Master Thesis

Supervision II

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Generation Z's Perceptions of Personification Approaches to Brand Communication on Social Networking Sites

Introduction

The advent of social networking sites has dramatically transformed the way people across the globe share information, communicate and relate to each other (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Especially among Generation Z – so-called "digital natives" (Turner, 2015) – social networking sites have become an essential part of everyday life – a meeting point, source of information, and inspiration. Interestingly, social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram have recently also caught the interest of companies and brands discerning new opportunities to communicate and interact with especially young consumers on a more personal level as well as to nurture meaningful consumer-brand relationships (Beukeboom et al, 2015; Gretry et al., 2017; Labrecque, 2014; Sung & Kim, 2014). As a result, brands have set up their own brand pages on social networking sites and started to use these originally private space platforms for strategic brand communication purposes (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). In 2017, the social networking platform Instagram already reported 25 million active business profiles (Ha, 2017), and the number is expected to have even increased since then.

With their unique structural characteristics and interactive features, social networking sites, however, shift the dynamics of brand-consumer interactions and relationships, challenging the traditional, instrumental perception of brand communication as one-way communication. Today, Web 2.0 technology has blurred the distinction between mass and interpersonal communication (Gensler et al., 2013) and the possibility of constant, direct brand contact has fundamentally changed how brands and consumers interact (Nisar & Whitehead, 2016). Consumers are no longer passive receivers of brand messages and relationship-building efforts but empowered to participate and actively engage in brand communication (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). Through their public communicative interactions and meaning-making activities, they increasingly act as co-creators of brand meanings thereby actively engaging in the social construction of brand value (Arvidsson, 2005; Gensler et al., 2013).

Despite the exploding volume of consumer-brand interactions on social networking sites, many brands are still struggling to generate trust and build sustainable consumer-brand relationships (Gretry et al., 2017). In this regard, a major question remains as to how brands should communicate with consumers in this highly interactive, both public and personal, communication environment (Gretry et al., 2017; Barcelos et al., 2018). Should brands take a different approach when communicating with consumers on social networking sites, which tend to be perceived as "personal space" platforms (Sung & Kim, 2014)? Which communication style and relational commitment is most beneficial for brands in order to gain consumers' trust and nurture sustainable customer-brand relationships?

These questions are of increasing importance in light of the fact that social networking sites are now filled with countless stimuli acting on consumers' senses. "While firms should be invested in cultivating dynamic online relationships with their consumers, the volume of chatter online makes it difficult for brands to cut through the clutter" (Hayes et al., 2020, p. 18). In this regard, the ability of brand communication messages to stand out and speak to increasingly sophisticated and skeptical consumers is a decisive factor for strengthening consumer-brand relationships (Hayes et al. 2020).

Successful brand communication in social media's two-way communication settings has recently been linked to a brand's ability to employ a "human voice" (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006) as opposed to a traditional, formal tone of voice characteristic for communication on corporate websites. Many marketing guides recommend brands to learn to speak consumers' language (Lund & Sutton, 2014), "to play the consumers' game" (Gensler et al., 2013, p. 253), and talk like a friend instead of a corporate identity on social networking sites. Today, brand communication on social networking sites is thus increasingly characterized by features of personalization: Brands attempt to "get personal" by endowing messages with qualities of human communication (Kim, Kwon, et al., 2018). This study is particularly interested in personalization approaches in terms of brands' communication style and relational

commitment. Interactive features of social networking sites enable brands to be more sociable than in traditional media: They, for example, employ conversational tones mimicking consumers' human tone of voice characterized by closeness, familiarity, and informality (Beukeboom et al., 2015), communicate with a sense of humor, admit mistakes and stress their commitment to build relationships with consumers by opening a dialogue and actively inviting them to conversations (Kim, Kwon, et al., 2018; Kwon & Sung, 2011) – all of which represent "behaviors" enacted by brands (Aaker & Fournier, 1995) that Kelleher and Miller (2006) and Kelleher (2009) grouped under the concepts of 'conversational human voice' and 'communicated relational commitment': "Mwah mwah mwah 💋 Try out our Brilliant Signature Filter and send your loved ones virtual kisses for 2021! 🎉 Have you tried it yet?" (L'Oréal Paris, 2020, December 26), "Who's beginning to feel the holiday vibes? 🌟 We want to see all your best #FestiveFeels using #CapturedOnHuawei. What does this time of year mean to you?" (Huawei Mobile, 2020, December 3), "FLEX FRIDAY 💪 Let's get it, peeps! Try this full-body workout you can do at home using some unexpected everyday equipment. […] [I]f you're giving it a go, we wanna see your flexual side – tag us using #ASOSFLEXCREW and share it with your mates!" (Asos, 2021, January 15).

