

## **Agenda Supervision III**

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework:**

In order not to have too many theoretical perspectives, I enclosed social presence theory, the concept of brand anthropomorphism, and parasocial interaction theory in the literature review and combined their ideas with the findings of previous literature.

I then take consumers' tendency to perceive human contact in brand communication (social presence) and attribute human-like characteristics to brands (brand anthropomorphism) as the basis for transferring theories pertaining to interpersonal interactions to the study of consumer-brand interactions on social networking sites: communication accommodation theory as well as role theory and expectancy violations theory

- Do you think this structure is logical and clear?
- Is the literature review too long?
- Do you think that the interpersonal communication theory CAT is a good fit for this study?
- After the last supervision meeting, I also enclosed a sociological perspective on Generation Z within the theoretical framework. Unfortunately, there is not much academic research dealing with the characteristics of Generation Z yet and my short section feels a bit like scratching the surface. It is also a bit contradictory to my research paradigm symbolic interactionism, which focuses more on individual sense-making and multiple meanings. Do you think this section adds value or should I take it out? If I keep it, should I include it in the theoretical framework or rather present some of the thoughts within the analysis?

### **Elicitation Materials:**

- Do you think the materials are suitable?
- Are there too many examples?
- Do you think a hotel brand is a suitable and generic brand, or do you think that another industry might suit better?
- Do you think it is good to focus on one example brand instead of many different?
- I plan to keep the materials in English as many international brands only communicate in English today. However, I want to conduct the interviews in participants' native language, which will probably be German. Do you think that is okay?
- Final layout: I will simulate these captions and comment sections on Instagram and take screenshots to make them more authentic

### **Interview Guide:**

- Questions, structure, length
- I decided to frame the interview as a "conversation" to create a more familiar situation, where interviewees feel comfortable speaking about their personal perceptions
- I will also translate the interview guide to German for German interviewees. I would still include the English version in the master thesis, right?

**Interview Invitation:**

- Do I have to include more information?
- Is it okay to share the invitation within my personal social network? This way I can ensure that participants are users of social networking sites, which is a necessary prerequisite for participating in this study. As I am a member of Generation Z myself, also my network comprises many people belonging to this Generation.



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## Master Thesis Draft

### Supervision III

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SKOM12 Strategic Communication: Master Thesis

Autumn 2020

# **Generation Z's Perceptions of Personification Approaches to Brand Communication on Social Networking Sites and Strategies for Improvement – A Brand Linguistic Perspective**

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## **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, 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 speak to increasingly sophisticated and skeptical consumers and hold their attention is a decisive factor for strengthening consumer-brand relationships (Hayes et al. 2020). This is particularly important with regard to challenges posed by the emerging third era of the web – the so-called *Web 3.0* – where blockchain technologies allow the “transfer of value without a center of profit [...] [and] centralized points of control” (Ragnedda & Destefanis, 2020, p. 3), placing more emphasis on value as defined by individual users. In this context, “decentralization [...] makes possible transparent, opt-in, peer-to-peer communications that allow individuals to take ownership of their precious time” (Silver, 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” 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 these platforms 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 these 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)

*“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)

*“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)



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 (Barcelos et al., 2018). In these situations, verbal social cues, such as tone of voice and communicated relational commitment, play a vital role in reducing uncertainties, forming consumers' perceptions of the brand personality, assessing its trustworthiness (Gretry et al., 2017) "and, subsequently, [in] determining whether the relationship will progress beyond the initial encounters" (Gretry et al., 2017, p. 77). 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 [...] [and] form the basis for the evaluative concept of the brand" (Fournier, 1995, p. 393). Previous studies have validated the notion that people tend to think of and interact with brands as if they were human beings, associating brands with human emotions and personality traits (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Kim, Kwon & Kim, 2018). Following the emerging branding paradigm, trait attribution cannot be crafted and controlled by brand managers (mindshare view of branding) but is grounded in the perceptions of consumers as active co-creators of brand meaning (Allen et al., 2008) operating in social collectives and cultures. In this regard, complex socio-cultural contexts are critical in assigning meaning to consumption acts. According to Allen et al. (2008), culture provides "meaning making resources" (p. 786) or "general categories of meanings" (p. 785) consumers use to make sense of brands, including their communicative behaviors and personalities.

