 50 emails sent – taken from a client database of 197 retail brands.

2021



2.4 Billion Bulk Emails

197 Retail Brands



15 Organisations

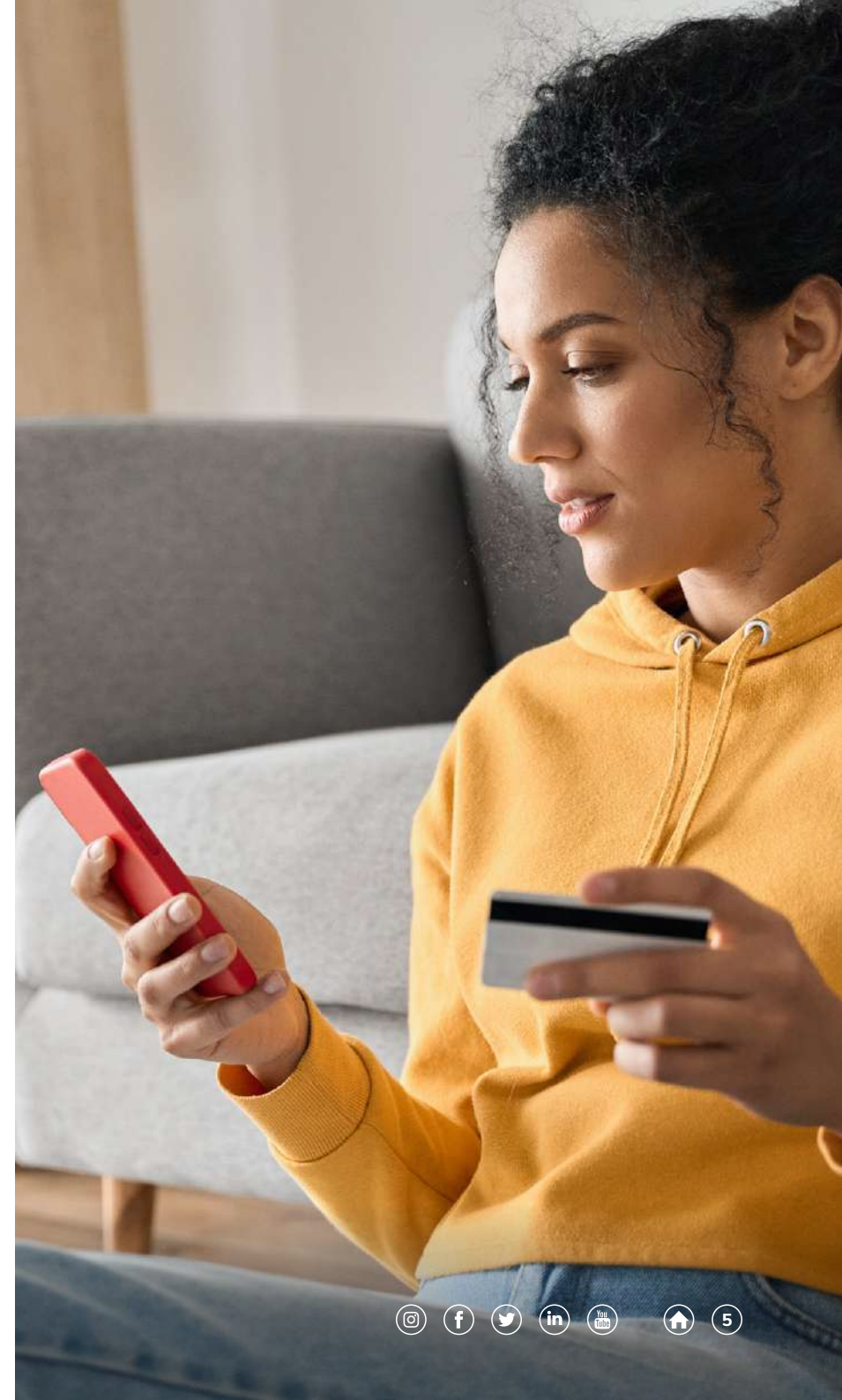
Top 50 Sales Emails

Executive Summary (cont.)

Key Insights:

- ✓ The most **successful retail emails** were sent early in the week, towards the end of the working day. The best retail months for email engagement were January and November.
- ✓ Reference to incentives like **discounts, credits, and freebies** boosted consumer engagement, particularly where these were positioned as 'reserved' or 'waiting' for the consumer.
- ✓ **Language of exclusivity**, where consumers feel unique and special, drove better engagement rates.
- ✓ **Language of scarcity**, where there was reference to a limited time or quantity of the sales item, encouraged more urgency for action.
- ✓ Visual language that relies on **animated GIFs** to showcase the retail product increased interest and engagement.
- ✓ Retail emails that used a **secondary handwriting font** to elicit personalisation received better click-through rates.
- ✓ Sales communications with a single-minded message and **one call to action** button were more likely to get engagement.
- ✓ Call-to-action buttons that are a **bright, bold colour** received more click-throughs.
- ✓ Linguistic tools like **alliteration and onomatopoeia** made brand writing more interesting and attractive resulting in more persuasive copy and boosted engagement.

Behavioural nudges have emerged as one of the best ways to improve sales while still maintaining an end user's freedom of choice. Communications that are framed with behavioural insights in mind benefit from the close link between language, behaviour, and decision-making. Crafting content in ways that are intrinsically linked to how people think and act means you're more likely to persuade: critical for retail emails.



Research Methodology

For this report, we analysed the 50 best-performing emails sent in the retail industry in South Africa in 2021.

Some Key Stats

-  50 emails were analysed
-  comprising of 17 457 words
-  from a database of 197 retail brands
-  with over 2.4 billion retail emails sent

Here's What We Looked At ...

Best-Performing Emails Based on Engagement

Email ranking was done according to key engagement metrics, including open rate and click-through rate as a percentage of the number of people communicated to.



Open Rate

Email open rate is the percentage of subscribers who open a specific email out of the total number of subscribers who you sent the email to. This is calculated by taking the number of people who open the email and dividing it by the number of emails sent that did not bounce (i.e., failed to reach the recipient). This number is then multiplied by 100 to arrive at the email open rate percentage.



Click-Through Rate

A click-through rate (CTR) for email is the percentage of people who clicked on at least one link in an email message. This is calculated by dividing the total number of people who clicked by the number of delivered emails and multiplying that ratio by 100 to arrive at the email CTR percentage.