On social networking sites, a brand's communication style and relationship activities can be particularly determining during first encounters, when consumers form opinions about new brands. In these situations, verbal social cues, such as tone of voice and communicated relational commitment, play a vital role not only in reducing uncertainties but are also decisive in forming brand trust (Gretry et al., 2017), consumer attitudes (Barcelos et al., 2018), "and, subsequently, determining whether the relationship will progress beyond the initial encounters" (Gretry et al., 2017, p. 77).

The way brands communicate with consumers can also construct brand personalities in consumers' minds. Like other marketing activities, a brand's communication style and

communicated relational commitment on social networking sites represent forms of (linguistic) behavior enacted by the brand that can "generate trait inferences that collectively summarize the consumer's perception of the brand's personality" (Fournier, 1995, p. 393) while elevating the brand to the status of an active, contributing relational partner (Fournier, 1995). Previous studies have validated the notion that people tend to think of and interact with brands as if they were human beings (Fournier, 1998; Sela et al., 2012). In this regard, language as a medium that originally characterizes interpersonal interactions becomes a key factor in also shaping brand trait perceptions with people responding to even small differences in language use (Sela et al., 2012).

Previous, predominantly quantitative, research has shown that a brand's conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment on social networking sites can influence consumer perceptions of and responses to brands but draws a contradictory picture on the nature of this effect. While consumer-brand interactions perceived as more human and interactive were found to constitute unique, enduring, and positive corporate characters (Men & Tsai, 2015) and result in more positive relational and brand performance outcomes (e.g., Hayes et al., 2020, Kelleher, 2009, Kelleher, 2006; Park & Lee, 2013), there are also studies showcasing opposite results. They indicate that a personalized, informal, closeness-implying communication style and relational commitment can indeed harm a brand, negatively impacting brand trust (Gretry et al., 2017), consumers' attitudes toward the brand (Steinmann et al., 2015) as well as purchase intentions (Barcelos et al., 2018).

This contradictory picture painted by previous research in the field of social media brand communication fuels the demand for a more thorough understanding of consumers' perceptions of brands' conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment in the context of social networking sites. In this regard, it would be particularly instructive to consider the perceptions of Generation Z – people born between 1995 and 2010 – that are about to "become a powerful force in marketing and customer experience" (Morgan, 2020). As not only digital

but also mobile and social natives (Brakl, 2018) this generation uses social networking platforms for communication and interaction more than any other generation (Prakash Yadav & Rai, 2017), with Instagram being the most popular platform. 76 percent of Generation Z say they discover brands via Instagram, and they are happy to actively provide comments and share their feedback with brands (Prakash Yadav & Rai, 2017). Being one of the most influential publics not only in terms of their extensive use of social networking platforms but also their large share of the global population – 32 percent in 2019 (Miller & Lu, 2018) – and increasing purchasing power (Fromm, 2018), it is essential to understand how to effectively communicate with this brand-savvy cohort in the social network environment.

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to expand the knowledge on brand communication in social network settings. More precisely, taking a consumer's perspective this study sets out to thoroughly understand how Generation Z perceives interpersonal, personification approaches in brand communication – namely a brand's conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment – on social networking sites. In addition, the study aims to contribute with new knowledge on how consumers as active co-creators of brand meanings (Gensler, 2013) use these verbal communication cues in constructing brand personalities in their minds. Consequently, the study will be guided by the following two research questions:

RQ1: How does Generation Z perceive brands' conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment on social networking sites?

RQ2: How does Generation Z construct the personality of brands employing a conversational human voice and communicating relational commitment on social networking sites?

To answer the research questions, this study undertakes a qualitative approach that allows gaining a rich and deep understanding of Generation Z's perceptions. Applying a multifold theoretical framework of interpersonal theories will further allow exploring the psychological underpinnings of consumers' perceptions and sensemaking processes.