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; 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. An in-depth investigation of consumer perceptions may shed light on why personification approaches can succeed in one situation while backfiring in another, thereby contributing to the formulation of more successful brand communication strategies for social networking sites.

In this regard, it would be particularly instructive to consider the perceptions of Generation Z – people born between 1995 and 2010 (Chaney et al., 2017) – 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 perspective this study sets out to thoroughly understand how Generation Z perceives 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 Generation Z consumers as active co-creators of brand meanings (Allen et al., 2008) use these verbal communication cues in making sense of brand personalities. Beyond understanding how Generation Z interprets personification approaches and the personalities of brands that utilize them, this study also takes a proactive, explorative stance and aims to provide new insights on how to better communicate with Generation Z consumers on social networking sites in the future. Consequently, the study will be guided by the following three 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?*

*RQ3: How can brands improve their strategies for communicating with Generation Z 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 including communication accommodation theory, role theory, and expectancy violations theory as well as a sociological

perspective on Generation Z will further allow exploring the psychological underpinnings of Generation Z consumers' sensemaking processes and communication preferences.

## **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 have 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, 2017) 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' – two relational maintenance strategies 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. Specifically, the application of interpersonal theories to the study of Generation Z consumers' perceptions of brand communication on social networking sites will add an instructive new perspective to the field.

However, the study's relevance is not limited to the field of brand communication. Findings will also be of value more broadly to the related fields of organizational communication and public relations on social networking sites.

Besides, this study offers practitioners theoretical guidance for better 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. 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).

## **Literature Review**

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 yet insufficiently researched 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 conceptualized, followed by a thorough review of – partly competing – consumer responses to these personification approaches in brand communication on social networking sites. They can be categorized into four themes, namely consumers' perceptions of human contact, brand personality, relationships with brands, as well as perceived violations of behavioral norms and

expectations. The chapter concludes with a synthesis that situates the present work in relation to previous scholarly discourse.

### **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 (Allen et al., 2008; 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 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. 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). In these contexts, people primarily come to know a brand through its use of language. 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 making sense of a brand's personality, the two widely cited concepts will be defined 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 conceptualization 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 has 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***

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 (e.g. Hayes et

al., 2020). In this regard, the strategies of using conversational human voice and communicating relational commitment as well as their potential implications closely pertain to ideas underlying the theory of social presence proposed by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976). Having its “roots in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 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).

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***

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) thereby elevating the brand to the status of an active, contributing relational partner (Fournier, 1995). 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). In this regard, 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) clearly underpin brand personalities' anthropomorphic direction in social network settings. “Anthropomorphism” defines the psychological process of perceiving the human in nonhuman entities and is powerful and pervasive in human thought and action (Guthrie, 1993). 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). In this respect, 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). Prooijen and Bartels (2019), for example, 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***

With regard to consumer-brand relationships, another stream of research has acknowledged social networking sites as rich platforms for creating feelings of parasocial interaction between consumers and brands, especially when communicating in a human-like manner. Originally explaining the development of consumer relationships with mass media, such as television or radio (Horton & Wohl, 1956), the concept of parasocial interaction (PSI) 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. 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”. Labrecque (2014) further 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 being engaged in a reciprocal relationship with a brand (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***

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). On a related note, Sela et al. (2012) 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.



Other studies emphasize the influence of 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, Jakic et al. (2017) showed that a brand's language style can increase the perceived quality of customer-brand interactions in social media if it is in line with consumers' expectations for the product/service category of the brand. Sung & Kim (2014) added 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 underlines 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; Vovoreanu, 2009). College students in Vovoreanu'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.

## **Synthesis**

As presented in this literature review, social networking sites and the affordances they offer to brands and organizations more generally, have attracted growing attention in communication-related fields including brand communications. Surprisingly, despite the pivotal role of consumer-brand interactions on these platforms, especially with regard to building meaningful relationships, there has been very little research explicitly addressing brands' use of language during these interactions – encompassing a brand's tone of voice and interaction style – as well as consumers' perceptions thereof. This is striking given that language has been shown to be a crucial social cue especially in social network settings where non-verbal and paraverbal cues are hard to convey.