Sales & Persuasion

If you had to look at your inbox right now, what would you see? Is it full? Empty? Chances are, you have multiple unread mails that you haven't gotten around to reading – and in time, will likely ignore or delete.

In the competitive brand space of the modern-day digital era, everyone is vying for your attention. Brands that can attract and interest you are more likely to engage and retain you – and sales communication is a critical part of a business' ongoing success.

Any type of successful business today involves the business of behaviour.

Thousands
of
Decisions

So Much
Noise



Plus, as readers and consumers, we're lazy. We don't want to work too hard to process information.

Too Many
Options

The Good News?

We can tailor brand communication to consider how we make decisions. While some decision-making is irrational, there are predictable patterns to this that lets us, as communicators, shape our readers' (and clients') choice architecture.

This helps to nudge certain behaviours – for example, opening a retailer's email, clicking through to their website or sales platform, and ultimately purchasing their product or service.

Behavioural Linguistics: The Science of Communication

Language > Ideology > Behaviour

Behavioural Linguistics is about nudging responsible action using communication — with the core belief that language is a powerful way to change behaviour.

- 1 **Build** brand affinity and positive sentiment
- 2 **Convince** adopting a viewpoint
- 3 **Drive** a desired call to action

This analysis focuses on the linguistic elements that correlate with email engagement; in this case, when email recipients:

- a **open** the email, and
- b **engage** with the communication by clicking on at least one link in the email.

Principles of a Behavioural Linguistics Analysis Include:

Semantics

► Vocabulary choice and word frequencies.

Syntax

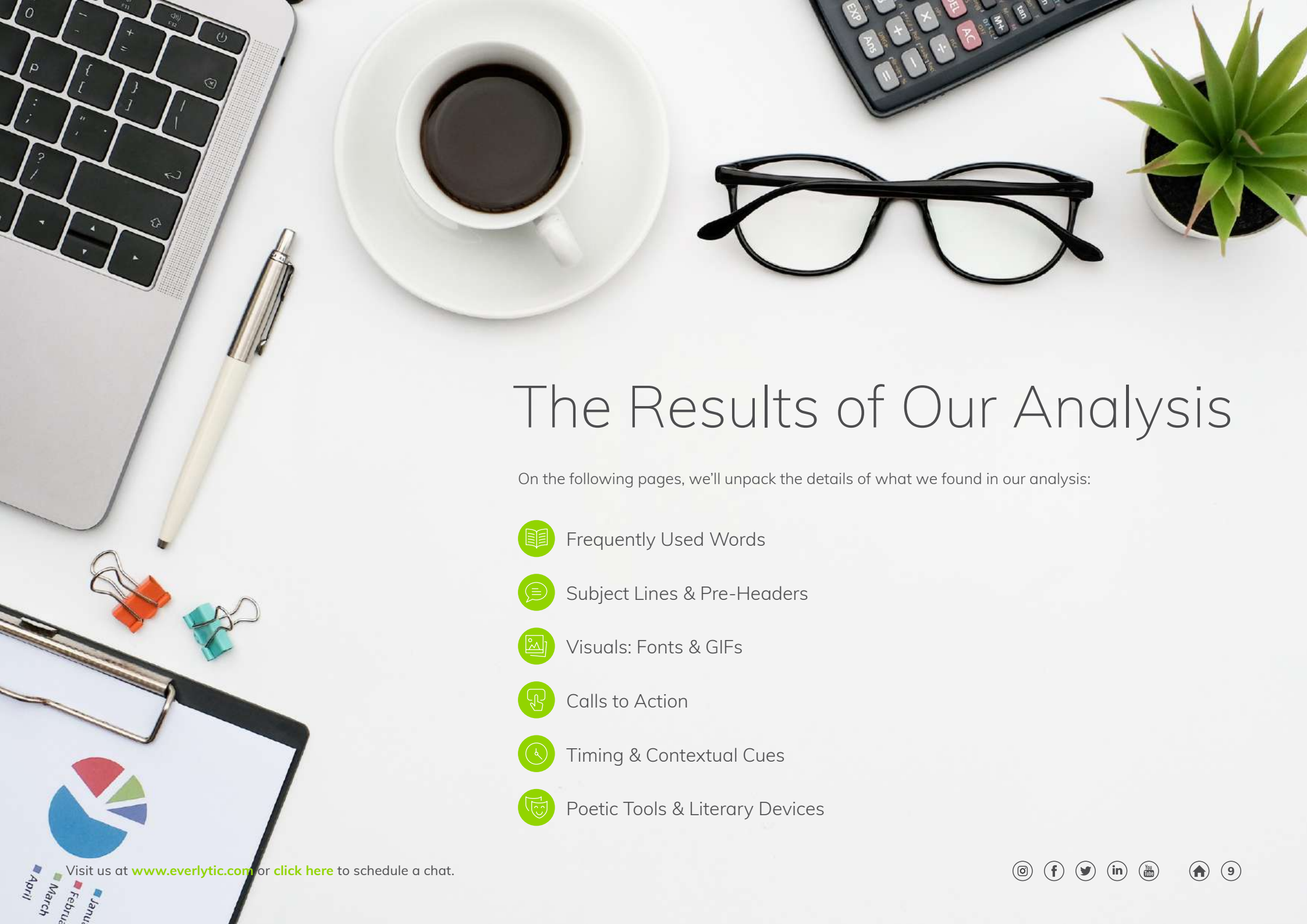
► Sentence length, tense, and use of grammar, like the use of questions and commands.

Phonetics

► The use of sounds and literary devices, including alliteration and onomatopoeia.

Visual Language

► Colours, GIFs, infographics, and imagery used.