Relevance

Answers to the research questions are of increasing importance in light of the changing communication landscape and the consequent growing importance of brand communication on social networking sites. Social media has become an integral part of brand communication strategies with marketers expecting social media spending to increase by 62 percent over the next five years (The CMO Survey, 2020). Opportunities to interact, engage and maintain a dialogue with consumers have elevated a brand's communicative interactions with consumers on these platforms into "conversations of strategic significance to its goals" (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493). Research has shown that effective brand communication on social networking sites is essential to strengthening users' positive attitudes toward (Duffett, 2016) and trust (Ebrahim, 2020) in a brand, eliciting users' engagement (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013), establishing positive consumer-brand relationships (Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Kim & Ko, 2010, 2012; Labrecque, 2014), and, ultimately, for a brand's sustained success.

As a research field, marketing- or brand communication has developed in the past few years from tactical, short-term campaign communication to strategic, interactive, and relationship-building communication (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). By studying Kelleher's (2009) still underexplored concepts of 'conversational human voice' and 'communicated relational commitment', which are anchored in relationship theory in public relations, in brand communication research, this study will foster interdisciplinary knowledge exchange within the field of strategic communication and extend the emerging body of literature on brand communication in social network settings. Similarly, the application of interpersonal theories

to the study of consumers' perceptions of brand communication on social networking sites will add an instructive new perspective to the field.

Besides, this study offers practitioners theoretical guidance for communicating and interacting with Generation Z in the social network environment and, ultimately, for building meaningful consumer-brand relationships. Findings will shed light on how and with what conversational style and relational commitment brands should communicate with this influential public in order to evoke favorable perceptions and brand personalities in consumers' minds. Given that brands today increasingly leverage automated software in their social network interactions with consumers, these insights could be of particular value for the development of future human-AI interactions, especially the design of chatbots' communication style (Liebrecht & Hooijdonk, 2020).

Disposition

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Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of ongoing academic conversations about brand communication on social networking sites, particularly with regard to personification approaches employed in brand communication and their perceptions by consumers. The first section defines social media brand communication, highlights previous research focusses, and locates brand linguistics as an important area of inquiry within the field. On this basis, the linguistic phenomena and relational maintenance strategies 'conversational human voice' and 'communicated relational commitment' (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006) will be introduced and operationalized, followed by a thorough review of – partly competing – consumer responses to these personification approaches in brand communication on social networking sites. The review sheds light on consumers' perceptions of human contact, brand personality, as well as perceived relationships with brands while proposing social

presence and the related concept of brand anthropomorphism, parasocial interaction theory, role theory, and expectancy violations theory as valuable theoretical lenses for this study. The chapter concludes with a synthesis that situates the present work in relation to previous scholarly discourse and connects the introduced concepts and theories to form a theoretical framework for this study.

Brand Communication on Social Networking Sites

The rise of social networking sites, and the communication affordances they offer to brands, as a result, have sparked interest among marketing and communication researchers, who are trying to understand how to leverage these new platforms for brand communication purposes. While social media more broadly refers to "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), social networking more specifically refers to the use of social media as a means of connecting with people (Alalwan et al., 2017). Social networking sites can therefore be defined as

> web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211)

The dynamic, visible, ubiquitous, and often real-time interactions enabled by social networking sites provide a new landscape for brand communication (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Within this highly interactive communication environment, consumers have become "pivotal authors of brand stories" (Gensler et al., 2013, p. 242) sharing their brand experiences within their network and thereby actively participating in the co-creation of brand meaning (Gensler et al., 2013). The multi-vocal, participative nature of brand authorship reinforced by social networking sites is also reflected in the conceptualization of social media brand communication,

which according to Voorveld (2019) can be defined as "any piece of brand-related communication" (p. 15) that is "distributed via social media [and] that enables internet users to access, share, engage with, add to, and co-create" (Alhabash et al., 2017, p. 286).

Previous scholarship within the field of brand communication in social network environments has mainly focused on consumers' various attitudinal responses toward social media brand communications (e.g., Beukeboom et al., 2015), motivations for and antecedents of using social media (e.g., Jahn & Kunz, 2012), engagement with brand communication (e.g., Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013), as well as user-generated content (e.g., Liu et al., 2017), content characteristics (e.g., De Vries et al., 2012), and electronic word of mouth activities (e.g., Kim, Park, et al., 2018). In spite of the growing research and attention on social networking sites within brand communication research, only a few studies have sought to investigate the concept of 'communication' itself as the "constituting pillar" (van Ruler, 2018, p. 379) of all forms of strategic communication as well as the role of language – such as the linguistic composition of content – in brand communication in social network contexts. Especially in social network interactions, where non-verbal and paraverbal cues are more difficult to convey, verbal cues – such as the language used – are gaining in importance (Jakic et al., 2017). A pathbreaking work in this respect is a recent paper by Carnevale et al. (2017), who propose a novel, interdisciplinary framework on the role of language in consumer-brand relationships. Through their framework, the authors define a new area of inquiry – "the study of language effects on consumers in brand-related settings" (p. 573) which they call *Brand Linguistics*. Unlike the traditional disciplines of linguistics, brand linguistics focuses on the consumer as the unit of its analysis and seeks to understand the consumption phenomenon using theories and methods from various language-related disciplines. According to the framework, language influences different processes underlying the consumer psychology of brands: "namely, consumers *identifying* brands, *experiencing* them, *integrating* brand information into an overall concept, *signifying* the brand as a symbol and identity signal, and *connecting* with the brand (p. 575).