Taking a closer look at a brands' tone of voice and interaction style, Kelleher introduced a conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment as successful relational maintenance strategies within social media's interactive communication settings. However, the subsequent research draws a contradictory picture on consumer responses to a human voice, informal, closeness-implying communication styles, and high levels of interactivity in brand and organizational communication focusing on a range of outcomes. While some studies highlight the value of personification approaches to brand communication for building more positive, human-like brand personalities, inducing more intimate interactions and in turn more positive relational and brand performance outcomes, other findings point to opposite effects, namely that a human voice and brands' relational commitment can even negatively impact brand trust and consumers' attitudes toward brands. What this limited body of research has in common is that it predominantly adopts a quantitative approach, which fails

to capture rich and deep descriptions about the underlying processes and psychological underpinnings explaining the varying observed effects. To fully understand how consumers perceive a conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment and the personality of brands that use these strategies in social network contexts, however, requires taking the perspective of the consumer, trying to enter their *Lebenswelt* in order to deeply comprehend how they interpret their experiences and construct their social reality, which is the aim of this qualitative study. This approach will not only allow to shed light on why personification approaches in brand communication may succeed in one context while backfiring in another but also yield more successful communication strategies for social network contexts from the perspective of consumers.

While some of the presented studies surveyed college or university students (e.g., Park & Cameron, 2014; Sung & Kim, 2014), there is, furthermore, a scarcity of studies investigating perceptions of specific social groups – particularly Generation Z – thereby neglecting “the existence of distinct meaning-making communities defined along age, gender, and social class lines” (Allen et al., 2008, p. 791) which has been consistently validated in consumer culture theory research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The present study addresses this deficiency by explicitly focusing on Generation Z as an increasingly influential public and “cultural meaning-making group” (Allen, 2008, p. 785), seeking to understand their distinct sensemaking processes.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Consumers’ tendency to perceive human contact in brand communication and attribute human-like characteristics to brands build the basis for transferring theories pertaining to interpersonal psychological processes to processes that can occur between consumers and brands. In this light, this study is one of the first to transfer cross-disciplinary theories on interpersonal interactions to the study of consumer-brand interactions on social networking sites. To

understand how Generation Z consumers perceive a conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment in brand communication on social networking sites as well as the personality of brands that deploy these communication approaches, this study draws on a multifold theoretical framework including communication accommodation theory, role theory, and expectancy violations theory. Furthermore, since consumers always operate in socio-historical and cultural contexts that provide general categories of meanings people use to make sense of their experiences, adding a sociological perspective on Generation Z can contribute to an even deeper understanding of Generation Z consumers' perceptions and communication preferences.

### **Communication Accommodation Theory**

As highlighted by terms as “personification approaches” and “interpersonal approaches”, a conversational human voice, high levels of interactivity and relational commitment in brand communication can be regarded as a brand's attempts to adjust to a human, interpersonal style of communication in order to infuse brands with humanity and build more relatable brand personalities. Communication adjustments are at the heart of communication accommodation theory (CAT), a key intergroup theory of interpersonal communication first introduced by Giles et al. (1973). This study argues that CAT may not only serve as a framework for studying intergroup accommodation in interpersonal contexts but also in consumer-brand interactions in social network contexts. Focusing on “explaining how and why individuals adapt their communication in various social and relational contexts, the motivations for enacting certain behaviors, and the social and relational consequences for doing so” (Soliz & Bergquist, 2016, p. 60), CAT can provide a valuable theoretical lens for understanding how Generation Z perceives brands' accommodation in communication style. The sections that follow delineate the key concepts of CAT while paying special attention to people's perceptions and evaluations of communicative adjustment as well as factors that moderate them.