The Results of Our Analysis

On the following pages, we'll unpack the details of what we found in our analysis:

-  Frequently Used Words
-  Subject Lines & Pre-Headers
-  Visuals: Fonts & GIFs
-  Calls to Action
-  Timing & Contextual Cues
-  Poetic Tools & Literary Devices

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The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)



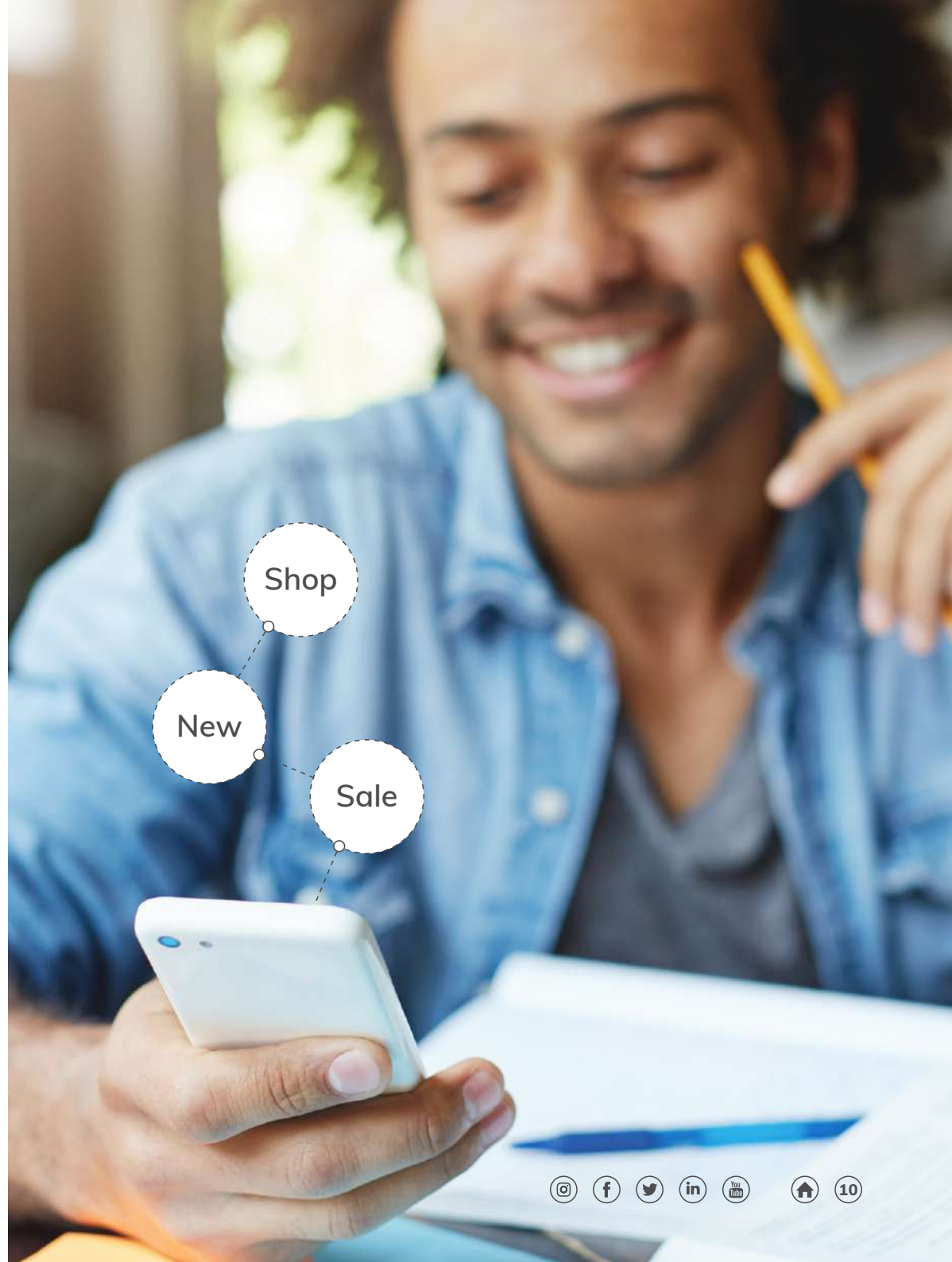
Frequently Used Words

In total, 50 emails comprising of 17 457 words were analysed. The 15 most frequently used words are shown below. Word frequencies show us a variety of interesting phenomena – highlighting the retail brands' main concerns and preoccupations.

1	Sale	9	Only
2	More	10	New
3	Home	11	Now
4	Shop	12	Reserve
5	You / Yours	13	Purchase
6	Pay	14	Payment
7	Buy	15	Instantly
8	Before		

For this research, closed-class words (e.g.: could, must, a, the, in, of) were edited out (except for pronouns) and the focus was on open-class words (nouns, lexical verbs, adjectives, and adverbs). These tend to be more indicative of a brand's overall style / tone and give a clear indication of the focus of the brand's message.

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The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)



Frequently Used Words (cont.)

Word Analyses Revealed 5 Key Behavioural Themes:

1 Scarcity

We've all experienced the scarcity bias. When something is less readily available, due to a limited quantity or time, we tend to think that it's more valuable and of higher quality.

This, in turn, nudges us to act faster.

Examples include:

- ▶ You still have a chance
- ▶ While stocks last
- ▶ 24 hours only
- ▶ Order before 15 Dec to get your delivery in time

2 Exclusivity

In the same vein as the scarcity bias, exclusivity plays on the benefits of being part of a small group that has access to scarce products and experiences.

This is an effective marketing strategy as it creates a heightened sense of desirability. And, as we know from scarcity, the less available something is, the more attractive it appears.

Examples include:

- ▶ Exclusive VIP Access
- ▶ Be the first to discover our pre-sale
- ▶ Offer to our most-valued customers
- ▶ Before everyone else

3 Incentives

An incentive is something that motivates us to perform an action – and they are very effective for initiating behavioural change.

These can be intrinsic (motivated internally by our sense of personal satisfaction) or, more commonly, extrinsic (motivated externally through getting something). Importantly, incentives are far more appealing when they are instant.

Examples include:

- ▶ A special discount to kickstart 2021
- ▶ We've added R100 to your profile!
- ▶ Free delivery on orders
- ▶ We'd like to offer you a free mug

4 Loss Aversion

Loss aversion is a behavioural bias that describes how the pain of losing something is roughly twice as powerful as the pleasure of gaining something.

In the world of sales, this knowledge that people don't want to lose something that they already have (or think they have) can be leveraged effectively using language.

Examples include:

- ▶ Shop and reserve your favourites
- ▶ Your complimentary credits will expire in a week
- ▶ Redeem voucher

5 Convenience

Anything that adds challenge or effort, even if these seem small or irrelevant, make it less likely that we'll follow through with a call to action.

Because of this, the principle of making things easy, quick, and convenient is crucial in nudging behaviour.