Two linguistic phenomena the authors consider important within these meaning-making processes are a brand's tone of voice and interaction style, which will be discussed in the next section.

The Concepts of 'Conversational Human Voice' and 'Communicated Relational Commitment'

> *The very sound of the Web conversation throws into stark relief the monotonous, lifeless, self-centered drone emanating from Marketing departments around the world. Word of Web offers people the pure sound of the human voice, not the elevated, empty speech of the corporate hierarchy. (Searls & Weinberger, 2000, p. 83)*

According to Searls and Weinberger (2000), one of the most important characteristics of online marketing communication is a human voice. In their cult text, *The Cluetrain Manifesto (Levine et al., 2000)*, they introduce the notion of markets as conversations and the human voice as a new mode of corporate talk that is inherently different from traditional marketing communication in that it is "natural, open, honest, direct, funny and often shocking" (Levine et al., 2000, p. xxi).

Drawing on these first-hand observations, one of the first researchers to investigate organizational communication style in social media's two-way communication settings were Kelleher and Miller (2006) and later Kelleher (2009). Studying organizational communication via online blogs – "the earliest forms of social media" (Kent & Li, 2020, p. 3) – they found that frequent visitors were more likely to perceive the organization as communicating with a conversational human voice. In turn, visitors' perceptions of both a conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment in blog content were positively related to key quality dimensions of organization-public relationships such as satisfaction, trust, commitment, and control mutuality. Consequently, the authors suggest that online blogs have an advantage in conveying a conversational human voice compared to non-interactive media and propose a

'conversational human voice' and 'communicated relational commitment' as promising relational maintenance strategies in participatory media. Since the present study explores how Generation Z consumers perceive a conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment in brand communication on social networking sites and how they use them in constructing a brand's personality, the two widely cited concepts will be operationalized in more detail below.

In brand-consumer interactions on social media, the tone of voice is often characterized by informality and closeness and high levels of interactivity make consumers perceive what Kelleher (2009) conceptualized as a 'conversational human voice': "an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization's publics based on interactions between individuals in the organization and individuals in the public" (p. 177). Contrary to a 'corporate tone of voice' which labels the more formal, distant conversation style traditionally employed by organizations, a 'human voice' defines a more natural, closeness-implying style of online communication (Park & Cameron, 2014). Although often associated with the choice of words, the concept of conversational human voice more broadly refers to a "style of organizational communication" (Kelleher, 2009, p. 177). According to Meyer (2016), the tone of voice comprises "more than just the words we choose. It's the way in which we communicate our personality" (para. 3). Following the operationalization of Kelleher & Miller (2006), organizations communicating in a conversational human voice are open to dialogue and actively invite people to conversations. They try to communicate in a human voice by using conversation-style communication and attempt to make communication interesting and enjoyable through a sense of humor. They further treat people as human and provide prompt feedback addressing criticism in a direct but uncritical manner. And, lastly, they would admit a mistake and provide links to competitors. Hence, what exactly constitutes a human as opposed to a corporate voice can be largely contextual (Barcelos et al., 2018). Besides the tone of voice and choice of words it can also comprise other components of communication style, such as a

first-person voice, telling personal narratives (e.g., Park & Cameron, 2014), or using first names, abbreviations, and textual paralanguage such as emoticons (e.g., Gretry et al., 2017; Hayes et al., 2020). Systematically investigating the relation between the use of single linguistic elements and the perception of a conversational human voice, Liebrecht and Hooijdonk (2020) recently found that personal greetings, non-verbal cues such as emoticons, and phrases stimulating dialogue elicit the highest perceptions of a conversational human voice.

