WHEN BRANDS GET PERSONAL IN ONLINE CHATTER: THE EFFECTS OF SELF-DISCLOSURE AND ANTHROPOMORPHISM ON CONSUMER–BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Companies are eager to build close relationships with their customers, with the aim to foster liking, attachment, and, thus, an increase in sales. Marketers have experimented with various means of getting closer to customers in the social media world. Increasingly brands are communicating directly with consumers through their corporate Twitter accounts, oftentimes in conversational tones. For example, in Starbucks’s Twitter, employees talk about interesting happenings in their personal lives; in Gucci’s Twitter, the company shares celebrity entertainment news with followers; McDonald’s Twitter routinely reposts funny anecdotes about things that may not have a direct bearing on the company’s products or services.

Just as in human-to-human communications, striking up a meaningful conversation with customers online requires the firm to get “personal.” The plurality of practices in conversing with customers on Twitter begs the question: Does sharing “personal” information about a brand shape customers’ brand perceptions? Despite their importance in interpersonal communication, the effects of personal disclosure have received little research attention with regard to consumers’ perceptions of brands—probably because the practice of self-disclosure is less common in conventional marketing communications. Now, with the emergence of Twitter as a brand communication vehicle, it is pertinent to examine whether resonant analogues to interpersonal relationships exist in consumer–brand communications in the Twitter context.
Looking at brand communications through an interpersonal relationship lens, this study aims to explore the effects of conversational talking as a form of self-disclosure on Twitter. Recent consumer research has revealed that self-disclosure can exist between people and nonhuman objects—that brands’ disclosure, including both superficial (e.g., general interest) and intimate (e.g., secrets) conversations, may play an important role in constructing relationships. Therefore, I predict that when a brand discloses intimate information as opposed to superficial information on Twitter, recipients likely respond with interpersonal conversation norms: They will feel they are closer to the brand.

Conceivably, consumer reactions to a brand’s self-disclosures should depend on the extent to which the consumers see the brand as a human being. The degree of anthropomorphism captures that people differ in their tendency to attribute human characteristics, intentions, and behaviors to nonhuman objects. A greater tendency leads to greater anthropomorphism of the brand. When consumers see the brand as human, they are more likely to interact with it in ways that resemble their interpersonal interactions. Activating a human schema will facilitate interpretations of the brand’s disclosure in human terms. Therefore, the degree of anthropomorphism should facilitate the processing of brand disclosures on Twitter. Compared with superficial disclosure, intimate disclosure should be better able to give a strong signal of closeness to consumers. Therefore, I predict that the effect of a brand’s disclosure
on psychological closeness/interaction depends on the extent to which consumers see the brand as a human being. Among people who highly anthropomorphize a brand, the feelings of closeness and interaction should be greater in an intimate disclosure condition, compared with those in the superficial disclosure condition.

In three laboratory studies and one field experiment, I tested my hypotheses using various manipulations of self-disclosure across different product categories, in two different countries (USA and China), with the degree of anthropomorphism measured and manipulated. In addition, to replicate and generalize the results, I used two methods to capture consumers’ closeness perception of the brand. More important, I brought the theory tested in this study into a real marketing environment and examined its applicability using true consumers from a fashion clothing firm on Sina Weibo (a Chinese Twitter-like service).

In study 1, I predicted that the brand’s personal disclosure presence on Twitter would be more effective in enhancing the closeness between the consumer and the brand than would nonpersonal brand presentation. In study 2, I investigated the quality of the personal disclosure of a watch brand. Specifically, participants were randomly assigned to different disclosure conditions (intimate vs. superficial). The effect of personal disclosure on psychological closeness (reversed psychological distance scale) would in all likelihood be moderated by the degree of anthropomorphism. I expected that consumers would feel more closeness in the intimate disclosure condition than in
the superficial condition when they highly anthropomorphized the brand. There were no differences across two conditions when they anthropomorphized the brand to a lesser degree. In study 3, I employed a 2 (anthropomorphism thinking: human vs. object) × 2 (self-disclosure: intimate vs. superficial) between-subject design for a skin care Twitter. To generalize the results, I added the Inclusion-of-Other-in-the-Self (IOS) scale as another measure of psychological closeness. The results confirmed the hypothesis and replicated the study 2 results. In study 4, I conducted a field study in a fashion clothing firm. Real customers of the brand filled out three surveys regarding the disclosure of intimate and superficial information in separate events. The disclosure condition was moderated by an anthropomorphism tendency in psychological closeness. Furthermore, the consumers’ responses to the posts were recorded as an interaction index.

In summary, this research reports the testing of the effects of brands’ self-disclosure on consumers’ perception of brand, using psychological closeness and interaction measures. The results are robust, across three different product categories (skin care, watch, and clothing), between east and west countries (USA and China) and with anthropomorphism either manipulated or measured. The findings demonstrate that a brand’s personal disclosure on Twitter will enhance consumers’ closeness perceptions and encourage them to interact more with the brand, and this effect is more pronounced for those consumers who highly anthropomorphize the brand. This research, to the best of my knowledge, is the first to examine self-disclosure effects on
consumer–brand relationships in the online social media context, and it contributes to an understanding of brand anthropomorphism in the e-commerce world.
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