### ***Accommodation Strategies***

Originally a socio-psychological model exploring accent and bilingual shifts in interactions (Giles, 1973; Giles et al., 1973), CAT today more broadly postulates that individuals when entering a communicative encounter tend to accommodate to one another in terms of a wide range of verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal characteristics (Dragojevic et al., 2016; Gallois et al., 2005; Giles & Ogay, 2007). In doing so, interactants primarily draw on three accommodation strategies, explicitly pertaining to their communication style: convergence, divergence, and maintenance. Convergence – “the historical core of CAT” (Giles & Ogay, 2007, p. 295) – refers to adapting one’s communicative behaviors to become more similar to the behavior of the interlocutor. Conversely, in divergence, one deploys a communication style that is dissimilar to another’s. Finally, maintenance is defined as “sustaining one’s ‘default’ level of communicating without adjusting for others” (Dragojevic et al., 2016, p. 37). According to the theory, adjustments can take place on only a single dimension (e.g., word choice) or on multiple dimensions at the same time (e.g., word choice, language, style) (Dragojevic et al., 2016). Correspondingly, a conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment in brand communication – following their preceding conceptualization – represent shifts on multiple dimensions including tone of voice, choice of words, textual paralanguage, and type of content in order to become more similar with the consumers’ believed communicative behavior.

### ***Motives for Accommodation***

While communicative adjustments to fellow speakers sometimes occur automatically and unconsciously, they also often represent conscious, deliberate linguistic choices (Dragojevic et al., 2016) – especially in strategically planned brand communication messages. In this regard, CAT proposes two distinct motives underlying communicative adjustments: First, “regulat[ing] social distance in pursuit of positive personal and social identities” (Gasiorek, 2016a, p. 28) (affective motive) and second, managing comprehension and increasing communicative

efficiency (cognitive motive) (Thakerar et al., 1982). While cooperative accommodation – convergence – builds on the premise of similarity attraction (Byrne, 1971) and is motivated by the desire to gain social approval, non-cooperative accommodation – divergence and maintenance – is motivated by the “desire to emphasize distinctiveness from one’s interlocutors, as a means to differentiate oneself from relevant outgroups and positively reinforce one’s own personal and/or social identity” (Dragojevic, 2016, p. 42). Moreover, speakers can adjust their linguistic style to increase or decrease their intelligibility, comprehensibility, and predictability. From a brand communication perspective, both cooperative and non-cooperative accommodation can thus be fruitfully employed in consumer-brand interactions, depending on the impression a brand wants to create.

### ***Outcomes of Accommodation***

Besides understanding antecedents of communicative accommodation, a core goal of CAT is to understand its reception and consequences, with “processes of perception, attribution, and evaluation of speakers’ behavior as central components of its framework” (Gasiorek, 2016a, p. 29). CAT posits that interactants form judgments about each other’s communicative behavior and make attributions about their motives, based on the perceived accommodation. These judgments and attributions, in turn, inform their evaluations of both the speaker and the quality of communication as well as future intentions for the speaker and the social group he or she belongs to (Dragojevic, 2016; Gallois et al., 2005). Convergence typically evokes positive evaluations among recipients. Converging speakers have, for example, been shown to be perceived as more socially attractive, warm, cooperative and competent (Gallois et al., 2005). In contrast, non-accommodation is often perceived as impolite, insulting, or hostile resulting in negative relational outcomes (Dragojevic, 2016). Non-accommodation, in this respect, does not only include divergence and maintenance, but also the more recently added constructs of overaccommodation and underaccommodation as communicative behaviors perceived to over

or undershoot the level of adjustment necessary for a successful social interaction (Gasiorek, 2016b).

Of course, the introduced general patterns do not invariably hold. As noted by Dragojevic et al. (2016) “[c]ommunicative behaviors often have multiple social meanings and different individuals may have different perceptions of the same behavior” (p. 49). They have built stereotyped expectations for what constitutes desirable, appropriate accommodation rooted in “sociocultural norms for intergroup contact” and the sociohistorical context of a given interaction. In this light, also convergence may elicit negative evaluations when exceeding a person’s optimal level of accommodation (e.g., overaccommodation) thereby violating social norms, for instance regarding what conversational style is appropriate to use in a given situation.

How a speaker’s accommodative behavior is evaluated is further moderated by “the attributions recipients make about those behaviors – that is, the motives and intentions that they think caused it” (Dragojevic et al., 2016, p. 50). Factors that recipients take into account in making evaluations include the speaker’s language competencies, his or her perceived internal interaction effort, and benevolent intent, as well as external pressures and constraints, impelling the speaker to behave in a certain way (Gallois et al., 2005; Giles & Ogay, 2007). In this regard, a recent study by Jakic et al. (2017) revealed that accommodating to a customer’s style of language can positively influence trust-building, but the effect to be “mediated by perceived relationship investments, such as perceived interaction effort, benevolence, and quality of interaction” (p. 418).