The second relational maintenance strategy identified in the seminal work of Kelleher and Miller (2006) and validated by Kelleher (2009) is 'communicated relational commitment', which has often been neglected in previous research most of which has been limited to the study of a conversational human voice. Building on the concepts of openness and assurances (Hon & Grunig, 1999), "[c]ommunicated relational commitment indicates – from the perspectives of publics – a type of content of communication in which members of an organization work to express their commitment to building and maintaining a relationship" (Kelleher, 2009, p. 176). It thus involves active relationship work initiated by an organization that communicates the desire to build a relationship, demonstrates and stresses its commitment to the relationship, emphasizes its quality, implies the relationship has a future, and openly discusses the nature of the organization (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Taken together, these communicative behaviors correlated positively with relational outcomes as perceived by publics in online two-way communication settings.

With their initial work in public relations research, Kelleher and Miller (2006) and Kelleher (2009) paved the way for further studies also in the related field of brand communication, which revealed various, partially opposing consumer responses to a brands' conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment on social networking sites.

Consumer responses to a human tone of voice and relational commitment in brand communication on social networking sites

In recent years empirical research in various communication-related fields including public relations, brand communication, crisis communication as well as interactive marketing such as webcare communications has acknowledged social networking sites as ideal platforms for humanizing brands and organizations and highlighted the value of interpersonal communication approaches for eliciting positive consumer responses and nurturing meaningful relationships with stakeholders on these platforms (Hayes et al., 2020; Labrecque, 2014; Men & Tsai, 2015; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; Sung & Kim, 2014). In particular, the use of a conversational human voice and high levels of interactivity have been shown to be important for effective communication in social network's two-way communication settings.

In this regard, Beukeboom et al. (2015) found consumers' perception of a conversational human voice in the Facebook activities of a brand to be the main explanatory factor in improving brand evaluations. Their findings suggest that interactivity in a brand's presence on social networking sites plays an important role in bringing about the perception of a conversational human voice and, ultimately, the positive impact on brand evaluations. In a similar vein, Dijkmans et al. (2015) showed in their two-wave longitudinal study that consumers' exposure to the highly interactive social media activities of a company enhanced perceptions of corporate reputation. As this effect was reinforced by the use of a conversational human voice, the authors concluded that indeed "'human-style conversations lead to better reputations'" (p. 643).

Perceptions of Human Contact – Social Presence Theory

The strategies of using conversational human voice and communicating relational commitment as well as their potential implications also pertain to ideas underlying the theory of social presence proposed by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) with earlier research suggesting that

a human voice creates messages that are perceived as more socially present, leading to more favorable brand outcomes (e.g. Hayes et al., 2020).

Having its "roots in symbolic interactionism (Blumler, 1969) and social psychological theories of interpersonal communication" (Biocca et al., 2003, p. 460), social presence has emerged to a theoretical concept widely studied in the context of mediated communication, where it refers to "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (Short et al., 1976, p. 65). In other words, it is "the degree to which a person is perceived as a 'real person' in mediated communication" (Gunawardena, 1995, p. 151). In mediated interactions, entire constellations of verbal and nonverbal cues can affect not only the apparent distance of the other (Short et al., 1976) but also "provide relational meaning of the interactants, such as their level of involvement or investiture in the relationship" (Biocca et al., 2003, p. 464). In this regard, Short et al. (1976) highlight that social presence is inherently related to two social psychological concepts – 'intimacy' (Argyle & Dean, 1965) and 'immediacy' (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968). The authors suggest that social presence of the communications medium adds to the level of intimacy, which is based on factors such as proximity, eye contact, personal topics of conversations, and smiling. Immediacy, on the other hand, pertains to the psychological distance between interactants conveyed through non-verbal and verbal cues in communication and was found to enhance social presence.

Empirical studies on social presence have been characterized by a variety of different emphases.

While originally conceived in the context of telecommunication as a framework for understanding the quality and attributes of communication media such as their varying capacity for social interaction and ability to convey nonverbal and social cues, social presence is nowadays used as a framework to also study human-computer interactions. Research in this context is interested in how various online content and interfaces shape users' "sense of being

with another" (Biocca et al., 2003, p. 456), thereby shifting the emphasis on people instead of merely media attributes. Social presence is conceived as "a feature of the communication interaction with the individual's perception determining the extent to which it exists, and the medium is one causal variable shaping that social interaction" (Biocca et al., 2003, p. 470).