Examples include:

- ▶ Hassle-free returns
- ▶ No more checkout queues
- ▶ Simple, secure payment
- ▶ How convenient is that?!

The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)



Subject Lines & Pre-Headers

The first point of contact we have with the consumer through this type of direct marketing channel is the subject line and pre-header text. Here, we have a fleeting moment to grab the reader's attention and ensure that they find the content relevant and compelling enough to dedicate more time to the email.

If the subject line is responsible for grabbing attention, the pre-header text is responsible for maintaining it.

Subject Lines

Stats show that most people now access their emails using a mobile device. Considering this, the length of the subject line is particularly important so that it fully displays and doesn't cut off in preview view. Aim for five to seven words, at 25-30 characters, so your subject line is in full view even if your reader scans their inbox quickly.

Top 5 emails linked to subject lines:

63% open rate | "[Brand 1] Online Is Here!"

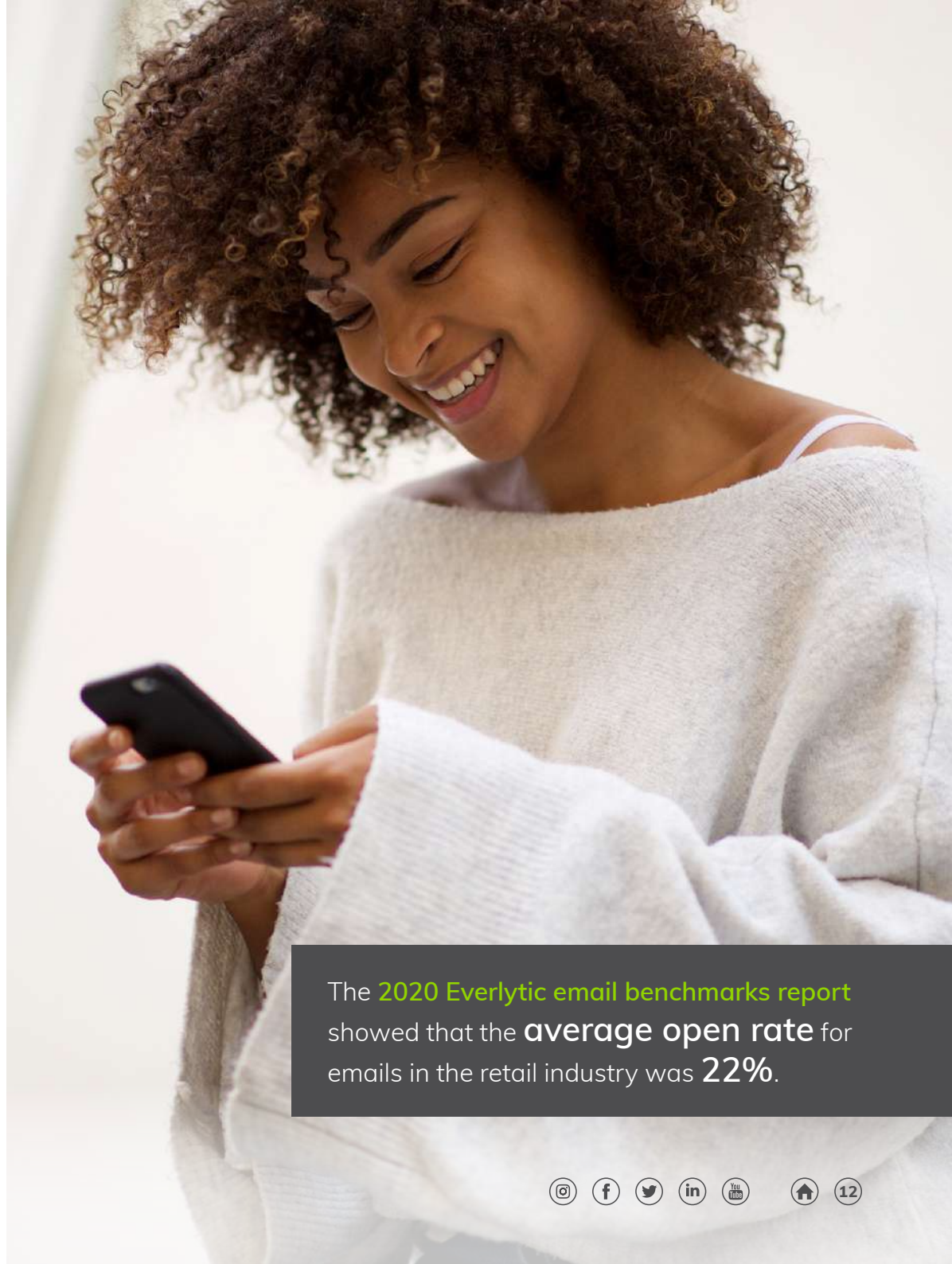
56% open rate | "Summer Dreaming"

48% open rate | "[Brand 2] is now available!"

48% open rate | "Everything OK?"

47% open rate | "Get 30% off your summer essentials"

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The **2020 Everlytic email benchmarks report** showed that the **average open rate** for emails in the retail industry was **22%**.

The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)



Subject Lines & Pre-Headers (cont.)

Pre-Header Text

This is the text that displays underneath the subject line on mobile and desktop views and is short summary text that gives readers a sneak peek of what's to come – with the aim to drive higher open rates.