To conclude, CAT constitutes a key theory of communication that – with its emphasis on recipients’ perceptions – provides a valuable lens to understand how Generation Z perceives a conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment in brand communication as well as the personality of the brand that deploys these convergence strategies. Since CAT relies on norm theories for explanation (Gallois et al., 2005), the

subsequent chapter will elaborate on social rules and expectancies as a function of interactants' group membership but also their relationship, and the interaction context by introducing role theory and expectancy violations theory.

### **Role Theory and Expectancy Violations Theory**

Two interpersonal norm theories that underlie the assumptions of CAT and may serve as additional lenses for studying consumer-brand interactions on social networking sites are role theory and expectancy violations theory (Burgoon & LePoire, 1993).

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 has been shown to increase 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 expectancies regarding the communication behavior of others that “exert significant influence on people’s



interaction patterns, on their impressions of one another, and on the outcomes or *[sic]* their interactions” (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005, p. 160). Expectancies are “enduring patterns of anticipated verbal and nonverbal behavior” (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005, p. 151) grounded in social norms and stereotypes associated with other language communities or individuals. They pertain to both what communication acts are typical in a given culture (predictive expectancies) and the degree to which a communicative behavior is considered appropriate, preferred or desired (prescriptive expectancies) (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). According to the theory, expectancies are derived from communicator characteristics (e.g., personality, communication style), relationship characteristics (e.g., degree of familiarity, liking, attraction, similarity, or status equality), as well as context characteristics (e.g., privacy, formality, or task requirements) (Burgoon, 1993). Violations of these expectancies may elicit a heightened state of awareness in recipients, triggering “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 and its communicative behavior (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1993). Whether a violation is positively or negatively interpreted and evaluated may be moderated by the communicator reward valence – the degree to which a communicator and thus an interaction with this person is deemed rewarding, useful, pleasurable or not (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). 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).

### **Generational Cohort Theory – A Sociological Perspective on Generation Z**

Consumer-brand interactions on social networking contexts, of course, do not take place in a social vacuum but are embedded in a broader macro context (Giles & Ogay, 2007). In this regard, interpretivists have underlined the need for consumer researchers to move beyond the study of individual consumers and view consumers as operating within sociohistorical contexts, cultures, and social collectives that are deemed critical in the assignment of meaning (Allen et al., 2008). One salient social category and culture that interviewees in this study have in common is their membership in Generation Z with a generation being “people born about the same time” (Rudolph & Zacher, 2017, p. 114) – often referred to as *birth cohorts*. According to Generational Cohort Theory anchored in sociology, members of a generation, who experience similar historical, political, economic, and social events during their formative years, share common value systems, attitudes, and behaviors (Mannheim, 1952). Similar observations and experiences of a generational cohort can also “influence their consumer behavior and define their characteristics as consumers” (Naumovska, 2017, p. 124), which is why generational theory can add an insightful socio-historical context for understanding Generation Z consumers’ perceptions and sense-making processes more deeply. The following section will provide a concise overview of Generation Z’s values, attitudes, and behaviors particularly in relation to brands and social networking sites.

Generation Z – composed of people born between 1995 and 2010 – is the first generational cohort to be born entirely within the digital age and includes the most technical-savvy, mobile, connected, and self-educated consumers to date (Chaney et al., 2017). Social networking sites are as normal to them as breathing and constitute key platforms for young individuals to socialize and build an online community (Duffett, 2017). In these contexts, peer acceptance is very important for members of Generation Z with a key trait being their need to belong (Williams et al., 2010). They further “show high degrees of creativity, expressiveness and individuality; desire immediacy without long waiting periods for consumption” (Duffett, 2017, p. 22). With unlimited information constantly available at their fingertips, Generation Z is also more aware and self-controlled than previous generations. Individuals “are able to quickly filter out boring and irrelevant messages, and rather focus their attention on more creative brand messages” (Duffett, 2017, p. 22). However, having grown up in a social media-driven world in which “fake news” have become a major concern, members of Generation Z are more skeptical also towards brands and have difficulties trusting their intentions (Thangavel et al., 2019). This brand-savvy cohort can rapidly discern unreliable brands and places high value on transparency, authenticity, and “realness” rather than hype in brand communication (Williams & Page, 2011). According to Francis and Hoefel (2018), behaviors of Generation Z are thus “all anchored in one element: this generation’s search for truth” (para. 3). Hence, while acknowledging that generational cohorts are highly heterogeneous groups (Taylor, 2018), Generation Z constitutes a psychographic segment characterized by distinct values, attitudes, and behaviors that are likely to inform how individuals in this study assign meaning to a brand’s conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment in social network contexts.