Translated to the field of brand communication in social networking sites, social presence can consequently be understood as "the degree to which consumers perceive a feeling of human contact, sociability, and sensitivity from the brand in communication" (Hayes et al., 2020, p. 17). Previous literature suggests that adding a personal dimension to an organization's or brand's online communication – e.g., by using a conversational human voice (Oh & Ki, 2019) – can evoke increased feelings of human contact and create the illusion of interpersonal communicative exchanges, often resulting in more positive consumer responses. Studying organizational conversations on social networking sites and blogs, Park and Lee (2013) as well as Park and Cameron (2014), for example, found that using a human tone of voice and first-person narratives can increase users' perceptions of warmth and social presence, which was key in building good relationships with the publics and strengthening publics' favorable behavioral intentions to purchase as well as to engage in dialogic and word-of-mouth communications. The studies' findings thus point to the importance of creating a sense of sociable and personal human contact on social media. Human elements in an organization's communication may elicit perceptions of transparency and feelings of interacting with another person instead of an organization, thereby nurturing quality organization-public relationships as well as fostering publics' intention to behave supportively toward an organization. This notion is further supported by Park and Jiang (2020), who found that the perception of trendy content and particularly social presence on social media encouraged user engagement, which in turn generated positive consumer intentions toward a brand.

Similarly, the findings of a recent study by Hayes et al. (2020) indicate that also the use of textual paralinguistic cues – more precisely emojis and emoticons – can increase consumers'

perception of social presence in brand messages. Social presence endows brand communication messages with a more conversational human voice positively impacting consumers' attitudes toward the brand, strengthening consumer-brand relationships, and, finally, increasing purchase intentions. Consequently, the study's findings suggest that textual paralanguage helps brands to create a more "human voice" thereby enabling more "human" consumer-brand interactions which are important for generating positive brand communication outcomes.

Personification Approaches and Brand Personality – Brand Anthropomorphism

Communicating in a human tone of voice and engaging in active relationship work on social networking sites can not only elicit a feeling of social presence but also help "generate trait inferences that collectively summarize the consumer's perception of the brand's personality" (Fournier, 1995, p. 393). The basic premise of studying brand personality is that also inanimate objects can be associated with human personality traits formed through any kind of brand contact (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998). The psychological process of perceiving the human in nonhuman entities is defined as "anthropomorphism" and is powerful and pervasive in human thought and action (Guthrie, 1993). Based on this, brand anthropomorphism, in particular, can be described as a "variant cognitive process that represents consumers' tendency to attribute human-like characteristics to corporate brands based on their overall actions and perceive them as entities with their own motivations, intentions and emotions" (Tuškej & Podnar, 2018, p. 6).

Previous research has revealed that a human tone of voice – e.g., employing personal pronouns and verbs in the imperative form – and perceived interactivity are successful strategies for imbuing human personality into brands on social networking sites (Kim, Kwon, & Kim, 2018; Kwon & Sung, 2011; Prooijen & Bartels, 2019). Kim, Kwon, and Kim (2018) found that brands interacting with consumers on social networking sites were ascribed more human-like brand personalities than brands without a presence on these platforms. Those personality dimensions included openness, agreeableness, extraversion, warmth, and conscientiousness and

were important for building both brand affect and trust. The results aligning with the Big Five human personalities (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1992; Norman, 1963) thus clearly underpin brand personalities' anthropomorphic direction in social network settings. Likewise, Prooijen and Bartels (2019) showed that higher levels of perceived interactivity – measured using items from Kelleher's (2009) conversational human voice scale – were associated with attributions of sociable, moral, and competent brand traits. Consequently, they concluded that interactivity and openness to dialogue with consumers can lead to "more positive attributions on all three dimensions of impression formation processes" (Prooijen & Bartels, 2019, p. 479) and to consumers relating to brands in ways that resemble human connections.

The latter points to the important role of brand anthropomorphism in the formation of personal consumer-brand relationships, which has also been emphasized by other authors (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Kwon & Sung, 2011; Men & Tsai, 2015; Tuškej & Podnar, 2018). Men and Tsai (2015), for example, showed that an agreeable corporate character with traits such as integrity, empathy, and warmth induces intimate, interpersonal interactions which in turn nurture quality relationships between organizations and publics. Tuškej & Podnar (2018) explain that these effects occur because consumers identify more strongly with brands with a perceived human-like character. The studies' findings thus underpin the effectiveness of a personification approach – a conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment – in brand communication within social media settings for building relatable, human-like brand personalities in consumers' minds and, as a result, more intimate consumer-brand relationships.