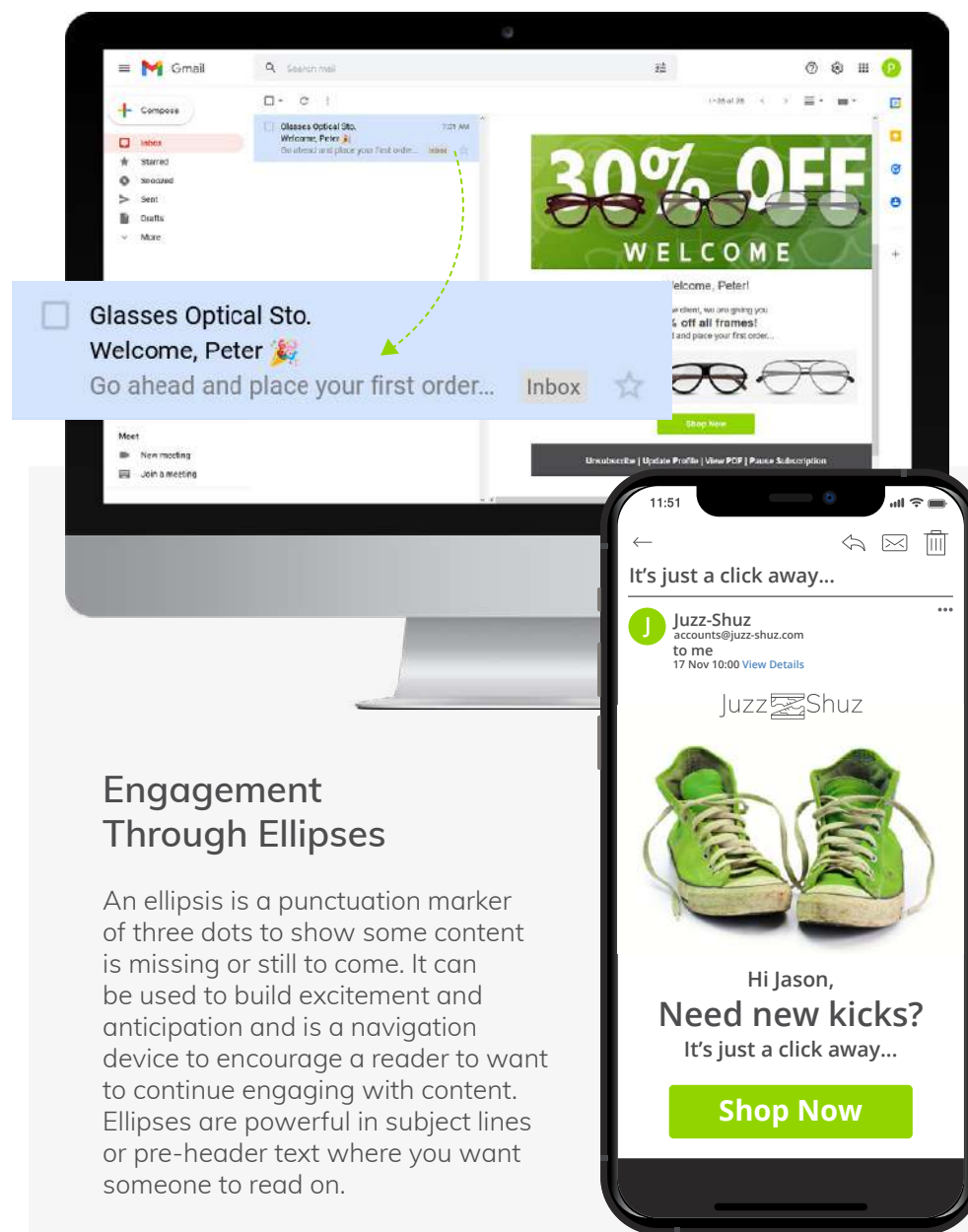
Top Tip:

Make sure you always set your pre-header text. If not, email platforms may auto-format this text and give your readers unnecessary or undesirable information upfront. For example, the option to view the email online or unsubscribe.

Pre-header text examples from our dataset:

- ▶ Register now for your exclusive launch deals
- ▶ Embrace the warmer weather with our latest collection
- ▶ You can now get groceries delivered in 60 minutes!
- ▶ Go ahead and place your first order...
- ▶ It's just a click away...
- ▶ Exclusive online offer to our most-valued customers

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Engagement Through Ellipses

An ellipsis is a punctuation marker of three dots to show some content is missing or still to come. It can be used to build excitement and anticipation and is a navigation device to encourage a reader to want to continue engaging with content. Ellipses are powerful in subject lines or pre-header text where you want someone to read on.

The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)



Fonts & GIFs

Our brains are designed to process visual information faster and more efficiently than any other form of information. This is called the **Picture Superiority Effect**. This makes imagery a powerful tool to capture attention and evoke emotion – which can help drive action.

Visual elements that help boost email engagement include varied font types and colour, header imagery and GIFs.

As part of this analysis, varied fonts and GIFs played a significant role in the top retail emails.



The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)



Fonts & GIFs (cont.)

Fonts

Just as the colours, shapes, and layout of an email all play a role in how we perceive and respond to a brand's message, font plays a role too. Consumers link different associations with different fonts and some fonts are now even categorised as old fashioned and outdated (think Comic Sans).

Font Readability

Email readability is important. This means using fonts that are easy to read and process, including Arial, Georgia, and Open Sans. If your font is intricate and difficult to read, it can lead to mental fatigue and can result in your reader not taking the desired action you're after.

When looking for the ideal font for reading brand emails, consider both legibility and availability. The ideal fonts are not just what your brand CI dictates, but rather what's easy to read on mobile screens and desktop browsers, as well as fonts that are available to most of your audience.

Using 'Pop' Fonts

While the body of your email should be in a clear and legible font, the use of a 'pop' font (similar to a pop of colour) is recommended. This helps to excite the eye in key headings or banner messages to add interest and emphasise text.

Handwriting fonts have shown to be effective here – leading to more favourable product evaluations because they humanise the product and enhance our emotional attachment to a product.

Did You Know?

Font psychology is the study of how different fonts impact consumer thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

What to Avoid

- ✗ Thin weights on smaller font sizes

This is an example vs. This is an example

- ✗ Narrow-width fonts

This is an example vs. This is an example

- ✗ All block capitals for bulk amounts of text, as this reduces readability

LOREM IPSUM DOLOR SIT AMET,
CONSECTETUR ADIPISCING ELIT.
VIVAMUS EU QUAM AC LECTUS
INTERDUM EFFICITUR. NULLA
PULVINAR AC NIBH EGET ULTRICES.
PROIN VELIT ODIO, SODALES SED
QUAM SED, ULTRICIES POSUERE
METUS.

VS.

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur
adipiscing elit. Vivamus eu quam ac lectus
interdum efficitur. Nulla pulvinar ac nibh
eget ultrices. Proin velit odio, sodales
sed quam sed, ultricies posuere metus.
Suspendisse rutrum neque et ipsum
consectetur accumsan. Vivamus maximus
at sapien sodales lacinia.

- ✗ Combinations of letters that look similar in upper and lowercase, unless you opt for using serif-style fonts to differentiate them and help with ease of reading

lluminate vs. Illuminate

The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)



Fonts & GIFs (cont.)

Fonts (cont.)