## **Methodology and Empirical Material**

### **Research Paradigm: Symbolic Interactionism**

With this study's emphasis on individual perceptions and sense-making, research was conducted within the symbolic interactionist paradigm, arising largely from the ideas of Charles Horton Cooley (1918) and George Herbert Mead (1934), and later coined by Blumer (1969). Pertaining to the interpretative traditions, the paradigm rests on the ontological assumption that reality is socially constructed through acts of human interpretation and meaningful sense-making (Prasad, 2017). While emphasizing the construction of meaning in social interactions, symbolic interactionism as a genre of thinking has its center of gravity on the individual and the self as "the lens through which the social world is refracted" (Rock, 1979, p. 146). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, "objects and events have no intrinsic meaning apart from those assigned to them by individuals in the course of everyday social interaction" (Prasad, 2017, p. 21). Social phenomena are conceived as symbolic in the sense that they hold different meanings for individuals and evoke a variety of responses to them. In this light, I argue that symbolic interactionism provides a fruitful "way of seeing" for this study as it enables to explore how individuals belonging to Generation Z interpret social phenomena – here a conversational human voice and communicated relational commitment in brand communication on social networking sites – through the individual lens they have developed in their lives. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the process by which individuals assign meaning to events and objects is largely influenced by how individuals see themselves and the role of others in social situations. In this regard, the study's application of role theory can shed some useful insights into how individuals perceive both their own and brands' roles in social network contexts and thus personification approaches in brand communication.

Since the poststructuralist 'linguistic turn', the symbolic interactionist perspective has furthermore been characterized by an increasing interest in language in daily life. Language

is conceived “as a primary shaper of meaning itself being the vehicle through which meaning is constructed and meaningful action enacted” (Prasad, 2017, p. 25). A brand linguistic perspective exploring individuals’ perceptions of linguistic patterns in brand communication as well as their influence on how individuals experience and interpret brands and their personalities is thus highly relevant within the tradition.

Conducting research in the symbolic interactionist paradigm also impacts how knowledge in this study is produced. The epistemological goal of this study is to enter – as far as possible – the everyday worlds of individuals belonging to Generation Z in order to deeply understand their perceptions and sense-making processes. For this purpose, this study employs a qualitative research method – in-depth and meaning-centered interviews – that allow capturing an intimate understanding of social phenomena from the standpoint of the people being studied. Within this process, it is important that I, as the researcher, keep my identity separate, focusing on the meaning ascribed by interviewees and not substituting it with my own.

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## Excerpts from The Ground Hotels' Brand Communication on Instagram

Note: Profile pictures and names have been edited for privacy reasons.

### Instagram Post Caption 1:

TAKE ME TO THE BEACH! 🤔🙏 Does this thought run through your mind daily too?!

Let's visit our hotel at Côte d'Azur right next to the beach! Oh, and there's also a FREE Sunday pancake breakfast! 🥞

Sounds good? Then hit up the link in our bio to find out more.

#### Comments:

paul.ribeaud: This sounds cool! I definitely want to go there!

theground.hotels: Great @paul.ribeaud! That's what we like to hear 😊

viktorixluisse: I stayed at this hotel last summer – one of my favorites!

Brand: Awww! Thanks @viktorixluisse! We're flattered! 😍

### Instagram Post Caption 2:

Yes, it's Gin O'clock again!