Brands as Friends – Parasocial Interaction Theory

Based on the notion that consumers often think of and relate to brands as if they were human, also parasocial interaction theory can offer a valuable theoretical lens for studying how consumers perceive personification approaches in brand communication on social networking

sites. Emerging from the communications literature, the concept of parasocial interaction (PSI) originally explains the development of consumer relationships with mass media, such as television or radio (Horton & Wohl, 1956). It is described as an "illusionary experience, such that consumers interact with personas (i.e., mediated representations of presenters, celebrities, or characters) as if they are present and engaged in a reciprocal relationship" (Labrecque, 2014, p. 135). Feelings of PSI and relationships evolve through verbal and nonverbal interaction cues and can even develop to the stage where consumers start viewing personas as "real friends" (Labrecque, 2014).

Recent applications of PSI suggest that it is not restricted to traditional mass media but can also be helpful in understanding the processes underlying the development of consumer-brand relationships in social media contexts. Given the possibility to converse directly with the brand and observe how it interacts with other users, social networking sites can provide rich platforms for creating feelings of PSI and strengthening relationships between consumers and brands, especially when communicating in a human-like manner. In this regard, a study by Colliander and Dahlén (2011) revealed that (fashion) blogs compared to online magazines generate both more positive brand attitudes as well as higher purchase intentions, since the more personal nature of blogs makes readers experience a higher level of PSI and, ultimately, after repeated exposure, consider bloggers as "friends". Likewise, Labrecque (2014) found that verbal and non-verbal message cues signaling interactivity and openness in brand communication via online blogs can elicit a sense of two-way communication with a mediated other and even evolve to a stage where consumers start viewing personas as real friends. Their findings indicate that "this sense of feeling connected with the brand goes beyond the interaction itself and drives increased feelings of loyalty intentions and willingness to provide information to the brand" (Labrecque, 2014, p. 134). However, previous research also highlighted that the awareness that the interaction may be computer-automated can attenuate message cues' ability to foster perceptions of PSI (Labrecque, 2014; Decock et al., 2021).

Informality and humanness in routinized responses may backfire as it triggers consumers' suspicion that the organization is not genuinely committed but only trying to polish its image with persuasive messaging (Decock et al., 2021).

When Personification Approaches Backfire – Role theory and Expectancy Violations Theory

Despite cited research suggesting that a conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment in brand communication on social networking sites may positively influence consumer attitudes and the consumer-brand relationship, there is still insufficient evidence that a personal communication style emphasizing a brand's relational commitment is the optimal way to communicate with all consumers. In fact, some studies have shown that a human communication style can even backfire negatively influencing consumer responses. In their experimental study, Steinmann et al. (2015), for example, found that a brand's personalized communication style in a brand community environment on Facebook negatively impacted members' attitudes toward the brand. Instead, a non-personalized, formal communication style was found to positively influence both members' hedonic and utilitarian attitudinal aspects toward a brand. Gretry et al. (2017) more recently revealed that whether an informal communication style positively or negatively impacts brand trust largely depends on consumers' familiarity with a brand. They "show[ed] that these effects occur because consumers expect brands to behave according to social norms, such that the use of an informal style is perceived to be appropriate for familiar brands and inappropriate for unfamiliar ones" (Gretry et al., 2017, p. 77).

Their findings underpin the assumptions of role theory and expectancy violations theory (Burgoon & LePoire, 1993) – two interpersonal theories that may also serve as valuable lenses for studying consumer-brand interactions on social networking sites. Role theory asserts that successful social interaction depends on whether relational partners behave appropriately given their respective social roles in a relationship (Sarbin & Allen, 1968; Schewe, 1973; Solomon et

al., 1985). "[P]ersons are members of *social positions* and hold *expectations* for their own behaviors and those of other persons" (Biddle, 1986, p. 67) that are contextually bound and learned through socialization experiences (Biddle, 1979). When interacting with one another, people must therefore understand the context and nature of their relationship, define their position within that relationship, based on that, determine their appropriate role and, ultimately, behave accordingly. Consequently, the success of an interaction depends on whether interactants share the same understanding of the relationship and behavioral norms. If the relational partner behaves in conformity with norms and expectations related to his or her role in a relationship, the behavior is evaluated positively and increases trust in the relationship (Gretry et al., 2017).