Font examples from the top emails include:



The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)

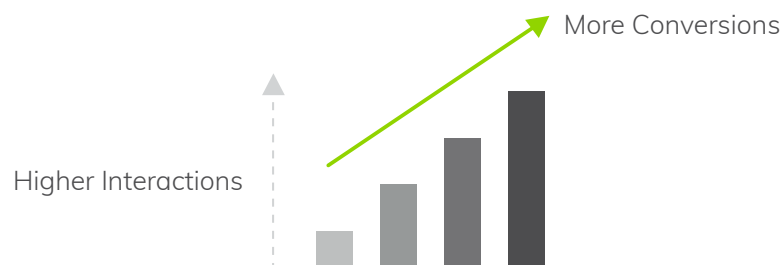


Fonts & GIFs (cont.)

GIFs

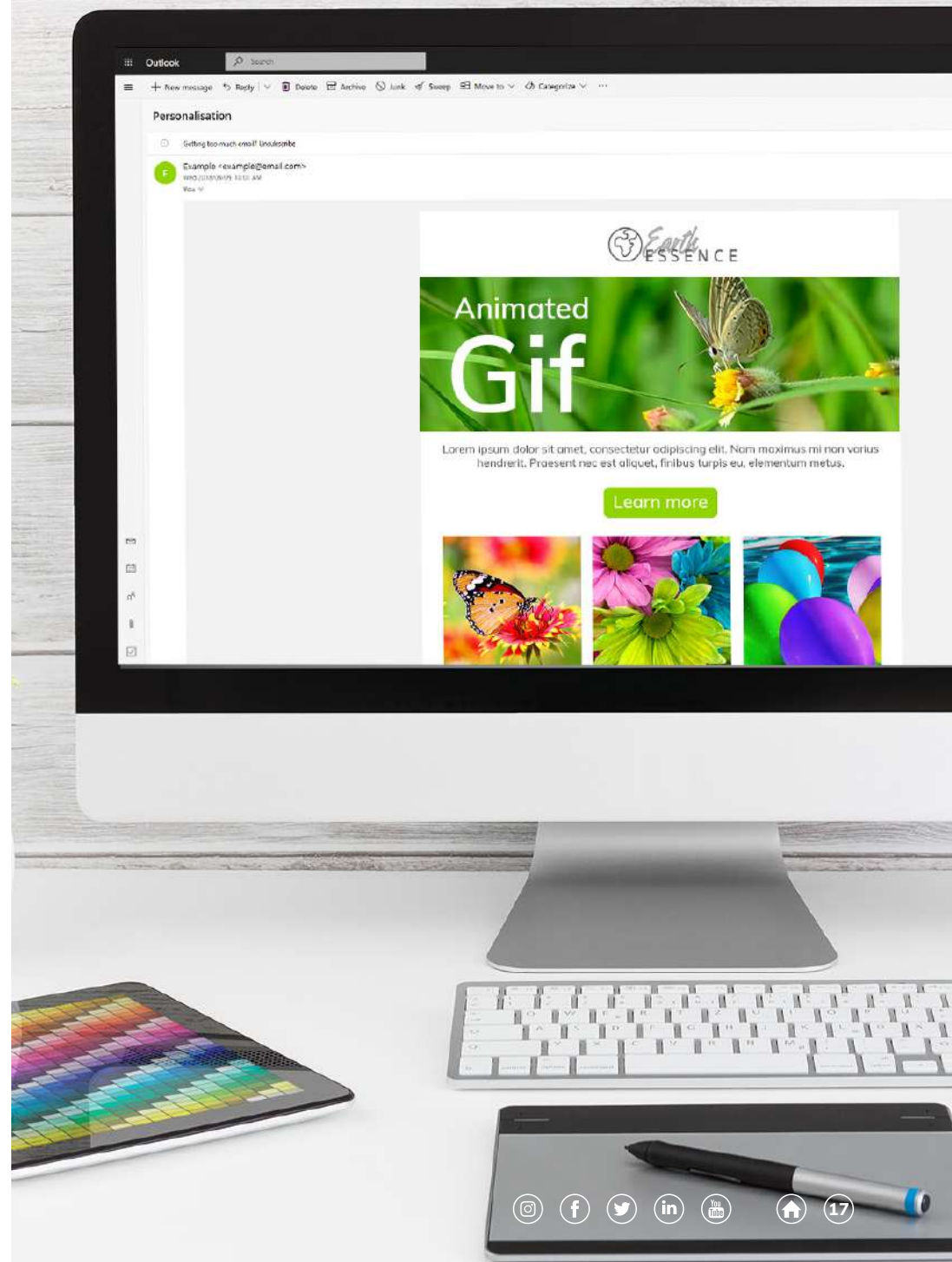
Three of the top five emails in the dataset used animated GIFs – a series of stitched-together images that move, like a looping snippet of a silent video.

GIFs add more interaction to marketing messages, hooking the recipients' interest and ensuring your message is consumed well. They also add a human touch to an email, making it look more appealing, exciting, and personal – capturing emotion as a moving image. This also helps to reduce the amount of text in an email, as messages can be conveyed through transitioning visuals.



Top Tip:

GIFs are far more engaging than static images and text, but be careful not to overuse them as this can be distracting, creating cognitive overload. In other words: don't let the GIF dominate the communication at the expense of the call to action.



The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)



Calls to Action

A call to action (CTA) is the part of an email that encourages the reader to do something. In the retail space, this often means clicking through to purchase a product or service. Your CTA is a crucial part of converting a potential customer and can drive a variety of different actions based on what your brand's goal is.

CTAs can either be created as **text hyperlinks** in the copy or **standalone buttons**. From the analysis, it was clear that standalone buttons that catch the readers' attention were more successful at driving email engagement.

Examples of some of these CTA buttons include:

Start Spoiling

SHOW ME ALL THE SPECIALS

SHOP NOW

SHOP DIAMONDS

Register & Shop Now

Grab My Free Mug!



The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)



Calls to Action (cont.)

Key CTA Insights

- ✓ **One call to action per email works better than multiple ones** as it reduces cognitive overload and encourages action.
- ✓ **Be short and concise.** Use only a few impactful words to get the key information across quickly and effectively.
- ✓ **Personal pronouns like 'my' and 'me' help build an immediate connection** with the reader, making the brand feel more personal and relatable.
- ✓ **CTAs that are unique and related to the brand's content stand out** more and are more memorable.
- ✓ **Use emotive language and strong action words**, like 'redeem', 'explore', 'enjoy' and 'discover'.
- ✓ **Call-to-action statements that create a sense of urgency drive quicker sales decisions.** Using all capital letters and exclamation marks can help to achieve this.
- ✓ **Call-to-action buttons on bold-coloured backgrounds are more visually appealing** and grab attention quicker. Here, white text is usually easier to read and process.