I tried to say no to the Gin, but it's 40% stronger than me. 😊

We just can't get enough of our favorite drink, especially in summer. 🍸🍹

What's your favorite sundowner drink to enjoy on our rooftop terrace in #thegroundhotels Hamburg? Tag your next sundowner date. 🌇

#rooftopbar #ginandtonic #sundowner

#### Comments:

lena\_kleyer: Mojito with @josephine.sten!

theground.hotels: Hey Lena, good choice! Can't wait to see you both around!! 😊

### Instagram Post Caption 3:

The semester break is over again? 😞 Plan your next city trip right away! 🤔🙏

Check our special student rates now!

If you have something to look forward to, learning is much more fun! 🎓🎓🎓

Book now ➡️: Link in Bio

Let's spend the night together in one of our 12 hotels! #thegroundhotels #designhotels

**Comments:**

johannliebs: Dear @theground.hotels, I would like to book a stay at one of your hotels, but unfortunately the rates are still too high for an average student. Please reconsider your pricing.

theground.hotels: Hi @johannliebs, sooo sorry, but unfortunately, we cannot offer our rooms at a lower price. Check out this [link](#) where you can often find last available hotel rooms at especially low rates. We would be happy to meet you in the future!❤️

**Instagram Post Caption 4:**

How about we hit the roads again? 🚚 Let's discover Europe together and recharge batteries at one of our 12 hotels in 6 different countries. 🌍

Which route do you want to choose? Tell us in the comments. 😊

**Comments:**

juliano\_frndz: I would love to discover the Nordics. Do you also have a hotel in Sweden?

theground.hotels: Hey, @juliano\_frndz, sure we do! We are waiting for you in beautiful Stockholm 🇸🇪

## Interview Guide

Thank you very much for taking the time to have a conversation with me today. I am a master's student in Strategic Communication at Lund University in Sweden and within the context of my master's thesis, I am exploring how Generation Z perceives personification approaches in brand communication on social networking sites and the personality of brands that deploy them. Moreover, I am interested in how brands can better communicate with Generation Z consumers on social networking sites in the future. For this purpose, I would like to have a conversation with you about your personal perceptions. There are no right and wrong answers, and the conversation is expected to take between 45-60 minutes. With your permission, I would like to audio video recorded and subsequently transcribe our conversation to support my memory. Only I will listen to the recordings and you will be sent the transcript and given the opportunity to correct any factual errors. Your identity as a participant in this study, and any other personal information gathered about you during the study, will be kept strictly confidential and will never be made public. Any direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication will be anonymized so that you as a person cannot be identified. If you have any questions, you are always welcome to ask and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Before we start, I will briefly define what I mean by the terms *brand* and *social networking sites* in the following. With *brands* I am referring to product brands (e.g., food, beauty, clothing), service brands (e.g., airlines, hotels, banks) as well as corporate brands (e.g., global corporations). *Social networking sites* include various online platforms that allow users to create a public profile and interact with each other such as Facebook or Instagram.

### Introducing Questions

1. How would you describe your use of social networking sites?

- 1a. What would you say are your main motivations for using these platforms?
2. Do you follow brands on social networking sites, and if so, could you give some examples?
  - 2a. What are your motivations for following these brands?
  - 2b. Could you describe how these brands communicate on social media? What are some typical characteristics of their content?
  - 2c. How would you describe your interactions with these brands on social networking sites?
  - 2d. Do you actively engage in conversations with brands or rather passively observe their communicative behaviors?
3. In general, would you say that social networking sites are appropriate platforms for brand communication?
  - 3a. Why do you think so?

### **Introduction of Stimulus Material**

I would now like to show you some authentic brand communication on Instagram generated by The Ground Hotels, which is a new hotel brand with different hotels across Europe. The examples feature some of its social post captions as well as interactions between consumers and the brand in the comment section. Please take some time and have a look at the examples.

4. What is your first impression of how the brand communicates?
5. Does its communication appeal to you and why or why not?
6. How do you like the way the brand relates to consumers?
7. Is there anything you find particularly striking?

### **Questions on Brand Personality**

8. How would you describe the personality of this brand based on its communicative behavior?
  - 8a. What would you say are its main characteristics?
  - 8b. What makes you think so?
  - 8c. How do you perceive the brand's level of trustworthiness?
  - 8d. Do you think the brand has good intentions?
  - 8e. Based on your first impression, would you say that you are interested in the brand and would like to see more of it?