In this regard, role theory is closely related to key propositions of expectancy violations theory. Originally developed to explain proxemic behavior (Burgoon, 1978), its scope now encompasses a wide range of verbal and nonverbal behaviors and more broadly "predicts and explains the consequences of expectancy confirmations and violations in interpersonal communication" (Burgoon, 1993, p. 31). The theory postulates that people hold expectations regarding the communication behavior of others derived from communicator, relationship, and context characteristics and that "violations of those expectations trigger a cognitive-evaluative process that results in valencing the violations as positive or negative" (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1993, p. 69). While positive violations exceeding previous expectations are theorized to generate more positive interaction outcomes compared to conformity to expectations, negative violations (disconfirmation) in which enacted behaviors are negatively valenced are theorized to lead to more negative evaluations of the target, whereas communicator valence may moderate these evaluations (Burgoon, 1993). Burgoon (1993) notes that although "[c]ultures and individuals may differ significantly on what conversational patterns, linguistic choices, and nonverbal behaviors are considered appropriate and desirable, […] the attachment of evaluations to communicative acts should be universal" (p. 37).

Since previous research has shown that people tend to ascribe and apply human, social beliefs to brands (brand anthropomorphism), perceive social presence in social media brand communication and relate to brands in ways resembling interpersonal relationships (PSI), the introduced interpersonal theories have also been considered valuable for application to consumer-brand interactions. That is, when people encounter a brand possessing characteristics associated with human personality and behavior, such as a conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment, their perceptions and evaluations are also likely to be guided by the degree to which the brand respects and acts in conformity with social norms and expectations associated with its role in the consumer-brand relationship in social network contexts (Gretry et al., 2017). Referring to expectations derived from relationship characteristics, Sela et al. (2012), for example, found closeness-implying language in marketing communications using terms borrowed from interpersonal communication to positively influence consumers' perceptions of and attitudes toward brands but the effect to be dependent on its congruence with consumers' expected level of closeness with a brand. Findings thus suggest that closeness-implying language can actually harm a brand when it is inconsistent with consumers' expectations regarding the consumer-brand relationship and the behavioral norms associated with it. In a similar vein, building on communication accommodation theory, Jakic et al. (2017) investigate how a brand's language style accommodation during customer-brand interactions on social media affects brand trust. Their findings revealed that accommodating to a customer's style of language positively influences trust-building, but the effect to be "mediated by perceived relationship investments, such as perceived interaction effort, benevolence, and quality of interaction" (p. 418) – resembling the concept of communicated relational commitment (Kelleher, 2009). Moreover, customers who perceived a brand's language style to be in line with their expectations for the product/service category of the brand conceived the quality of interaction more positively. This finding also emphasizes the influence of the social role and expectations derived from the characteristics of the communicator – the

brand – in guiding consumer responses to an interactive, personal communication style on social networking sites. In this regard, Sung & Kim (2014) showed that while increased interactivity on social networking sites can have a positive effect on company evaluation, non-promotional messages are not more effective than promotional messages. Based on companies' previous and repeated promotional behavioral patterns on social networking sites, individuals may have built predictive expectations toward corporate messages to be promotional.

Another group of researchers underline the importance of respecting users' "social norms that determine expectations of appropriate and inappropriate communication between organizations and publics" (Vovoreanu, 2009, p. 81) but refer to context features (Barcelos et al., 2018; McCorkindale et al., 2013; Sung & Kim, 2014; Vorvoreanu, 2009). College students in Vorvoreanu's (2009) focus group study, for example, envisioned social networking sites for personal use and did not perceive them as an appropriate platform for corporate activities. Even though they preferred a personal tone for communication with other users, organizations were expected to stick to more traditional forms of corporate communication. Similarly, Sung & Kim's (2014) experimental study showed that consumers' evaluations of an organizations' activities on a social networking site depend on their perceptions of the platform as a personal space. People, who conceive a social networking site as a personal space tend to evaluate corporate activities on this platform more negatively – as an intrusion, violating their expectations toward the platform. A recent study conducted by Barcelos et al. (2018) further points to the importance of the consumption context. A human tone of voice enhanced purchase intentions only for consumers looking at a brand page to satisfy hedonic goals, while it did not increase their purchase intentions in utilitarian consumption contexts and can even reduce them in contexts characterized by high situational involvement, where humanness is associated with the perception of risk. These findings thus suggest that a human tone of voice might not always be a brand's best choice.

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