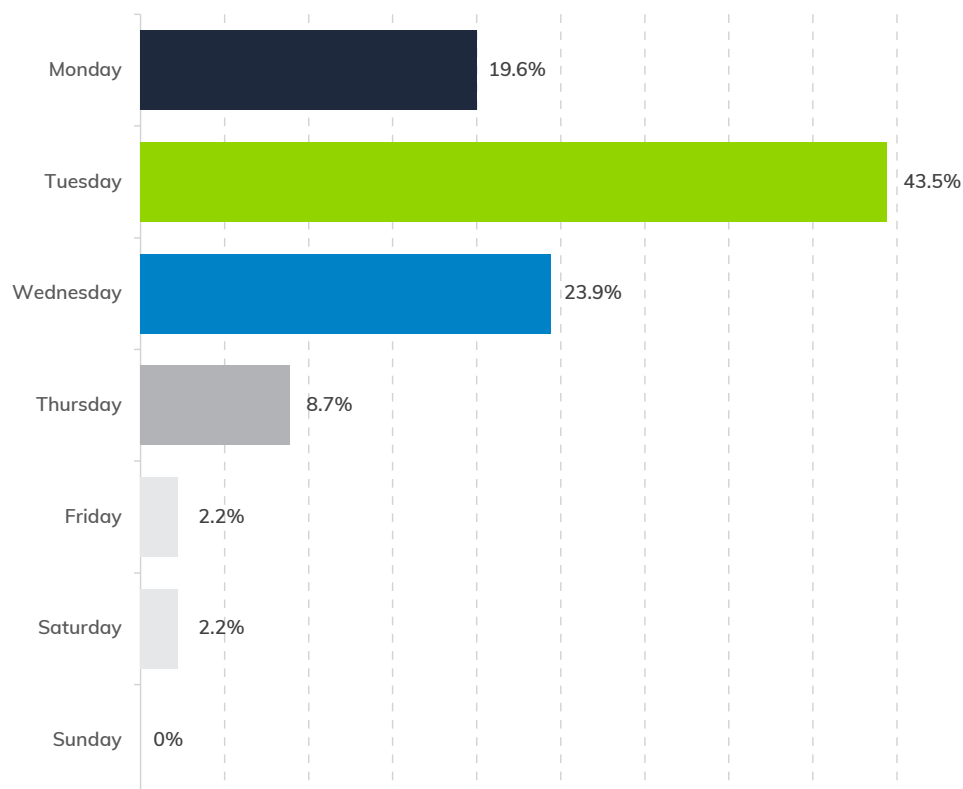
The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)



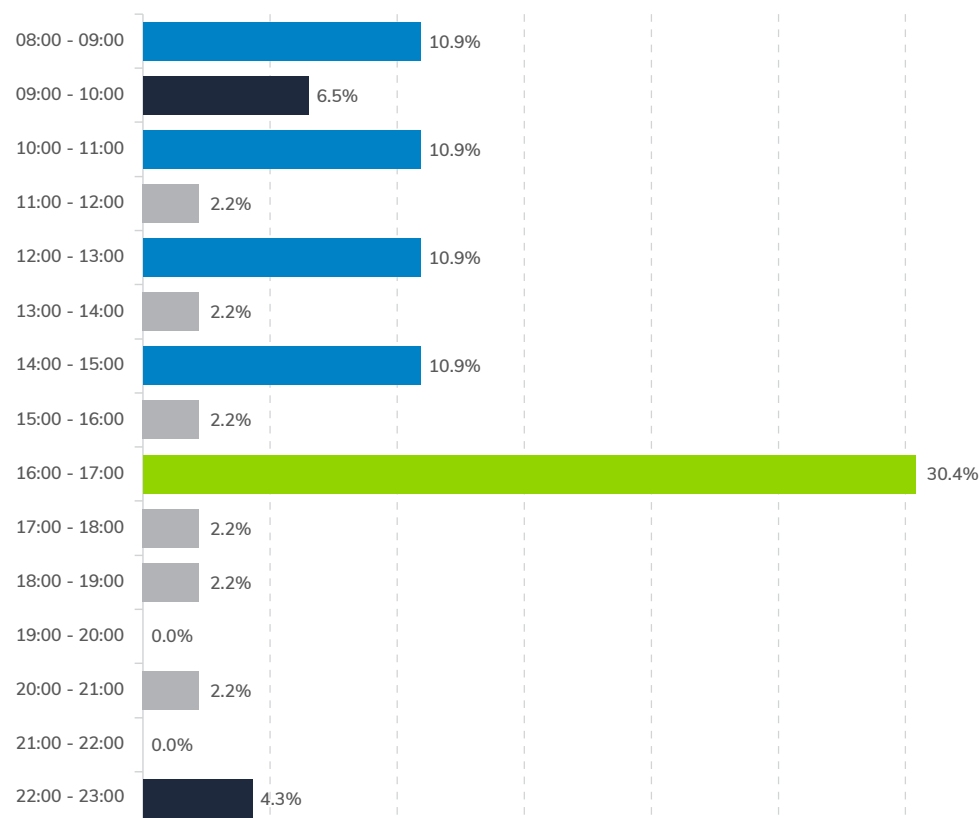
Timing & Contextual Cues

When it comes to message dispatch, matching the day and time of email opens with engagement levels shows that early-week sends at the end of the workday got more interaction.

Email engagement ranked by day:



Email engagement ranked by open rate time:



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The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)



Timing & Contextual Cues (cont.)

In terms of monthly engagement, January (24%) and November (17%) achieved the highest average engagement levels. This aligns to timely trends with January (the start of a new year) and November (traditionally a sales month linked to Black Friday or Cyber Monday) being key sales periods for retail brands. September and October tied in third place, with scores of 13%, which corresponds to the seasonal shift to spring / summer – another key sales period for retailers in South Africa.