### **Questions on Conversational Human Voice and Communicated Relational Commitment**

Let's have a look at some of the communication characteristics in more detail.

9. How do you like a sense of humor in brand communication on social networking sites (e.g., Gin example)?
10. How do you perceive brands' use of emoticons and emojis?
11. In the examples the brand's tone of voice is often characterized by informality. The brand for example uses colloquial expressions (e.g., "cool") or interjections (e.g., "Awww!", "Oh"). How do you like an informal tone of voice on the part of a brand?
12. How do you feel when brands use first-person voice and tell personal narratives (e.g., "We just can't get enough of our favorite drink, especially in summer.")?
13. In the examples, the brand often actively invites people to conversations, for instance by asking about their travel plans or favorite drinks. What do you think of this brand behavior?
  - 13a. Do you like this kind of interactivity initiated by a brand on social networking sites?
  - 13b. Would you say that there is a limit? Can brands be too interactive?



14. The brand in the examples always responds to consumers' comments and answers their questions. How do you perceive this openness to dialog on the part of the brand?
15. In the examples, one person criticizes that the brand's prices are too high for students. How do you perceive the way the brand addresses this criticism?
16. Let's imagine a situation, where you comment on a brand's Instagram post, and the brand answers addressing you by your first name, as in some of the examples. How would you perceive this personal greeting?
- 16a. Do you think your perception may change depending on whether it is a familiar or unfamiliar brand addressing you this way?
17. How do you feel when a brand stresses its commitment to build or maintain a relationship with you? (e.g., "How about we hit the roads again?"; "Can't wait to see you both around!!")
- 17a. How do you like when a brand treats you as a human or even as a friend and not primarily as a customer?
- 17b. Would you say that there is a limit? When does a brand's commitment to building or maintaining a relationship with you become too much?
18. How do you like when a brand reaches out to you regularly, e.g., by daily posts and stories on social networking sites?
- 18a. Do you think this kind of commitment on the part of the brand rather positively or negatively impacts your relationship with the brand?
19. Have you personally experienced brands using a similar personal, human-like communication style and stressing their commitment to building a relationship with you on social networking sites? If so, could you please describe the situation in as much detail as possible?
- 19a. How did you feel?

- 19b. How would you describe your connection to the brand based on its communication style?

Looking back at the brand communication examples in general, ...

20. Do you perceive this communication style and relationship investment on the part of the brand to be authentic?
21. Do you feel that the brand is genuinely interested in building a relationship with you?
22. Would you say that it is appropriate or rather inappropriate for a commercial brand to communicate in this way?
23. How much energy do you think the brand invests into its communication?
24. What do you think are the motives and intentions of brands to choose this kind of personal, human-like style of communication and relational commitment?
25. What would you say, if I told you that the brand messages in the examples were generated by artificial intelligence, not humans?
- 25a. How do you think your perceptions of this personal, human-like communication style would change, if at all?

### **Questions on Preferred Brand Communication Style on Social Networking Sites**

Let's talk about how brands can better communicate with young people on social networking sites.

26. If you could instruct a brand on how to communicate with you, what would your preferred communication style look like? Please describe in as much detail as possible.
- 26a. What would be your preferred tone of voice for brands?
- 26b. How close do you want the relationship to be? Shall brands act as your friends or keep their distance?

## **Closing**

To summarize, we have talked about how you perceive brands' personal, human-like tone of voice and their communicated commitment to building a relationship with you on social networking sites. We have furthermore covered how you perceive the personality of brands that deploy this type of communication and you have outlined your preferred communication style for brands in social network contexts.

27. Is there anything else we haven't talked about that you would like to add?

28. May I contact you in case I have any further questions?

At the end of our conversation, I would like to inform you that the brand communication examples we talked about were derived from authentic brand communication on the social networking platform Instagram, but that The Ground Hotels is a fictitious brand. I chose a fictitious brand to avoid possible biases that might have been caused by your prior knowledge about and experiences with an authentic brand.

Thank you very much for the conversation! I will send you the transcript for review within the next week.

## Interview Invitation

I will share this invitation via Instagram Stories, where it can be accessed by my network comprising 578 people.

