



Research Review

Humanizing brands: When brands seem to be like me, part of me, and in a relationship with me

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Abstract

We review a growing body of research in consumer behavior that has examined when consumers humanize brands by perceiving them as like, part of, or in a relationship with themselves. One research stream shows that sometimes consumers perceive brands as having human-like forms, minds, and personality characteristics. A second stream identifies ways that a consumer perceives a brand as being congruent with or connected to the self. Finally, a third highlights that consumers can view brands in ways that are analogous to the types of relationships they have with people. We review research in these three areas and point out connections among these research streams. In part, we accomplish this by showing that factors associated with the SEEK model, which are designed to explain anthropomorphic tendencies, are also relevant to other ways of humanizing brands. We identify major propositions derived from this research and several areas for which additional research is needed. We conclude with recommendations for the many opportunities for expanding our conceptual and empirical understanding of this domain.

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Introduction

In the past 20 years, we have witnessed a growing literature that can be subsumed within the domain of “humanizing brands”. This broad topic comprises three subdomains shown in the bottom half of Fig. 1. Each subdomain has developed somewhat independently, in part because each assumes a different reference point. Anthropomorphism, the first of these subdomains, takes a *human-focused perspective*, examining consumers’ perceptions of brands as having human-like qualities. Here, researchers have studied brands as having (1) human-like features or physiognomy (as when one perceives a handbag as having features that resemble a human face); (2) a human-like mind (as when one infers that a computer has its own intentions and motives); and (3) a human-like personality (e.g., the brand is friendly). A second stream adopts a more *self-focused perspective*, examining not how the brand is like people in general, but rather how it is specifically like oneself. This subdomain includes work on the perceived congruity between the brand and the self, as well as the extent to which consumers are connected to the brand (brand-self connections). A third subdomain takes a *relationship-focused perspective*, examining how consumers’ relationships with brands can resemble their relationships with people. This work

acknowledges that consumers have different types of relationships with brands and that such brand relationships can vary in their strength and affective intensity, as well as in the relationship norms that guide them. Our paper aims to summarize the literature in this domain, integrate this research, and identify issues that the field should address in moving this perspective forward.

We review the expansive yet relatively recent literature pertaining to each subdomain sequentially, following Fig. 1. We first discuss background research from psychology on individuals’ general tendencies to humanize non-human entities. We then review branding research that has emphasized the human-focused, self-focused and relationship focused perspectives shown in Fig. 1. In reviewing each area, we also show that factors noted in the upper portion of Fig. 1 help us understand the conditions under which these tendencies are most likely to operate. We also draw connections between and within the subdomains, showing linkages and common drivers that might otherwise remain obscured given the relative independence of each stream’s development. We conclude with a set of propositions that reflect accumulated knowledge, and we discuss future research opportunities in the domain of humanizing

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