Fresh Start Effect

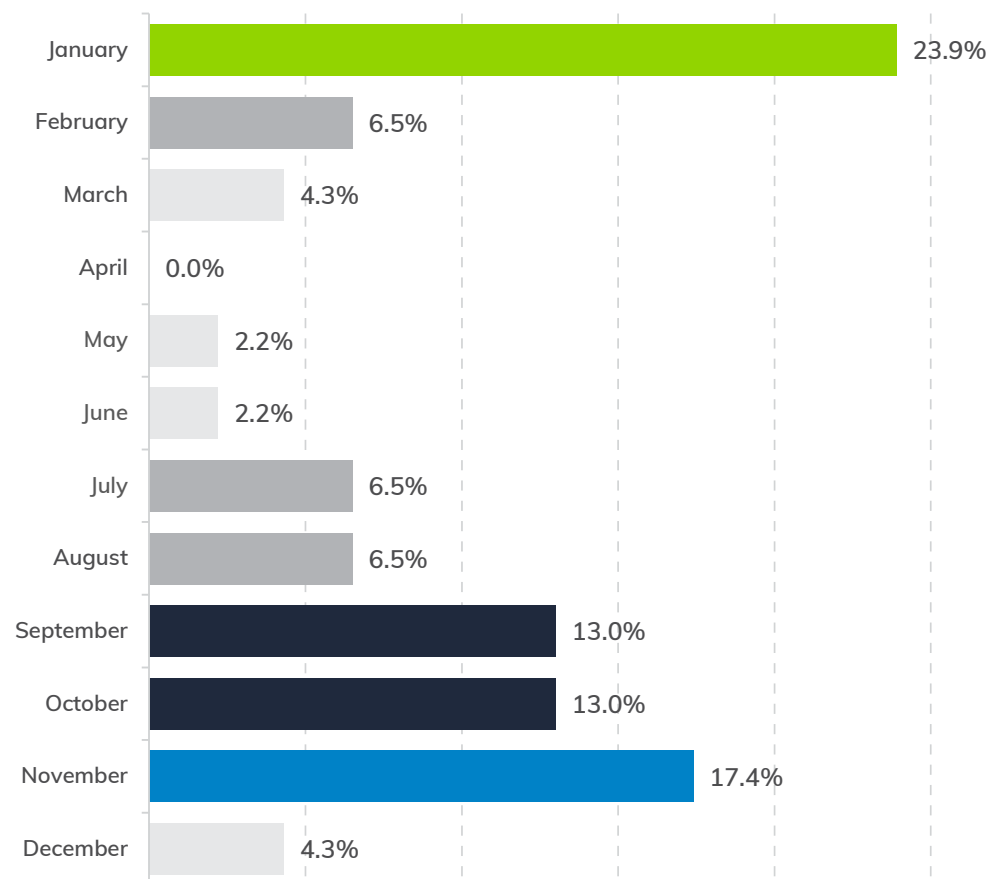
People are better at tackling their goals when they start on what is referred to as 'temporal landmarks'. For example, beginning a diet at the start of a week or joining the gym at the beginning of the year. Known as the Fresh Start Effect, this timing factor can positively influence purchasing decisions when done right.



Black Friday

Black Friday is an American retail term for the Friday after Thanksgiving weekend, which marks the start of the Christmas shopping season. On this day, retailers offer highly promoted sales and discounted prices to drive excitement and boost sales figures. The concept of Black Friday has extended into the South African retail world and, for many, corresponds now with month-long retail sales in November.

Email engagement ranked by open rate time:



The Results of Our Analysis (cont.)



Poetic Tools & Literary Devices

Alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance, repetition, puns, and metaphors are all great linguistic tools for creating engaging writing and, more importantly, persuasive writing. These help to add an element of fun into a communication, which has been shown to boost immediate interest and improve longer-term recall.

Some examples of literary device usage across the emails include:

- ▶ Woohoo!
- ▶ Bank account blues
- ▶ Cosy corner
- ▶ Start spoiling
- ▶ Something special
- ▶ The season to sparkle

Sentence Type

The sentence type is also important. As much as 88% of the emails in this analysis used at least one imperative (command type) in their communications, with examples including:

- ▶ Priced to go!
- ▶ Priced to sell!
- ▶ Sale!
- ▶ How convenient?!
- ▶ Ready, steady, shop!

Punctuation

Punctuation also conveys an emotional value that helps brands connect at a more human level. Previous research shows that using exclamation points – appropriately – correlates with boosted engagement.

This is because a key function of an exclamation mark is to convey excitement and get your target audience to pay attention. It also encourages them to act – with urgency.

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Crafting Behavioural Communication

Language Tips for Sales

1 Pay Attention to Pronouns

Instead of 'our price', 'our discount', or 'our deal', attribute the benefit to the consumer by using the second person pronoun 'your'. This immediately helps the consumer to relate the offer to their own lives, making it more relevant and enticing.

2 Add Power Words to Your Sales Dictionary

- benefit
- discover
- easy
- exclusive
- free
- gain
- guarantee
- love
- new
- now
- proven
- reveal
- safety
- save
- you, yours

3 Use Hedonic Language

Consumers get bored easily and lose interest in content quickly. Offset this with novelty. This can be done using hedonic (decadent, novel language) to highlight the new, or the excitement of an action, to boost its appeal and make us more interested in it. Creative naming conventions and fun adjectives help with this.

4 Focus on Value Framing

When it comes to message framing, content creators have a choice on how to position and structure the message. You can change the attractiveness of a message by highlighting either the positive (gain) or negative (loss) aspects of the same decision. Test what works for your audience.

5 Overcome Objections

We want things simple, cost effective, and hassle-free. Frame your retail emails to overcome objections that a consumer may have.

For example: "This will take a long time to purchase", "I don't want to pay for delivery", "Delivery takes too long", "What if I want to return the item", etc.

6 Lists & Bullet Points

Showcasing the value of your product or service? Use navigation devices like lists, bullet points, and infographics to highlight the key benefits, simply. Also remember the Serial Position Effect. Here, we remember the first and last items in a list best, and the middle items worst.

Final Thoughts

Every type of marketing comes down to persuading a customer to give you a desired outcome: to pick your brand's product or service. Through email marketing, being able to use words to inspire a positive reaction and action is an invaluable skill set.

Apply Behavioural Linguistics and the design and strategic principles listed in this report to harness the power of persuasion – giving your business a critical competitive advantage.

Like this report?

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